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Some Reflections on the Relationship between People of the Fourteenth Century, City and Territory

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People of the fourteenth century showed their awareness of landscape and their ability to control nature. The connection between city and landscape outside its walls, denotes a sense of belonging to place, the role of open spaces, careful observation of nature by artists, welfare conditions of the environment, the sense of security and safety that the city offers.

The relationship between people, nature and city shows its strength in its simplicity given by people's ability to grasp their new role in the world with a broad vision.

Landscape in the fourteenth century through art and literature

There we shall hear the chant of birds, have sight of verdant hills and plains, of cornfields undulating like the sea, of trees of a thousand sorts; there also we shall have a larger view of the heavens, which, however harsh to usward, yet deny not their eternal beauty; things fairer far for eye to rest on than the desolate walls of our city. Moreover, we shall there breathe a fresher air. (*Decameron*, I, introduction)

With these words full of beauty and admiration for what surrounds him, Boccaccio describes, in the introduction of the first day of the *Decameron*, the countryside around the city of Florence: the importance of nature emerges in people of the fourteenth century. Florence, as told by the historians Villani and Boccaccio, was surrounded by a ring of houses in the hills where citizens usually spent the summer. The descriptions of the historians show the passion of the Florentine citizens for nature. People modelling the area around the walls with a high aesthetic sense: they created fields, houses and gardens, enhancing in this way, the equilibrium of a landscape contemplated in beauty and in richness, landscape in which people are in perfect harmony with nature. All this shows sensitivity and attention to «eternal beauty», to attain feelings of happiness from contact with beauty and the variety of places. Nature becomes a place that gives well-being and health, all the senses are stimulated at all times by spices and flowers, palaces and churches, the chirping of birds or the words of the storyteller in the squares and streets. People come into contact with nature and appreciate its wonderful richness.

Landscape, in its entirety, is seen with new eyes: what emerges in the literary and artistic expressions is the relationship between people, city and nature, seen with a broad vision in an orderly and comprehensive framework.

Hauser says (Hauser, 2001, p.27) that the entire fourteenth century is marked by Giotto's naturalism and his *The Gift of the coat* shows all the complexity of the conception of the period. St. Francis's head is located right between the two mountains; the landscape takes up almost two thirds of the scene. This highlights the activity and energy of the citizen's world that is constantly on the move: the city on the hill surrounded by walls shows a separation between the urban and rural landscape and, at the same time, underscores people's ability to control nature and the great ability of the inhabitants to improve and exploit the place in which they live. The towers have, in the upper part, loggias and large windows that indicate interest in the landscape outside the walls: nature can be observed and admired from the highest point. The walls create a boundary between inside and outside, a protection against possible attacks, but at the same time a connection with nature: in fact there are olive trees, cultivated fields, farmhouses, villas and countries next to the city walls.

People of the fourteenth century show a new interest in individuality. Nature isn't seen as a dangerous place, but a peaceful, simple and harmonious place. In *The Miracle of the source*, a fresco of the Stories of St. Francis in the Upper Church in Assisi, we can see refreshing water that flows between rough rocks. Not only did Giotto paint the source with clear water, whose freshness seems to contrast with the aridity of the golden rocks, but he also depicted the wonder in discovering nature as a source of refreshment, charm, scholarship, and research: we can see these emotions in the young man's eyes.





Figure 1 | Giotto, The Gift of the coat, (1290-1295), Assisi, Basilica of St. Francis, Upper Church

Nature, moreover, as some doctors argued in this period, was considered a healthy place. People show their ability to dominate nature by improving the quality of life, utility work and production: we can see this in agricultural transformations, in cultivation, in the use of water with artificial canals, ponds and mills. The ability to observe nature is reflected in the city. Citizens realise that their urban creation is influential, wonderful and accidental in nature. People transform what they have around them, with self-consciousness, courage, with cunning and capacity, trying to create a world for its needs. People modelled the city following orography, in conformations of urban streets and of squares.

Walled cities contributed to a revival of commerce. Trade routes were developed thanks to the circulation of important products such as spices and silks from the Orient, skins, wool and events, i.e. fairs.

Land and sea routes grew due to greater geographical knowledge, resulting from different historical and cultural events, such as the Arab influence on both the East and the West, the spread of the monastic order, the Crusades and pilgrimages to the Holy Land, conflicts between the Ottoman Turks and the Byzantines, the unification of Asia's people by the Mongols and the ascent to the throne in 1260 by Kublai Khan, whose reign marked the apogee of Mongol power.

This rekindled interest in the mysterious people of the Orient, both from a religious point of view and a commercial one. It pushed western merchants to the Far East, including Marco Polo, who wrote *Il Milione*, a story which shows different human singularities with immense and varied oriental wonders, who show the breadth of vision and the need for understanding and comparison.

