

INTRODUCTION

SAN GIOVANNI is a big, bustling town at the center of the upper Arno valley. It lies on flat land between the gravel flood plain of the river and the tracks of the state rail line, along a road that, since the thirteenth century, has linked Florence with Rome. This road serves as the spine of a very special system of streets. Unlike the surrounding villages in the Chianti region to the west and in the Apennines to the east, whose precipitous, hillside sites induce an irregular pattern of curving or climbing roadways, San Giovanni is shaped by streets that are straight, run parallel to one another, and intersect cross streets at right angles. Men, not topography, established their form.

The view down any of the principal thoroughfares (Fig. 1) extends the length of the town. Facades line both sides of each street, and only cross streets interrupt the continuous parallel enclosure, introducing accents of light and increased traffic at regular intervals. The prospect down any road was once closed by the defensive wall (this has now been replaced by other structures), which circled the settlement. Movement on any of the principal streets leads to the center of the town, where a large rectangular piazza stretches from one side of the urban complex to the other. In the middle of the piazza, to the west of the main street, stands the town hall. San Giovanni, the church of the town's first convent, dominates the space to the east; the parish church of San Lorenzo and the oratory of the town's miraculous Madonna frame the square to the west. The piazza is the daily meeting place for the townspeople, the site of the weekly market and of holiday celebrations.

The regularity of San Giovanni's plan is the product of the town's



1 San Giovanni. Main street, view from the southeast.

origin. San Giovanni was a founded or new town, created in 1299. It is one of a thousand such towns that more than doubled the number of European urban centers between the early twelfth and the mid-fourteenth centuries. Sponsored by such political authorities as the Holy Roman emperors and the kings of France as well as local counts, abbey, and city governments, founded towns adapted the land to new conditions. They accommodated a growing international trade, provided regional centers where previously there had been only small agricultural villages, pioneered undeveloped areas, and secured contested territory. Settlers were drawn from the vicinity or relocated from great distances. Government was established by the town's founder, whose agents administered justice and collected taxes. Many of these settlements prospered. Lübeck in Germany, Montauban in France, Salisbury in England, and Alessandria in Italy are all medieval new towns.

When new towns were placed on open sites, their founders were called on to plan the physical layout as well as to organize economic and political activity. Planning could be limited to the surveying of a single street and a few house lots or it could extend to the design of a complex urban composition. Formally ambitious schemes were rare. One successful plan, reproduced without concern for the special conditions of the site, could serve many projects. Type, not invention, dominates the formal history of the new towns. In the great majority of cases the significance of the towns is best appreciated by geographers, economists, and historians of law, military events, and local history. On a few occasions, however, the planning process was the focus of a broad cultural and artistic debate. The plans produced under these special circumstances include some of the greatest works of western urbanism.

The present book examines the most obvious and best documented case of this kind. Its subject is a group of five towns founded by the city of Florence between 1299 and 1350. San Giovanni is one of them; the others are Castelfranco di Sopra, Terranuova, Scarperia, and Firenzuola. The documentation for the unrealized plan for Giglio Fiorentino adds further information. The towns preserve their medieval plans relatively well. In the best of them there is a grandness of conception and an attention to detail that raises orthogonal planning to the level of art.

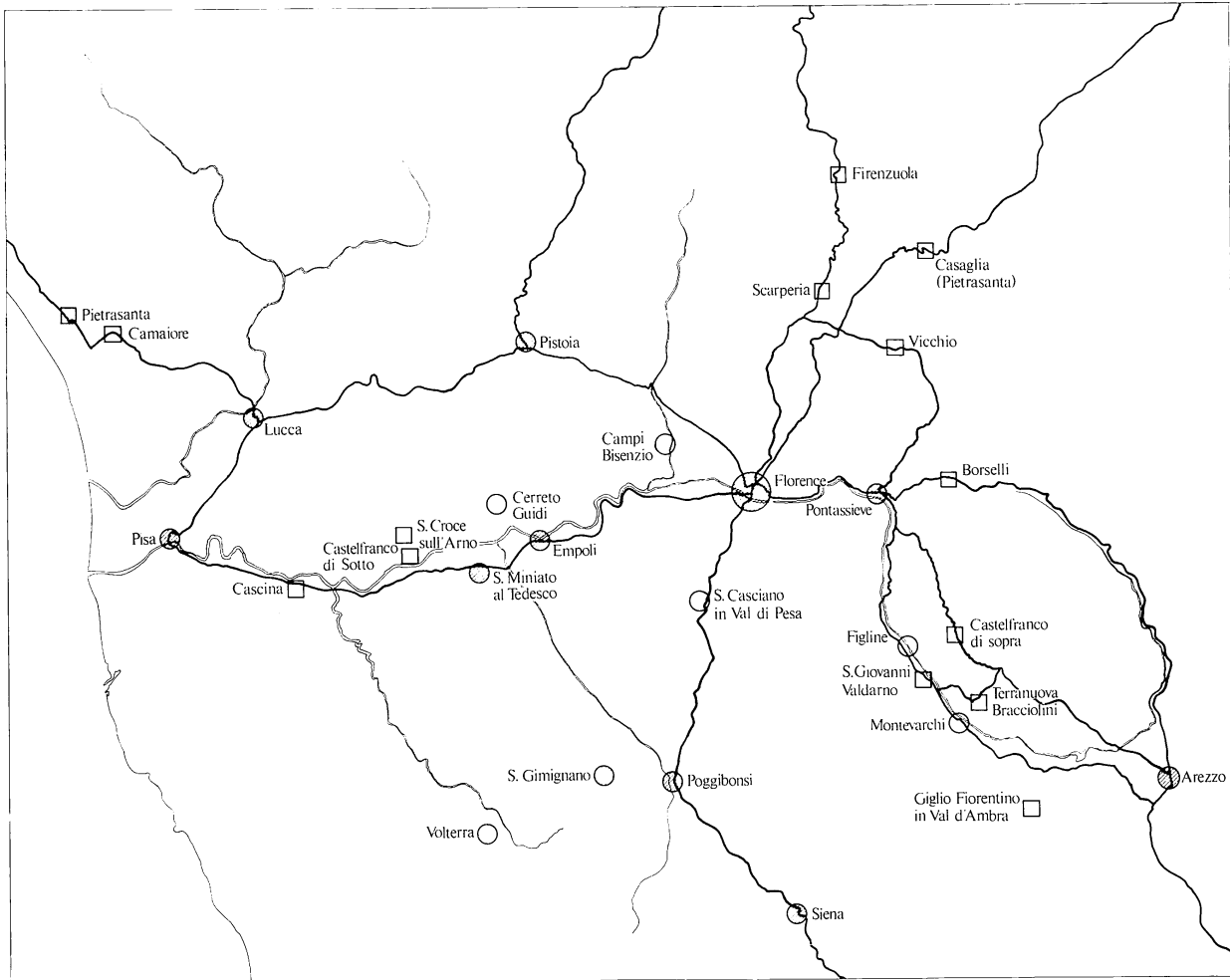
In the Florentine new towns the discipline of straight lines and right angles is rigorously enforced; it is, however, only the medium for expressing more sophisticated formal ideas. Symmetry dominates the plans. The main street is one axis of composition; a line drawn perpendicular to it, through the middle of a central square, is a second. A large number of parts

