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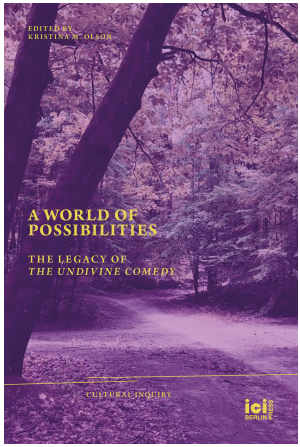

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Dante's War

Exiles, *carestia*, and Conflict in the Florentine Countryside, 1301–1304

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ABSTRACT: During two years of public service (1300 and 1301), Dante was engaged in initiatives to ensure food (grain) security for Florence. However, as a signatory of the San Godenzo accord in June of 1302, the exiled Dante joined and helped lead the armed struggle by White Guelfs and Ghibellines in the Mugello valley to disrupt Florentine interests, particularly grain shipments, during the 1302–03 food crisis (*carestia*). His involvement in this effort seems to contrast with certain aspects of the model of leadership that he developed in later works, including *Convivio* and the *Commedia*.

KEYWORDS: exile; Guelfs; grain; food; priorate; carestia; Convivio; Mugello

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Dante's War

Exiles, *carestia*, and Conflict in the Florentine Countryside, 1301–1304

GEORGE DAMERON*

In *Inferno* 32 and 33, the narrator-poet, Dante, encounters a flesh-eater. In the ninth circle (Cocytus) of the treacherous, in the second 'round' of those condemned for treachery against party or faction (Antenora), the narrator and his guide, Virgil, come upon a prominent Guelf nobleman, Ugolino della Gherardesca. As Ugolino is gnawing on the nape of Archbishop Ruggieri of Pisa, he recounts a story that is both poignant and horrifying. The prelate Ruggieri, who had condemned his former ally Ugolino (along with his sons) to die of starvation in the Torre della Fame in Pisa, suffers the infernal fate of being eaten himself by his erstwhile ally.[1] In chapter 4 of *The Undivine Comedy* ('Narrative and Style in Lower Hell'), Teodolinda Barolini observes that Ugolino

* The title of this essay pays homage to William Caferro's marvelous book, *Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

1 For a recent reading of cantos 32 and 33 which highlights the role of 'political betrayal' as the cause of his punishment (rather than cannibalism), see Christiana Purdy Moudarres, 'Bodily Starvation and the Ravaging of the Will: A Reading of *Inferno* 32 and 33', *Viator*, 47.1 (2015), pp. 205–28. For the historical Ugolino della Gherardesca (and bibliography), see Donna Yowell, 'Ugolino della Gherardesca', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), pp. 839–41. See also Simonetta Saffiotti Bernardi and Umberto Bosco,

went about telling this story with a 'narrative cunning by which he hopes to elicit the pilgrim's sympathy'.[2] Indeed, 'the self-consciousness of the episode encompasses an authorial self-scrutiny as well' (*UDC*, 95). After all, the dream embedded in Ugolino's narrative with wild animals recalls the 'dreamscape' of *Inferno* 1, with its 'allegorical wolves and hounds' (*UDC*, 95), presumably signifying Ugolino's greed and bestiality. However, even if Ugolino is a 'good storyteller', Barolini writes, 'the poet asserts his own narrative authority over Ugolino's with extraordinary force and aggressivity, issuing the ferocious invective against Pisa' (*UDC*, 95). To understand the significance of Ugolino's story, therefore, an appreciation of the historical context within which it unfolded is necessary. Indeed, as Barolini noted in her discussion of the episode, the criticisms of both Pisa and Genoa issued by the poet in canto 33 are 'important to understanding the historical backdrop against which Ugolino betrayed and was betrayed' (*UDC*, 97).

'Authorial self-scrutiny', 'understanding the historical backdrop', 'betrayed and betrayal' — these are indeed crucial dimensions of a canto about which so much can still be written. In her recent book, *Dante's Gluttons: Food and Society from the 'Convivio' to the 'Comedy'*, Danielle Callegari explores this story, adding insights to an already extensive corpus of commentary on the two cantos. It is, however, part of a much broader enterprise on her part, as she examines closely the symbolic meaning of food and images of food in Dante's writings from his early works through the *Commedia*. Noting that previous 'indifference to food in Dante may also be due to a methodological bias against the use of material culture to read the poet's work',[3] Callegari observes

'Ugolino della Gherardesca, conte di Donoratico', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ed. by. Umberto Bosco (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1970) <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ugolino-della-gherardesca-conte-di-donoratico_(Enciclopedia-Dantesca)/> [accessed 18 May 2025]. All references to the text of the *Commedia* used for this essay are from Dante Alighieri: *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, Società Dantesca Italiana, Edizione Nazionale, 2nd rev. edn, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994). English translations come from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum, 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980–82).

2 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 95, hereafter *UDC*. Subsequent references given in parentheses in the main text.

3 Danielle Callegari, *Dante's Gluttons: Food and Society from the 'Convivio' to the 'Comedy'* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), p. 18.

that the language of food functions in Dante's work promote his notions of good leadership. Dante 'establishes our responsibility to create and sustain community through the act of nourishment and giving of the self'.[4] Regarding the *Convivio* (1303–07) in particular, she writes: 'The gesture of feeding, to give food instead of keeping it for oneself, afforded the opportunity to model good leadership by being a reliable provider and inclined toward charity'.[5] The character of Ugolino in cantos 32 and 33 represents the opposite of that model. Along with other characters portrayed at the end of the canticle (Alberigo and Satan), Ugolino represents 'a perfect contrast with the successful head of the community, who is powerful through providing and enforcing cohesion through communion in food'.[6] He is the negative archetype of a civic leader.

The image of the character of Ugolino as 'betrayer and betrayed', his association with the factionalism of his native city, his record of previous service to his community, and his close connection of his destiny with food ironically call to mind certain aspects of Dante's own life. Indeed, at least on the surface, and perhaps only incidentally, the historical Ugolino had something in common with Dante the poet. Of course, unlike Ugolino (if we believe the story about him), Dante was not a cannibal, even though he wrote about it in canto 33. Nevertheless, there are some interesting parallels between the historical Ugolino (d. 1285) and the poet (d. 1321). When the Black Guelfs condemned Dante as a traitor in 1302, he considered himself betrayed both by his native city and by the faction of Guelfs. As Ugolino had once served as *podestà* of Pisa for ten years, Dante had also served his city-state in a variety of posts for at least seven years, including (and most importantly) as prior in 1300.[7] After returning to Pisa at the invitation of his ally, Archbishop Ruggieri, Ugolino was betrayed and died in

4 Ibid., p. 14.

5 Ibid., p. 114.

6 Ibid., p. 116.

7 The primary guide for the chronology of Dante's life is taken from the 'Chronology' in *Dante in Context*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. xx–xxiii; and Lino Pertile, 'Life', ibid., pp. 461–74. For specific details about Dante's life chronology, I draw upon Marco Santagata, *Dante: The Story of His Life*, trans. by Richard Dixon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2016).

prison. Condemned to death himself by his own factional enemies, Dante also faced the death penalty after 1302, but he escaped punishment because he never returned to Florence. Both were caught up in factional divisions. Finally, according to the Florentine-biased Pseudo-Brunetto Latini chronicle (c. 1300), the historical Ugolino roused the Pisans to anger for having allegedly brought about starvation at a time of grain abundance. This behaviour is precisely the opposite of the model of urban governance as apparently portrayed by Dante in the *Convivio*.[8] But as for Dante, surprisingly, his own actions in 1302 in support of the military campaigns against Florence aimed to limit if not end the ability of the city to import food, particularly grain. In that year he supported if not helped lead armed efforts to induce hunger in his native city during the most serious food (grain) crisis (*carestia*) in a generation. His activities stand in stark contrast to the model of civic governance that he apparently later developed in the *Convivio* and the *Commedia*.[9]

As this essay will argue, after many years of public service, the newly exiled Dante was directly engaged in aiding and abetting a military strategy in 1302–03 based on the use of food deprivation as a weapon of war. The Dante who wrote (but did not finish) the *Convivio* (1303–07) observed that good citizenship and leadership required providing sufficient nourishment for one's citizens. This was the same Dante who in 1302–03 helped lead and support military policies designed to deprive Florence of sufficient food during the Mugello war

8 The relevant passage from the chronicle of Pseudo-Brunetto Latini is quoted in both English and the original Italian in Callegari, *Dante's Gluttons*, pp. 105–06. Callegari notes that both Cook and Herzman use the text to argue in favour of Ugolino's cannibalism in their essay, William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, '*Inferno* XXIII: The Past and Present in Dante's Imagery of Betrayal', *Italica*, 56.4 (Winter 1979), pp. 377–83. On p. 378 of their essay, the authors quote the passage from Pseudo-Brunetto Latini's chronicle that relates to Ugolino's withholding of grain from the Pisans: 'This Count Ugolino was a man of such a type that he caused the people of Pisa to die of hunger and at this time although he had a great abundance of grain was so cruel that a staio of grain cost seven pounds.' They cite the source for the quote in David Herlihy, *Pisa in the Early Renaissance: A Study in Urban Growth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 109.

