

**Volume 11**

**Number 024**

**Savonarola - II**

**Lead: At the height of the Renaissance in Florence, Fra Girolamo Savonarola thundered against corruption, ostentation, and vanity in civil affairs and in the life of the Roman Catholic Church. He paid for his meddling with his life.**

**Intro. : *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: Savonarola was born into privilege in 1452. Educated to follow his father as court physician in Ferrara, Italy, he turned to the Dominican priesthood, and served in**

**various assignments with increasing scholarly reputation. It was in Florence, however, at the Monastery of San Marco after 1489, that he developed the passionate preaching style that compelled him into prominence and popularity.**

**Florence at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century was the center of the European cultural and intellectual universe, the brightest jewel in what would later be called the Italian Renaissance. Presiding over this extraordinary and brilliant revival of interest in art, antiquity, literature and science were the talented members of the banking House of Medici, most especially Lorenzo de Medici, the Magnificent. For**

**Savonarola, all of this emphasis on worldliness and humanism was distracting and at variance with his understanding of true spirituality. He inserted himself into the political affairs of Florence, helping to bring the fall of the Medicis after Lorenzo's death, allying himself with French invaders in 1494, proclaiming them the scourging agents of God. He then turned on the French, and following their departure helped establish a Christian Republic of which he served as spiritual guide.**

**The new government strictly suppressed of all sorts of vice and frivolity, gambling, and even ostentatious clothing. He condemned modern lusts fleshly and cultural and**

called his followers to a life of simplicity and self-denial. On occasion they would bring their goods, looking glasses, wigs and false beards, rouge, fans, necklaces and other jewelry, profane books, cards, chessboards, and paintings, some by famous artists such as the great Sandro Botticelli, Di Credi, and Fra Bartolomeo, and burn them in the public square in the so-called “bonfire of the vanities,” Botticelli, enthralled by Savonarola, plunged into religious mysticism, abandoned the themes that had animated his dazzling brilliance before the 1490s, and may have died in poverty.

Savonarola’s success and excesses led to his downfall. Along the way he

**acquired powerful enemies, including allies of the deposed Medici and the corrupt Borgia Pope, Alexander VI. A political change in the city restored his enemies to power and his continued resistance to Papal commands resulted in his excommunication, trial, and execution by hanging and burning in the spring of 1498.**

**Savonarola was in reality a medieval ascetic, hostile to the emerging modern world, and though vigorously orthodox in his doctrine, in many ways anticipated the Reformation critique of a corrupt Roman Catholic clergy and the coming radical Protestant hostility to art, science, literature, and certain**

**types of music. His attempted use of the state to enforce righteousness and his religious extremism tossed up powerful opposition and in the end secured his downfall.**

**At the University of Richmond,  
this is Dan Roberts.**

**Resources**

**Hibbert, Christopher. *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*. New York, NY: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1980.**

**Ridolfi, Roberto. *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1976.**

**Weinstein, Donald. *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.**

**<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/savonarola.html>**