THE DATING OF DANTE'S VOYAGE IN THE DIVINE COMEDY

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Abstract: One of the most fascinating, and debated, topics regarding Dante's immortal masterpiece, the Divine Comedy, concerns the date on which he imagines his journey to take place. Almost all commentators have placed it between March and April 1300, based on many apparently reliable historical and symbolic quotations. However, several astronomical references point in a completely different direction, and indicate a date around 25 March 1301. In addition to this, a closer examination of the historical and symbolic indications reveals that they are far from homogeneous: some provide no useful information, several give information congruent with 1301, and only a few are consistent with 1300. This paper also explores the reasons for the apparent contradictions between different references. The strong indication that seems to come from the present work in favour of 25 March 1301 represents an invitation to Dante scholars to reconsider the whole question.

Keywords: Dante, Divine Comedy, dating the journey, astronomical evidence

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most debated subjects relating to the Divine Comedy has always been the date of Dante's imagined journey to the otherworld. Obviously, this is not a fact of purely intrinsic value, since it acquires very important meanings for the great poem, both historically, symbolically and scientifically. However, as we shall see, it also has particular relevance for the assessment of the poet's scientific knowledge, and thus his reputation with posterity. However, although much has been written on the subject, the resolution of the dating question has always seemed elusive, as it is fundamentally suspended between two types of apparently contradictory indications, the astronomical and the historical-symbolic ones. The prevailing tendency so far has seemed to be that of assigning priority to the latter, which are more numerous, than to the former, which are more scarce and, at least so far, unconvincing.

Curiously, the first commentators were somewhat imprecise in the dating of the journey: they all agreed on the year, 1300, but della Lana (whose commentary was written between 1324 and 1328) only identified the month, March (Scarabelli, 1866(i): 110, 362); the Ottimo (written between 1330 and 1340) placed the beginning in mid-March, on Good Friday (Torri, 1827(i): 7, 382); Pietro Alighieri (after 1347) in the middle of March (Nannucci, 1845: 311); Boccaccio (1373–1374) on 25 March (Padoan, 1994: 25, 79) but, curiously, in two places stated that the year was 1300 (Padoan, 1994: 20, 352), in another 1301 (Padoan, 1994: 150); Benvenuto da Imola (second half of the fourteenth century) in the middle of March 1300, still Good Friday (Tamburini, 1855(i): 512); da Buti (1385–1396) gave contradictory indications: Holy Saturday of 1300 (Giannini, 1858(i): 22–23), Holy Saturday of March (Giannini, 1858(i): 32), 2 March 1300 Holy Saturday (Giannini, 1858(i): 156), also stating that the Sun entered Aries in the middle of March (Giannini, 1858(i): 32); the Anonimo Fiorentino (late fourteenth century-early fifteenth century) on 18 March, claiming it was Good Friday (Fanfani, 1866(i): 454, 467).

Landino (1481: f11v) (the only noteworthy fifteenth-century commentator) claimed that the Full Moon occurred on the night between 4 and 5 April 1300, that Dante entered Hell on the night between 5 and 6 April, and that it was Good Friday (commentary on Inf., XXI, vv. 106–117).

The first scholar to take the trouble to check that Easter in 1300 fell on 10 April seems to have been, according to Dionisi (1788: 45), Giambullari, who did not use any astronomical “tables” as Dionisi says, but rather the Ecclesiastical rule of Easter. Giambullari (1544: 22–26) claimed that the journey began on Good Friday, 8 April 1300, but he also argued that there was a contradiction (which Dante resolved in a symbolic, “mystical” sense, according to him), with the Full Moon, which Giambullari, this time, derived from astronomical tables and not from the ecclesiastical rule, and set on 4 April, Holy Monday. Daniello (1568: 140) (the most important commentator of the sixteenth century), said it was Good Friday in 1300. Mazzoni (first edition 1572) also derived the date of 4 April for the Full Moon, but claimed that Dante began the journey on 5 April (Mazzoni, 1587: 217–218).

No comments appeared in the seventeenth century. According to Dionisi (1788: 70), the journey began either on 13 or 25 March, and the Full Moon is pure poetic fiction (Dionisi, 1768: 74). Lombardi (1830(i): 458) (who wrote in 1791 and was the most important commentator of the eighteenth century) placed the Full Moon on 4 April 1300, and the
entry into the underworld on the night between 4 and 5 April (Lombardi, 1830(I): 439).