9 As Callegari argues, Dante's progression from Ugolino to Alberigo and then to Satan offers 'a perfect contrast with the successful head of the community who is powerful through providing and enforcing cohesion through communion in food' (Callegari, *Dante's Gluttons*, p. 116).

(during summer and fall of 1302). How do we explain this apparent contradiction between actions taken in 1302–03 and the philosophical arguments advanced after 1303? It is not the aim of this essay to resolve this issue, as any response must be speculative. Dante left the armed struggle and the battlefield as early as the spring of 1303 or as late as the summer of 1304. Perhaps there is a dose of self-criticism and regret ('self-scrutiny') on Dante's part when he finished *Inferno* in 1315, evident in cantos 32 and 33 in the person of Ugolino? We can never know for certain. However, at the very least, this essay aims to renew attention to Dante's participation in military operations directed against Florence in 1302–03 that intended to induce hunger in the city. Unfortunately, as Guido Pampaloni observed many years ago when he published his findings on Dante's year of exile, the lack of sufficient documentation hampers the ability of the historian to answer all the questions and fill in the gaps.[10] Nevertheless, we know enough to conclude that Dante's role as a major participant in the wars by Ghibellines and White Guelf exiles against Florence seems to stand at variance with the philosophical positions regarding food, leadership, and governance that he apparently later promoted in his works after 1303.

For seven years (1295–1302), Dante had been a reliable and consistent participant in Florentine public life. Some of those duties either directly or indirectly included responsibilities associated with the urban grain supply. After his exile from Florence in 1302, his political activity continued, albeit in alliance with White Guelfs and Ghibellines engaged in a war against the Black Guelf faction then in control of Florence. After many years as a public servant with duties that at times concerned the urban food supply, Dante supported and

10 Santagata, *Dante*, p. 152; Guido Pampaloni, 'I primi anni dell'esilio di Dante', in *Conferenze Aretine 1965* (Arezzo: Academia Petrarca; Bibbiena: Società Dantesca Casentinese, 1966), pp. 133–47 (p. 144). Scholars hold differing views about when exactly Dante left the armed struggle. Pampaloni believes he left in the spring of 1303 (ibid., pp. 144–45), as did Robert Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, trans. by Giovanni Battista Klein, 5 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1960), IV, p. 325. For Santagata, Dante 'distanced himself from the theater of war' either after Niccolò da Prato's departure from Florence on June 10, 1304, or after the death of the pope on July 7 (Santagata, *Dante*, p. 172). Given the fact that Dante began the *Convivio* in 1303, abandoning the armed struggle in the spring of 1303 seems more plausible than leaving a year later in the summer of 1304.

helped lead military efforts in the countryside north and east of the city that intended, among various goals, to disrupt the supply of food to the city, particularly grain. The purpose, at the very least, was to drive up the urban price of grain and thereby encourage disorder to undermine the legitimacy of the new Black Guelf regime; at most, it aimed to induce hunger if not starvation within the city walls. In early 1302 Dante was one of several signatories of an agreement at San Godenzo in the Mugello valley north of Florence to indemnify members of the Ubaldini magnate family for any losses incurred from those military actions. Indeed, as a military leader and as a financial guarantor of those efforts, Dante was therefore an active participant and financial guarantor in a military strategy based on food deprivation: tactics that exacerbated an already severe *carestia* (grain shortage) in 1302–03. Not surprisingly, in March of 1302 the Black Guelf regime identified Dante as a traitor to Florence and to his party (the Guelfs).[11] For the writer who had completed the *Commedia* by 1321, however, it was Black Florence itself, allied with Pope Boniface VIII in 1302, that had been the 'betrayer' — to him, to his party, to his city.

What follows is a presentation of the historical context leading up to the time when Dante signed the indemnification agreement in June of 1302 at San Godenzo. It focuses specifically on the politics of food during the years of his public service and early exile (1295–1303). It does not add any new specific details to what we already know about Dante's life during those seven years; nevertheless, the evidence that Dante was a party to a military strategy based on inducing food deprivation is compelling and worth emphasizing. With his past experiences

11 Robert Hollander, *Dante: A Life in Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) provides a very detailed chronology of the poet's life on pp. xi–xiv, as does Nick Havely, *Dante* (Maldon, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. xxi–xxvi. Santagata, *Dante*, chapter 3 covers Dante's public service between 1295 and 1301, as do Barański and Pertile, 'Chronology', pp. xxi–xxii, and Pertile, 'Life', pp. 464–66. For Dante's role at the conferences at Gargonza and San Godenzo, see Pampaloni, 'I primi anni', pp. 142–44; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 144–57. For the first Mugello war from June through September 1302, see Santagata, *Dante*, p. 152. The text of the indemnification letter is published in Isidoro del Lungo, *Dino Compagni e la sua Cronica*, 3 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1879–87), II (1879), pp. 569–70. See below for details. For the severe *carestia* (food shortage) of 1302–03 and the disruption of grain shipments by White Guelf exiles and Ghibellines, see Giuliano Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo. Carestie e annona a Firenze dalla metà del '200 al 1348* (Florence: Olschki, 1978), pp. 84–88.

as a public official engaged in food policies and as a military (cavalry) leader at the battles of Campaldino and Caprona in 1289, at San Godenzo in 1302 Dante signed an indemnity agreement that effectively subsidized Ubaldini's efforts in the Mugello to use food deprivation as a weapon of war. Those efforts included a variety of strategies to hamper the delivery of grain to the city from Romagna, including targeting grain shipments, capturing Florentine *castelli*, and obstructing or disrupting the road infrastructure. In 1302–03 the ideal strategic goals of the White Guelf exiles and Ghibellines in the *contado* — aims that Dante not only supported but led — were to induce famine and inspire internal rebellion.[12] The rest of this essay will consist of three parts. A brief first section surveys the history of the political economy of grain and food crises from 1265 to 1295, coinciding with the first three decades of the poet's life. The second section highlights the seven years between 1295 and 1302, the period during which Dante assumed an active role in public service that included a close familiarity with the urban food supply (the *annona*). The third part examines two years, 1302 and 1303, the beginning of his exile and engagement in the military resistance to the new Black Guelf regime in Florence. Sometime in 1303 the poet abandoned the field of battle to resume his philosophical writing, beginning both the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*.[13]

For the first decade of Dante's life (1265–75), as the population and size of Florence was growing rapidly, the Florentine city-state enjoyed reliable access to its principal source of food source: grain.[14] In fact, for most of the third quarter of the thirteenth century (c. 1250–c. 1275), grain harvests were generally favourable. Occasionally, how-

12 Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 85–86; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 150–52; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 319–32.

13 For Dante's life in exile, see Pertile, 'Life', pp. 466–68. For the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, aside from Callegari, *Dante's Gluttons*, see Lino Pertile, 'Works', in *Dante in Context*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 483–88.