of the plans conform to the magnetic field of these lines, from the arrangement of building lots around the square to the configuration of the town's defenses. The variety of size and shape of the elements integrated into San Giovanni's orthogonal matrix is extraordinary. Long blocks oriented parallel to the axis of the main street are made to fit comfortably with a square of extended proportions perpendicular to them. In contrast to the mechanical repetition of like units that is sometimes held up as the paradigm of medieval new-town planning, the complexity of Florentine designs distinguishes them as the most accomplished urban projects of their age.

The Florentine new towns were works of art in the literal sense that their designers were artists. We do not know this about any other medieval new-town project. In part this is the result of the surviving documentation. For most new towns only the official acts of foundation are preserved. These documents assign authority and grant legal privilege; they say almost nothing about design and construction. The Florentine archives preserve both this and another level of record; in addition to legislative documents, the deliberations and financial accounts of planning committees and builders chronicle the city's activities as a founder of towns. The daily records identify the designers of the new towns as mason-architects from the circle of builders active in the city's public projects. Careful examination of the plans reveals their contribution. In an age in which geometry was considered the essence of art, the indispensable theoretical base for all design, the geometrically generated proportions of the new-town plans are a sure sign of the participation of professionals in the design process.

The new towns were built to serve Florence. They were fortresses in newly acquired territory, markets that collected produce for the city, and centers of loyal population. They became administrative capitals of the expanded Florentine state and the main resting places on routes that brought people and merchandise from all over Europe. The towns represented Florence, both to its new subjects and to travelers; their very names proclaimed their allegiance to the city. San Giovanni was the name of the city's patron saint; Firenzuola and Giglio Fiorentino borrowed Florence's own name. The towns tied the land to the capital by presenting models of urban life to the rural population. The public institutions of the new towns were copies of Florentine examples. Through them the residents of the settlements assimilated city ways and integrated themselves into the life of the state. By the fifteenth century men from the new towns were making important contributions to events within the city.

The Florence that the new towns represented was itself a recent



2 Tuscany. Squares represent founded towns, circles are towns expanded by the Florentines, shaded circles are cities.

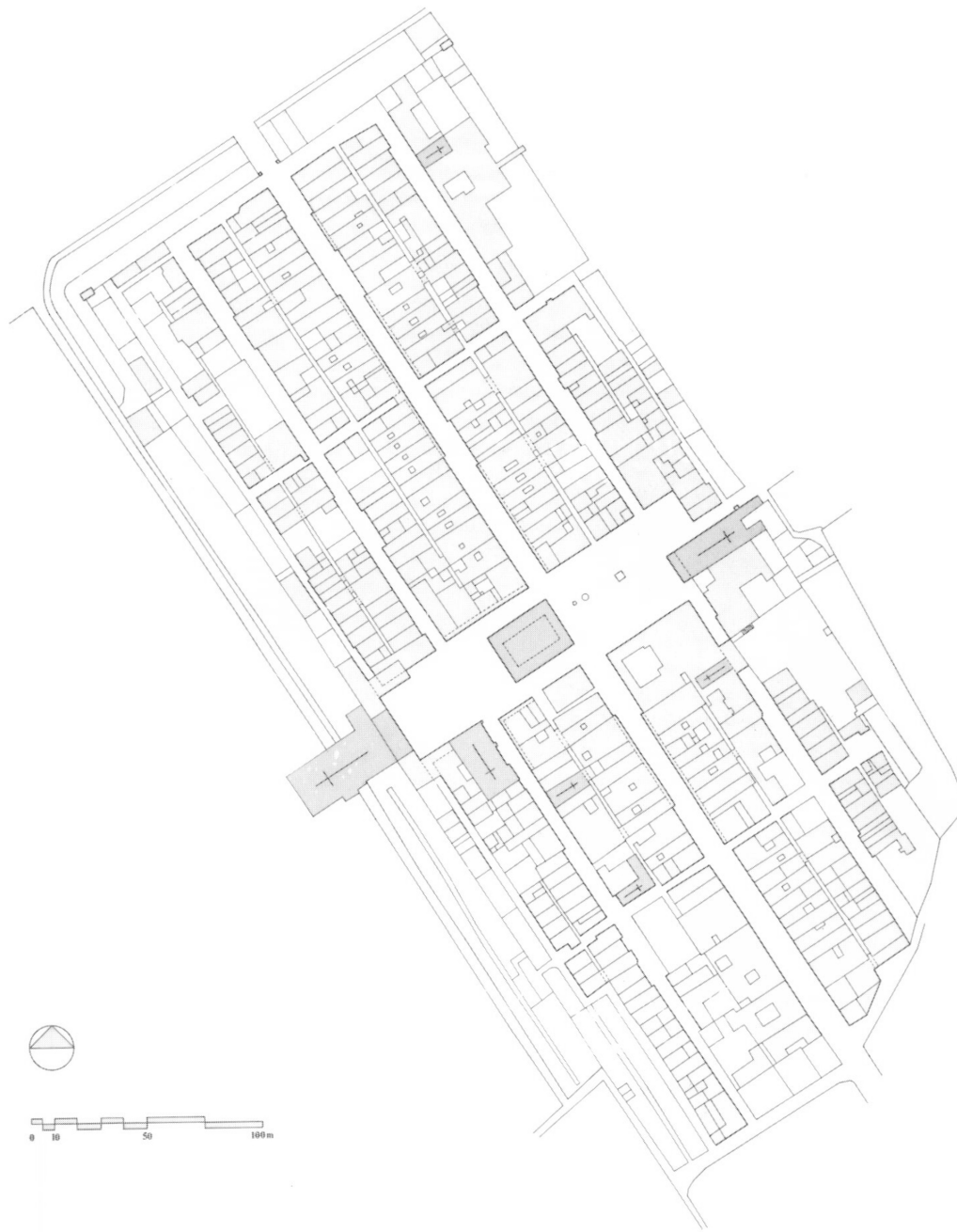
creation. A merchant regime came to power in the city in 1282 with the expansion of public authority as one of its principal goals. This political idea had many implications for the physical character of the city. The government took control of the urban environment in a way that no previous regime had. It passed the first law of eminent domain since antiquity and embarked on an ambitious program of reconstruction and expansion. The new cathedral, the monumental town hall, numerous churches, and the circuit of walls that increased the size of the city five fold were all projects undertaken by the merchant commune.