The diffusion of commerce brought the circulation of foreigners' products into everyday life: there were

spices that came from the East, (there were numerous apothecaries in Siena and in Florence there was the Art of Doctors and Pharmacists), wines such as *Vernaccia* from *Corniglia* (*Decameron*, X, 2) and Greek wine (*Decameron*, II, 2).

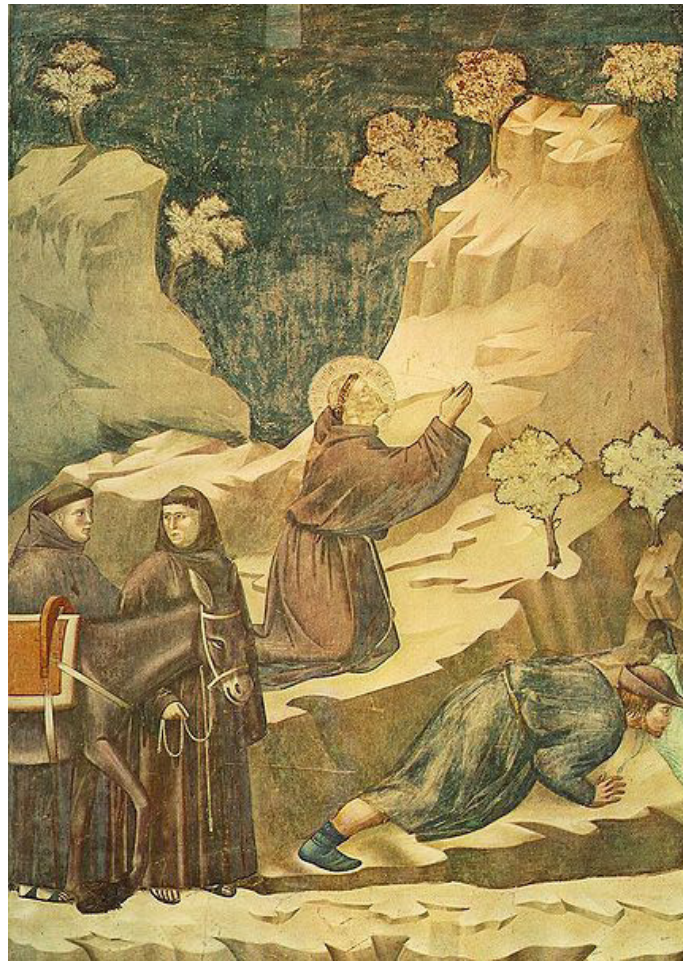


Figure 2 | Giotto, In The Miracle of the source, (1290-1295), Assisi, Basilica of St. Francis, Upper Church

Growing needs influenced the enlargement of commerce and the development of production: this brought about the emergence of a spirit of rational organisation that was to be predominant in the entire intellectual and material life of people of the fourteenth century.

People of the fourteenth century had a profound sense of belonging to places: the city was admired and artists represented real places with exquisite precision.

People's aspirations were the size of the city, power and continued growth of the city: they built cities because of the increase in population. The city gave the sensation of a safe and secure place, solidity and refinement, wealth and power.

Artists showed their passion for the artwork of a city: the city was a space of people's construction, citizens were proud of their creation, which described and represented magnificence. Artwork made references to reports, to the importance of places and their role in society, realistic descriptions and architectural and natural representations. Above all, the need for meeting and interacting during workdays and feast days emerges, as does the importance of space in the city and in the countryside outside of the walls.

As seen in Giotto's frescoes and in the *Decameron*, the city became a living organism, according to the needs of the people. As a result of population growth, houses were enlarged, streets and squares became (a meeting place between citizens and) the main centre of trade, with the opening of markets.

Furthermore, streets were named according to the different types of jobs, for example baker's street, or the metalworker's street. Another important aspect it is that the streets had wells with fresh water.

The streets and squares became the principal meeting place between citizens, not only for commercial purposes but also for cultural exchange.

The town was a hub of activity, with streets and squares always full of activity: with shops in the streets and many tasks were dealt with in front of houses and along the way, so citizens knew their variety. The city bustled with activity, colours, sounds and scents. Narrow streets were only for pedestrians, this enabled them to continue to carry out their outdoor activities.

All roads were varied, with small variations in height, material of construction, the skyline of the rooves and the openings of doors and windows, thus making every part of the city particular and unique.

The cleanliness of the rooms, especially in the villas and palaces, shows attention to hygiene and to smells as we can see in the introduction of the first day of the *Decameron*, «with galleries, halls and chambers, disposed around a fair and spacious court, each very fair in itself, and the goodlier to see for the gladsome pictures with which it was adorned». In houses it was necessary to have good smells, in fact we note the presence of gardens over the bedroom (*Decameron*, V, 4) «I should like to have a little bed made up on the terrace by his room and over his garden, where, hearing the nightingales sing, and being in a much cooler place, I should sleep much better than in your room».

