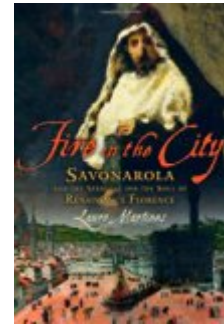


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lauro Martines. *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Florence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xv + 336 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-532710-6; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517748-0.

Reviewed by Lyn Blanchfield (Independent Scholar)  
Published on H-Italy (April, 2008)



Similar to his 2003 success, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot against the Medici*, Lauro Martines' *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Florence* is a wonderfully colorful examination of another crucial period in Florentine history when the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, took spiritual and political control of the city. Writing in a dynamic, engaging, and accessible style Martines, an eminent scholar and UCLA professor emeritus of Renaissance Italian history, focuses primarily on the years from 1494 and 1498 when "Savonarola's life and the history of Florence were so joined together that it is impossible to pull them apart" (p. 5). As he states clearly, this book is directed toward a broad, non-scholarly audience and is not a true biography but rather the "biography of a time and place ... and Savonarola is, to be sure, the prime actor" (pp. 5-6). Given the purpose and Martines' intended audience, this book is very successful and, with only minor flaws, fulfills its promise as a detailed yet highly readable investigation of Savonarola in this critical period.

The book begins with the Savonarola family in Ferrara and the birth of its most infamous son, Girolamo, in 1452. Referring briefly to Savonarola's first, and disastrous, Lenten series of sermons in Florence in 1484 followed by his exit from the city, Martines moves quickly to Savonarola's return in the 1490s and provides an excellent account of the city's complex governmental and political system in the period right before the French king Charles VIII entered the city with his army in 1494, an act that prompted the Medici to flee and catapulted Savonarola into the political limelight.

Proceeding in a roughly chronological fashion, Martines follows Savonarola's career in Florence with chap-

ters such as his entrance into the city's political life, his ritualistic use of the city's male youth, his contentious relationship with Pope Alexander VI, his excommunication, the "Siege of San Marco," his supposed confession, and his and his companions' executions in May 1498. Interspersed with these are chapters that are much broader in scope such as those on the friar's political and spiritual ideas, the development of the Savonarolan movement, and a chapter which, according to its title, "Wailers and Bigots," appears to be about the friar's supporters yet truly concerns his opponents. The final chapter provides an overview of the friar in his historical and cultural context and considers whether Savonarola was, in the words of one historian writing in the 1980s, a "terrorist." [1]

Attempting such a comprehensive, scholarly, and yet thoroughly accessible work is challenging yet Martines handles the task quite well. Using numerous authoritative primary accounts, such as those by the Florentines Luca Landucci and Piero Parenti, lengthy passages from Savonarola's sermons, and major scholarly studies of this period, Martines weaves together the friar's message with a thorough investigation of Florence's complex political and social hierarchy which, as he explains so well, involved many powerful men, their families, and the battles between them. Martines is particularly adept at maintaining the central focus on Savonarola's influence on various social groups while giving just enough historical background to explain how and why "Florence rallied so strongly behind him" for so many years (p. 295). For example, when discussing Savonarola's use of male youth in chapter 9 (entitled "Angels and Enforcers: 1496-1498"), Martines explains the boys' street processions from 1496-98 in the context of the friar's mission of transforming Florence into a "New Jerusalem," provid-

ing details on the social status of male children in this “city in which political standing, wealth, and class were supremely important to the question of who exactly a man or woman was” (p. 119). Martines even includes well-known architectural landmarks to situate the reader in the city, as when he describes a priest arrested for calling Savonarola and his companions “Sodomites” and being forced to “mount a pulpit on the steps of the cathedral, just beside Giotto’s great bell-tower and facing the Baptistry” (p. 119). Situating the friar in the larger context of Florentine life, politics, and even geography for the non-expert reader is one of the great strengths of the book and reflects Martines’ vast knowledge and expertise.

While Martines is successful in recreating the world of Florence in the 1490s, he is less successful in the last chapter when, in the interest of summarizing the friar’s impact on the city, takes on the ideas of a historian who (incorrectly) considers Savonarola an “extremist” and a cultural and spiritual “terrorist.” While Martines does well to dismiss this view completely in the text and in a brief introduction to the bibliography, one wonders why he felt the need to address this historian at all. Throughout the book, Martines presents the friar sympathetically

and accurately and does not need to introduce this biased and, as Martines asserts, “self-destructive” biography of the friar (p. 313).

Other minor criticisms include putting the notes at the end of the book and with only page references as a guide, and creating a fictitious letter from Florence to the pope in chapter 15 (“Rome Closes In”) that is both confusing and unnecessary. Having no footnotes or endnotes within the text does make the book more accessible to a larger audience but is rather cumbersome for scholars looking for more precise references. Scholars may also note the infrequent mention of certain groups such as women and Jews. Despite these points, however, this book is very successful in terms of what Martines set out to do. Intended for a broader reading public, this book is highly readable, fast-paced, historically accurate, and fun to read. Non-experts will find it an enjoyable and good overview of Savonarola and his impact on Florence; scholars of this period may not find anything new yet will doubtless consider it an interesting read nonetheless.

#### Note

[1]. Franco Cordero, *Savonarola*, 4 vols. (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1986-1988).

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**Citation:** Lyn Blanchfield. Review of Martines, Lauro, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Florence*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14400>

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