The plan of the city underwent a major transformation in this period.

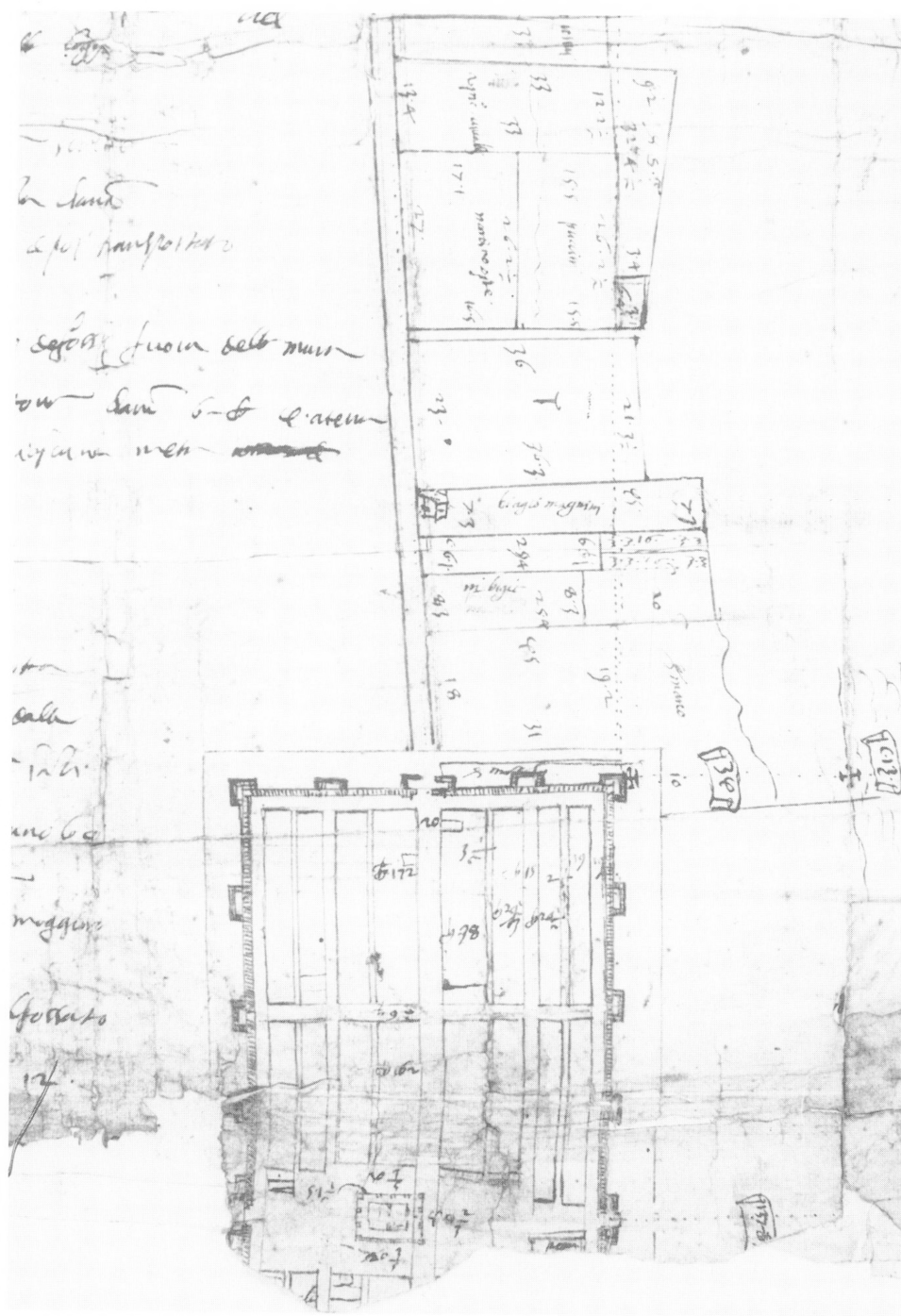
From a townscape of isolated neighborhoods shot through with back alleys accessible only to the people who inhabited them and dominated by the urban castles of the powerful extended families of the nobility, the government attempted to remake the city into a spatially unified whole. Straight, wide streets were the primary instruments of change. The new roadways rationalized the city's space and improved hygiene. More important, they established a system of public space protected by the new merchant regime that tied all the areas of the city together. Roadways replaced the courts at the center of private precincts as the focus of architectural design. The street system converged on the center of town, where the great buildings that served the whole community were prominently sited.

This architectural vision has had a lasting effect on all western urban design. The great cities of modern Europe have monumental cores and comprehensive systems of public thoroughfares. Squares and streets provide the sites for building; architecture looks outward with elaborate facades. The late Middle Ages pioneered this urban structure but even in Florence the rebuilding of the environment was never completed. A long history of habitation marked the city in ways that had little to do with the new values. Even the ambitious government of the priors could not completely transform a city whose origins reached back to antiquity. To appreciate the most comprehensive schemes of the merchant commune we must look to the new towns. At San Giovanni and the other towns, Florentine planners not only represented the capital city, they perfected it. These were the ideal cities of the merchant commune. Thus, a study of the new towns is a study of Florence itself.