14 For a general overview of the political economy of grain from the twelfth to the mid-fourteenth century, see George Dameron, 'Feeding the Medieval Italian City-State: Grain, War and Political Legitimacy in Tuscany, c. 1150–c. 1350', *Speculum*, 92.4 (October 2017), pp. 976–1019 <https://doi.org/10.1086/693379>. For the period covered by this essay, c. 1250–c. 1330, see pp. 996–1007. See also Dameron, *Feeding the Medieval Italian City-State: Grain, Political Legitimacy, and War, c. 1100–1350* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

ever, imports from afar were necessary. For example, although the city imported grain in 1271 from southern Italy and from Provence, for the most part Florence experienced no major interruption in its grain supply until the mid-1270s. Like most city-states in Tuscany, in the 1270s we first begin to see the emergence of the most significant public bureaucracies dedicated to insuring grain security. Such was the case for Florence, as managing imports from neighbouring regions to supplement domestic grain reserves became increasingly necessary. The first actual grain bureaucracy appeared in 1274, but it was apparently short-lived. Food security was increasingly becoming a major public policy priority for the government of the Florentine Commune, as grain harvests between 1275 and 1285 were increasingly inconsistent and difficult. For two years (1275–77), the city as well as the region of Tuscany experienced the first major grain shortage or dearth (*carestia*) of the second half of the thirteenth century. In response, the Parte Guelfa loaned funds to finance imports to the new (post 1267) government of the Primo Popolo, and the Kingdom of Naples exported many hundreds of *salme* of grain to Florence.[15] After the crisis of the mid-1270s, the grain magistracy created in 1274 disappeared from our sources for reasons unknown (though it was not uncommon in Tuscan communes for certain magistracies to pop up as needed and then disappear after the crisis that called them into being had dissipated).[16]

The 1280s and 1290s (and until 1295, when Dante turned 30) were important decades in the development of the poet's life and family. During those decades he married Gemma Donati (1285), his children

15 Pinto, *Libro del Biadiaolo*, pp. 80–81, 100–01, 107–09; Nicola Ottokar, *Il comune di Firenze alla fine del Dugento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), p. 110; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, III, pp. 104–05, 166–67. The license to export 800 *salme* of wheat from Sicily to Florence in 1276 by way of Pisa to meet the food needs of Florence is as follows: 'Cum ad supplicationem Potestatis, Consilii et Comuni Florentie, devotorum nostrorum eis concesserimus licentiam extrahendi de portubus licitis et statutis Sicilie, ad extractionem victualium deputatis, octingentas salmas frumenti ad salman generalem, ferendas per mare apud Pisas et deinde apud Florentiam pro usu et sustentatione hominum ipsius terre [...]'. *Documenti delle relazioni tra Carlo I d'Angiò e la Toscana*, ed. by Sergio Terlizzi (Florence: Olschki, 1950), pp. 398–99. For other export licenses to ship grain to Florence from Sicily, see ibid., pp. 397, 402–03, 404–05.

16 This first grain magistracy appears in the document Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Diplomatico*, Santissima Annunziata, dicembre, 1274, hereafter *ASF*. For more information (and documentation) of this magistracy, see Ottokar, *Il comune di Firenze*, pp. 109–10; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, III, pp. 166–67.

were born (1287, 1289), he wrote two of his most important early lyrical works (the *Detto d'Amore* and *Fiore*, 1286–87), and his muse, Beatrice (wife of Simone dei Bardi), died in 1290. In June of 1289, to be precise, Dante served as a cavalry officer for Florence at the battle of Campaldino (and possibly Caprona on August 6, 1289) during its war with Arezzo. During this war (which lasted until 1293), Dante served in the cohort of *feditori*, a prestigious detachment of cavalry that usually spearheaded the attack.[17]

This was also an important decade and a half in the food history of Florence. By 1284, the urban government opted to create a new and more permanent magistracy, the *Sei della biada*, dedicated specifically to insuring food (grain) security for the city. This is the same year that a new loggia at Orsanmichele was begun, a short distance from Dante's home parish church, to provide a large and central location for the marketing of grain. When the married poet began his twenty-first year (1285–86), Florence and the rest of Tuscany experienced another severe grain shortage (*carestia*), far worse than the crisis of the mid-1270s. In order to deal with this crisis, the Commune unveiled several new initiatives to supplement domestic production and to encourage imports from the Senese and Romagna. These measures included the offer of bounties to anyone bringing grain from outside the city limits (*districtus*) to the urban market (1285), the establishment of a major urban granary or storehouse (*canova*, 1285), and the repair of road infrastructure with public funds provided the *Sei della biada* to facilitate grain deliveries to the Orsanmichele market (1286–87). The members of the new (1282) governing magistracy of the Commune, the priorate, approved in 1287 the creation of a new grain market at Monteluco della Berardegna in the *contado* to facilitate access to grain reserves from an agriculturally rich region of Tuscany. It was located on the periphery of two major grain producing regions, the Senese and the Aretino.[18]

17 Barański and Pertile, 'Chronology', p. xx; Pertile, 'Life', pp. 461–64; Santagata, *Dante*, chapters 1–2. For the battle of Campaldino, see Federico Canaccini, *1289: la battaglia di Campaldino* (Bari: Laterza, 2021). For Dante's role in the Aretine war, including Campaldino and Caprona, see Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 52, 61–62; and John Najemy, *History of Florence* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 80–81.

18 Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, ed. by Giuseppe Porta, 3 vols (Parma: Guanda, 1990–91), I, pp. 547, 576; Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, *Cronica Fiorentina di Marchionne di Coppo Stefani*, ed. by Niccolò Rodolico (Città del Castello: Lapi, 1903), p. 62 (rubric

On July 10, 1289, just a month after Campaldino, the newly elected magistrates of the *Sei della biada* successfully petitioned the powerful Consiglio del Capitano for funds to use at their own discretion to purchase grain and to pay the salaries of their small staff. In 1290 and 1291 the government defined more precisely the powers and duties of the *Sei della biada* regarding imports, grain purchases, and policing. By early 1291, for example, we learn that the magistracy of the *Sei* was empowered to arrange for grain imports, keep careful track of their governance procedures and records, and police (guarantee the security) of the urban grain supply (*annona*). All their duties, however, were to be conducted under the supervision of the principal magistracy of the priorate, and all their funds came from communal coffers. Although 1291 was not a year of *carestia* (harvests were apparently favourable from 1287 to 1295), there was sufficient concern on the part of the *Sei* regarding a shortage of grain — enough to prompt the import of at least 400 *staia* from Romagna and to enforce strict fines levied on violators of the export ban (*divieto*).[19] Immediately after Campaldino, therefore, it seems that communal leaders initiated certain measures through its grain magistracy (now half a decade old) to mitigate the vulnerability of the commune to threats to its grain imports during possible military operations. The areas of highest vulnerability to disruption were grain imports from the Aretino (upper Arno valley) and from across the Apennines from Romagna (through the Mugello valley).[20]

168, year 1286): 'Come fu grande carestia in Firenze ed in molte altre parti'; Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 80–81, 107–09, 116, 122–23; Najemy, *History of Florence*, chapters 2–4 (for political and social background up to 1340). For the grain market at Orsanmichele, see ibid., pp. 54–55. In 1287 the Florentine government approved a market to be established at Monteluco della Berardegna, near the border with Siena and Arezzo. The purpose was to maximize the amount of grain from that region for Florence ('maxime pro copia grani et blade habenda', from Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, p. 107, citing *ASF* Provvizioni Protocolli 1, c. 45r).

19 Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 80–83, 101. Davidsohn notes that the Commune gave Guido da Polenta enough money to import 3,000 staia of grain to the city market (Orsanmichele). See Robert Davidsohn, 'Die Getreidepolitik, der Kommune', in Davidsohn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte von Florenz*, 4 vols (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1896–1908), IV, pp. 307–15.

20 Giovanni Cherubini, 'L'approvvigionamento alimentare delle città toscane tra XII e XV secolo', in Cherubini, *Firenze e la Toscana (Scritti vari)* (Pisa: Ospedaletto, 2013), pp. 39–55 (especially pp. 42–46).

It was during this year, 1295, that Dante entered public service. Over the next six years, he served in several positions that either directly or indirectly involved the urban grain supply. His entry into public life came at the end of an especially productive phase of his artistic life, as the writer of lyrical (love) poetry. His entry into public life also coincided with the political ascendancy of the Cerchi, who were apparently his patrons, allies, or both. Though originally from the non-aristocratic *popolo*, gradually (and certainly by the time he was writing the *Commedia*) he came to be politically critical of both the *popolo* (whom he believed were flawed by envy and greed) and the aristocracy or magnates (for their factionalism). To be eligible to serve in the Commune, the governance of which was managed by the major guilds, one had to be registered as a member of a guild. Dante did join a guild in July of that year: the guild of doctors and apothecaries (*Medici e Speziali*). His political career in communal governance began — as was expected of any politician wishing to ascend the ladder of political office — with service on several communal councils. In November (1295) he appeared as a member of the Council of Thirty-Six (or *Consiglio speciale del Capitano del Popolo*) as a representative of his neighborhood (*sestiere*). A month later, he spoke before the council of the heads of the major guilds (the *Consiglio dei Capitudini*) on the issue of election reform regarding the priorate. In June of 1296 he assumed a role on the Council of One Hundred (*Consiglio dei Cento*), which normally met with the priors, and he spoke on several issues. He opposed welcoming Pistoian exiles into the city, spoke in support of certain anti-magnate proposals, and expressed an opinion regarding the relocation of a hospital in Piazza San Giovanni to make room for the new cathedral.

