



The Pursuit of Italy: A History of a Land, Its Regions, and Their Peoples

By David Gilmour

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A provocative, entertaining account of Italy's diverse riches, its hopes and dreams, its past and present

Did Garibaldi do Italy a disservice when he helped its disparate parts achieve unity? Was the goal of political unification a mistake? The question is asked and answered in a number of ways in *The Pursuit of Italy*, an engaging, original consideration of the many histories that contribute to the brilliance?and weakness?of Italy today.

David Gilmour's wonderfully readable exploration of Italian life over the centuries is filled with provocative anecdotes as well as personal observations, and is peopled by the great figures of the Italian past?from Cicero and Virgil to the controversial politicians of the twentieth century. His wise account of the Risorgimento debunks the nationalistic myths that surround it, though he paints a sympathetic portrait of Giuseppe Verdi, a beloved hero of the era.

Gilmour shows that the glory of Italy has always lain in its regions, with their distinctive art, civic cultures, identities, and cuisines. Italy's inhabitants identified themselves not as Italians but as Tuscans and Venetians, Sicilians and Lombards, Neapolitans and Genoese. Italy's strength and culture still come from its regions rather than from its misconceived, mishandled notion of a unified nation.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Amazingly compendious . . . The best one-volume history of Italy now available . . . [*The Pursuit of Italy*] has the same tonic, exhilarating impact as the thigh-slapping overture to a Verdi opera.” ?Jonathan Keates, *The Literary Review*

“[*The Pursuit of Italy* has] a freshness and readability often lacking in more laborious histories, an attractiveness reinforced by the quality of the writing, which is versatile and vivid and frequently witty, able to encompass both densely factual material and complicated narrative without loss of clarity or elegance . . . Compelling to read and highly informative . . . Brilliantly accomplished.” ?Barry Unsworth, *The Spectator*

“Lucid and elegant, clever and provocative . . . Tracing Italy's history from Romulus and Remus to the misdemeanours of Silvio Berlusconi, Gilmour develops his thesis with wit, style, and a great deal of learning.” ?Dominic Sandbrook, *The Sunday Times (London)*

“[A] well-researched and engaging canter through the peninsula's history.” ?Peter Popham, *The Independent*

“[Gilmour is] a witty guide with an elegant prose style and a mind delightfully furnished with anecdotes and dictums, sensual impressions and conversations . . . [His] prose smells not of the archive but of a convivial meal eaten beneath a pergola in the Pisan hills.” ?Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *The Daily Telegraph*

“Gilmour's elegantly written book . . . is full of impressive insights . . . A stimulating, up-to-date and reliable guide to modern Italian history.” ?Tony Barber, *Financial Times*

“In this superb history of Italy and the Italian people, Gilmour celebrates a nation of bewilderingly mixed bloods and ethnicities . . . *The Pursuit of Italy* offers an enduring tribute to a various and wonderful people.” ?Ian Thomson, *Evening Standard*

About the Author

Sir David Gilmour is one of Britain's most admired and accomplished historical writers and biographers. His previous books include *The Last Leopard*, *The Long Recessional* (FSG, 2002), and, most recently, *The Ruling Caste* (FSG, 2006).

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The Pursuit of Italy

1

Diverse Italies

FRACTURED GEOGRAPHY

Italy, complained Napoleon, is too long. It is indeed very long, the longest country in Europe outside Scandinavia and the Ukraine. It is also one of the thinnest, its peninsula about as narrow as Portugal and the Netherlands, broader only than Albania and Luxembourg. Ugo La Malfa, a republican politician of the twentieth century, liked to picture the country as a man with his feet in Africa and his hands clutching the

Alps, trying to pull himself up into the middle of Europe.¹

We think of Italy as a country with a north and a south, but actually its 720 miles run diagonally through different climatic and vegetation zones from the town of Aosta in the north-west, where French is an official language, to the Salentine Peninsula in the Apulian south-east, where Greek is still spoken. On the battlements of the Castle of Otranto you feel you are in the Balkans, and in a sense you are: you can see the mountains of Greece and Albania across the water; you are closer to Istanbul and the Ukraine than you are to Aosta; the Black Sea is nearer than the west coast of Sardinia. When Apulia joined the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, the new state's capital was Turin, a city so far away that Otranto is today closer to seventeen foreign capitals than it is to Turin. No wonder you sometimes hear Apulians refer to themselves as Greeks or Levantines. Sometimes they pretend that they are not also Italians.

In 1847 the Austrian chancellor, Prince Metternich, dismissed Italy as '*une expression géographique*', a remark that has subsequently succeeded in annoying many people, especially Italians and historians. At the time Italy may have been more than a geographical expression - thought was still divided into eight independent states - but Metternich was repeating a view widely held for more than 2,000 years: Italy, like Iberia, may have been a geographical unit with natural borders but it had not been united since Roman times and did not seem to require political unity now or in the future.

Italy seems to begin with the myth of Hercules, the Greek hero who rescued a stray calf that had wandered across southern Italy and swum the Straits of Messina. The land the animal crossed duly became known as Italia, from the word *outoulos* or bull-calf, a word that has also bequeathed us, via Oscan and Latin, the word *vitello* or veal. A related theory, recorded by the Greek historian Timaeus, held that the ancient Greeks had been so impressed by the cattle in Italy that they had rewarded the land with the same name.