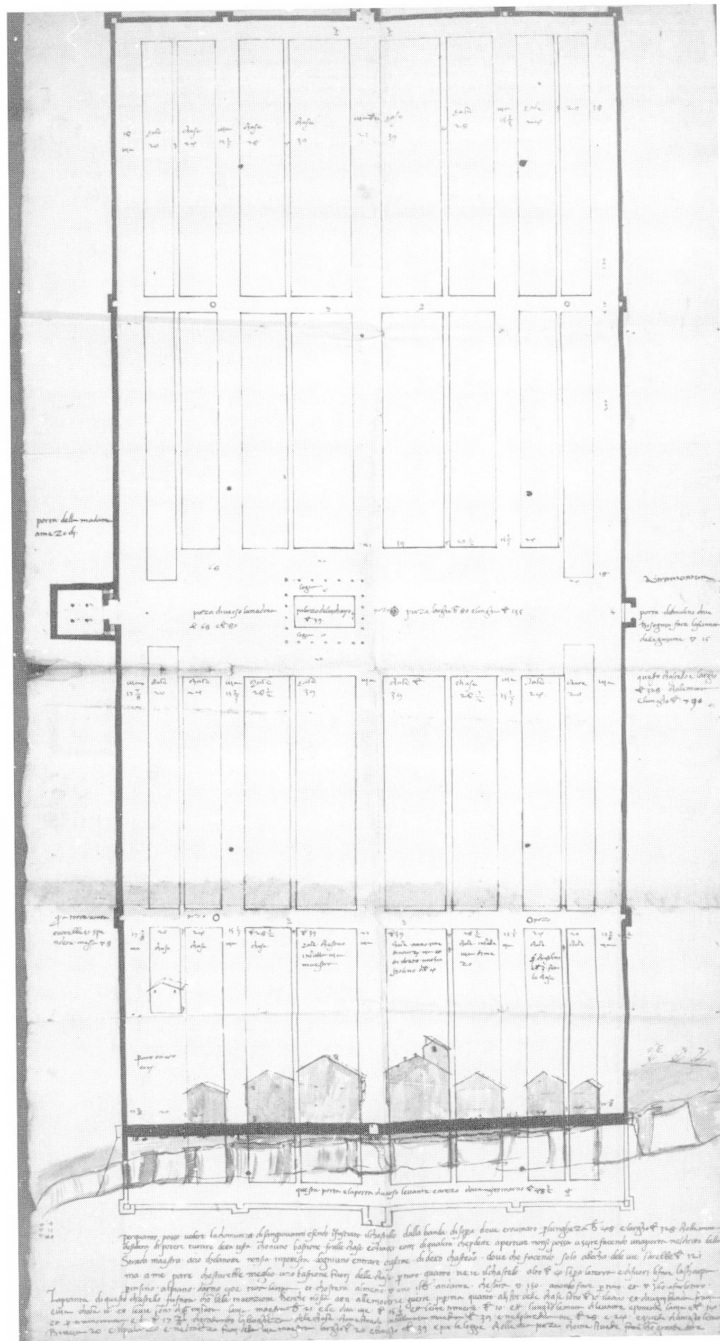
Florence's new towns were located in the countryside, 30 to 50 kilometers north and east of the city (Fig. 2). The most important projects were conceived in clusters, with the upper Arno valley the first area targeted for development. In 1285 the Florentines discussed the creation of one or two towns there (Document 1); when they went ahead with the project in 1299, the foundation document called for three towns (Document 2). The immediate results of this initiative were the towns of San Giovanni and Castelfranco di Sopra.¹ San Giovanni (Figs. 3 – 10; see Fig. 1) is located between the towns of Figline and Montevarchi, on land that until the thirteenth century had been marsh.² Earlier settlements and an older road lie on the gently rolling plateau to the northeast of the riverbed. Castelfranco (Figs. 11 – 15) was sited there, about 6.5 kilometers from San Giovanni. A third town was built in 1337, when the residents of twelve villages southwest of



3 San Giovanni. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (ASF, uncataloged).

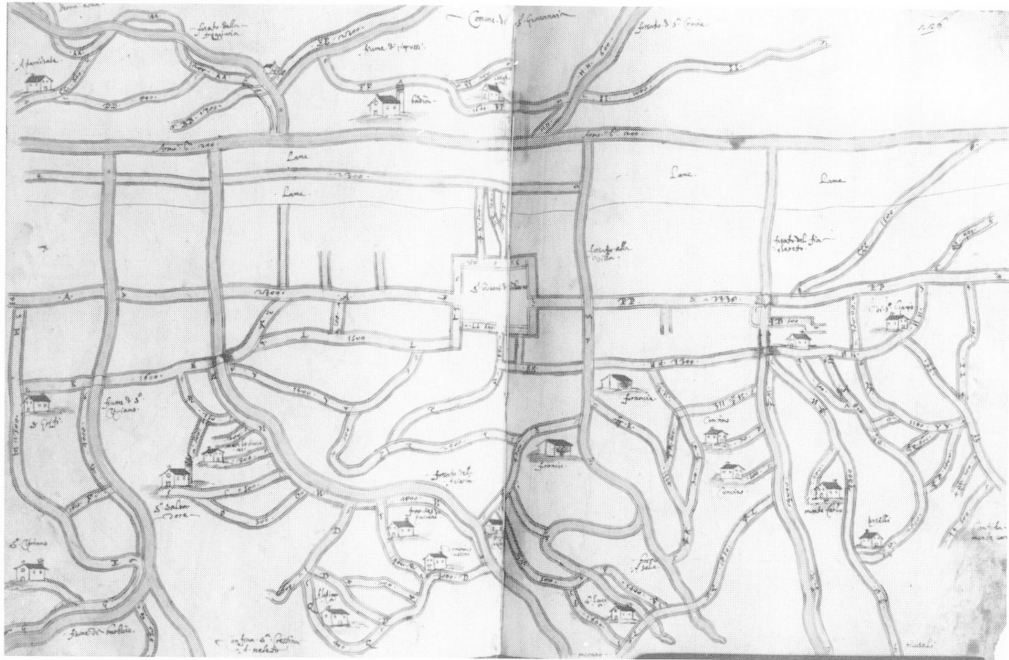


4 San Giovanni. Sixteenth century (ASF, *Piante dei Capitani di parte*, cartone XVIII, no. 28. Text in Document 22).



5 Piero della Zucca, drawing of San Giovanni, 10 March 1553 (ASF, *Cinque conservatori del contado*, 258, fol. 602 bis. Text in Document 23).