By 1297 the Donati faction, opponents of Dante's political patrons, the Cerchi, had returned to political dominance, and Dante dropped out of public life. Surviving records note that he made one more set of remarks in council in 1297.[21] This was the same year that coincided

21 Santagata, *Dante*, chapter 3 (especially pp. 93–96); Hollander, *Dante*, p. xii; Pertile, 'Life', pp. 464–65; Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 57, 62; Barański and Pertile, 'Chronology', p. xxi; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 168–70; *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Renato Piattoli (Florence: Libreria Luigi Gonnelli e figli, 1940), documents 56 and 79, pp. 62–64, 85–87. Starn offers a brief and concise overview of Dante's public

with a significant enhancement of the supervisory power of the priorate and the *Gonfaloniere della Giustizia* (Standard-bearer of Justice) over the operations of the *Sei della biada*. Specifically, the priors and the Standard-bearer of Justice were now invested with ultimate authority over the grain supply, superseding the *Sei della biada*. This did not presumably mean that they were managing the day-to-day operations of the grain supply process (the *annonaria*), but it did signal increased, centralized oversight over the *Sei* by the principal organs of power, the Signoria. These measures occurred two years after the passages of the Ordinances of Justice of 1295, which enhanced the power of the Signoria over many of the rural magnates (who themselves were major producers of grain destined for urban markets). The priors and the *Gonfaloniere della Giustizia* anticipated correctly in 1297 that 1298 would bring a poor harvest. It was indeed quite a mediocre year regarding grain. The *Sei* planned for the potential danger posed by the 1298 harvest and requested and received public funds to import supplemental grain. Imports continued into 1299, when the Bardi company imported 2,000 florins worth of wheat from southern Italy with funds from tolls dedicated to the *Sei* for imports.[22] Although Dante seems to have dropped out of public life after 1297, he had already served as a veteran of several government councils (one of which met with the priorate) and had participated in significant discussions as a member of the communal governing elite. He was no doubt familiar with the workings of the *Sei della biada*, now more closely supervised from 1297 by both the priorate and the *Gonfaloniere della Giustizia*.

The half decade between 1297 and 1302 were decisive years for both the commune and Dante's own personal fortunes. At least three massive construction projects were underway: the new cathedral (from 1296), the Palazzo dei Priori (1299), and the new circle of walls (begun 1284, and continuing especially after 1299).[23] However, polit-

career. See Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 72.

22 Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 80–83, 107–09, 115–17; Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 81–87; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 97–98.

23 Richard Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), pp. 4–5; Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 87, 97–100.

ical and social conflict intensified during this half decade, fueled by the tension between the Cerchi faction of the Guelfs (White Guelfs, with which Dante was aligned) and the Donati faction. At the same time, the papacy aligned itself increasingly with the Donati faction (Black Guelfs) to leverage its own efforts at the time to dominate Tuscany, particularly Florence. During these tumultuous years (1297–1302), as a civic leader, the poet found himself in the middle of these escalating crises. Nevertheless, he continued to serve the Commune in a variety of ways, including, and most importantly, as prior between June 15 and August 15 of 1300. As Florence moved closer toward civil war and Dante toward eventual exile in early 1302, he assumed several responsibilities that were either indirectly or directly concerned with the security of the urban grain supply. Not only was there a growing political crisis, but there was also a food crisis that reached its peak in 1302, the same year as Dante's exile: a severe region-wide grain shortage (*carestia*) caused by heavy rains, followed by severe drought.[24]

The list of duties and responsibilities which Dante shouldered for the Commune in 1300 and 1301 is well known and will not be described in detail here. However, for the purposes of this essay, it is noteworthy that several of them — at least three, specifically — were either directly or indirectly food- (grain-) related. Perhaps most important was his service as prior between June 15 and August 15, 1300. As previously noted, the priors had ultimate responsibility for overseeing the grain supply and exercised supervisory control over the *Sei della biada*. In the year before his term began, in 1299, some regions of Tuscany were already suffering from a food emergency. In June of that year the *Consiglio generale* in Siena had declared a *charestia generalis* connected with all foodstuffs. By the next year, the Commune of Siena was requiring its ecclesiastical institutions to deliver

24 For a first-hand account of the political developments in Florence between 1295 and the end of 1301, see books 1 and 2 of Dino Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence*, trans. by Daniel Bornstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), especially pp. 19–48; and Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, pp. 29–109. For secondary accounts, see Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 88–93; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 88–109; Hollander, *Dante*, p. xii; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, chapter 1. For the 1302 *carestia* and food crisis, see Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, pp. 108–09; Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 83–84, 105.

grain reserves to the city.[25] When Dante served as ambassador to San Gimignano on behalf of Florence in May of 1300 at a conference of White Guelfs, he had entered territory already suffering from serious food shortages. The aim of that meeting was to create a plan to push back against further papal encroachment in Tuscany. In this year of political and food-related crises, his opposition to expansionist papal policies toward Tuscany was steadfast. Even a year later in June of 1301 he was the only member of the *Consiglio dei Cento* to vote against any further Florentine aid to the papacy for its military war against the Aldobrandeschi in southern Tuscany. In addition, the years 1300 and 1301 coincided with some of the worst factional violence to date, resulting in a final split between White (anti-papal, *popolo*-leaning) and Black (pro-papal) Guelfs. Although Dante aligned with the former, during his two-month stint as prior in the summer of 1300, he and his colleagues tried to tamp down the escalating conflicts by exiling selected leaders of the two major factions. Seven members of the Cerchi faction (Whites) were banished to Sarzana, and eight members of the Donati factions (Blacks) were exiled to Città del Pieve. Among those exiled was Dante's pro-Donati friend, the poet Guido Cavalcanti. This effort at peace-making unfortunately failed in August and September. The Cerchi convinced the priorate to allow their leaders to return (but not the Donati). This cancellation of the exile of Cerchi leaders contributed to the decision on September 23 by Matteo Acquasparta, the papal legate in Tuscany and the Romagna, to excommunicate the government of Florence and to impose an interdict on the city. Emissaries from Florence, Siena, and Bologna went to Rome to seek resolution to the factional conflicts, and Pope Boniface VIII agreed to lift the interdict in exchange for an agreement by Florence to contribute to the papal war effort against the Aldobrandeschi.[26]

25 Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, p. 102, citing Archivio di Stato di Siena (ASS) Consiglio Generale 55, folio. 102. For Siena, see William M. Bowsky, *A Medieval Italian Commune: Siena under the Nine, 1287–1355* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 203–04.

26 For a contemporary perspective on the origins and course of the Black-White feud, see Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, pp. 62–81. See also *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, document 73, pp. 80–82. For secondary accounts, see Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 154–56; Najemy, *History of Florence*, p. 91; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 105–14, 131–37; Pertile, 'Life', p. 465; Havely, *Dante*, pp. xxiii–xxiv; Hollander, *Dante*, pp.

Differences over food policies, though never explicit, played a role in the factional tensions between Black and White Guelfs. The Blacks tended to follow policies sympathetic to the magnates, many of whom were urban or rural lords in possession of grain-producing lands. They preferred high grain prices in the city. The political base of the more *popolo*-oriented Whites, led by Vieri dei Cerchi, favoured lower food (especially grain) prices that were consistent with the interests of their own political base, the urban population. This may help explain why, in August of 1300, before Dante rotated off the priorate on August 15, the magistracy was seeking a military and diplomatic alliance with Guelf Bologna, a major source of grain imports for Florence. At least indirectly, and perhaps even directly, if such an alliance had succeeded, it would have had a significant positive impact on Florentine food security. It promised, for example, not only to provide Florence with a strong Guelf military ally as a hedge against further papal encroachment in Tuscany, but more importantly the agreement could help keep secure and safeguard the mountain passes and road arteries between Romagna and Florence that were so vital for the grain imports from the Romagna to Florence. Military and diplomatic cooperation between Florence and Bologna would therefore have helped ensure that exported Romagnolo grain would have had unobstructed and secure access to the Florentine market. This was especially important, as the Ubaldini magnate family still exercised considerable power in the Mugello valley and already had a long history of anti-Florence military activity in the hinterland between Romagna and Tuscany. Not surprisingly, these diplomatic efforts met with opposition from the pope's legate in Tuscany and the Romagna, Matteo Acquasparta. As Dante's biographer Marco Santagata noted, the alliance was to be formalized just ten days after Dante had left the priorate on August 15. Like previous priors' efforts at peace-making, however, this attempt at an alliance with Bologna fell victim to escalating internal political tensions and violence within Florence itself, and fierce opposition from the papacy.

xii–xiii; Barański and Pertile, 'Chronology', p. xxi. The long article by Guido Pampaloni, 'Bianchi e Neri', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ed. by Umberto Bosco (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1970) <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bianchi-e-neri_(Enciclopedia-Dantesca)/> [accessed 19 May 2025] is still very relevant.

