

The Visconti War and Boccaccio's Florentine Public Service in Context, 1351–53

It is the historian's task to contextualize events and the individuals who participate in them. The years 1351 to 1353 were important ones for Florence and for Giovanni Boccaccio. The city engaged in a bitter war with the Visconti of Milan that involved much of central and northern Italy, and would define (according to the treaty of Sarzana in 1353) the spheres of influence of the sides until the end of century. Boccaccio famously initiated his public career in the city, which included participation in several communal offices and, as Vittore Branca emphasizes, service on "political missions" as Florentine ambassador, most notably to Petrarch in March 1351 to offer him a chair at the new university.¹

Contextualizing Boccaccio's Florentine public service is challenging on account of a lack of historical study for these years. The standard sources on the Visconti war (Albano Sorbelli and Francesco Baldasseroni) are now more than a hundred years old.² Meanwhile, the related field of diplomatic history has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention, primarily in terms of Garrett Mattingly's venerable thesis about the establishment of resident Italian ambassadors in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and its relation to the formation of the Renaissance state.³ The details of Trecento Florentine diplomacy remain largely unknown, aside from general notions, based in part on the example of Boccaccio, that the era saw the stirrings of a "humanist tradition" which became more prominent in the fifteenth century.⁴ The consensus is not based on archival study, despite the survival of a great deal of documentary evidence from the period.

¹ Branca 1997, 86–88; Wilkins 1961, 101. The outlines of Boccaccio's public career for these years are in Kirkham, Sherberg and Smarr 2013, xiv–xv and Armstrong, Daniels and Milner 2015, xxxii, 3–18.

² See Sorbelli 1901; Baldasseroni 1902 and 1903.

³ See Mattingly 1955; Lazzarini, 2015; Frigo, 2000.

⁴ Gilli 2009 and 2010; Maxson, 2014, 14–15, 89 and 110–11. For diplomacy and Florence in the later period, see Fubini 2006.

This essay is an attempt at redress, albeit a limited one. It deals primarily with one civic post held by Boccaccio, that of chamberlain of the *camera del comune* in January-February 1351; and one embassy, to Lombardy and the Romagna in August 1351. The two have been fundamentally misunderstood but reveal a great deal about both the poet and the city.⁵ They show that Boccaccio was a man of substantial political influence and financial means, who was deeply involved in Florentine affairs, particularly the war effort against the Visconti from 1351–53. They also indicate that Florentine diplomacy was far more complex and nuanced than previously understood, with a strong element of subterfuge and blurred lines between the civic and personal interests of the participants.

II

Boccaccio was elected chamberlain of the *camera del comune* in January 1351 for a two-month term.⁶ The job placed Boccaccio at the head of Florence's "pre-eminent financial office," which collected communal taxes and paid the salaries of a wide range of public officials. The officials included the podestà, the executor of justice, the chancellor, castellans, policemen who guarded the palaces of the prior and podestà, ambassadors, town criers, accountants, bell ringers, musicians and numerous others.⁷ The *camera* also rented houses used for civic purposes, paid for the *palio* run every June in honor of Saint John the Baptist and purchased feed for maintenance of the communal lion, the symbol of the prowess of the city.⁸

As chamberlain, Boccaccio thus helped supervise a large bureaucracy that consisted of more than two hundred employees. He served together with three other men, two of whom were, by law, clerics. The clerics, Benedetto Caccini and Jacopo Giovanni, were both from the Dominican monastery of San Marco. The other lay chamberlain was Paolo di Neri Bordoni.⁹ Each received a key to the strong box that contained communal monies. Direct access to the funds meant that chamberlains needed to be honest and trustworthy. To this end, they were required to post surety upon taking the position. No Florentine statutes survive for 1351, but one from 1355 lists the figure at 1000 florins, a significant sum that alone suggests that the holder

⁵ Vittore Branca 1997, 86. See also Kirkham, Sherberg and Smarr 2013.

⁶ ASF, Provvisioni registri 38, fol. 175; balie 7bis, fol. 1r.

⁷ Guidi 1981, 277. Gherardi 1885 and Davidsohn 1977–78, 4.1:200–04. For a fuller description of the *camera* at this time, see also Caferro 2018.

⁸ Gherardi 1885, 317

⁹ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 18r; Camera del comune, camerlenghi uscita 76, fol. 173r.

of the job had considerable financial means or well-to-do friends to put up the money for him.¹⁰ The requirement to post surety did not, however, apply to clerics. Their honesty was apparently manifest by their choice of profession. Indeed, monks frequently held civic posts involving the handling of money throughout Italy. In Florence at this time, the *camera dell'arme*, which oversaw the communal arsenal of weapons and purchased supplies for armies, was wholly supervised by monks.

In any case, the appointment of Boccaccio to the post of chamberlain of the *camera del comune* indicates that he was well-connected in political circles by 1351. The post was prestigious, but not remunerative, befitting a citizen of influence. It paid the wage of 8 *lire* a month, less than the salary of the doctor employed by the city to tend the poor (10 *lire* a month) and the captain of the police force that protected the palace of the priors (20 *lire* a month).¹¹ The service of Boccaccio's fellow lay chamberlain Paolo di Neri Bordoni highlights the political connections attendant to the job.¹² Bordoni had a long history of involvement in Florentine public affairs. He was a prior of the city in 1338–39 and active with other members of his family in government during the period when Walter, the duke of Athens, briefly ruled Florence. When the duke was exiled in 1343, Paolo was one of the six citizens who held temporary executive power. The next year, Paolo served in the influential post of *gonfaloniere di giustizia*.¹³

It is important to stress that Boccaccio's job as chamberlain was merely to administer the bureaucracy that handled communal finances. A recent account of Boccaccio's life in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio* describes the poet's service as the equivalent of "communal treasurer," a task that suited well Boccaccio's prior experience in banking in Naples, where he learned accounting skills.¹⁴ The pleasing symmetry is unfortunately incorrect. The Florentine *camera del comune* employed full-time accountants to manage communal budgets. Indeed, it hired one specifically to oversee income, and another specifically to handle expenditure. The men were assisted by notaries, who physically wrote out the accounts. Like the other chamberlains, Boccaccio's role was restricted to participation in decisions involving the disbursement of funds with members of *balia* and the executives of the city, who possessed coercive authority.

