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1

## Jacobus de Voragine in His Time

Jacobus, known in English and in French as “de Voragine,” was an Italian whose name in its traditional Italian form is Iacopo da Varazze. Varazze is a small town on the Ligurian coast not far from Genoa. It is thought today, however, that although Iacopo’s family came from Varazze, he himself was born in Genoa.<sup>1</sup>

“That year, on Friday 3 June, soon after twelve o’clock, the weather being serene and clear, the sun was obscured and for some time it was night and no one remembered having seen anything similar in other times nor such a great obscurity taking place during the daytime and that lasted so long. As a result, very many were struck by it and much frightened.” This eclipse of the sun described by an anonymous layperson in Genoa chronicling the year 1239 is the oldest authentic event to which Jacobus de Voragine alludes in his writings. It is amusing to note that our Dominican’s oldest chronological reference concerns a marvel of nature. It is as if he were predestined to be receptive to the marvelous and not over-concerned to separate the natural from the supernatural.<sup>2</sup>

The life of Jacobus de Voragine is fairly well known because, for one thing, he became prominent within a religious order that

made liberal use of both the written and the spoken word and, for another, because he himself, despite his humility, was quite sensitive to chronology, which is one expression of time. As a result, the autobiographical information present in his own works, in documents relating to the history of the Dominican Order, and in a series of essential notarial acts (for the most part relating to the last period of his life, 1292–1298, when he was archbishop of Genoa) have been preserved. This great specialist on the saints was himself not canonized, but only beatified, and that beatification came late. It was pronounced by Pope Pius VII in 1816 at the request of the Genoese, who had always been devoted to his memory.

As is usually the case in the Middle Ages, we do not know Jacobus de Voragine's birth date (the keeping of parish registers did not become general practice until the sixteenth century), but it is likely that his family belonged to the minor nobility in Liguria and that he was born in 1228 or 1229. The summary of his life that follows contains only authentic dates founded on indisputable documents. In 1244 Iacopo, who was at the time almost certainly an adolescent, entered as a novice into the Dominican monastery founded in Genoa in 1222. In 1267 the chapter general of Bologna raised him to the post of provincial of Lombardy. This was a highly important post, given the wealth and the prestige of that province and the fact that it was extremely large, including all of Northern Italy, Emilia, and Picenum on the Adriatic coast south of Ancona. He occupied that position for ten years, until 1277. We do not know in which Dominican monastery of the region—whether in Bologna or, more probably, in Milan—he established his seat. He was reappointed by the provincial chapter of Bologna in 1281 and remained provincial of Lombardy until 1286. From 1283 to 1285 he served as a temporary replacement for the master general of the Dominican Order, a charge to which the pope had been unable to name a friar with a wider acceptance in the Order. In 1288 he was a candidate for the archiepiscopal seat of Genoa, which was vacant at the time. He found himself enmeshed in a lively polemic within the Order, however,

in which he is thought to have supported the new master general, Muño de Zamora, and in the course of the violent (and at times armed) conflicts that followed, even within the Order, he was threatened with assassination on two occasions and with being thrown into the well of the Dominican monastery in Ferrara. In 1292, when the political winds had shifted, he was named archbishop of Genoa by Pope Nicholas IV. The pope died soon after, however, so it was a cardinal charged with papal functions who consecrated Jacobus as archbishop, in Rome on April 13, 1292. Jacobus de Voragine took an extremely active part in the intense political struggles that shook Genoa at the end of the thirteenth century. Unrest existed in ecclesiastical milieus as well, and here Jacobus launched a legislative reorganization of both the clergy and the laity and attempted to mediate between the enemy Guelph and Ghibelline factions. He managed to reestablish civil peace in 1295 and led an imposing procession through the city, parading on horseback at the head of the population and then presenting a belt of knighthood to the Milanese Iacopo da Carcano, the *potestate* of Genoa (as in most of the larger cities of Italy in the thirteenth century, foreign potestates had replaced the consuls in the city's government). In the same year, Jacobus went to Rome, at the bidding of the new pope, Boniface VIII, to make use of his talent for mediation by reestablishing peace between Genoa and Venice. He failed to achieve this goal, however. On his return to Genoa he was equally unsuccessful at preventing either the breakdown of the peace between factions or the resumption of violent confrontations. In his sorrow, his poetic tastes inspired him to write, "Our zither has been transformed into mourning, and our organ has changed into a human voice of men and women weeping." The violence in Genoa was so intense that the Cathedral of San Lorenzo was burned to the ground; in June 1296 Jacobus obtained an indemnity from the pope for its reconstruction. Having fulfilled his functions as conscientiously as he could and having settled a number of archdiocesan economic problems, he died during the night of July 13 to 14, 1298, aged about seventy, quite advanced in years for a man of his time.