12 Florentine New Towns



6 San Giovanni and surroundings (ASF, *Capitani di parte*, numeri neri 121, fols. 227v – 228r).



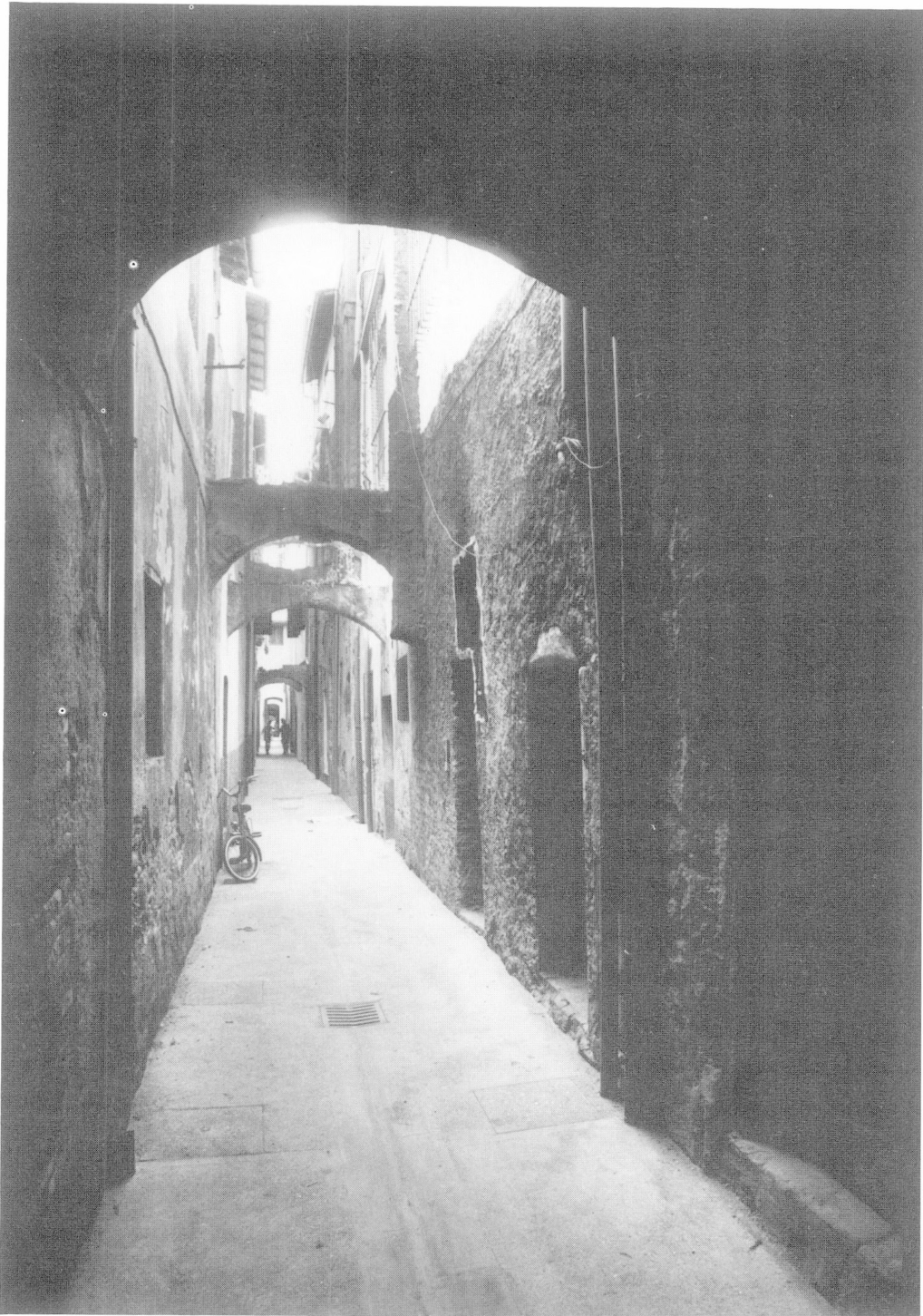
7 Giorgio Vasari and Giovanni Stradano, *Allegory of San Giovanni Valdarno*, detail, 1563 – 1565. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Salone dei Cinquecento (Photograph: Soprintendenza alle Gallerie, Florence).



8 San Giovanni. Central square with the Palazzo Pretorio and the church of San Lorenzo, seen from oratory of Santa Maria delle Grazie.



9 San Giovanni. Central square with the church of San Giovanni, seen from the Palazzo Pretorio.



10 San Giovanni. Alley behind lots facing onto the main street.



11 Castelfranco. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (ASF, uncataloged).



13 Castelfranco. Central square, view from the south.



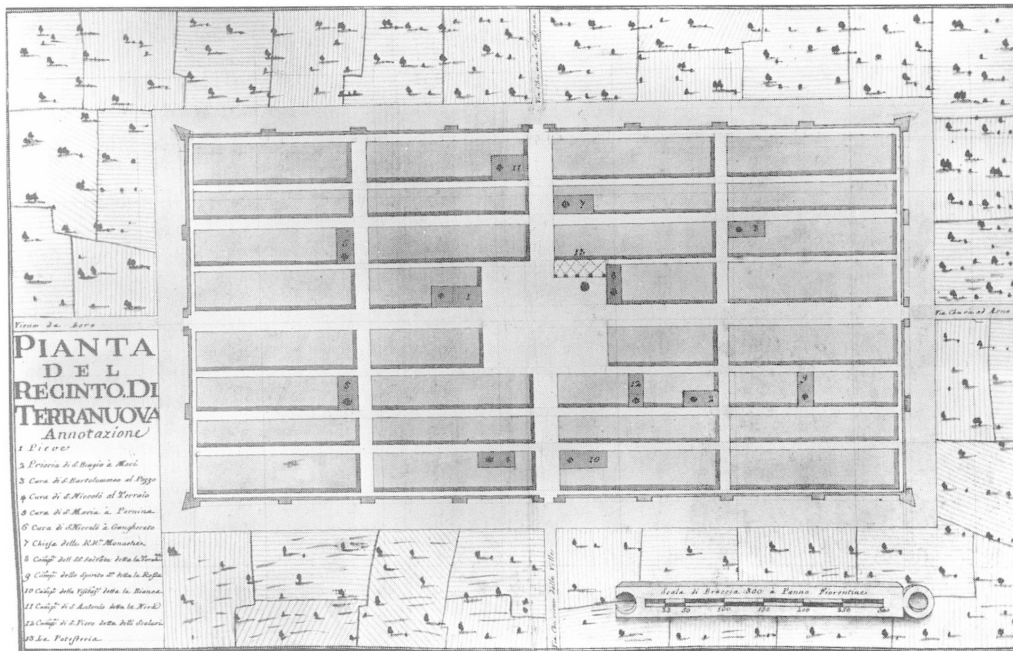
14 Castelfranco. Southwest gate.