This may be the explanation for the origin of the name 'Italia', but it does not seem quite convincing. For centuries northern visitors have been scathing about the skinny appearance of Italian cows, especially the small, white, wide-horned ones bred mainly for pulling carts and drawing ploughs. The arid south of the peninsula, bereft of pasture and hay fields, can hardly have seemed a herdsman's paradise even for the Greeks: the great Murge Plateau in Apulia cannot support cattle because it does not have streams. Italy today has to import more than half the milk it consumes and, if we associate the south with any kind of cattle now, it is with water buffaloes, producers of the milk used in making the soft white cheese *mozzarella di bufala*. Yet the buffaloes are of Asian origin and were brought to Italy for ploughing in the early Middle Ages; later they went wild, roaming over Campania and the Pontine Marshes before they were domesticated once more in the eighteenth century. Used as draught animals rather than for milk and meat, the herds seemed to be dying out in the first half of the twentieth century. Their famous product did not become either famous or fashionable until the 1980s.

In the fifth century BC the word 'Italia' applied only to the Calabrian toe of the Italian 'boot', which was inhabited by a people known as the Bruttians. Later it was extended to Lucania and Campania, and later still the term spread northwards to describe Rome's conquests in the peninsula. The Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides did not regard the land beyond the River Po as a part of Italy, and indeed geographically the Po Valley belongs to the continental land-mass not the peninsula. But after the Romans had subdued its Gallic tribes and reached the Alps, that area too was added to Italia. By the second century BC another Greek historian, Polybius, confirmed that almost the whole of modern Italy was then Italia, though Roman poets of a later age sometimes called it by other names such as Hesperia, Ausonia, Saturnia terra and (appropriately for what is now the largest wine producer in the world) Oenotria, 'the land of wine'.

There was one sharp check to this progress. In 91 BC some of Rome's *socii* (subservient allies) rebelled and set up a state in the central Apennines called Italia, with a capital Corfinium (renamed Italica), administered by praetors, a senate and two consuls. The insurgents even produced coins showing the bull of Italia goring and about to rape the Roman wolf. They were defeated, however, in the ensuing Social War by Rome's traditional tactic of brutality plus concessions, and no further attempt was made to set up a state called Italy for many centuries to come.

Within a century of the war, the earlier version of Italia was organized as an administrative unit by Augustus,

the first Roman emperor, who divided it into eleven districts; the Istrian Peninsula, which was joined to Venetia, was the only part that does not belong to the modern state of Italy.¹ A later emperor, Diocletian, expanded Italia to include Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and Raetia, a district that contained parts of what are now Switzerland, Bavaria and the Tyrol.

Augustan Italy, lauded by Virgil and his fellow poets, remained an inspiration to the poets of the Middle Ages, to Petrarch who sang of 'the fair land / That the Apennines divide and the sea and the Alps surround',² and to many others later on. Yet until the end of the eighteenth century Italy remained a literary idea, an abstract concept, an imaginary homeland or simply a sentimental urge. If at times people used it to express resentment at foreign occupation, its independence and unity were not political aspirations. And for a large majority of the population it meant nothing at all. Even in 1861, at the time of unification, some Sicilians thought L'Italia - or rather la Talia - was their new queen. A full century later, the social reformer Danilo Dolci encountered Sicilians who had never heard of Italy and asked him what it was.³

The geography we imbibe from school textbooks and atlases makes us think that Italy is peculiarly blessed in its position. According to the revolutionary patriot Giuseppe Mazzini, God had given Italians 'the most clearly demarcated fatherland in Europe'.⁴ There it lies in the centre of the Mediterranean, protected in the north by its Alpine ramparts and everywhere else by its seas.

Italy is actually extremely unfortunate in its position, which has made it one of the most easily and frequently invaded places in the world. The Alps may look impressive but they have been penetrated without difficulty since the Bronze Age. In the twelfth century BC traders were bringing amber from the Baltic across the Alps to Etruria and Sardinia; by the Roman era seventeen of the twenty-three Alpine passes were being used. Few ramparts have been so consistently surmounted down the centuries. Hannibal brought his Carthaginian army over the Western Alps, while Alaric's Goths and Attila's Huns came from the east through the lower Julian and Carnic Alps. In 1796 General Bonaparte, as he then was, marched through the Maritime Alps between Nice and Genoa - allowing him to boast to his soldiers, '*Annibal a forcé les Alpes - nous, nous les avons tournés*' - but four years later, now as first consul, he descended on Italy through five more northerly passes. Afterwards he had himself painted riding a white charger through the snows of the Great St Bernard, though in fact he had been led through them on a little grey mule.

Many other aggressors have emulated these invaders of Italy. Once they had got through the passes and on to the plain, they could speed up across the Po Valley, which was flat, inviting and difficult to defend, unless they were attacking from the west, in which case they were hindered by tributaries of the Po flowing southwards in parallel from the northern lakes: Milan was simple to capture, and those other 'gateways' to Italy, Turin and Verona, were not much harder. One reason why the eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) lasted for a thousand years longer than its western counterpart was that it was much easier to defend. The Goths and Huns might rampage around the Balkans but they were halted at Constantinople by the city walls and a fleet that prevented them from crossing the Bosphorus and ravaging Asia Minor. Later the Byzantines performed a similar feat in reverse, blocking the Arabs in the seventh century and thus preventing them from pouring into eastern Europe, reaching Italy and doubtless Islamicizing Rome. At a time, a century before Charlemagne, when Europe was militarily weak, Byzantium saved it and made possible its later rise to dominance. Apart from the French Riviera, the Italian peninsula has the only Mediterranean coasts that (except around Bari) have never been Muslim.

Its seas made Italy even more vulnerable than its mountains. With 4,500 miles of coastline, the peninsula and its islands are almost impossible to patrol. They can be attacked from all directions by predators from three continents.

Boats were man's first means of transport, and by 5000 BC these had become sufficiently sturdy to undertake long sea voyages. In the fifth century BC Herodotus observed that a boat could sail 75 miles in twenty-four hours, a statistic suggesting that invaders of Italy from...

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