¹⁰ Guidi 1981, 316.

¹¹ ASF, balie 7bis, fol 1r; Camera del comune, camerlenghi uscita 75, fol. 129v.

¹² ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 18r.

¹³ Becker 1967, 150 and 173; Brucker 1962, 22; Paoli 1862, 17.

¹⁴ Armstrong, Daniels and Milner, 2015, 10–11.

A sharper sense of the poet's economic status at this time may be gleaned from an extant tax assessment for 1351–52. The document, known as the *Libro della Sega* (or *Estimo* #306 in archival speak), was the work of a committee of twenty citizens tasked with increasing communal revenue for the war against the Visconti.¹⁵ Formal assessment of wealth was a prerequisite for imposing loans and direct taxes (*estimi*) on citizens, so that they would be responsible for amounts proportional to their means. The evaluation of 1351–52 was for a direct tax (*estimo*) on all citizens. The legislation was unusual because Florentine officials had, since 1315, abandoned direct imposts on citizens in favor of direct levies on the countryside. But the Visconti war was expensive and the fiscal expedient was borne of great necessity. The precise rules regarding the assessment are not entirely clear. It involved estimation of “redditi mobiliari e immobiliari” (movables and immovables) of the heads of households in the city.¹⁶ Bernardino Barbadoro, who has gone the furthest in studying the tax, laments its vagueness, particularly the lack of information, unlike the famous *catasto* of 1427, regarding the composition of families, and inconsistency with respect to the listing of the professions of the heads of families. Nevertheless, each *capofamiglia* was assigned a fiscal coefficient and each neighborhood (*gonfalone*) was assessed an overall rate.¹⁷

Boccaccio is listed in the document as resident of the *quartiere* Santo Spirito and *gonfalone* Nicchio.¹⁸ His assessment or fiscal coefficient was 21 *lire*. Laura Regnicoli, using Barbadoro's analysis, argues that the figure, together with a later adjusted assessment in 1355, indicates that Boccaccio was a man of “media consistenza” with respect to his *quartiere*.¹⁹ She emphasizes that his patrimony had recently grown greatly on account of inheritance from his father, who died of the plague in 1348.²⁰

Boccaccio's fiscal coefficient in 1351 may be contextualized further. His close friend and neighbor, Pino de' Rossi, for whom Boccaccio wrote the *Epistola consolatoria* in 1360, had an assessment of 27 *lire*, similar to that

¹⁵ The committee of twenty citizens was assembled on 7 December 1351. The assessment was finished in March 1352. ASF, Provvioni registri 39, fol. 58^r. See Barbadoro 1933–34 and Cessi 1931.

¹⁶ Regnicoli 2013, 5, 24. About the basis of assessment, see Barbadoro 1933–34, 12–13. Gene Brucker called the tax “a classification according to wealth” (1962, 93).

¹⁷ Barbadoro 1933–34, 618–19.

¹⁸ ASF, Estimo 306, fol. 185^r.

¹⁹ Regnicoli 2013, 24.

²⁰ Regnicoli 2013, 15.

of Boccaccio.²¹ Another friend from the neighborhood, Niccolò di Bartolo del Buono, a prominent merchant, was, however, assessed at the much lower rate of 13.5 *lire*, which was the same as that of Antonio Pucci, the vernacular poet, who was also from the *gonfalone* Nicchio and who served during Boccaccio's tenure as chamberlain (and beyond) as a town crier.²² The equivalent coefficients of del Buono and Pucci are curious because the former was involved in international trade, while the latter appears to have passed his entire career as a salaried employee of the Florentine government (first as a bell-ringer). Del Buono worked as a *factor* (*fattore*/agent) of the Peruzzi bank from 1336 to 1342, conducting business in Naples, Bologna and other places. After the bank failed, he entered the wool cloth trade and became a partner in the Uzzano bank, which in 1351 was one of the most important in Florence, with branches in Pisa, Bologna, Genoa, Rome and Naples.²³ It is worth asking whether the assessment of 1351, like the *catasto* of 1427, allowed international merchants, whose profits often came from outside the city, greater opportunity to hide their assets.²⁴ The well-known diarist Donato Velluti, who served as a judge and advisor to the *camera del comune* during Boccaccio's tenure as chamberlain, had an assessment of 57 *lire*, more than four times greater than del Buono's.²⁵ A modern account of Velluti's life remains to be written, but his *Cronica domestica* suggests that his career and economic activities took place largely within the city, where he held numerous civic offices and remained in plain sight of tax officials.²⁶

There is much more work to be done contextualizing the *estimo*. The famous chronicler Matteo Villani was assessed 18 *lire*, a figure close to that of Boccaccio, and the renowned painter and architect Taddeo Gaddi, pupil of Giotto, had an assessment of 27 *lire*.²⁷ The residents of Boccaccio's *quartiere* of Santo Spirito whose fiscal coefficient most closely resembled that of the poet were "magistro Iacopo," a doctor (*medicus*) and Piero Neri, a doublet maker (*farsettaio*), both of whom were assessed at 21 *lire*.²⁸

It is important in any case to emphasize that Boccaccio's appointment as chamberlain of the *camera del comune* coincided directly with the enactment of the *balia* that oversaw preparations for the war with Milan. The

²¹ ASF, Estimo 306, fol. 29^r.