Its surrogates (the Black Guelfs) were on the political rise in mid- and late-August of 1300.[27]

Although Dante was no longer serving on the priorate, he continued to be an active participant in urban governance in the following year, 1301. In a meeting of the *Consiglio delle Capitudini* in April, for example, he spoke out as an 'advisor' or 'wise man' (*savio*) regarding advice about the procedures for the election of the priors. During his tenure as a member of the *Consiglio dei Cento* (April–September), while meeting jointly with the *Consiglio delle Capitudini*, he argued in June against extending the two-and-a-half-month end date for Florence to supply knights (*cavalieri*) for the papal war against the Aldobrandeschi in southern Tuscany. The request was made by the papal legate, Matteo d'Acquasparta, and it carried with it the recommendation of the priors. Later that same day, when the *Consiglio dei Cento* was meeting alone, Dante spoke out against it once more. By June 19, however, the proposal received majority support in the council. Dante's stance turned out to be the minority position. The White Guelfs seemed divided on the issue, and Dante sided with a vocal minority increasingly hostile to the apparent aims of Pope Boniface VIII to replace the Whites in government with his allies, the Blacks, and to bring Tuscany as a whole under the hegemony of the papacy.[28] Even though he represented a minority position at the time with regards to the issue of military aid to the papacy, he continued in the spring of 1301 to be chosen by civic leaders for positions of leadership. The second major grain-related post he assumed came in the spring of 1301 (his first was his service as prior).

In April of 1301 the members of the grain magistracy (*Sei della biada*) appointed him as chair (*officialis et superstans*) of a commission charged with the responsibility to supervise the road renovation, straightening, and extension of via San Procolo from the urban suburb of borgo Piagentino to the *torrente* (stream) of Affrico. Today the road corresponds to the via Pandolfini. In the early fourteenth century it was lined with houses, cottages, and small parcels of land, extending

27 Santagata, *Dante*, p. 114.

28 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, documents 81, 82, 83, 84, pp. 92–96; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 135–37; Hollander, *Dante*, p. xii; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 197–98; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 135–37; Pertile, 'Life', pp. 464–66.

beyond the urban walls into the eastern suburbs. The purpose of this project, among other commercial goals, was to facilitate the flow of grain and foodstuffs from the eastern suburb and beyond — the borgo Piagentino — to the urban market of Orsanmichele and to prevent obstructions along the route caused by local (presumably pro-Donati?) magnates. These food shipments came from the Valdarno di Sopra to the east of the city, corresponding roughly with the borderlands of the Aretino. The Signoria had ultimate authority over roads and bridges, but often that authority was delegated to the grain magistrates (as it was here). Dante's biographer, Santagata, argues that the *Sei* appointed Dante because he himself was a property owner near the borgo Piagentino (in the parish of Sant'Ambrogio) and therefore had a stake in the project. An additional argument that does not exclude Santagata's observation is that the *Sei* recognized Dante as an experienced leader who could be trusted to complete a project and as someone with previous experience as a prior whose principal responsibilities included supervision of the food supply and the grain magistracy (the point of the project). In addition, Dante had already established a record of opposition and hostility towards magnates.[29] Five months later in an urban council he spoke out once more against magnate interests. On September 13, 1301, in the *Consigli dei Cento e del Capitano* (meeting

29 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, document 80 (April 28, 1301), pp. 87–92; Michele Barbi, *L'ufficio di Dante per i lavori di via S. Procolo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1921), pp. 89–110; Franek Sznura, *L'espansione urbana di Firenze nel dugento* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1975), pp. 50–51; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, p. 200; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 121–22. The document about the via San Procolo project was first published by G. Milanesi in 1869 (see Barbi, *L'ufficio di Dante*, p. 89). It specifically cites the need to secure the delivery of foodstuffs into the city by extending and making straight the via S. Procolo that headed toward the eastern suburb of borgo Piagentino and the Affrico (*torrente*). By so doing, the project also aimed to put an end to the noisy obstructionism and disorder caused by the magnates along the way. They were identified as a security threat to the food supply that entered the city from the eastern suburbs. The key passage, as reproduced by *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, p. 87 is the following: 'Exponitur coram vobis dd. sex officialibus positis pro comuni Florentie super reinveniendis iuribus comunis Florentie et viis mistendis et dirizzandis, quod via Sancti Proculi, que protenditur versus Burgum de la Piagentina, que est multum utilis et necessaria hominibus et personis civitatis Florentie, maxime propter vittualium copiam habendam et maxime eo quod populares comitatus absque strepitu et briga magnatum et potentum possunt securo venire per eandem ad dd. priores et vexilliferum iustitie cum expedit'. In Dante's day along the via S. Procolo were houses and small cottages ('domus, terrena sue casolaria in via Sancti Proculi'; Sznura, *L'espansione urbana*, p. 51).

jointly), Dante spoke out in favour of conserving the anti-magnate Ordinances of Justice from 1293 and 1295. For over half a decade they had elevated the political power of the *popolo* and excluded the magnates from the most important positions in the Commune.[30]

The third example of a food-related public service taken by Dante occurred while serving on the *Consiglio dei Cento*. It was also one of the final instances in which he spoke publicly in a communal council. On September 20, 1301, in the *Consiglio dei Cento*, meeting jointly with other councils, Dante spoke in favour of initiatives to construct new roads to guarantee access to products from the *contado*, including food (to provide the means of subsistence for the city: 'mezzi di suscitenza' in Davidsohn's words). Along with Lapo Saltarelli (of whom Dante will be sharply critical in *Paradiso* 15.126–29), he spoke in council in favour of letting Bologna transfer imported grain from Pisa through Florentine territory to Bologna. Not only did Dante acknowledge again in council the need to have a road infrastructure that facilitated the delivery of products from the *contado* (such as grain and other foodstuffs) to urban residents, but he also in this intervention demonstrated his ongoing sympathy for Guelf Bologna.[31]

The next four months in Florence were tumultuous as well as increasingly dangerous for anyone who was not a Black Guelf sympathizer. In October 1301, Charles of Valois, the pro-papal commander of a very sizeable military force, joined the exiled Donati at Siena. Anticipating direct political and military intervention by the papacy in Florence, Dante was part of a delegation sent to Rome on behalf of the Signoria to convince Pope Boniface VIII at the Lateran Palace to step back from encouraging and supporting a military incursion into Florence. The pope, however, demanded obedience, and the priors back in Florence acquiesced. The mission of the embassy had been undercut. While Dante remained in Rome, Charles of Valois and his soldiers entered Florence on November 1 with the help of Vieri dei Cerchi and the Black Guelfs. What followed was nothing short of a coup-d'état by the Black Guelfs, and by November 7 all major commu-

30 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, document 86, pp. 97–98; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, p. 199.

31 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, document 87, pp. 98–99; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, p. 201.

nal offices were in the hands of the pro-papal Blacks.[32] Subsequent to the coup, the Blacks were now in control of the government. By the end of 1302 the Black regime will have exiled around 600 people, condemned to death about 559, and either destroyed or confiscated the properties of the exiles. Among those outside the city on November 7 (1301), whose property would later be subject to confiscation and whose public career was over, was Dante Alighieri. He was in Rome during the coup and chose never again to return to his native city.[33]

The year 1302 was a very fateful year for both the White Guelf-Ghibelline alliance in exile and for Dante personally. In this year he chose to join the armed struggle in the countryside against his native city. By early 1302, Florentine territory was entering a worsening food emergency (*carestia*) caused by excessive rains followed by drought. Over the course of 1302, White Guelf exiles and Ghibellines in the *contado* acted to undermine the legitimacy and power of the new pro-Black regime in Florence by disrupting the flow of grain to the city through military activity in the Mugello and upper Arno valley (Valdarno di Sopra). They struck at their enemies by disrupting roads, besieging *castelli*, and blocking grain shipments to the city. Ghibelline Pisa, an enemy of the new communal regime, also helped by obstructing deliveries at Porto Pisano in early 1302. Among many other consequences, this compelled the merchant Giovanni di Marsiglia to seek an alternative port to unload his 2,000 *moggia*. Ghibelline and White Guelf emissaries also petitioned the Commune of Genoa in this same year to cease handling exports to Florence, and, concurrently, pressured Pisan and Genoese ship captains to attack ships that carried grain to Florence. In early 1302, during a worsening food emergency, White Guelf exiles and their Ghibelline allies were therefore embarking on a strategy to use food as a weapon of war against their Black Guelf enemies in Florence. Repercussions against Dante and other opponents of the new Black regime began as early as January. In late January of 1302, Dante found himself and four other former priors

32 Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 22–52 (especially pp. 38–48); Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 88–93; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 137–40; Pertile, 'Life', p. 466; Hollander, *Dante*, pp. xxii–xxiii.