Restricting ourselves to the most significant commentaries and essays of the last two centuries, Philalethes (1839: 2, 161) (John of Saxony) proposed the three dates of 25 March, 8 April and 5 April 1300, the latter assuming Dante referred to the Passover; Torricelli (1853(II): 317–318) took 3 April, Palm Sunday, as the date for the beginning of the journey, believing that the Full Moon had occurred on 2 April. Capocci (1856: 163), fixed the Full Moon on 3 April, and the beginning of the journey on the 4th; Antonelli (1865: 23) fixed the beginning on 4 April; Gregoretti (1868: 61–62), stated that the Full Moon was on 4 April and the beginning of the journey on 5 April 1300; Della Valle (1869: 9) and Agnelli (1891: 105–106) set the date of the journey on 8 April, and the date of the Full Moon, using the ecclesiastical rule, on 7 April, Maundy Thursday; Scartazzini (1874: 4) was ambivalent: in the Commentary Major he indicated 25 March 1300, in the second edition of the same (Scartazzini, 1900: 10) 25 March, 5 or 8 April 1300, an indication confirmed in the Commentary Minor (Scartazzini, 1896: 7) but as he did, he put before the three dates the indication that it was Good Friday, which of course would only apply to 8 April; Ponta (1892: 71–72) assumed 3 April, Palm Sunday, as the date of the beginning of the journey, and the date of the Full Moon; Moore (1900: 50; 1903: 175–177) set the same dates, and in the same way, as Della Valle and Agnelli; Grandgent (1913: 7) followed Moore; Orr (1913: 423) considered the day to be an “ideal” Good Friday, falling one week after the Equinox, at the time of the Full Moon; Torraca (1915: 3, 163) set the start at 8 April; Del Lungo (1921: 17, 243) assumed the beginning and Full Moon on 8 April; Sbriccoli (1962: 3, 139) makes the journey begin on 8 April; Momigliano (1969: 5) indicates only the year, 1300; Porena (1964(I): 14–15), Sapegno (1973: 4) and Provenzal (1980: 177) on 25 March; Di Salvo (1985(I): 6) on 25 March or 8 April; Gizzie (1974: 58), Barletti (1987: 14), Chiavacci Leonardi (1991: 646), Sermonti (2015: 33–34), Malato (2021: 9) and Bosco-Raggio (2022: 386) on 8 April, Manuguerra (1997: 6) on 4 April; Bellomo (2013: 43) indicates an ideal holy week of 1300; while Barbero (2020: 307) favours 25 March.

2 THE MAIN INDICATIONS

2.1 Malacoda

The most probative dating indication seems to be the remark from the famous tercet of Canto XXI of Inferno (Dante, 1921(ii): 112–114):

Yesterday, five hours later than this hour,
one thousand two hundred and sixty-six
years were completed that here the way was broken.¹

The speaker is Malacoda, the leader of the devils of Malebranche, the crowd of infernal beings who rule the ditch of the barters (Figure 1). He tells Virgil that the road is broken up and one cannot go ahead from where they are, because the ledge is ruined owing to the earthquake on the day of Christ’s death which shook the whole of Hell (cf. Dante, 1921, Inf., XII: 31–45). And this happened precisely 1266 years – 19 hours ago (“one day minus five hours”). Now, for Dante (1921, IV, XXIII: 10), from what he writes in the Convivio, Christ died at the age of 34. During the Middle Ages it was common opinion, based on the tradition founded on the statements of various Church Fathers, Tertullian, Lattantius, Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, that Christ died on the same day of his conception, 25 March (Angelitti, 1897: 19; Dionisi, 1788: 64–65). The Florentines, like Dante (1921, Par., XVI: 34), counted the years ab incarnatione, and thus began the year on 25 March of each year (Dionisi, 1788: 67), celebrating it with the feast of Annunziata, which commemorates the moment when the Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary her sacred conception. Moreover, in antiquity the world was thought to have been created at the Equinox (Dionisi, 1788: 66, 69); the Julian Calendar had established that the Equinox occurred on 25 March (ibid) and the date of 21 March was not adopted by Christianity until the sixth century (Tempesti, 2006: 49). Here, then, is how Malacoda’s words can be interpreted: yesterday, the day on which Dante makes his entrance into the underworld, was exactly 1266 years after the death of the Redeemer, so it was 25 March 1300.

