Introduction

POPE BONIFACE VIII, the last great representative of the mediaeval papacy, had a taste for the extravagant. This penchant for acting on a grand scale brought him varying results throughout a long career, and ultimately contributed to his defeat and death. At no point, however, did his extravagance find more appropriate expression than in his proclamation of the first papal jubilee at Rome in the year 1300.

The scene is preserved in a retouched and badly damaged fresco, probably by the Italian painter Giotto, which depicts Boniface adorned with the splendid papal tiara and mantle standing on a balcony of the Vatican basilica between two cardinals. Directly before him hangs the bull of jubilee framed by draperies decorated with his family arms. Below, presumably, is an immense crowd assembled to receive the announcement that during that year those who, in a true state of penitence, visited the basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul for fifteen days—or thirty
for native Romans—would receive pardon for their sins.

In response to this unprecedented proclamation, the faithful poured into Rome from all parts of Italy and beyond the Alps, on horseback and on foot, with the aged and decrepit borne on the shoulders of their children. The exact number of pilgrims is impossible to determine, but one eye-witness declared that throughout the year there were never less than 200,000 foreigners in the city and the rumor persisted that 2,000,000 pilgrims had passed through Rome by the end of the year. Even granting that these figures must have been inflated in the usual mediaeval manner, the impression created, as one chronicler noted, was that “almost the whole world was running to the Roman Curia.”

The reasons for this extraordinary success were undoubtedly complex. If the concept of drawing on the papal treasury of merits for the pardon of sins had been evolving for centuries, the idea of a special occasion for its exercise was new, unexpected, and appealing. And Rome itself still provided a tremendous attraction for pilgrims and tourists as the shrine of the greatest martyrs, the seat of the papacy, and the traditional capital of the world. Even so, the basic object of the jubilee, the public celebration of the apogee of papal authority and majesty in the pontificate of Boniface, must be counted a major factor in the triumph.
Some reflection of this emotional response may be seen or sensed in the works of three budding celebrities—all from Florence—whose names were destined to grace the pages of history. The young Giotto probably made his first trip to Rome to participate in the preparations for the jubilee and to paint the fresco which recorded the scene described above. He was followed by the scholar Giovanni Villani, who declared the jubilee "the most marvelous scene ever witnessed," and who was so stirred by the history he read in the monuments of Rome that he decided to write a chronicle of his own city, which as The History of Florence was to become one of the greatest of all mediaeval historical writings in the vernacular. Finally, the famous description by Dante of pilgrims to the jubilee crossing the bridge to St. Peter's is so vivid as to suggest that he too must have been present at the celebration. In any case, the fact that he set the Divine Comedy in the year 1300 would seem to demonstrate his preoccupation with the symbolic significance of the year of jubilee.

Nor was this surprising. At the time, while Boniface was celebrating the jubilee, most Europeans could have been as satisfied with their accomplishments and their prospects as was the Pope with his. The political, economic, and cultural advances of the preceding two centuries, the greatest since the fall of the Roman Empire, contributed not merely to a sense of satisfaction but to confidence in the future. The
enthusiasm for the papal triumph, however, was not universal as could have been inferred from the failure of the great secular authorities, the German Emperor and the kings of France and England, to make an appearance at Rome.

At the time, it is true, Edward I of England, Philip IV of France, and the German Emperor Albert of Hapsburg were all occupied with serious problems at home; and the first two, at least, sent emissaries to represent them at Rome. But neither the chronic unrest of their vassals nor unresolved issues between themselves would have been likely to keep Edward and Philip from Rome if they had not both been involved with Boniface in a major struggle for prestige and power. The Emperor, it might be added, was detained in Germany by intrigues fomented by Pope Boniface himself, who was attempting to assert and even to exercise supreme lay power. To have attended the jubilee might well have given the reigning monarchs the sense of celebrating the triumph of an authority they were preparing to resist to the limit of their resources.

In 1296, Boniface VIII had issued a bull, Clericis laicos, forbidding secular rulers to levy taxes on the clergy without the Pope’s consent. A direct challenge to the kings of France and England, it provoked a vigorous reaction from both Philip IV and Edward I. Boniface appeared to retreat, but in 1302 he returned to the attack with the bull Unam sanctam, in which
he announced that "it is entirely necessary for salvation that all human creation be subject to the pope of Rome." Even if, as is now held, the ideas expressed were not new, the tone and manner of their expression were. After a futile attempt at negotiation, Philip sent one of his principal advisers, Guillaume de Nogaret, to arrest the Pope and bring him to France for trial before a council to be summoned for the purpose. Nogaret found Boniface at a country residence at Anagni, where he subjected the aged and ailing pontiff to threats and humiliations so extreme as to arouse the townspeople to his defense. Nogaret retreated, but a short while later Boniface died of shock. The real outcome of the confrontation, however, can be seen in the election, in 1305, of Clement V to the papacy. Archbishop of Bordeaux, he never did go to Rome, but instead set up his court at Avignon, a papal enclave in southeastern France, thus becoming a virtual, if voluntary, pawn of Philip. Seldom in history has such pride as Boniface expressed in 1300 at the jubilee been followed so swiftly by such a total fall.

His was the tragedy of a brilliant but deeply flawed character. It was also the climax of a long, mounting conflict between spiritual and secular authority in mediaeval society. And most important, in this context, it symbolized the destruction of the great thirteenth-century synthesis—which had reached its political culmination in the middle of the century—
by the unchecked extension of its inner principles to ultimate and disastrous conclusions. In spite of many personal conflicts between individual rulers, the authority of Rome, at least in theory, supported and balanced that of the kings or emperor, just as both lay and secular powers were nourished by the freely given financial support of the towns. The harmonious and balanced interaction of these forces had produced the great political structures of the age. Attempts to transform each into independent and unlimited powers could only end in general political disruption and in the destruction or transformation of each institution.

If Boniface was one of the first and most spectacular victims of this process, he was not the last. Although Edward I of England, Philip IV of France, and the Emperor Albert of Hapsburg appeared to their contemporaries as particularly capable and successful rulers, they too were to be swept rapidly from the scene and Europe was not to know their like again for generations. At first glance the lack of capable successors might appear a mere accident of inheritance; neither Philip IV nor Edward I left sons of character or ability comparable to his own. But a close look at the history of the ensuing years reveals that if these rulers' heirs were inferior, the problems they faced were new and ominous.