15 Castelfranco. Road inside the town wall.



16 Terranuova. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (Ufficio Tecnico Erariale, Arezzo).



17 Terranuova, 1779 (Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, *Manoscritti*, A.1.13, fol. 34).



18 Terranuova. Central square, view from the northwest.



19 Terranuova. Main cross street, view from the northwest.

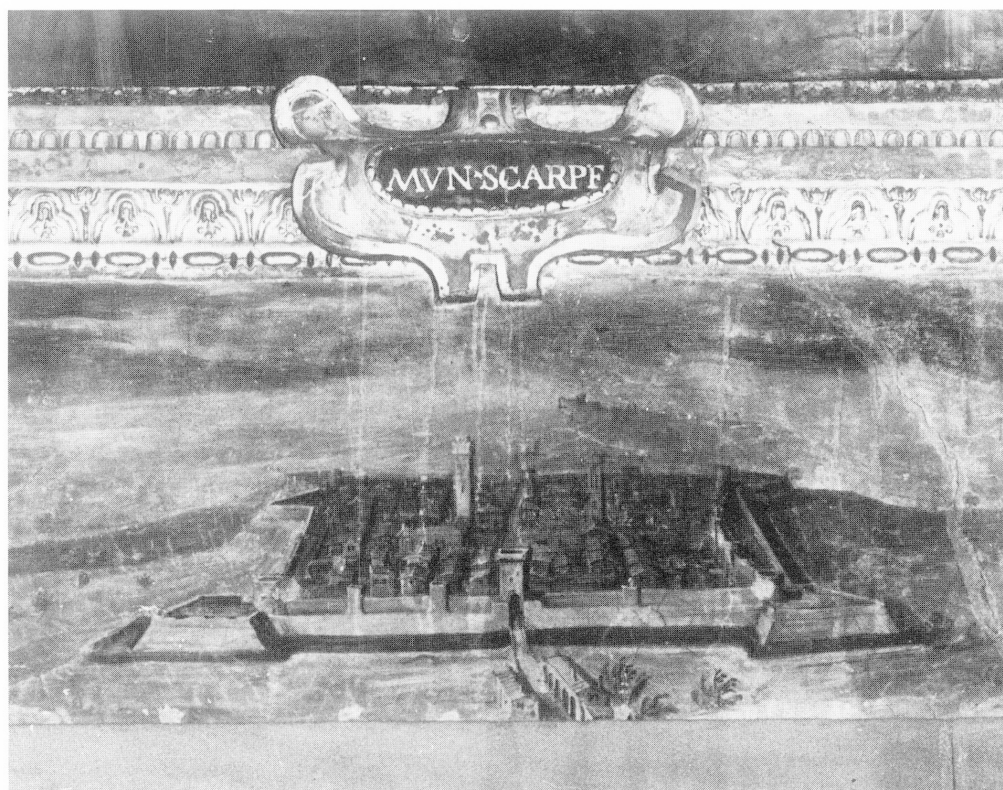


20 Terranuova. Residential street in the southeast quarter.

24 Florentine New Towns



21 Scarperia. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (ASF, uncataloged).



23 Giovanni Stradano, *Scarperia*, 1556 – 1559. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Sala Cosimo I.



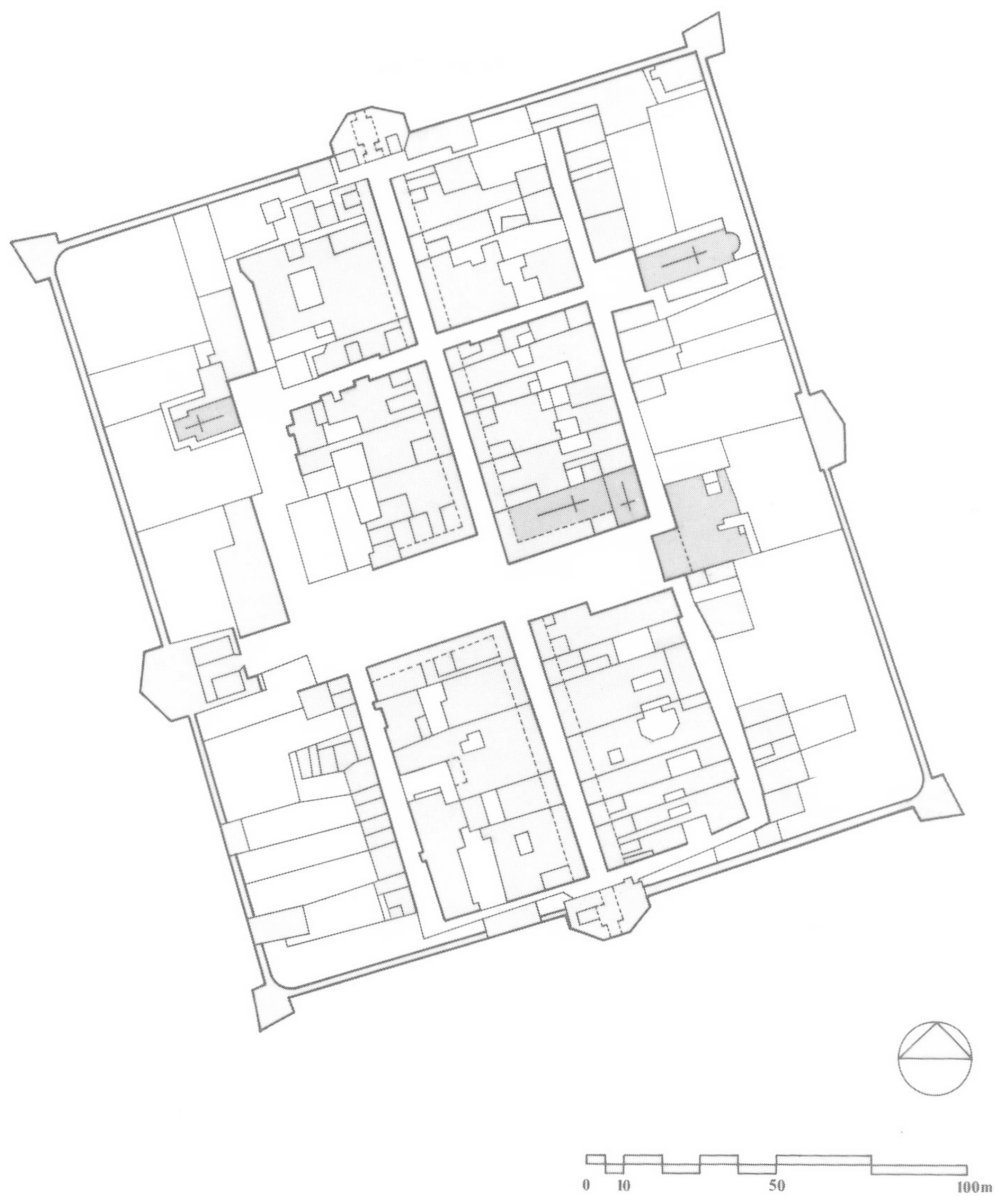
24 Scarperia. Main street, view from the south (Photograph: Alinari 10093).