2.2 The Full Moon

The preceding indication, however, contradicts the line from Inf. XX, 127, where Dante has Virgil say: “and already last night the moon was round”, that is, when Dante enters Hell and begins his journey, there was a Full Moon. In 1300 the Full Moon occurred on 5 April¹ and this 11-day discrepancy with the date 25 March obviously poses a problem. Some, like the above-mentioned Dionisi and Orr, or Buscaino Campo (1894: 42), have assumed a more or less symbolic or ideal Full Moon. This can, however, be ruled out, since the circumstance of the beginning with a full Moon is re-
iterated in *Purg.*, XXIII, 119–121, and in the
days following the beginning further details are
given on the corresponding positions and
phases of the waning Moon (Dante, 1921, *Inf.*
XXIX, 10–11; *Purg.* X, 14–15; *Purg.* XVIII,
76–81).

Others have assumed that Malacoda did
not mean that “yesterday” was 1266 years
after Christ’s death, but that “yesterday” was
the anniversary of Christ’s death, i.e. Good
Friday, which in 1300, as we have seen, fell on
8 April: we have already mentioned some of
these supporters who, as already said, in order
to square with the “round moon”, had to admit
that Dante had used the ecclesiastical Full
Moon. Even those who imagined the begin-
nning of the journey to be on 5 April, Holy Tues-
day, claimed that it represented the anniver-
sary of Christ’s death being the day following
the Full Moon with the Sun in Aries, as the day
on which Jesus was crucified (Dionisi, 1788:
48). On the other hand, no anniversary can be
found with a journey starting on 4 April, Holy
Monday, or 3 April, Palm Sunday, which sev-
eral have indicated.

2.3 The Season

In the famous passage in the first canto of
*Inferno* (37–40) Dante (1921) sets the season
in which his journey begins:

The time was from the beginning of
the morning,
and the sun was rising with those
stars
that were with it when the divine love
for the first time set in motion those
beautiful things;

hence: it was early morning and the Sun was
rising in the sky surrounded by the same stars
that were in conjunction with it when God first
set the cosmic mechanism in motion. In an-
cient and medieval times it was believed that
the world was created at the Spring Equinox
because the Sun would exert a better influ-
ence in that position (as also stated by the
poet in *Dante, 1921, Par.* I: 38–42). However,
of course, the astronomical indication is not
precise: even assuming that Dante, as we
shall see, refers to the signs of the zodiac, not
to the constellations, he does not explicitly say
that the Sun was at the beginning of the sign
of Aries, as it is at the Equinox. Therefore, it could be any time between 21 March and 20 April, the dates on which the Sun was traditionally within the sign of Aries, or between 12 March and 12 April, the actual dates on which it was there in 1300 and 1301, because of the advance due to the faulty way in which the Julian Calendar represented the length of the tropical year.

3 CONFLICTING INDICATIONS

There are quite a few other indications within the poem, both symbolic, historical and astronomical, that critics for a long time have considered consistent with the year 1300. But in 1864, Vedovati (1864: 15–27) analysed some historical and symbolic passages in the poem and found that they fitted better with the spring of 1301. And in 1897, Angelitti analysed the astronomical references in the Commedia for dating purposes and found that they fitted 1301, not 1300.

These astronomical references were then examined by various authors, such as Capasso (1960, 1967: 15–19), D’Ovidio (1901: 545–559), Moore (1900, 1903: 144–177), Orr (1913: 409–424), Rizzacasa D’Orsogna (1911) and Solerti (1898), who also dealt extensively with the various historical and symbolic references. Of these, however, only Rizzacasa D’Orsogna and Capasso considered that the indications were better suited to 1301, the others not finding the arguments convincing. However, their conclusions were quite surprising. In particular, Orr, although she had correctly discussed the various historical references, showing the many ambiguities and various possible interpretations in one direction or the other, finally stated that the astronomical indications, which were almost all in one direction, were not such as to counterbalance the historical ones.

Moore, on the other hand, was positive that the historical indications were all in favour of 1300, even the uncertain ones and even the contrary ones. He even neglected some of the latter and overlooked the astronomical ones, seeming on the whole to be biased by preconceived and undemonstrable theses. For example, he claimed that “Dante never believes himself obliged to sacrifice a poetic effect ... for the sake of scientific precision.” (Moore, 1900: 70), and that the Commedia is “...not a scientific treatise for professional astronomers but a poem written for readers of average culture and intelligence.” (Moore 1903: 166). He also pointed out that the astronomical backgrounds created are “...purely imaginary ...” (Moore, 1903: 173).