²² ASF, Estimo 306, fols. 38^r, 34^r.

²³ Rutenburg 1957.

²⁴ Brucker 1962, 22; Caferro 1996.

²⁵ ASF, Estimo 306, fol. 34^r.

²⁶ Branca 2015, 26–27; La Roncière 1977.

²⁷ ASF, Estimo 306, fols. 84^r, 162^r; Barbadoro 1933–34, 641.

²⁸ ASF, Estimo 306, fols. 18^v and 22^v.

balia, consisting of eighteen officials, began in November 1350, in response to the purchase by Milan of Bologna in October, the act that set the military events into motion. Florence did not start fighting Milan until the spring and summer of 1351. Nevertheless, the city had already in winter 1350–51 begun preparing for war, appropriating money for supplies, troops and personnel. Indeed, Boccaccio's first disbursement of funds as chamberlain of the *camera del comune* was on 10 January for 7,820 florins to Gianozzo Lambucci, the chamberlain of the *balia*, to pay for ambassadors, spies, masons and weapons related to the war.²⁹

III

It was at the height of the war in August 1351, six months after his service as chamberlain was over, that Boccaccio went on embassy to the Romagna and Lombardy. The statement bears repeating, as current accounts are confused. According to Vittore Branca, Boccaccio's embassy occurred in August 1350, a year earlier, followed by another apparently analogous one in August 1351, for "le solite e non determinabili ragioni personali" that is, for the usual, unknown personal reasons rather than any civic purpose.³⁰ Branca's dating is based on citation of the archival document published by Lorenzo Mehus in 1759.³¹ Mehus unfortunately misinterpreted the date of the document, failing to take into account that the medieval New Year began in March rather than January. The error, a common one, placed Boccaccio's embassy to Romagna and Lombardy before his famous visits to Petrarch in March 1351 and Dante's daughter in September 1350, thus enhancing its seemingly personal aspect. Other scholars have followed Branca. The recent *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works* (2013) dates the embassy to 1350 and includes it in a timeline of Boccaccio's professional activities alongside the trip to Dante's sister for "August-September 1350." The editors do not include the August 1351 embassy at all.³² Likewise, Francesco Tateo cites only the embassy in August 1350.³³ Meanwhile, *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio* (2014) omits the embassies of August 1350 and

²⁹ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 1^r.

³⁰ Branca 1997, 83 and 86.

³¹ Traversari 1759, 1:268.

³² Kirkham, Sherberg and Smarr 2013, xiv–xv. Janet Levarie Smarr has Boccaccio going to the Romagna in 1350, "where his personal acquaintance with Ravenna and Forlì was no doubt useful" (2013, 11–12).

³³ Tateo 1998, 6.

August 1351, but cites instead a trip in November 1350, which it calls Boccaccio's "first commission as communal ambassador."³⁴ The historical accounts of the war by Sorbelli and Baldasseroni unfortunately say nothing of Boccaccio's diplomatic activities at this time.

The archival evidence on the matter is, however, clear. Boccaccio's embassy appears in *balie 7bis*, which is the financial accounts of Giannozzo Lambucci, the chamberlain in charge of the *balia* that oversaw the war effort. The entry is dated 2 November 1351, the day that Boccaccio was paid. Boccaccio is listed by his familiar title of "dominus" or knight. His embassy began on 25 August 1351 "ad partes Romandiole et Lombardie" and lasted 33 days.³⁵ Boccaccio received the salary of 5 *lire* a day, a rate not much different from his monthly salary as chamberlain. Overall, Boccaccio earned 165 *lire* as ambassador and 16 *lire* for two months' work as chamberlain of the *camera del comune*. The proper sequence of Boccaccio's embassies then is: to Dante's daughter in September 1350, to Petrarch in March 1351 and to Lombardy and the Romagna in August 1351, when Petrarch had already left Italy.³⁶

The citation of the embassy in a *balia* record leaves little doubt that Boccaccio's service was related to the war. Florence enacted *balie* specifically to manage wars, granting them special powers to circumvent the traditional bureaucratic machinery to acquire and disburse funds quickly in order to meet fiscal demands and to hire officials to manage military affairs and conduct negotiations. The document that lists Boccaccio's embassy contains payments for the war effort.³⁷

The timing of Boccaccio's embassy is noteworthy. If it had occurred in August 1350, as Branca has it, or in November 1350, as *The Cambridge Companion* has it, Florence would not yet have been actively engaged in war with Milan. By August 1351, however, the conflict was in full swing and had indeed reached a critical stage. Milanese forces under the captain Giovanni da Oleggio crossed the Apennines in late July into Florentine territory, north of the city in the Mugello region.³⁸ The army camped outside of Scarperia and lay siege to the town.³⁹ The *balia* record shows feverish activity. Florence sent weapons, supplies and men to Scarperia and fortified nearby

³⁴ Armstrong, Daniels and Milner 2015, xxxii.

³⁵ ASF, *balie 7bis*, fol. 18^r.

³⁶ Dotti 1987, 235.