33 Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 46–48; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 138–42; Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 88–93.

accused in absentia of extortion, barratry, and ill-gotten gains; he was fined 5,000 florins and barred from office for two years by the Florentine *podestà*, Cante dei Gabrielli da Gubbio. He would refuse to pay and chose instead not to return to Florence. By not returning, he faced confiscation of his property and death.[34] Also in 1302, the *podestà* of Florence, as recorded in the *Libro del chiodo*, noted that several men had been convicted for having journeyed to Genoa to stop grain shipments to Florence. Those cited included Lapo Saltarelli. The *podestà*'s statement clearly reveals the intentional aim of these emissaries, and it also represents the general aims of the Guelf exile-Ghibelline alliance: to bring about famine for Florence and its population ('predictam civitatem Florentie et populum ipsius fame necare').[35]

Already by the end of January the Florentine priors, *podestà*, and *Capitano del popolo* were deliberating what to do about the devastation and revolts sparked by an alliance between the Pazzi and the Ubertini in the Valdarno di Sopra. In February the two rural magnate families had taken Treggiaia in the Valdarno, for example, located between Piantravigne (or Pian-tra-Vigne) and San Giovanni Valdarno.[36] However, Dante's involvement in the armed struggle against Black-controlled Florence most likely began no later than early March of 1302. We know very little of his movements in the first half of 1302, but we know enough to conclude that by June of that year he was fully engaged in the struggle. Initially, the poet probably travelled from Rome to Siena, and from there to Gargonza, according to Leonardo Bruni's biography. Located in the Val di Chiana in the grain-producing region of the Aretino

34 Giovanni Villani recorded the severity of the 1302 *carestia* in the usual way of contemporary chroniclers: by recording the high price of grain: 'E nel detto anno fue gran caro di vittuaglia, e valse lo stato del grano in Firenze a la rasa soldi xxii di soldi [...] il fiorino d'oro'. Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, p. 109. For Dante's convictions, the grain politics of early 1302, and the activities of the White Guelf exiles and Ghibellines after the November 8 (1301) takeover of Florence by the Blacks, see Najemy, *History of Florence*, pp. 88–95; Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 84–87; Hollander, *Dante*, p. xiii; and Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 143–44. Santagata, chapter 5 (especially pp. 149–73), covers the White Guelf-Ghibelline war against Florence. Davidsohn covers much the same ground regarding the military activities of the White exiles and Ghibellines and their efforts to cut off the supply of grain to Florence during Dante's first year of exile in 1302; see Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 317–31.

35 Fabrizio Ricciardelli, *Il libro del chiodo*, Fonti per la storia dell'Italia medievale, Antiquitates, 9 (Rome: Istituto Palazzo Borromini, 1998), pp. 152–53.

36 Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, II, pp. 286–87.

not far from the White Guelf exile base at Arezzo, it was the site of a significant strategic planning conference of Ghibelline and White Guelf exiles for anti-Florence military activities. Pampaloni dated the conference sometime between January 27 (first condemnation of Dante) and March 10 (the second); Santagata dates it between February 10 (internment and final fines) and March 10. In any case, the conference at Gargonza essentially launched the armed struggle against Florence. Its *castello* was in the possession of the Pazzi and Ubertini, fierce and traditional Ghibelline opponents of the Florentine Guelfs. By March of 1302, a military campaign to hobble grain deliveries to Florence and to recapture Florentine *castelli* had already gotten underway. When, in early March, White exiles met with these Ghibelline leaders at Gargonza, they apparently formalized an alliance around a war strategy directed against Florentine *castelli* and possessions in the upper Arno valley, east of Florence. By April, that strategy was bearing fruit, and the exiles-Ghibelline enemies of Florence in the Arno valley were conducting military operations against Florentine interests in that region of Tuscany. Part of those activities included the obstruction of grain transports from the upper Arno valley to Florence, the capture of strategic *castelli*, and the disruption of the road infrastructure. Figline, a key grain market town for Florence, fell to the Pazzi and Ubertini. The Gherardini eventually took major *castelli* in the Chianti, Montagliari, and Brolio regions, allowing them to control the road infrastructure in the Greve and Pesa river valleys. Both valleys were major sources of grain for Florence. White exiles then used the *castello* of Montagliari (near Panzano in the Chianti) as a base from which to attack grain shipments from the south Tuscan port of Talamone to Florence through the Maremma Senese.

Dante's role in all of this is not clear, and the absence of adequate documentation does not allow us to confirm his presence at Gargonza. However, the best evidence that he was there comes from the fact that on March 10, the *podestà* of Florence, Cante dei Gabrielli, went much further in terms of penalties imposed on Dante than in January. He sentenced him and fourteen other White Guelfs to death for not having returned to Florence and for not having paid the fines as stipulated on January 27. An additional factor for the March decree was likely his attendance at the Gargonza conference. Indeed, historians Gio-

vanni Cherubini and Guido Pampaloni both conclude that Dante was probably present at Gargonza, which most likely took place before the March 10 death penalty judgment. Not only was he there, Pampaloni argues, but he was also part of the leadership team planning military operations at the conference. In addition, he suggests, it was precisely this role at the conference that triggered the second condemnation of Dante (and others) by the Black Guelf-controlled government of Florence. Dante's modern biographer, Marco Santagata, also concludes that Dante was a participant at Gargonza. He notes that the death sentence imposed on Dante on March 10 is evidence of retaliation for his presence at the conference.[37] By early April, the military operations conducted by the White Guelf exiles and Ghibellines were already far along, creating conditions resembling civil war in the *contadi* of Florence and Pistoia. On April 5, the Florentine *podestà* Cante dei Gabrielli, therefore, issued another series of death sentences, also targeting White Guelf exiles, among others.[38]

As the rural magnates, the Ubaldini and the Adimari, were leading military operations in the Mugello to obstruct the delivery of grain from the Romagna to Florence in the south, exiles commanded by Naldo dei Gherardini were simultaneously targeting the road and *castello* infrastructure south and southwest of the city in the Val di Greve and Val di Pesa. For the Gherardini, both Montagliari and Montaguto (Val di Greve) in 1302 were centres of fierce resistance to Florence. From May 1, 1302, they intercepted grain transports headed for Florence from southern Tuscany along the Greve and Pesa river valleys. Those conducting the transports were either killed or taken prisoner for ransom. The exiles, under the command of Naldo dei Gherardini, also took the captured grain destined for Florence to their own *castelli*,

37 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, documents 90, 91, pp. 103–09; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 142–58; Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth*, pp. 50–52; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 275–82, 280n, 317–18; Pampaloni, 'I primi anni', pp. 140–43; Pampaloni, 'Bianchi e Neri'; Giovanni Cherubini, 'Gargonza', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ed. by. Umberto Bosco (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1970) <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gargonza_(Enciclopedia-Dantesca)/> [accessed 19 May 2025]; Pertile, 'Life', p. 466. For White Guelf use of Montagliari as a base to attack grain shipments from Talamone, see Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, p. 86.

38 Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, p. 108; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 292–94.

and they sliced the hooves of the mules carrying the sacks of grain (to prevent them from being used again). In the rebellious Mugello, the White Guelf and Ghibelline alliance operated out of Ubaldini and Adimari *castelli* to harass the grain transports from the Romagna that were headed for Florence. As the historian Robert Davidsohn notes, this was all part of a grand strategy to bring hunger to the city during an already serious *carestia* and create conditions for an internal revolt that would bring members of the alliance back into power ('per affamare la città e provocare nel popolo assiliato dai bisogni una sollevazione che li avrebbe dovuti ricondurre in patria').[39]

During the spring of 1302 the heavy rains that had initially caused the *carestia* were ending, and what was to become a prolonged drought was now beginning. In April, Ghibelline exiles seized the strategic grain market in the upper Val d'Arno, Figline, wresting control from the signoria of Florence. In the upper Arno valley itself, Florentine military efforts, led by Cante dei Gabrielli, were concentrated on attacking the city's enemies at Piantravigne. From that location the alliance of Ghibellines and White Guelf exiles engaged in widespread warfare throughout the valley (in Villani's words, 'grande guerra nel Valdarno'). Though first without success, the Florentine army was eventually able to take Piantravigne in July only because Carlino dei Pazzi, its castellan, allegedly betrayed the *castello* to the Florentines for a bribe. Many years later, for this act of treachery, Dante — ever the supporter of the White Guelf-Ghibelline alliance against the Blacks — places Carlino in the second ring of Cocytus, Antenora, at the bottom of hell among those who betrayed their country or party (*Inf.* 32.68–69).[40] During those operations at Piantravigne, the exiled Whites and Ghibellines met again on June 8, this time north of Florence in the Mugello valley in Guidi territory. The site of the conference was the palazzo of the Guidi at San Godenzo, and Dante was there to represent the Whites

39 Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, pp. 108–10; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 322–32 (quote on p. 328); Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 55–59; Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth*, pp. 49–52.