D’Ovidio, who also kept up a rich correspondence with Angelitti on these issues, took the latter’s remarks very seriously, while admitting that the opinion for 1300 was “... generally followed more by tradition and laziness than by conscious conviction.” He maintained not only that “…the historical evidence in favour of 1300 far exceeds ... that ... favourable to 1301 …", but also that “…the historical evidence must count more than the astronomical evidence", though why so, it is not clear.

Solerti asserted, after a survey of 20 historical items, that only three were favourable to 1301, eight to 1300, and nine “…offer no foothold …", although he did not include the astronomical ones in his research.

Below I will consider the various references and sources, discussing their consistency with respect to 1300 and 1301.

4 ASTRONOMICAL REFERENCES

4.1 Around the Equinox

Even if the astronomical indication in Inf.(1), 37–40 is not explicit, as the precise position of the Sun on the ecliptic at that moment is not given, one can hardly avoid the impression that a day very close to the Equinox is intended and 25 March, for all the symbolic values mentioned above, is the ideal candidate.

4.2 The Moon in 1301

One cannot fail to note, of course, that in 1301 a Full Moon occurred precisely on 25 March, a day coinciding with all the dates we have examined for their symbolic meanings: the anniversary of Christ’s conception and death, the beginning of the world, the ancient Equinox, the beginning of the Florentine year, the feast of the Annunciation.

4.3 Venus

A compelling piece of information is to be found in the splendid tercet, among the most beautiful and evocative, dedicated to the planet Venus when Dante (1921, Purgatorio, I: 19–21) sees it on his arrival in Purgatory (Figure 2):

The beautiful planet that induces to love
made all the east laugh,
veiling the Pisces, which were escorting it.

Bearing in mind the chronological scansion of the voyage (Moore, 1900: Tables V–VI; Buti and Bertagni, 1966: 242–243; Gizzi, 1974: 68–72) and assuming it begins on the evening of 8 April 1300, we are in the morning
of 11 April. But it appears that on that date Venus was observable in the evening, and poorly, because it was only 8° from the Sun, and it was in the sign of Taurus, at 37° ecliptic longitude (Dante refers to signs, not constellations, see e.g. Dante, 1921, Par., XXII: 110). It makes little difference if the journey begins on the previous days. But if the voyage begins on 25 March 1301, then the planet would be indeed visible in the morning of 28 March 1301, and highly visible, being close to its maximum angular separation from the Sun. Furthermore, being at 330° ecliptic longitude, it was right at the beginning of the sign of Pisces. The circumstance of morning visibility is also confirmed by Purg. XXVII, 94–96:
I think it was that hour when, from the east,
Cynthia first shone on the mountain,
she who seems ever burning with the fire of love,
when Dante describes the dream he had at the time
when the light of Venus (called Cynthia, from the island of Cynthia on which the
goddess Venus had landed after her birth from the sea),
appears on the horizon, before dawn,
and in which Lia, Laban's eldest daughter, appears to him.

4.4 Mars

As it is inferred from the following passage
(Dante, 1921, Par., XVI: 34–39), Mars is in the sign of Leo:

He said to me: “From that day when
‘Ave’ was said
till the birth in which my mother, who
is now a saint, delivered of me whom she was pregnant,
to its Lion five hundred and fifty
and thirty times this fire came back
to rekindle itself beneath its paw.

The speaker is Dante’s ancestor, Caccia-
guida. To declare his year of birth, he says that
since the time of the Annunciation (“Ave”
is the greeting formula used by Archangel Gabriel in the announcement to Mary of the immaculate conception) Mars has returned under the sign of Leo 580 times. That “came”
(cf. Angeli, 1897: 96) is a strong indication
that the planet was also in the sign of Leo at the time of the vision. In fact, on 31 March
1301 (Dante reaches Paradise six days after entering the underworld) Mars was actually in Leo, at 130° ecliptic longitude, whereas between
9 and 14 April 1300 it was in Aries, between 3° and 7° ecliptic longitude.

4.5 Saturn

In Par., XXI, 13–15, when Dante and Beatrice ascend to the seventh heaven, that of Saturn, the poet writes:

We have ascended to the seventh splendid,
which below the Lion’s burning breast
now sends its beams down mixed with its virtue.

