

World Poetry

*The Power and Limits of Sight and Expression,
Re-reading The Divine Comedy with Jorge Luis Borges*

Spring 2020

Dante Alighieri

1265-1321, Florence

- Transitional historical moment
 - Rise of the city-state
 - Birth of early capitalism
 - Re-discovery of texts of antiquity
 - Increasing Church (Pope, Rome) involvement in the economic and political struggles
 - Resultant corruption of spiritual goals of Church
 - Beginning of transition from Latin to vulgar languages in literature



Jorge Luis Borges

1899-1986, Buenos Aires, Argentina

- Transitional historical moment
 - Writer, poet, philosopher, translator
 - Borges's works have contributed to philosophical literature and the fantasy genre
 - His most famous works are two collections of short stories from the 1940s: *Ficciones* and *El aleph*



Syllabus, Presentations and Break out rooms

The History of Italy

History of the Italian Peninsula

Roman Republic: 509 BCE – 27 BCE

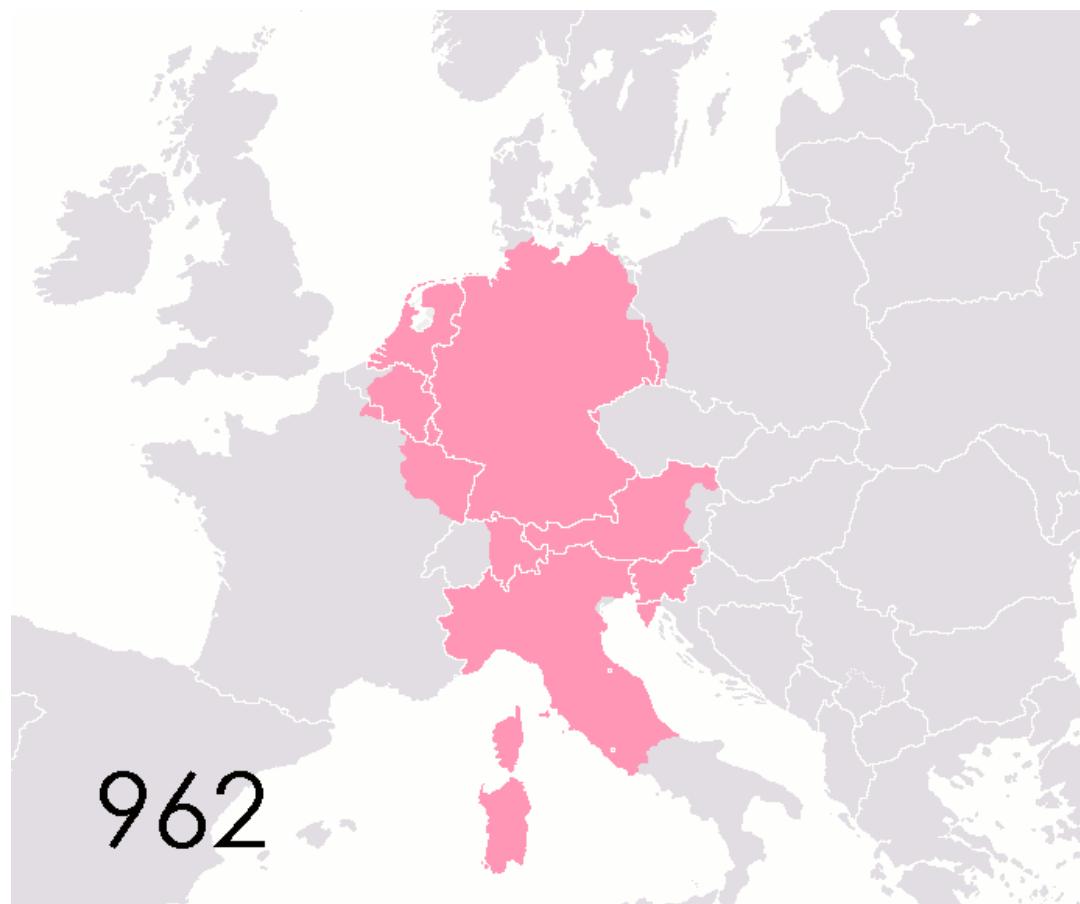
Roman Empire: 27 BCE – 476 CE

- 27-180 Pax Romana: Caesar Augustus, founder of the Roman Empire through Marcus Aurelius
- 285: The **Emperor** Diocletian creates two capitals for the **empire**, with the **Eastern Empire** governed out of Byzantium (later Constantinople) and the **Western Empire** governed from Rome.
- 272-337: Emperor Constantine moves the main capital to Constantinople (Istanbul) and converts to Christianity on his death bed
- 395: Empire divided. Theodosius gave the two halves of the Empire to his two sons and split the Empire.
- 395-475: Decline of Western Empire
 - It lost the strengths that had allowed it to exercise effective control over its Western provinces; military, population, economy, the competence of the Emperors, efficiency of the civil administration. Increasing pressure from invading barbarians (Visigoths, Germanic tribes).



History of the Italian Peninsula

- 380: Bishop of Rome granted primacy
- After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Italian peninsula suffered a series of wars of conquest by the Goths, the Byzantines and the Lombards.
- 751-1870: The Papal States, donated by Pepin and made official, later, by Charlemagne. Pope had temporal sovereignty.
- 800-1808: Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne (Charles I, King of the Franks) the Holy Roman Emperor in Rome. The Roman Pontiff and the German Emperor became the *universal powers* of Italy and Europe