40 Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, pp. 86–87 (quote on p. 86); Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 55–56; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 316–32; Santagata, *Dante*, p. 151.

along with Vieri dei Cerchi.[41] It marked a shift of the armed struggle from the south to the northeast. Representing the Ghibellines was Lapo degli Uberti, the nephew of Farinata, noted for his appearance in the *Commedia*. As a leader among the White exile organization (the Universitas partis Alborum de Florentia) in its governing body, the Council of Twelve, Dante lent his considerable letter-writing and rhetorical talents to the council as its secretary or registrar.[42]

At the San Godenzo conference, Dante joined thirteen others on June 8 to sign an agreement to indemnify the house of the Ubaldini for any losses incurred in its military operations against Florence in the Mugello and other mountainous regions north of the commune. Those assets at risk included the territory around the *castello* of Montaccianico and any ecclesiastical benefices lost to the Ubaldini from confiscation in retaliation by the pope.[43] The original document no longer exists, but the local notary, Giovanni di Buto, included the text in a later notarial protocol.[44] As both Robert Davidsohn and Guido

41 Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 319–22; Pampaloni, 'I primi anni', pp. 142–44.

42 Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 149–58, 408 note 15; Pertile, 'Life', p. 466.

43 Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 319–32; Pampaloni, 'I Primi anni' pp. 143–44; *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, document 92, pp. 109–10. Isidoro del Lungo edited and published the indemnification agreement in *Dino Compagni e la sua Cronica*, II, pp. 569–70. As noted in Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, p. 321, the text was transcribed into the notarial protocol (*segnatura antica*) of Giovanni di Buto, G, 366, f. 120. Apparently, water has blotted out the date. The notary included the text among the documents of 1309 (but after one from 1324). Giovanni di Buto da Ampinana was a notary who worked in the Mugello (Vespignano, Ampinana, San Godenzo) from 1299 to 1335. For reference to him, see George Dameron, *Florence and its Church in the Age of Dante* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 253; and Emanuele Repetti, 'Ampinana', in *Dizionario geografico, fisico, storico della Toscana*, 6 vols (Florence: Presso l'autore e editore, 1833–46), I (1833), p. 82. There are twelve volumes of his notarial protocols for that period, from 1299 to 1335 (*ASF* Notarile Antecosimiano 9493–9503). On the basis of the online information regarding Giovanni di Buto da Ampinana at the Archivio di Stato di Firenze site, provided by the Associazione Amici dell'Archivio di Stato di Firenze, I can identify the protocol that includes the indemnification agreement as *ASF* Notarile Antecosimiano 9495. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the opportunity to see the original document myself in the archive.

44 The most relevant passage for this essay from the text of the indemnification agreement reads as follows: 'Dominus Torigianus, Carbone et Vieri de Circhiis; dominus Guillelminus de Ricasoli; dominus Neri, Bectinus Grossus, Bectinus et Nuccius domini Acceriti de Ubertinis; dominus Andreas de Gherardinis; Branca et Chele de Scolaribus; Dante Allegherii; Minus de Radda; Bectinus de Pazziis; Lapus, Ghinus, Taddeus et Azzolinus de Ubertis. Isti omnes, et quelibet eorum per se, omni deliberation pensata, promiserunt et convenerunt Lapo Bertaldi de Florentia, recipiente

Pampaloni have argued, by signing onto the agreement Dante lent the alliance his prestige and prominence to the campaign, even though he certainly did not have the financial assets equal to those of his aristocratic co-signatories. The events of the following two months reveal exactly what was being planned at San Godenzo. Between June and September 1302, the 'Mugello war' resulted in widespread destruction, particularly of *castelli* and farmlands (wheat fields), by Ubaldini forces. Among the locations targeted in the Mugello during the summer of 1302 were San Piero a Sieve and Gagliano, near Barberino. Both were market towns important for the grain trade, and both were on important highways linking Florence with the Romagna (the source of much of its imported grain). According to contemporary accounts, significant amounts of farmland were destroyed.

Though challenged, the Florentine Blacks were not, however, losing the war. In fact, they were growing stronger.[45] By mid-July, Florentine (pro-Black) forces began to 'turn the tables' on the Ubaldini and the exile armies. On July 15, the Whites finally suffered defeat in the Val d'Arno at Piantravigne. The Florentines then moved against the two remaining areas of the *contado* that had been targeted by their enemies: the Mugello and the Val di Greve (south of city). Florentine forces devastated several *castelli* of the Ubaldini (Santerno near Firenzuola, Santa Croce, San Martino a Lago near Scarperia, and another near Senni). Then, Florentine armies took the offensive in the Val di Greve and defeated the combined White-Ghibelline forces at Montagliari and Montaguto (Montagliari, as noted above, had been the base from which Whites were harassing grain transports to Florence

pro viro nobili Ugolino de Felicione et pro eius filius, et pro omnibus aliis de domo Ubaldinorum et pro quolibet eorum, omnia dampna interesse et expensas restituere satisfacere et emendare de eorum propriis bonis, quod vel quas predicti Ugolinus vel eius consortes incurrerent sue reciperent tam in bonis temporalibus quam etiam in benefitiis ecclesiasticis occasione novitatis sue guerre facte vel faciende per castrum Montis Accianichi, vel per aliquam aliam eorumdem fortilitiam seu fideles, vel per ipsosmet ad arbitrium eorum; sub pena duorum milium marcarum argenti'. Isidoro del Lungo, *Dino Compagni*, II, p. 570.

45 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, document 92, pp. 109–10; Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 55–57; Isidoro del Lungo, *Dino Compagni*, II, pp. 569–70; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 151–58; Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth*, pp. 49–52; Pampaloni, 'I primi anni', pp. 143–44; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 317–23.

from the south Tuscan port of Talamone).[46] However, Florentine armies were not always victorious. In fact, on August 17 the Commune suffered defeat at Montaccianico, the major Ubaldini possession in the Mugello. By the end of 1302 or early 1303, the Whites had moved their headquarters from Arezzo to Forlì, then a centre of power for the Ghibellines in the Romagna. Dante apparently joined them there.

The White Guelfs continued their military operations in the Mugello. According to Dino Compagni, White exiles in 1303 continued to wage total war in the Mugello between Montaccianico in the Mugello to Lastra on the Via Bolognese: 'The Whites rode from Monte Accenico to the area of Lasta, burning whatever they found.'[47] Along with their allies, however, during the launching of a second Mugello campaign in March of 1303, the White-Ghibelline-Ubaldini coalition nevertheless failed to take Pulicciano near Borgo San Lorenzo, and thereby lost the capacity to control a major route across the Apennines that could serve as a pathway from which to attack Florence. At this time in 1303 Dante left Tuscany for the Veneto, settling for at least ten months at Verona in the household of Bartolomeo della Scala (death c. 1304). There, still serving as a representative of the White government in exile, he worked unsuccessfully to convince Bartolomeo to join forces with the exiled White Guelfs, the Commune of Bologna, and other Romagnol communes in an anti-Florence alliance.[48]

Back in Florence, violence erupted in February 1304 as the Black Guelfs themselves split into two major factions led on one side by Rosso della Tosa and on the other by Corso Donati. On March 2 the papal cardinal legate, Niccolò da Prato, entered Florence amidst a population still facing high grain prices and weary of factional conflict. He had successfully helped to resolve the intra-Black factional violence, and by February he had intended to engineer a resolution to the conflict between White exiles and Ghibellines on one hand, and the Black Guelfs on the other. From Arezzo, still a White Guelf and Ghibelline headquarters where Dante was then apparently resid-

46 Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, pp. 86–87, 135–42; Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 85–86; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 322–32.

47 Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, p. 59.

48 Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 57–58; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, IV, pp. 321–25; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 151–73; Pertile, 'Life', pp. 466–67.

ing, the poet wrote a letter in March or April to Niccolò da Prato on behalf of the captain of the White Guelf organization (Universitas) while preparations for a meeting were taking place. Eventually, twelve representatives of the Whites and Ghibellines met with twelve representatives of the Blacks in Florence. Unfortunately, the Black Guelfs set out to disrupt the peace-keeping efforts of the cardinal and created a climate of violence to undermine any agreement. On June 8, 1304, the cardinal counselled several major White families to leave the city, and he did so himself on June 10. This did not prevent the Blacks from torching hundreds of homes in the city centre, including many owned by the Whites. On July 7, 1304, Pope Benedict XI, horrified by the violence yet still seeking a peaceful solution, died after ordering the various parties to Perugia for a conference. Over a month later, on July 19 and 20, the White Guelfs, in an anti-Florence alliance with enemy communes (Arezzo, Pisa, Pistoia, Bologna), suffered a devastating defeat at La Lastra, just north of the city on the Via Bolognese.