Saturn was in Leo in both the springs of
1300 and 1301 but, while between 9 and 14
April 1300 it was 11° away from Regulus, the
star of the first magnitude called by Ptolemy the “Heart of Leo”, on 31 March 1301 it was
only 3° from the star, which makes the indication much more consistent. Moore (1903:
171–172) refutes the indication (confusing, among other things, the cardinal points east
and west and the ecliptic longitude of Saturn with the distance to the constellation’s bound-
daries). He states in fact that in 1301 Saturn
would not have been directly below Regulus, but a little above. This is not the case though:
at the meridian passage of Leo, Saturn would have appeared exactly to the east of Regulus,
and Moore’s later assertion that the “heart of Leo” is not the same as the “breast of the lion”
also plays into the game. In fact, Saturn would have appeared just below the vast breast of
Leo, of which Regulus is a part. But it is also possible that the word “below” simply indicates
the actual position in the sky of Saturn’s sphere below the sphere of the fixed stars (cf. Orr, 1913: 407).

4.6 The Longitude of the Sun on Arrival
in Purgatory and Paradise

If the journey had begun between 6 and 8 April
1300, not everything would have taken place with the Sun in “those stars that were with it
when the divine love for the first time set in motion those beautiful things”), namely in the
sign of Aries. In fact, it would have entered the sign of Taurus as early as 12 April, and on 14
April it would have been 35° longitude (5° in the sign). Even if Dante had based himself on
the conventional date established by the Church for the equinox, 21 March, and not on the actual
equinox occurring on 12 March in 1300, I find it unlikely that he would have chosen for his journey a date lacking coherent
symbolical meaning.

4.7 Such A Mouth Almost

In the first canto of Paradiso (Dante, 1921,
Par.: 43–45):

Had made morning there and here
evening
such a mouth almost, and there was
wholly white
that hemisphere, and the other part
black,
we find the reference to “such a mouth”, the
point on the horizon which, in previous lines,
was defined as the exact eastern point where
the Sun rises and expresses its best influence
on the world, that is to say at the Equinox,
when it is at the intersection of the celestial
equator, the ecliptic and the equinoctial colure.
The word “almost” must be intended as an
indication that a few days have passed since
the Sun was exactly on the equinoctial point.
But, if the time were between 9 and 14 April
1300, it would seem far too many days had passed since both the actual Equinox (12 March) and the ecclesiastical Equinox (21 March). In contrast, a location around the end of March would fit the astronomical indication better.

5 HISTORICAL REFERENCES

5.1 The Year of Christ’s Death

It seems likely to me that Dante has followed the Christian chronological convention of regarding the year of Christ’s birth, the first of our era, as year 1, not year 0. The figure 0 was in fact not used in antiquity (and even in Dante’s time only by mathematicians, and not by all of them). This would be confirmed by the fact that in the *Quaestio de aqua et terra*³ (Stocchi, 2005: 88) he states that Christ was born on a Sunday and, while 25 December of year 0 (or –1) was a Saturday, 25 December of year 1 was a Sunday (cf. also Angelitti, 1897: 18). Therefore, when Christ died, at the age of 34, it was year 35 of our era. Thus, adding up Malacoda’s 1266 years brings us to 1301, not 1300.

5.2 Florentine Ciacco

In *Inf.*, VI, 64–68 Ciacco (Figure 3) mentions the clashes between the Cerchi and Donati families in Florence:

*And he to me: “After a long struggle they will come to bloodshed, and the savage party will drive the other out with much offence. After which, that party will fall within three suns, and the other will take over.*

Commentators⁴ have generally held that “they will come to bloodshed” refers to the fight that took place in Florence on 1 May 1300 between the young members of the two houses (Compagni, 1905(I): 22; Villani, 1823(VIII): 39), which would automatically rule out the year 1301, as the indication would evidently lose the taste of a prophecy. The interpretation, however, appears much more complex: by 1300 the long feud had already begun (Compagni, 1905(I): 20), and also other fights had already taken place in the dispute, a scuffle in 1297, and a poisoning in 1298 causing six deaths (while in
the May Day fight of 1300 there were only injuries. The "prophetic" content appears, therefore, somewhat faltering, and would in any case partially stand even if the journey began in 1301 with regard to:

a) "the savage party will drive the other out with much offence" that probably "predicts" (but it is not certain) the Donati's banishment from Florence which took place in the summer of 1301 (Compagni, 1905, I: 24);
b) the sentence "After which, that party will fall" "predicting" the exile of the Cerchi, which took place in March–April 1302 (Compagni, 1905, II: 25).

It is precisely the reference to the latter event, which should have taken place within three years ("suns"), excessive for both 1300 and 1301, that seems to demonstrate the poor chronological reliability of the passage for dating purposes.