³⁷ ASF, *balie 7bis*, fol. 1^r.

³⁸ ASF, *balie 10*, fols. 24^v–25^r; Brucker 1962, 142; Sorbelli 1901, 115.

³⁹ Sorbelli 1901, 127–33.

castles. On a single day, 9 September, the city spent 668 florins on armor and 709 florins on food and grain for Scarperia, hired numerous troops and sent out many embassies.⁴⁰ On 12 August officials doubled the taxes (*gab-belle*) on salt and flour to raise needed funds and moved forward with the urban *estimo*, referred to in the *balia* as the *gabella di fumante*.⁴¹

In this highly charged atmosphere, Boccaccio went on embassy to the Romagna and Lombardy, a mission that took him through the war zone. The complicated diplomatic situation has yet to be unraveled by historians. Florence fought not only with Milan, but also with Ghibelline magnate families in its countryside who sided with them. Chief among these were the formidable Ubaldini and Guidi clans, whose lands lay along the northern border of the Florentine state near Scarperia and its environs, where much of the fighting took place. While the Milanese army attacked Scarperia, the Ubaldini conducted raids against the nearby town of Firenzuola, due north.⁴² Meanwhile, the Romagna was in open revolt against its nominal overlord, the papacy, which opposed Visconti expansion. Petty lords, or *signoretti*, fought for supremacy in the region, a struggle exacerbated by the pope's transfer to Avignon. The *signoretti* were linked together by an intricate web of intermarriage and had the common goal of territorial gain at the expense of the church and each other. John Larner pointed to "perfidy" as their most basic characteristic.⁴³

The *signoretti* included Boccaccio's erstwhile patron, Francesco II di Sinibaldo Ordelaffi of Forlì, at whose court the poet stayed in 1346–47. Ordelaffi was typical of the tangled relations and motivations of the lords in the region. His wife Marzia (Cia) Ubaldini — who would famously distinguish herself as a warrior on the battlefield — was the daughter of Maghinardo Ubaldini, a leader of that clan. Ordelaffi's sons Lodovico and Giovanni were married to daughters of the Malatesta lords of Rimini. As the Milanese army moved into Tuscany in April and May 1351, Ordelaffi allied with the Ubaldini, Giovanni Manfredi, lord of Faenza and Guido II da Polenta, lord of Ravenna, to attack the city of Imola, held by Roberto Alidosi. Ordelaffi and his allies had the support of Milan, which saw Imola as an important point of attack against the papal state. Alidosi meanwhile sought help from the Florentines.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ ASF, balie 7bis, fols. 9^v–10^r; balie 10, fols. 38^v–44^r.

⁴¹ ASF, balie 10, fol. 35^r.

⁴² Sorbelli 1901, 103.

⁴³ Jones 1974, 49–77; Larner, 1965, 58–75.

⁴⁴ Sighinolfi 1905, 45 and 61; Sorbelli 1901, 50–51.

The archival documents make clear the profound fear and uncertainty in Florence at this time. Defeat at Scarperia, a mere sixteen miles north, would leave open a direct path to the city and devastation at the hands of Milanese forces. When Boccaccio left Florence on embassy in August, city officials were frantically seeking alliances: with neighboring communes, lordships in Lombardy and the Romagna and with the pope. The aim was to form a league to oppose the Visconti. Leagues were a common expedient in times of war, although little studied by modern scholars. They involved the contribution by each participant of a share (*taglia* or cut) of troops for a mutual army. Florence's efforts began already in the spring and fall of 1350 before the war started.⁴⁵ But negotiations moved slowly. Florentine officials were particularly frustrated with the pope, the city's traditional ally, who had opposed Milan when it purchased Bologna in October 1350, but by the summer of 1351 maintained an uneasy truce with the Visconti and appeared inclined to make peace. Just prior to Boccaccio's service as ambassador, Florence sent a letter to the pontiff (Clement VI) in Avignon (11 August) urging him to provide "spiritual weapons," including excommunication against the Visconti and plenary indulgence for those who fought them. The pope offered no firm promises.⁴⁶

Despite the hectic pace of events — and lack of scholarly literature about them — the archival sources allow us to contextualize Boccaccio's embassy more carefully. The same *balia* that lists Boccaccio's mission on 25 August contains mention of numerous contemporaneous others. Florence sent Matteo Davanzati to Verona on 13 August, a week and a half before Boccaccio, for nine days, and Gianni Torrigiani to Rimini on 9 August for nineteen days. Jacopo Cecchi went to Perugia on 10 August for thirteen days and Jacopo Gherardi Gentile to Pisa on 21 August for six days.⁴⁷ The city paid particularly close attention to Lombardy and the Romagna. While Boccaccio was still in the region, Florence sent Lemmo Cecchini on 12 September "ad partes Lombardie" for a full seventy days, followed by Filippo Marsigli, who went to Verona on 22 September for forty-six days and then to Ferrara for

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Canestrini published much of Florence's diplomatic correspondence with the papacy in these years from the *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10* records in the Florentine archive (1849, 347–446, 380–82, 389). Diplomatic dispatches relating to Umbria have been published in Degli Azzi Vitelleschi, 1904. Still more Florentine letters relating to the Visconti war are in the appendices of Sorbelli 1901 and Baldasseroni 1903.

⁴⁶ Reproduced in Baldasseroni 1902, 403–04; Canestrini 1849, 380–82.