By then, on both an artistic and a political level, Dante had already distanced himself from the White Guelf-Ghibelline alliance and from its military operations. He had already abandoned the armed struggle as early as the spring of 1303 or perhaps as late as after the departure of Niccolò da Prato on June 10 or right after the death of the pope a month later (July 7) in 1304. From July of 1304 to early 1306, now in Bologna, he apparently devoted most of his time to the composition of both the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. Indeed, it was earlier at Verona in 1303, benefiting from the intellectual riches of the Biblioteca Capitolare while he was negotiating with Bartolomeo della Scala to join the anti-Florence coalition, that Dante had begun writing the *Convivio*, or 'The Banquet'. A philosophical work about the natural desire for knowledge and wisdom, it relied on the metaphorical language of hunger and deprivation to designate the absence of those virtues.[49]

Several years later, following the Florentine defeat at Montecatini in 1315, the Florentine authorities offered amnesty to those eligible rebels (White Guelfs and Ghibellines) previously condemned to death.

49 Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle*, pp. 72–75; Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, II, pp. 135–40; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 160–73; Pertile, 'Life', pp. 467–68; Hollander, *Dante*, pp. xiii–xiv.

The judge, Ranieri di Zaccharia da Orvieto, appointed by King Robert of Anjou, made a list, and among those on it was Dante. At the time he was probably completing the *Purgatorio* and writing *Monarchia*. In exchange for amnesty, the rebels were required to return, acknowledge guilt, and pay a fine. Dante opted not to accept the terms of the amnesty. As a result, the judge reaffirmed the death sentence (death by beheading) for Dante as well as his sons. A proclamation of permanent banishment followed on November 6. There was no turning back for Dante in 1315. As Lino Pertile has observed, by 1315 the *Commedia* (he was just beginning *Paradiso*) 'was a declaration of militant politics, which was fatally destined *not* to resolve the conflict between Dante and his birthplace but rather to exacerbate it'.[50] Dante's decision not to acknowledge any fault and not to accept the amnesty seems to confirm that in 1315 he still had no regrets for joining the armed struggle against Florence twelve years earlier.

In her 2009 essay in *Dante Studies*, '"Only Historicize": History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books), and the Future of Dante Studies', Teodolinda Barolini lamented that the 'lack of historicizing has been an abiding feature of Dante exegesis'.[51] Her advice 'to the young Dante scholar', and presumably for the field in general, was simple: 'only historicize' (*OH*, p. 37). To 'historicize' Dante and arrive at a rich understanding of his cultural legacy, Barolini suggested, one might for example focus on food and food imagery in a text such as the *Convivio* (1303–04). Here material life — the consumption of food to remedy deprivation (hunger) — is vividly and metaphorically made apparent in the very title itself: *Convivio*, or the banquet. Regarding the aim of this vernacular philosophical treatise, Barolini observes that it 'is essentially an analysis of the forms of human deprivation, both spiritual and material, that the author is undertaking to redress' (*OH*, p. 39). Arguing from Aristotle, according to this interpretation, Dante observed that humans have a natural desire to know, to satisfy with

50 *Codice diplomatico dantesco*, ed. by Piattoli, documents 114 and 115, pp. 153–57; Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth*, pp. 81–82; Santagata, *Dante*, pp. 300–01; Pertile, 'Life', pp. 472–73.

51 Teodolinda Barolini, '"Only Historicize": History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books), and the Future of Dante Studies', *Dante Studies*, 127 (2009), pp. 37–54 (p. 37), hereafter *OH*. Subsequent references given in parentheses in the main text.

knowledge the hunger that results from deprivation. *Convivio* itself serves as a 'banquet of knowledge', and food as metaphor becomes central to its meaning. Indeed, bread ('pane') itself, Barolini notes, represents symbolically 'the crumbs of knowledge from the table where the bread of the angels is served that Dante will dispense to those who have been knowledge-deprived' (*OH*, p. 39). Sources of material deprivation simply hamper our ability to live life to the fullest. As Barolini observes, 'Thus the obstacles to self-fulfilment begin for Dante with physical defects of the body, "difetti da la parte del corpo," which until very recently in human history posed insurmountable impediments to full participation in life' (*OH*, p. 40).

The images in the *Convivio* associated with food are rooted in real life: hunger, crumbs, food, deprivation, the communal table, bread, and satiety. Food and drink imagery are also certainly omnipresent in classical literature and philosophy, most famously in Plato's *Symposium*. As argued here, however, there may have been an additional context that contributed to Dante's focus on food and hunger imagery in his *Convivio*: a political one. When the poet began both the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, it was 1303, the last year of a significant food crisis (*carestia*) in Tuscany before 1329.[52] This was also the year (1303) that followed his attendance of the military planning conferences at Gargonza and San Godenzo. For seven years prior (1295–1302), Dante had been involved in one way or another in the governance of his native city. He had been the member of and participant in several of the most important councils in which grain transports were discussed, the overseer of a significant grain-related road project associated with the Florentine *annona*, an ambassador to the papacy and to San Gimignano, and the member of the most important urban magistracy that exercised authority over the urban grain supply, the priorate. During those seven years, among his many other roles, he was well experienced in the politics of food and the dangers of grain shortages for a city of 100,000. Any prior in 1300 — and Dante served for two months (June 15 to August 15) — knew that

52 In Tuscany, the food (grain) crisis of 1302–03 was followed by a good harvest in the summer of 1303. There were no major *carestie* or grain crises again until 1328–29 (Pinto, *Il libro del Biadaiolo*, pp. 87–88).

unlike the communes of Siena, Arezzo, and Colle, Florence was unable to feed its growing population of 100,000 from its own territory and was required to import grain, particularly from nearby Romagna, the Aretino (upper Arno valley), and distant Apulia.

Although we are hampered by a lack of documentation that can provide precise details about the nature of his collaboration with White Guelf exiles and Ghibellines in the countryside in 1302–03, we do know that with his participation in the armed struggle against Florence, Dante brought a legacy of experience and leadership in grain-related urban governance at the highest level. His leadership in those military efforts and his signature on the indemnification agreement signified a willingness to participate in a strategy built around food deprivation, directed at the city controlled by his enemies and from which he was now an exile. The upper Arno valley, the mountainous borderlands between Tuscany and Romagna, and the infrastructure of roads and *castelli* in the Greve and Pesa valleys — so vital to the Florentine food (particularly grain) supply — became the targeted zones for attack by the White-Ghibelline alliance meeting at Gargonza (March 1302) and San Godenzo (June 1302). By the spring of 1303 or summer of 1304, having decided to abandon the battlefield for the challenge of philosophy, Dante wrote about hunger in *Convivio* as a metaphor that signified the innate yearning for philosophical wisdom and knowledge. It is indeed ironic — if not perfectly understandable — that after leaving the field of battle and opting to turn his attention to philosophy and learning, the first work he wrote in exile, the *Convivio*, dealt with the epistemological themes of deprivation, relying on metaphors associated with food and hunger. The year before (1302) he began that work, inducing hunger had served as the end goal of a real-world war strategy in which he had played a part. Thirteen years after his exile had begun (1315), Dante completed the *Inferno*. The historical Ugolino (d. 1289), cited by the chronicler Pseudo-Brunetto Latini (c. 1300) as having intentionally starved his fellow Pisans, had become in the imagination of Dante the fictional character of Ugolino in cantos 32 and 33. Of this figure in the *Inferno*, Callegari writes: 'The count's gruesome gluttony in Hell is not only an ironic twist on the rejection of communion with Christ, but also a reminder of the agreement he broke with his people in choosing to let them starve

while indulging in political factionalism'.[53] Thirteen years after Dante, the exiled political actor, had participated in and led military actions including the obstruction of grain supplies against Florence in 1302, he became the poet who now condemned Ugolino della Gherardesca (*Inferno* 32 and 33) to the ninth circle of hell, among those who had been treacherous against their own people.[54] One wonders if Dante himself was aware of the irony.

53 Callegari, *Dante's Gluttons*, p. 107.

54 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. with commentary by Charles S. Singleton, 6 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970–75), II (1970), pp. 606–12.

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