Three elements of his biography throw light both on Jacobus de Voragine as a person and on his oeuvre. First, he was fundamentally—one might say viscerally—a Genoese, totally devoted to the city where he was probably born and certainly died at the head of its clergy, and the history of which he wrote (*Chronica civitatis Ianuensis*) at the very end of his life. From adolescence he had been a member of the recently created Dominican Order, founded by Saint Dominic in 1216 (and as we have seen, his own monastery was founded six years after that). He remained a prominent member of the Order, especially in Genoa and in Northern Italy. We should not forget, however, that although this friar, unlike many Franciscans, was not primarily an itinerant preacher, he did make many voyages, all of them within the Mediterranean basin or the central areas of Christendom (for example, to Pecs in 1273 and to Bordeaux in 1277). Unlike some historians, however, I do not view him as a friar with a special attraction for Mediterranean space, the arena of Genoese commerce. He was essentially a man of the Church, as were all Dominicans, in particular those of the more populated and active cities.<sup>3</sup> Thus the great theologian Albert the Great, a member of the Dominican Order, pronounced an astonishing series of sermons in Latin and German in the mid-thirteenth century, proposing a sort of theology and spirituality of the city according to which narrow, somber urban streets were equated with Hell and large open squares with Paradise. Jacobus de Voragine, who wanted to make pious use of the saints to sacralize or sanctify times and places, believed that just as he did this in writing in the *Golden Legend*, he could also do it in acts, in particular by the transfer of relics. In 1293, during his tenure as archbishop, he organized a provincial council in the cathedral of San Lorenzo to give solemn recognition to the authenticity of the relics of Saint Siro, the patron saint of Genoa. Ecclesiastical authorities, members of the government, the notables of the city, and (in successive groups) the entire population of the city participated. In 1283 Jacobus de Voragine wrote a life of Saint Siro (one of his lesser works) in which he speaks of the relics. Between 1296 and 1298 he

wrote, in Latin, a history of the translation of relics of Saint John the Baptist to Genoa in 1099, and he had already written (in 1286 and 1292), histories of relics kept in the monastery of Saints Philip and James in Rome, a convent for Dominican nuns. Jacobus de Voragine himself was first buried in San Domenico, the church of the Dominicans in Genoa, and then in the late eighteenth century his remains were transferred to another Dominican church in Genoa, Santa Maria di Castello, where they remain today.

The second biographical element to be noted is Jacobus's profound attachment to his Order, to its founder, and to his fellow Dominicans. This is apparent in his treatment of the life of Saint Dominic and of the saint chronologically closest to him, Saint Peter of Verona. A fellow Dominican, preacher, and inquisitor, Peter of Verona was massacred on the road from Milan to Como by assassins in the employ of powerful heretics on April 12, 1252, and canonized as a martyr in 1263. During the latter half of the thirteenth century, the Dominicans were a young order, as the official thirteenth-century life of Saint Dominic stresses, and the order almost immediately occupied an eminent place in the urban, social, cultural, and of course in the religious life of Christian Europe. Preaching, as their official name "the Order of Preachers" indicates, was the Dominicans' primary instrument of edification, but they made use not only of the spoken word to sanctify Christian society, but also—as Jacobus de Voragine himself illustrates—employed the written word, in a century when the ability to read was increasing in society. It seems to me that Jacobus de Voragine fully shared in that fondness for novelty and was in no way nostalgic for the past, as some have suggested. The past moved him only when it was the Christian past—the past in which Christianity was born and spread throughout ancient society—a past that was a novelty and, for Jacobus de Voragine, a novelty that brought salvation.<sup>4</sup> The Dominicans are often represented as essentially intellectuals. And this quite wrongly. For the most part, they were simple friars, devoted to preaching and to informing themselves as much as that mission required. This was already the



case in the thirteenth century. Intellectuals—and by his works, his ideas, and his influence, Jacobus de Voragine was incontestably an intellectual—were a minority within the Order.