⁴⁷ ASF, balie 7bis, fols. 7^v–9^r.

fifteen more. The last mission includes specific mention of the purpose: “to negotiate with representatives of the Malatesta lords of Rimini.”⁴⁸

An extant letter sent by Florence to Perugia on 2 September provides insight into the city’s broader diplomatic strategy. It states forcefully the great importance officials placed on forming a joint league against the Visconti with “whatever lord, city, land or commune” it could.⁴⁹ The letter reveals that Florence negotiated specifically with the “Lombard” lords Cangrande of Verona, Obizzo d’Este of Ferrara and Giacomo II da Carrara of Padua, to whom it sent Rosso de’ Ricci as ambassador. The city negotiated also with the Romagnol lords Galeotto and Malatesta Malatesta of Rimini, Giovanni Manfredi of Faenza, Francesco Ordelauffi of Forlì and Roberto Alidosi of Imola, to whom it sent Otto Sapiti. And Florence sent a separate ambassador Stefano del Forese to speak with representatives of the towns of Pistoia, Volterra, San Gimignano, San Miniato and Colle di Valdelsa.⁵⁰ On 4 September, Florentine officials wrote letters to the college of cardinals and pope respectively, again seeking temporal and spiritual sanctions against the Visconti and imploring the pope to assume his traditional role as defender of Guelf Tuscan communes and join a league of states. The city sent Pietro Bini to the pontiff at Avignon to argue the case.⁵¹

The context suggests that Boccaccio went in August 1351 to negotiate on behalf of the *balia* with the northern and Romagnol lords regarding participation in a military league. The service matches well the diplomatic aims of Florence and also Boccaccio’s elevated personal status. Florence maintained overlapping embassies in the region, and the deployment of Boccaccio, a well-known figure, may be interpreted as confirmation of the difficulty appealing to the lords, who in fact, as the sources show, remained reluctant to join Florence. Branca’s distinction between the “personal” business of the poet and the public aims of the city misses the mark because the personal reputation and connections of an ambassador commended him for public service and enhanced his diplomatic value to the city. Indeed, scholars do well to avoid drawing too sharply a line between the personal and civic interests of Florentine political actors. Boccaccio’s famous embassy to Petrarch in March 1351 was both personal and professional. It was a meeting of two new friends, but also involved an offer to Petrarch to join the newly founded university extended by the city. As Florentine officials knew all too

⁴⁸ ASF, balie 7bis, fols. 9^v, 17^v.

⁴⁹ “[Q]ualunque signore, città, terra o vero comunanza.” ASF, *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10*, fols. 166^r–67^r. Canestrini 1849, 383.

⁵⁰ Degli Azzi Vitelleschi 1904, 51–52.

⁵¹ Canestrini 1849, 383–86; Baldasseroni 1902, 379–80.

well, Petrarch's presence on the faculty of the fledgling studio would have helped ensure its success, which was anything but certain in the years of the Black Death.

Letters to ambassadors have survived for these years in the *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10* records in the Florentine archive, but unfortunately none refers to Boccaccio's mission in the summer 1351. Thus it is not possible to know more precisely with whom Boccaccio met and whether, for example, his mission included an audience with his former patron Francesco Ordelaffi. On 6 September 1351, Florence succeeded in making a military league, but only with its Guelf neighbors and traditional allies Siena and Perugia. The league called for 2,000 cavalrymen, of which Florence supplied 900, Perugia 565 and Siena 450.⁵² Florence continued its attempts to expand the league, actively seeking the participation of Lombard lords and the *signoretti* in the Romagna. The northern lords had the advantage that they could take the war directly to the Visconti outside of Tuscany. The ongoing efforts are confirmed by ambassadorial letters and the Florentine *capitoli* records that show that the league of 6 September was adjusted: a new one was drawn up in October 1351 that included the city of Arezzo and another in December 1351 that added several small towns.⁵³ The league was, in short, open-ended, as Florence searched for more members up north.⁵⁴

There are, however, several unusual aspects to Boccaccio's embassy, which render more difficult attempts to understand its precise purpose. According to the citation in *balie 7bis*, Boccaccio was paid on 2 November 1351 for service that began on 25 August and lasted thirty-three days. Thus, Boccaccio waited a whole month and a half after he returned to receive compensation. Florence usually paid its ambassadors in advance in order to cover the cost of the trip. This was important, as such journeys were financially burdensome for envoys (and the reason that Donato Velluti, for one, disliked them). In addition, Boccaccio's salary of five *lire* a day was higher than the going rate, which was four *lire* a day for a citizen who, like Boccaccio, bore the title of "dominus." Ambassadorial wages were connected to status, which in turn was linked to the number of horses provided the ambassador for his entourage. A *dominus* traveled with four horses, each valued at one *lire* a day, and thus earned four *lire* a day. The typical ambassador received three *lire* a day for an entourage of three horses. *Balie 7bis* makes no mention of the number of horses or attendants that Boccaccio

⁵² ASF, *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10*, fol. 99^r; Baldasseroni 1902, 382, 388, 391, doc. 8.

⁵³ ASF, *Capitoli*, registri 27, fols. 54^r, 62^r–69^v.