25 Scarperia. Central square, looking toward San Barnaba.



26 Scarperia. Central square, looking toward the Palazzo Vicarile.



27 Firenzuola. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (ASF, uncataloged).



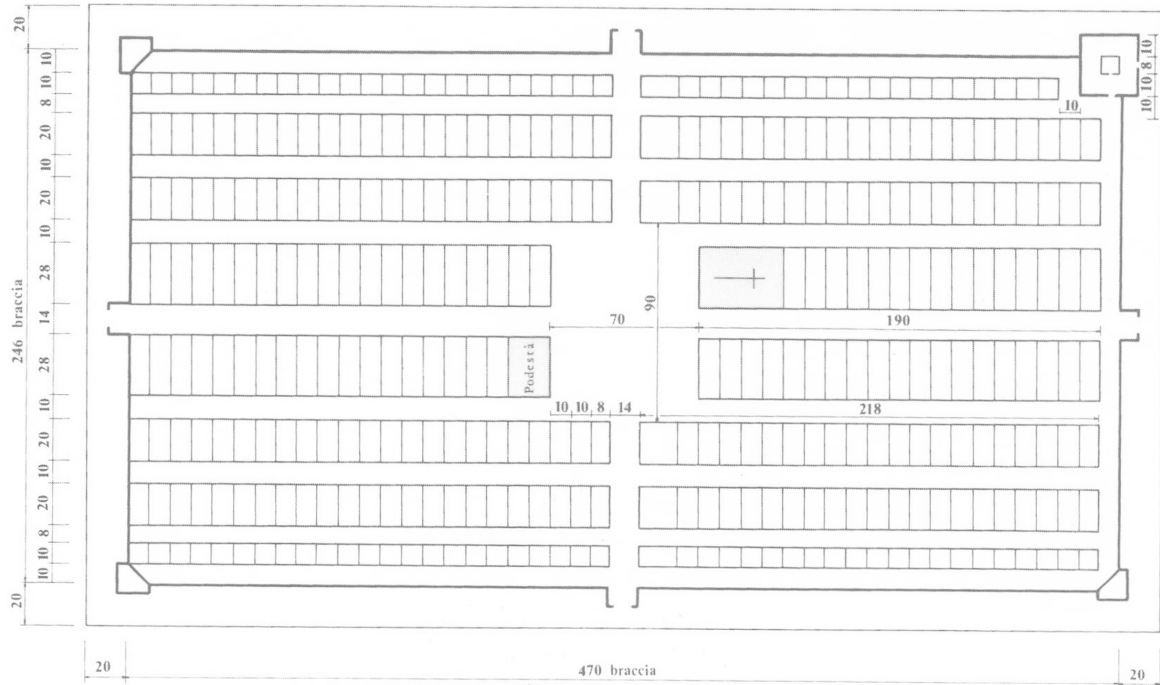
28 Firenzuola. Central square (G. Carli. *Firenzuola*, 1981).

Castelfranco petitioned the Florentine *Signoria* for protection (Document 16). Designated Castel Santa Maria by the Florentines, the town came to be known as Terranuova, and is now known as Terranuova Bracciolini after its native son, Poggio Bracciolini, chancellor of the Florentine republic between 1453 and 1459 (Figs. 16 – 20).³

The Apennine mountains north of Florence are the site of the city's second system of new towns. In 1306 the *Signoria* proclaimed its intention to found two towns straddling the Apennine watershed (Document 3). The town nearer the city, officially named Castel San Barnaba but known as Scarperia after the earlier title of the site, was begun immediately (Figs. 21 – 26).⁴ It is located in the Mugello region, about 4 kilometers north of the Sieve river, on a flat spur of land that rises gradually north toward the mountain ridge and a pass now called the Giogo di Scarperia. The second town, designated in the foundation document as “*ultra alpes*,” was not begun until 1332 (Document 13).⁵ It lies on the valley floor below the Giogo and was given the name Firenzuola (Figs. 27, 28). Because of its position at the farthest reaches of Florentine controlled territory, Firenzuola was constantly overrun by the city's enemies. Burned in 1342 and 1351,⁶ it was not completed until the 1370s, and then on a significantly reduced scale.⁷

In 1350 Florence planned another town of the same type as the five that have survived. It was to have been called Giglio Fiorentino and was slated for a site in the Val d' Ambra, an upland valley to the southeast of the upper Arno valley, toward Arezzo. No settlement or construction was generated by this effort, but before the project died a governmental town building committee — the *Ufficiali delle Castella* — prepared a full description of the scheme, in which everything from immigration schedules to street plans and building codes for houses was discussed. The documentation for this project (Documents 17 – 21) provides a uniquely detailed picture of the early stages of a new town project (Fig. 29).⁸

At the time that it was building the five new towns and planning the Giglio Fiorentino project, the Florentine government was involved in a number of other town building efforts. Most like the new towns were two projects for settlements atop mountain passes at the border of Florence's territory. One, called Pietrasanta, was the city's first effort to establish a new town (Document 1). In the summer of 1284 Florence purchased the land for the project, north of the Apennine watershed, on the road between Borgo San Lorenzo in the Mugello region and Faenza in the Po valley. The mountain site exposed the settlers to attack both by the city's enemies and by the forces of nature. The town survives only in a village



29 Giglio Fiorentino. Reconstruction of the plan (ASF *Uff. Cast., Rocche*, 1, fols. 15v – 18r, 19 May 1350. Text and translation in Document 19).

bearing the name Casaglia which provides no clues to the original plan.⁹ In 1329, the Florentine government conceived a similar project for a site at the top of the Consuma pass, between Pontassieve on the Arno and the Casentino region to the east; it is known only from the document proclaiming its foundation (Document 12). Both this town and Pietrasanta were intended as markets to encourage the importation of grain and as colonies that would develop abandoned land. In both regards they are unlike the Florentine new towns sited nearer the city on lower ground. These were to be real frontier towns, Florentine outposts that could not have become the centers of thriving local economies. The scheme to populate Pietrasanta with settlers from Florence — and to give out farmland in addition to building sites in the town — was unique in the city's conception of new towns and would have insured the settlement's separation from its neighbors. The failure of these schemes demonstrates the experimental nature of the new-town formula and the limits of its potential.