Furthermore, the importance of personal care was evident: private bathrooms were only in a few houses and public bathrooms were diffused in the city, which shows the appreciation for cleanliness.

Meetings, especially of love, were favored in the bathroom, as we read in *Decameron* (VIII, 10): in this case water in the bath was scented with ointments of moss and flowers. The supply of drinking water was also a collective function. People took water from streams, spring water, wells and fountains that were all in small squares: this gave the opportunity to encounter others and socialize.

The city followed the logic of social life with exceptional attention to the senses: there were scents of gardens on the ground floor of houses, use of fragrant flowers and widely cultivated herbs, scents of spices in the streets and the smell of fresh cut hay that spread in the fields in early summer.

Sight and hearing were gratified by pleasant sounds, like waking up to the cockcrow or twittering of birds or the sound of the bell every hour. In the streets there was continuous music given by storytellers, by choirs of processions, by prayers of monks, by the noise of watermills.

During the night there was silence and you could sleep quietly. Soundscape outlined a gritty stimulus for active daily life during the day and a significant silence during the night for sleep or for monastic prayer. During the day you could go to fields or to woods, on the banks of the rivers or in nearby gardens: the countryside offered a wealth of products and, from morning to night, people would come and go in and out of the walls where the wide doors were open all day.

All the buildings of the city were painted with bright colors: these colors accompanied man in everyday life. A visual stimulus was also given by the products of the markets open to the air or by people who worked in the streets. Everything stimulated the senses, with creativity and a school of ideas.

Life blossoms in this expansion of senses: without it, the pulse is slower, muscle tone is lower, perhaps that same desire to live succumbs. People couldn't close their eyes to such beauty: the city was artwork, and the dress of its citizens during holidays resembled a garden in blossom (Mumford, 2007, p. 43).

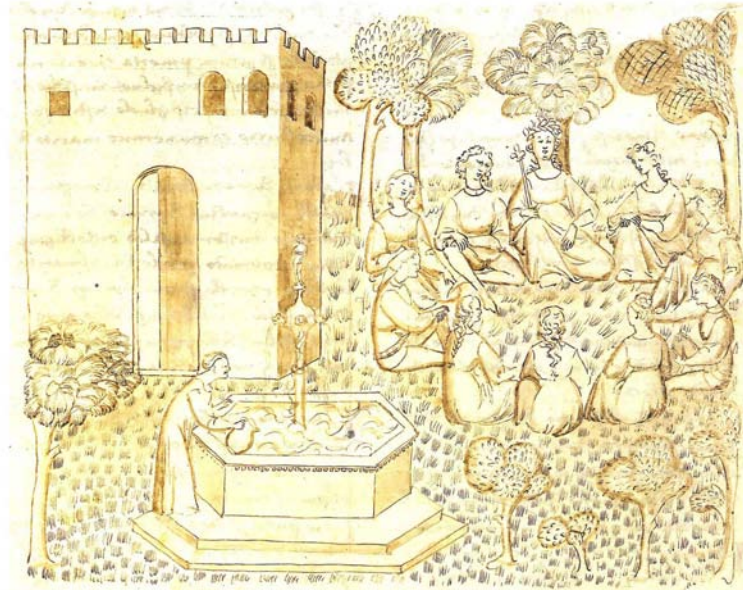


Figure 3 | G. Boccaccio, Decameron, c.1365-1367, Cod. Parig. It.482, c. 4 v., B.N.F., Parigi

These sentiments are exalted in the gardens. They were born from the contact between nature and culture: humanity with wisdom, studying the laws of nature, created beautiful places, sources of peace and salvation, where people could escape from human pain and tragedy of the plague taking refuge in the beauty of nature as we see in the introduction of the first day of the *Decameron*.

Boccaccio shows all the young people's wonder at seeing the beauty of the garden: they enter the garden at a slow pace, in order to enjoy the place dominated by exceptional harmony:

The aspect of this garden, its fair order, the plants and the fountain and the rivulets that flowed from it, so charmed the ladies and the three young men that with one accord they affirmed that they knew not how it could receive any accession of beauty, or what other form could be given to Paradise, if it were to be planted on earth. (Boccaccio, *Decameron*, III, introduction).

Through these words, the people of the fourteenth century show how nature and humanity's work can together become essence and beauty in perfect harmony, wealth and a source of pleasure for the mind, creating, with skill and attention to nature, a Paradise in which to live.

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Legend: The references to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, by Vittore Branca, Einaudi edition of 1992, are indicated by Roman numerals for the days and those Arabs to the stories and to scan the text using the number of steps indicated by the curator.

Example: II, 6, 25 = Day Two, Sixth news, numbering step (p.) twenty-five.