⁵⁴ Canestrini 1849, 386–87.

traveled with. And a careful reading of the overall document shows that Boccaccio did not in fact stay for the whole 33 days for which he was paid. He returned eight days early, on 19 September, when he served as witness to a transaction involving his friend Francesco del Bannino related to the transfer of 20 infantrymen to the Mugello to reinforce the army there against the Visconti.⁵⁵ Several prominent Florentines also received payment that day for troop transfers, including Pazzino Donati, who had served as witness to the payment of Boccaccio's wage as ambassador in November, and Beltramo de' Pazzi and Rosso de' Rossi.⁵⁶

The evidence highlights once again Boccaccio's close connection to the Visconti war as well as the special nature of his embassy. Ambassadors listed in *Balie 7bis* were usually paid in advance of their trips, but late payments, particularly during the Visconti invasion in the summer of 1351, were not uncommon.⁵⁷ Francesco di Piero Ricci, who went on embassy for thirty days to the Mugello beginning 7 July, was not paid until 4 November 1351, two days after Boccaccio and three months after he returned!⁵⁸ The delays likely reflect the state of communal finance, which suffered as a result of the war and may have reached a particularly problematic stage during the desperate struggle in the summer of 1351. And Boccaccio's salary does not seem elevated in comparison to the others in the *balia*, nor is the lack of mention of an entourage restricted to the poet. Jacopo Gentile, who, as noted above, went on embassy just days before Boccaccio, earned six *lire* a day, one more *lira* than the poet, although he is not listed as "dominus." There is no mention of Gentile's entourage. Meanwhile, Jacopo Cecchi is identified as a notary, but received five *lire* a day for his embassy, the same as Boccaccio. Filippo Marsigli was paid a variable rate: four *lire* for each of his forty-six days in Verona and then seven *lire* a day for the next fifteen days in Rimini.⁵⁹ On 8 November, Florence sent the prominent jurist, Tommaso Corsini, who is listed like Boccaccio as "dominus," to Siena for six days and paid him eight *lire* per day, without mention of his entourage.⁶⁰

The citations in *balie 7bis* are, in short, inconsistent. Matteo Davanzati, who went to Verona on 13 August, is listed as going with one horse.⁶¹ Lemmo Cecchini, who traveled to Lombardy on 12 September, had one

⁵⁵ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 10^r.

⁵⁶ ASF, balie 7bis, fols. 10^r–10^v.

⁵⁷ ASF, balie 7bis, fols. 7^v, 18^v.

⁵⁸ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 18^v.

⁵⁹ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 17^v.

⁶⁰ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 19^r.

⁶¹ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 7^v.

horse and one attendant (*famulus*).⁶² Boccaccio's embassy is nevertheless singular in that the distance he traveled without advance pay was substantial and undoubtedly added greatly to the expense. Francesco di Piero Ricci, noted above, was paid late, but went only as far as the Mugello. And the payment to Boccaccio for more days than he worked appears unique in the document, while the choice of 33 days seems ironic for a noted devotee of Dante. It may be that the additional salary was intended to compensate Boccaccio for the lack of advance funds, or perhaps that Boccaccio remained in diplomatic service while witnessing the transaction involving his friend del Bennino. If the latter is true, then Boccaccio was in the Mugello during the height of the decisive siege there.

A reasonable interpretation of the evidence is that Boccaccio's mission was a sensitive and likely secretive one. Indeed, Boccaccio's embassy appears in *balie 7bis*, but it does not appear in *balie 10*, which is an otherwise parallel volume of the accounts of the chamberlain Giannozzo Lambucci for the same period (18 November 1350 – 18 November 1351). *Balie 10* repeats what is in *balie 7bis* but gives more detailed information about the financial measures taken by the city and the legislative acts relating to the hire of ambassadors and other officials involved in the war effort. *Balie 10* states explicitly that the basic purpose of the embassies in summer 1351 was to “contract a league or confederation” with other states for a mutual *taglia*.⁶³ Thus it reinforces the evidence in ambassadorial letters that Boccaccio and his fellow envoys were involved in this type of negotiation. But while *Balie 10* lists the now familiar embassies of Matteo Davanzati, Gianni Torrigiani, Jacopo Gentile, Jacobo Cecchi, Lemmo Cecchini and Filippo Marsigli that preceded and succeeded Boccaccio's embassy in August 1351 in *balie 7bis*, it does not include Boccaccio's.⁶⁴

A thorough line-by-line comparison of the two *balie* is needed. But the inclusion of formal legislative acts in *balie 10* and the absence of the same in *balie 7bis* indicates at base that Boccaccio's embassy did not go through the usual Florentine deliberative channels, which involved consultation by members of the *balia* with the executives of the city. The evidence reinforces the notion, consistent with Vittore Branca's view, that Boccaccio had close personal ties to the ruling regime, which had him deployed differently from other envoys.

⁶² ASF, *balie 7bis*, fol. 9^v.

⁶³ “[A]d tractandam confederationem et unionem.” ASF, *balie 10*, fols. 13^r, 17^v–18^r, 34^r.

⁶⁴ ASF, *balie 10*, fols. 34^r–35^v.

The same evidence calls into question, however, the basic nature of Florentine diplomacy at this time. Careful archival study shows that Boccaccio's August 1351 embassy is not only missing from *balie 10*, but also from the budgets of the *camera del comune*, the office he served as chamberlain for two months, which was the main fiscal organ of the city.⁶⁵ The cameral budgets routinely list embassies and have been the standard source of them, since far more cameral budgets have survived than *balie* records. But the embassies in the *camera del comune* budget for July-August 1351, when Boccaccio went on mission, do not in fact correspond to those listed in either of the extant *balie* for the period! The budget contains a different set of embassies that coincided with Boccaccio's. It shows that in the weeks preceding Boccaccio's departure, Florence sent, on 27 July 1351, Bartolomeo Ristori and Lippo Ammannanti to Lombardy for nineteen days. On 5 August it sent Ugucione Boninsegne "ad partes Marche et Anconam" for thirty-one days and on 22 August (three days before Boccaccio) the city paid Dominus Francesco de' Medici, Filippo Machiavelli and three other men for an embassy to Forlì that began on 4 July, presumably for the purpose of speaking directly with Boccaccio's former patron Ordelauffi.⁶⁶ Unlike the citations in the *balie* records, those in the cameral budget clearly specify the number of horses and attendants that went with the ambassadors. Dominus Francesco de' Medici was paid four *lire* a day for four horses.