A very different sort of project — one that would hardly be considered town building were it not for the subsequent histories of the sites —



30 Vicchio. Fortified between 1365 and the end of the 1370s. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (ASF, uncatalogued).

engaged the Florentines sporadically throughout the fourteenth century. In 1300 three villages in the neighborhood of Empoli in the lower Arno valley petitioned the Florentine government for permission to build fortifications to which they could retreat for protection in time of war.¹⁰ A petition from another rural group, dated 1309, solicited both the city's permission and its expert advice for a hilltop retreat at Vicchio in the Mugello.¹¹ This latter project was taken up again in 1324 and, once more, in 1365.¹² Between 1365 and the end of the 1370s a hexagonal circuit of stone fortifications was built at Vicchio, "so that the people of the surrounding countryside can retreat to it and defend themselves" (Fig. 30).¹³ While a few residents of the surrounding villages were required to build houses within the walls, none was asked to move there. The need for protection and defense also prompted the Florentines to build fortifications at Pontassieve, at the confluence of the Sieve and Arno rivers (Fig. 31), between 1356 and the late 1370s.¹⁴

In the second half of the fourteenth century, a period of demographic



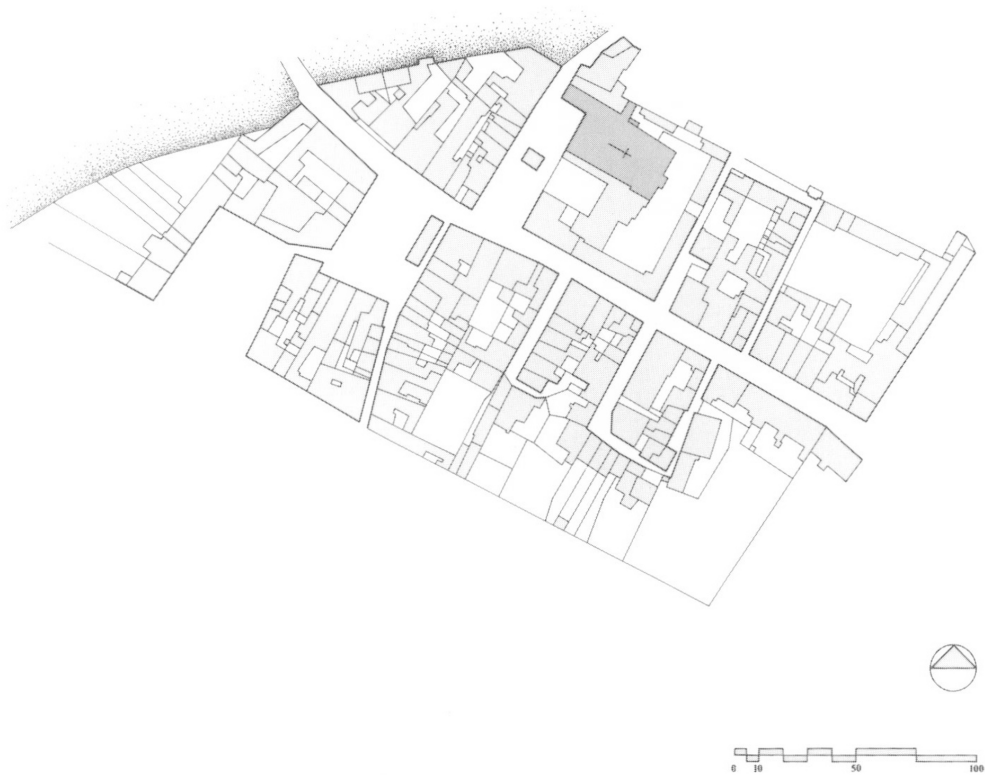
31 Pontassieve. Fortified between 1356 and the late 1370s; streets surveyed in 1382. From the cadastral plan, nineteenth century (ASF, uncataloged).



32 Figline. Expanded and refortified between 1353 and the early 1370s.



33 San Casciano. Expanded and refortified between 1354 and 1358.



34 Campi. Received a market field, a residential area, and new walls between 1376 and 1389.

crisis created by the plague of 1348, the Florentines did not attempt to found any new settlements. Much of the Tuscan territory had already been pacified and urbanized by this time. Town building was restricted to the expansion and improvement of existing facilities. Pontassieve became a permanent settlement in this period. In 1382, well after the fortifications were completed, the land inside the walls was surveyed into a system of streets and squares.¹⁵ Twelve years later the town received market privileges in order to promote immigration.¹⁶ Further upstream in the Valdarno, the thirteenth-century settlement at Figline (Fig. 32) was expanded and refortified between 1353 and the early 1370s.¹⁷ In the Val di Pesa, south of Florence, the town of San Casciano (Fig. 33) was similarly enlarged, refortified, and internally restructured between 1354 and 1358.¹⁸ Campi (Fig. 34), just south of Prato in the lower Valdarno, was given a market field, a

residential area laid out orthogonally, and a new set of walls between 1376 and 1389.¹⁹

All of these projects, in their goals and in their form, were different from the five new towns and the Giglio Fiorentino project. They were less ambitious and more constrained. Yet work on enlargement, like work on the empty defenses used as retreats by neighboring villagers, involved many of the same tasks required of new-town construction. The documents connected with these projects and the environments that survive teach us a great deal about Florentine town building in the fourteenth century. The evidence of these projects, like that of towns built by governments other than that of Florence, is used in this study to illuminate the history of the new towns.

CHAPTER 1

POLICY

THE PROSPERITY OF FLORENCE was dependent on the city's control of the neighboring countryside. As a source of food for its citizens, raw materials for its artisans, soldiers for its armies, tax revenue, and population itself, the city's territories were indispensable. Like other Italian communes, Florence had not always possessed this resource. The *comitatus*, or land tied to the urban centers of antiquity, passed out of the control of cities during the period of Longobard rule (568 – 774), and it was not until the twelfth century that the newly powerful communes began the reconquest of what was then called the *contado*. The cities' first goal was to extend political dominion to the diocesan boundary. Later, the more powerful of them began to acquire territory at the expense of neighboring towns. Florence was among the most expansive. In 1295 Pistoia came under the city's domination; in 1337, Arezzo; in 1351, Prato; in 1354, San Gimignano; in 1406, Pisa; in 1472, Volterra; and in 1559, Siena, the city's last great prize (see Fig. 2).

These successes came relatively late in the history of the Florentine commune. The victories on which the material prosperity of the city was based occurred earlier and closer to home. The government's rivals were not foreign powers but the great barons—the Guidi, the Uberti, the Ubaldini—who had ruled the lands immediately outside the city's walls since the period of the Ottonian emperors. To guarantee the safety of its trade routes and its access to the produce that fed its citizens, the communal government had to bring these noblemen under its authority. The valley of the Arno above and below the city, the Chianti hills to the south, and the valley of the Mugello in the Apennines were the first targets of Florentine expansion into the countryside.