### 5.3 Guido Cavalcanti

Dante assumes the poet Guido Cavalcanti to be alive in Inf., X, 109–111:

Then, feeling remorse for my guilt,
I said: "Now you will say to that man
who fell
that his son is still among the living;
when Dante meets Cavalcante Cavalcanti, Guido's father, in lines 58–60, sensing that Dante, a living being, is making that journey on account of his intellectual stature, the man asks him why his son Guido, who is no lesser in this respect, is not his companion in the journey. Here the poet's behaviour is rather strange and ambiguous and perhaps reflects the complexity of the relationship he had with the one he considered "first of my friends" (Vita Nuova, III, 14). He eludes the question and rather tells him that he is accompanied by another, Virgil, whom Guido had disdained (I: 63, according to others, Guido's "disdain" is for Beatrice). That "had", rightly, foreshadowed to Cavalcante that his son was dead and, since he had died a few days before 29 August 1300, the date of his burial (Del Lungo, 1879, II: 98), he could not have been alive in the spring of 1301. In the face of a father's despair, Dante is silent while Cavalcante breaks down from grief (line 72). Dante (1921, VV: 94–108) explains his own double hesitation as perplexity at the fact that the damned are unaware of the reality of the present, as Farinata would explain to him immediately afterwards. A rather singular attitude, however: as if someone, who has learned from an uncertain source that a relative has died, asked us, knowing that we are informed of the matter, whether it is true or not, and we, instead of hastening to reassure them, questioned in amazement the reliability of their source. However, Dante's response is not decisive for dating his journey. In other words, the poet is puzzled: about learning that Cavalcante does not know that his son is alive, or because he does not know that his son is dead? And he justifies himself for hesitating: but on saying that Guido is alive or that Guido is dead? And what guilt is overshadowed in line 109? Of having led Cavalcante into believing, with his own silence, that his son is dead, whereas in fact he is alive, or of convincing the man, with his hesitation, of a truth that Cavalcante did not know? Negligence or indelicacy? And, in lines 110–111, Dante's behaviour is so conflicting with his previous attitude that the suspicion comes, as with Tiraboschi and later Angelitti and D'Ovidio (1901: 548), that when he has Farinata tell Cavalcante that Guido is alive, without waiting for him to come to too, he is offering a pitiful lie that he would not have had the heart to tell the poor father to his face. In short, nothing decisive seems to come from this passage in favour of 1300.

### 5.4 Farinata degli Uberti

The famous prediction of Farinata degli Uberti (Dante, 1921, Inf., X, 79–81; see Figure 4) is closely connected to the previous episode:

But before fifty times is rekindled
the face of the woman who reigns here,
you shall know how heavy that art is.

What Farinata is predicting is that, not fifty lunations will pass (Persephone, the queen of the underworld and wife of Hades, was in ancient times one of the representations of the Moon), before Dante experiences on his own skin how difficult it will be to return to Florence after being banished. Given that a lunation lasts 29.5 days, fifty lunations equal four years and 15 days. Since the time mentioned is between the end of June and the beginning of July 1304 (Petrocchi, 1997: 97; 2005: 47; Villani, 1823, VIII: 72) when Dante's last hopes of returning to Florence were lost, the suggestion is certainly wrong if the beginning of the journey is placed between March and April 1300—more than 50 lunations would have passed (52.5), very imprecise for 25 March 1301 (41 lunations). Unless Dante means 50 months, in which case the suggestion would be perfect for 1300.

### 5.5 Boniface VIII

In Inf., XIX, 52–54 we find the famous rail of Pope Nicholas III (Figure 5) who believes that
Dante is Boniface VIII, coming in advance to replace him in his torment:

And he cried out: “Are you already standing here, are you already standing here, Boniface? the record lied to me of several years.

That “several” (parecchi in Italian) has always been puzzling to commentators. In fact, Boniface VIII died on 11 October 1303 (Dupré Theseider, 1971: 163), and two and a half or three and a half years is a time span that certainly cannot correspond to the word used, at least in its modern meaning. However, it is perhaps worth noting that nowhere
else in the work does Dante use this word: in another place he uses the singular, “a lot” (parecchio in Italian) in the sense of “equal” (Dante, 1921, Purg., XV: 18). But there is also another meaning of parecchio, namely “pair, couple” from the Latin par, Paris, which has this meaning among others (Battaglia, 1995: 582; Pianigiani, II, 1907: 978). Dante may have used it in this sense, meaning “of a couple of years the writing lied to me”, which makes it more likely that he intended 1301 rather than 1300.