 - The empire never achieved full political unification, evolving instead into a decentralized, limited elective monarchy composed of kingdoms, principalities, duchies, city-states.
 - The height of empire, 1155-1268
- 1076: Pope and Holy Roman Emperor begin to fight for power
 - This fight continues through Dante's day and his Florence is divided between the Guelfs (pro-Pope) and the Ghibellines (pro-Emperor)



Florence and Italy in Dante's Time

- Florence was an independent Republic, as well as part of the Holy Roman Empire.
- By 1298, Florence was the banking center of Europe.
- As many Florentine banks were international companies with branches across Europe, the florin quickly became the dominant trade coin of Western Europe
- The fight between the HRE and the Pope intensifies in the 1200s as Frederick II becomes HRE in 1212 and his holdings (under the house of Hohenstaufen) engulf the Papal States. Charles of Anjou (France), with the help of the Pope, defeated Frederick's armies after his death (1250) and took over Southern Italy, until 1294 when he died.
- The period (late 1200s –late 1300s) was marked by strife: the constant wars between the Guelfs and Ghibellines; series of plagues including the Black Death in 1347; the Papal Schism or Avignon Papacy (1309-1376)



Florence and Italy in Dante's Time

- Dante was elected to serve a 2-month term as a prior, during the upheavals of government between Guelf factions.
- After bloody riots, the Black Guelfs organized a coup d'état and charged all members of the White Guelf government with treason.
- Dante escaped and was accused and tried in absentia in January 1302, for embezzlement, forgery and opposition to the pope.
- He lost his property, was stripped of his citizenship and exiled. If he returned, he would be burned at the stake.
- He started the *Divine Comedy* at this time. It was completed in 1320, exactly 700 years ago.



The Middle Ages

- Often called the ‘Dark Ages’ in the West, after a name given it by Boccaccio.
- As knowledge of Greek declined in the West with the fall of the Western Roman Empire, so did knowledge of the Greek texts, many of which had remained without a Latin translation.
- After the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204) and the Sack of Constantinople (1204), scholars gained access to the original Greek texts of scientists and philosophers, and translated them directly into Latin.
 - Including Aristotle, Plato, Archimedes, Proclus



Inferno, Cantos 1 - 2

Where are we?

Who is the protagonist?

What is the action of the canto?