His attachment to the Dominican Order can also be seen in the special influence on his literary activity, and in particular on the *Golden Legend*, of Dominican authors. In the early thirteenth century, which was marked by a renewal of preaching, in particular to the urban public, a new type of legendary was developed. These were in fact called “new legendaries” or “abbreviated legendaries” (the latter because they characteristically shorten the narration of saints’ lives to avoid boring listeners). Before Jacobus de Voragine, two Dominicans had already redacted a “new legendary,” and they became essential sources for the *Golden Legend*. The first of these figures was Jean de Mailly, who has already been mentioned and whose legendary was probably written and circulated after 1243. Jean de Mailly was a secular priest in the diocese of Auxerre, who at some unknown date between 1240 and 1250 entered the Dominican monastery of Metz.<sup>5</sup> Jacobus de Voragine’s other Dominican source was the 1245 legendary of Bartholomew of Trent. The particular character of the *Golden Legend*, which is not an ordinary legendary, probably pushed the Dominican Order to continue to put new legendaries into circulation after Jacobus’s death, the best known of which is that of the illustrious Bernard Gui, who died in 1331 and who was also the author of a much-admired manual for inquisitors. One indication of the exceptional success of Jacobus de Voragine’s work is that we possess only one manuscript of Bernard Gui’s legendary, as opposed to a thousand manuscripts of the *Golden Legend*.

Third, we need to measure what that work and its author owed to their times. For European Christianity, particularly in Northern Italy, the age was a turning point that saw Christian society move from the “beautiful thirteenth century” to the crises of the end of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Medieval Christianity had reached its zenith in the first half of the thirteenth century. The Gregorian reform had produced its full effects: the near indepen-

dence of the Church and lay institutions from one another; a reform of the Church; the ascension of the laity; the rapid growth of cities; an acceleration of exchanges of both goods and ideas; the expansion of agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as of urban craft work; and the development of education, with a growing emphasis on calculation, reason, and debate. This was the time, as Father Marie-Dominique Chenu has demonstrated, when theology became a science and, as Alexander Murray explains in his fine book *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, when *ratio*, in its dual sense of calculation and reason, expanded in many domains. Although society remained profoundly religious, it recalled that God had made man in his own image and that man should make better use of the qualities and the strengths that God had placed within him. Some, Colin Morris and Aron J. Gurevich, for example, have spoken of the “birth of the individual.” I have attempted to describe that great moment in “Du ciel sur la terre: La mutation des valeurs du XIIe au XVIIIe siècle dans l’Occident chrétien.”<sup>6</sup> Jacobus de Voragine certainly made use of what these developments offered, and the *Golden Legend*, in a certain fashion, marks the high point of that expansion within Christianity.

However, the latter half of the thirteenth century was also a turning point when prosperity brought changes that were often painful and at times violent. (Indeed Jacobus de Voragine himself experienced these upheavals, especially in Genoa.) Internecine struggles peaked in the Italian cities: around 1280, the first urban workers’ strikes took place; monetary difficulties brought the ancestors of bankers to the first financial failures; the last convulsions in the struggle against heretics led to the assassination of the Dominican preacher Peter of Verona, the saint of most recent date presented in the *Golden Legend*; apocalyptic fears arose of the end of the world; and there were early hints of confrontations within the Church that would lead to the popes’ exile to Avignon. One might also argue that the glorious aspect of the medieval high point reflected in the *Golden Legend* was a prefiguration of the great Christian celebration

that was to be the Roman jubilee of the year 1300. Alain Boureau has evoked the dual nature of the age—a time of festivity and confrontation, of order and disorder—in a fine article that focuses on Jacobus de Voragine’s *Chronicle of Genoa*, but in which he evokes an atmosphere that applies to the *Golden Legend* as well.<sup>7</sup>

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