5.6 Casella the Musician

In Purg., II, 98–99, Dante meets his musician friend Casella as one of a new group of souls
arriving from the world of the living (Figure 6). The date of his death is unknown but when Dante questions him as to why such a long time has passed from his death to his arrival on the holy mountain, he first responds neutrally, stating that he knows essentially nothing about it—this is how it was decided, but he concludes:

Truly enough for three months he has taken away whoever wanted to enter, in all peace.

He seems to mean that “the helmsman Angel for three months has been ferrying all those who were entitled to it thanks to the indulgences” (granted by the Jubilee proclaimed by Boniface VIII since Christmas 1299). If this interpretation is correct, then the reference can only be to the spring of 1300. However, Tommaseo (1865(I): 303) already noted that
“has taken away” (ha tolto in Italian) can only refer to the past, not the present: thus it would mean “has finished removing”, not “has begun to remove”. Moreover, “truly enough” (veramente in Italian) has an adversative, not an affirmative value. In fact, it would have been weird for Casella to have been kept waiting even in the last three months, if the time was the spring of 1300, since all those who took advantage of indulgences were also let through. What Casella is saying is essentially: “I don’t blame anyone for having to wait, that’s how it was; but up to three months ago they all passed.” And since the Jubilee ended on 24 December 1300, this inevitably takes us back to the spring of 1301.

5.7 Beatrice d’Este’s Second Wedding

In line 74 of canto 8 of Purgatorio Dante mentions Beatrice D’Este’s second wedding on 24 June 1300 (Anonymous, 1729: 348), which evidently undermines the hypothesis that the journey is made to begin in the spring of 1300.

5.8 Currado Malaspina

In Purg. VIII, 133–139 the Lunensis foretells that Dante will see for himself the magnanimity and liberality of his house:

And he: “Now go; for the sun will not lie down
seven times on the bed that the Ram
with all its four feet covers and be-
strides,
before this courteous opinion
shall be nailed in the middle of your head
with bigger nails than another man’s speech,
if course of judgment be not arrested.

The first evidence testifying to Dante’s presence in Lunigiana is dated 6 October 1306 (Troya, 1826: 81; Bassermann, 1902: 367), and thus the indication appears congruent with the spring of 1300: in fact the words used are equivalent not to “seven years from now” but to “within seven years”. However, it is worth pointing out that the prediction does not relate to the actual arrival in the place as to when one achieves awareness of the qualities of the place: it may take some time before one becomes aware of the virtues and beauties of a new domicile. Besides, this awareness often occurs precisely when one is forced to leave the new abode, or return to it the second time: and possibly Dante, who had already left Lunigiana in the early months of 1307, would return there the following year (Baruffini, 2005: 15).

5.9 Alberto della Scala

In Purg., XVIII, the Abbot of the Monastery of S. Zeno in Verona stigmatises the behaviour of Alberto della Scala, Cangrande’s father, predicting his death and remorse for taking advantage of his power as he appointed one of his illegitimate sons as abbot (vv. 121–122):

Someone who has already one foot in the grave,
will soon mourn that monastery.

Since Alberto died on 10 September 1301 (Dalla Corte, I, 1594: 582), the expressions “has already one foot in the grave” (“he is about to die”), and “soon” are undoubtedly more likely to incline to a journey beginning in the spring of 1301 rather than 1300.

5.10 The Death of Forese Donati

In Purg. XXIII, 76–78, when Dante meets his friend, the poet Forese Donati (Figure 7), he says to him:

And I to him: “Forese, from that day
in which you passed away
not five years have passed till now.

Since the poet died a few days before 28 July 1296 (date of burial in Del Lungo, 1879, II: 611), the quotation fits the spring of 1301 like a glove.

5.11 The Ten-Year Thirst

In line 2 of Canto XXXII of Purgatorio, Dante mentions the possibility of finally quenching his ten-year thirst, that is, the desire to contemplate the face of his beloved Beatrice, who had been dead for ten years (Figure 8). Beatrice died on 19 June 1290 (Vita Nuova, 29; Del Lungo, 1890: 26–27). In the spring of 1300 ten years would not have passed yet, while in the spring of 1301 ten years and nine months had passed. Since this is an approximate record, it is not so obvious, as it would seem at first sight, to lean towards the first indication. What I mean is, let us suppose one were born nine years and nine months ago, would they say they were 10 years old? I do not think so, they would probably say they were nine years old, nine and a half, not ten. And if one were born ten years and nine months ago, would they say they were eleven years old? Again, I doubt it, they would say they were ten years old or maybe ten and a half.