Clearly not all Florentine embassies were the same, or treated the same way by city officials. And while it is evident that those listed in the *balie* records were related to the war, the *raison d'être* of the committee, it would be false to assume that, conversely, those listed in the cameral budget were unrelated to the conflict. The destinations of the embassies are the same in both sources. The cameral budget of July-August 1351 includes an embassy by Tommaso Corsini (who clearly covered a lot of ground) and Marco Strozzi that specifically says that the men were sent directly to speak with the captain of the Visconti army, Giovanni da Oleggio.⁶⁷

Further archival study will illuminate the nuances of Florentine diplomacy. But what readily emerges from the sources is a strong element of subterfuge and stealth in local practice. Those ambassadors listed in *balie 7bis* and *balie 10* were appointed simultaneously with men designated as *nuntii*,

⁶⁵ It should appear in ASF, Camera del comune, camerlenghi uscita 73, fols. 1^r-66^v, but it does not.

⁶⁶ ASF, Camera del comune, camerlenghi uscita 81, fols. 575^{r-v}, 578^r.

⁶⁷ ASF, Camera del comune, camerlenghi uscita 81, fol. 574^v.

who were charged, like the ambassadors, with negotiating “unions and confederations,” but tasked also with “investigating news” (*investigando nova*).⁶⁸ The latter referred to spying and was used in the *balie* also for the activities of *esploratori*, short-term officials specifically hired to find out the secrets of the enemy.⁶⁹ The town crier and vernacular poet, Antonio Pucci held this job during the later phases of the war in 1353.⁷⁰

Florentine *nuntii* were sent alongside formal ambassadors, and a close reading of the *balie* leaves no doubt that *nuntius* was a synonym for spy.⁷¹ Boccaccio’s mission to Lombardy and the Romagna coincided with the selection of several *nuntii*, including Tommaso Bartoli, who was sent to Lombardy, and Morello Nicole, who went to Avignon.⁷² Two days before Boccaccio’s embassy, Florence sent still another *nuntius*, known only as Rosselino, to Lombardy.⁷³

In early September, Florence elected a new set of ambassadors in conjunction with corresponding *nuntii* for Lombardy and the Romagna.⁷⁴ It is not clear how long the men served, who went with them and what the criteria for their pay were. Unlike ambassadors, they received a flat rate or fee for their service. But most importantly, the men, like Boccaccio, do not appear in the budgets of the *camera del comune*.

The evidence adds further perspective on Boccaccio’s diplomatic service. Indeed, none of Boccaccio’s missions on behalf of Florence from 1351 to 1353 appear in the budgets of the *camera del comune*. Boccaccio’s visit to Dante’s sister in September 1350 was undertaken on behalf of the confraternity of Orsanmichele, which presumably paid him and whose books for the period no longer exist. Boccaccio’s embassy to Petrarch in March 1351 was, however, undertaken on behalf of the city, but is not in the budgets or *balie*, although Petrarch himself refers to the meeting in book eleven of *Familiars*. And Boccaccio’s service in December-January 1351–52 to Florence as ambassador to Louis, margrave of Brandenburg and duke of Bavaria, does not appear in the cameral budgets. We know of the mission from

⁶⁸ ASF, balie 10, fol. 34^v; balie 7bis, fol. 8^r.

⁶⁹ See Caferro 2018.

⁷⁰ ASF, balie 9, fol. 5^r.

⁷¹ Buongiovani Buoni is listed in *balie 7bis* as “nuntius sive spia.” ASF, balie 7bis, fols. 1^v, 2^r; Nernio Cambii is referred to as “investigator et nuntius,” sent to spy in Bologna. ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 1^v.

⁷² ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 8^r.

⁷³ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 8^v.

⁷⁴ ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 9^v.

extant letters of introduction in *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10* for Boccaccio to Louis and his ally, Conrad, Duke of Teck, dated 12 December 1351, a month after Boccaccio was paid for his embassy to Lombardy and the Romagna.⁷⁵ The embassy is verified by a letter written by Louis himself to Florence from Bolzano on 5 March 1352, in which he acknowledged receiving “Johannem de Cartaldo [*sic*]” and sending back to Florence Diepold von Katzenstein, Louis’ “special secretary” [*secretarius specialis*], to continue talks.⁷⁶ Boccaccio likely met Louis in Tyrol, where Louis was also duke.⁷⁷ Vittore Branca imagines Boccaccio traveling through the Alto Adige, Trentino and perhaps to Friuli, where there were Florentine merchants and perhaps even relatives.⁷⁸

The embassy of 1351–52 may perhaps shed light on Boccaccio’s service in August 1351. The historian Giuseppe Gerola, who closely investigated the details, was not convinced of its reality, owing to the now familiar lack (“complete lack,” in his words) of budgetary evidence for the embassy.⁷⁹ But Florence’s negotiations with Louis were highly secretive. In appealing to the German margrave/duke, Florence was in fact appealing to an outright enemy of the pope, the city’s traditional and most important ally. Louis — the son of Louis of Bavaria, who famously traveled to Rome in 1327 (with Marsiglio of Padua in tow) to crown himself emperor — had been excommunicated by Pope Clement VI.⁸⁰ Louis’ representative, Diepold von Katzenstein, spent the winter hiding secretly in Florentine territory, while he negotiated. Florentine officials were deeply concerned about antagonizing the pope, with whom they continued to negotiate. Indeed, at the very time that Boccaccio was negotiating with Louis, Florence had an embassy of the highest dignity with the pope in Avignon, led by the bishop of Florence (Angelo Acciaiuoli). The Florentine bishop had been in Avignon for a month and a half.⁸¹

⁷⁵ The documents are in *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10*, fol. 107^{r-v}. See also Corazzini 1877, 395–96; Hortis 1875, 8, doc. 4 (appendices II, III) and Gerola 1903, 345–46.

⁷⁶ Gerola reproduces Louis’ letter to Florence (1903, 345–46).

⁷⁷ Riedel 1838–69, 18:296–97 and 19:22–24; Hortis 1875, 10.

⁷⁸ Branca 1997, 86–87.

⁷⁹ Gerola 1903, 340.

⁸⁰ Hortis 1875, 9.

⁸¹ The embassy began on 25 October 1351 and lasted for two months. ASF, balie 7bis, fol. 16^v (24 October, paid in advance); balie 10, fol. 45^v. The instructions to the ambassadors have survived in the *Signori Missive I Cancelleria 10*, reproduced in Canestrini 1849,

The overall military situation in Florence had changed by winter 1351–52. The Milanese army, which threatened Scarperia in August and September 1351, had retreated from Florentine territory in October. But the diplomatic situation was largely the same. Florence and Milan geared up for renewed battle, and the former worked again to put together a broad military alliance that had eluded the city during the summer.⁸² An extant letter by Florence on 23 December 1351 to Tomasso Corsini, who was in Siena with the envoys of the existing league (with Perugia and Siena) makes clear that Florentine officials believed that the pope and Visconti were very close to an accord.⁸³ The fears expressed in the letter are strikingly similar to those expressed in the dispatch sent by Florentine officials to its envoy with league members back in September 1351.⁸⁴

It is possible then that Boccaccio's embassy to Lombardy and Romagna in August 1351 and to Tyrol in the winter of 1351–52 involved similar issues. Lost in muddle that is medieval Italian diplomatic history is the fact that Louis of Brandenburg had important interests in Lombardy. He maintained close ties with the della Scala family of Verona and was the mortal enemy of Giacomo Carrara, lord of Padua, whose territory abutted his own in Tyrol. Louis had in fact been at war with Padua since 1350. Boccaccio's discussions with northern lords in August 1351 about a mutual league may well have included also discussions with Louis — or more precisely a representative of Louis — about participation in that league. The high stakes and sensitivity of the talks commended Boccaccio still further for the job. It is noteworthy in this regard that the first of Boccaccio's embassies that is in fact listed in a *camera del comune* budget is his journey to Avignon to speak with Pope Innocent VI, after the end of the Visconti war.⁸⁵ One wonders whether the citations in the *camera del comune* budgets represent more open and straightforward communal embassies, while those in the *balie* represent more ambiguous negotiations that the city did not wish to leave so transparent. And there are clearly embassies that do not appear anywhere in the communal registers.

387–88 and Baldasseroni 1903, 85–89; Sorbelli 1901, 146–50. The embassy was renewed on 12 January 1352 for 30 days. (*Camera del comune, camerlenghi uscita* 83, fol. 353^v).

⁸² Sorbelli 1901, 133.

⁸³ The document is reproduced in Baldasseroni 1903, 89–90.

⁸⁴ Canestrini 1849, 386–87.

⁸⁵ Kohl 1998, 93–94.

IV

What does all this say about Boccaccio? The poet was financially and politically prominent in 1351 and deeply involved in communal affairs relating to the war with Milan. His embassy to the Romagna and Lombardy in summer 1351 was connected to the conflict and formed part of a broader Florentine diplomatic strategy that had a strong surreptitious aspect to it. It is worth asking whether there was a relationship in this regard with Petrarch, who kept company with the lords of Padua and Verona, but departed the region in June 1351 to return to France. Petrarch maintained a friendship with Emperor Charles IV, who was an enemy of Louis of Brandenburg, but with whom Florence conducted simultaneous negotiations during the war for help against the Visconti. Here we return to the murky line of division between the personal and public agenda of Boccaccio and ask indeed whether there was a mutual or contradictory political stance and whether that can be separated out from personal relations.

The most basic point, however, is that Boccaccio was deeply involved in the Visconti war. Indeed, his other public service to the city centered around the conflict. In January 1351, Boccaccio was chamberlain to the *camera del comune*. In February 1351 he served as witness for the sale of Prato to Florence by Naples, which was a measure, as Branca and others point out, undertaken by Florence in response to Visconti expansion.⁸⁶ In November 1351, Boccaccio served as *difensore del contado*, a hazy post with a military component.⁸⁷ From August 1352, Boccaccio served as *governatore della gabella del pane* (for six months) during a famine exacerbated by the war.⁸⁸ And just after the peace of Sarzana was signed in March 1353, Boccaccio was elected as one of the *ufficiali di Torre*, an office that oversaw the income from public properties involving prominent citizens.⁸⁹ After that, Boccaccio appears less frequently in Florentine public service.

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⁸⁶ Branca 1997, 86.

⁸⁷ ASF, Tratte 184, fol. 95^r; Pampaloni 1978 and Agostini Muzzi 1978.

⁸⁸ ASF, Tratte 184, fol. 115^r. On the famine, see Brucker 1962, 84.

⁸⁹ Becker 1967, 152.

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