5.12 The Hundredth Year

Noblewoman Cunizza da Romano in Par., IX, 37–40:

Of this bright and dear jewel
of our heaven which is nearest to me,
Figure 7: ‘Dante and Forese Donati’, by Scaramuzza, 1871.

Figure 8: ‘Beatrice unveils in front of Dante and the griffin, image of Christ, and satiates the poet’s ten-year thirst’, by Scaramuzza, 1872.
great fame has remained; and before it dies, this hundredth year will be repeated five times:

sings the praises of troubadour Folquet de Marselha, saying that his fame will last for at least five centuries, meaning that it will last a long time. The hundredth year mentioned by Dante is considered by commentators to be the last year of the century, hence 1300. However, elsewhere the poet uses the expression “hundredth” (centesmo in the language of Dante) with the meaning of “century” (Dante, 1921, Purg., XXII: 93) and the expression “thousandth” (millesimo in the language of Dante) with the meaning of “millennium” (Dante, 1921, Par., XX: 129). And the expression “hundredth year” might also have the same meaning. Curiously, Moore (1900: 8), who also favours the 1300 hypothesis, says: “This expression is more naturally to be referred to the year with which a century begins (according to popular usage) than to any other year.” But 1300 is not the first year of the 14th century, as much as the last of the 13th. And why would Dante, an exponent of the cultural elite, reason according to “popular” usage (assuming such usage really exists) rather than according to “educated” usage (assuming any other exists)?

5.13 Dante’s Exile

Dante’s ancestor Cacciaguida (Figure 9), in predicting his banishment from Florence to Dante (1921, Par., XVII: 49–51), makes precise reference to the person responsible for this exile:

This is wanted and this is already plotted,
and soon will be done by those who think so
where Christ is bought and sold every day.

by which he means the papal curia of Boniface VIII. The reference also seems to be chronologically accurate. Dante did not come into open conflict with Boniface VIII except when he became one of the seven priors of Florence for the two-month period 15 June–15 August 1300 (Del Lungo, 1921: 12). Eventually, the Pope sent Charles of Valois to Florence and the city sent an embassy to Rome that also included Dante, who was, however, detained by the Pope beyond the terms (Compagni, 1905, II: 4, 25; Del Lungo, 1921: 12; Petrocchi, 1997: 86–87; 2005: 41). In November 1301 Charles took the city in a coup d’état, then ordered the expulsion, in early 1302, of the White Guelph faction to which Dante belonged (Compagni, 1905, II: 25; Villani, 1823, IX: 49). The “this is wanted and this is already sought” hardly seems to fit with the spring of 1300, while in fact it was precisely what was happening in the spring of 1301. And the “soon” of the next line would make more sense, because the spring of 1301 was much closer to the event of the expulsion than the spring of 1300.

5.14 The Age of Can Grande

In Par., XVII, 79–81 Cacciaguida again, in predicting to Dante the places where he will go during his exile, mentions the Scaligeri of Verona, telling Dante that he will meet among others one who at the time of the journey is still too young for his fame to be great:

People are not yet aware of him because of his youth, for only nine years
these spheres have around him revolved:

Cangrande della Scala was actually born on 9 March 1291 (Anonymous, 1726: 641), and this solely fits with the spring of 1300.

6 SYMBOLIC REFERENCES

6.1 The Year of the Jubilee

Many commentators have insisted that an important reason why Dante would place the beginning of the journey in 1300 is because it was the year of the Church’s first Jubilee. The argument is difficult to accept, since it was proclaimed by a Pope, Boniface VIII, whom Dante considered a kind of Antichrist. The Commedia overflows with murderous charges against him: besides the already mentioned Inf., XIX, 52–57, and Par., XVII, 49–51, there are several others: Inf. XXVII, 69–111, Purg. XXXII, 148–160 and XXXIII, 43–45, Par. IX, 126–142 and XXX 145–148 as well as St. Peter’s famous terrible invective in Par. XXVII, 10–66. In addition, an event that would be so crucial to Dante is only mentioned in the poem in passing and cursorily twice, by Casella, as we have seen above, and in the following passage (Inf., XVIII, 28–33):

as the Romans who, because of the large crowds,
on the year of the jubilee, upon the bridge
arranged for people to pass,
so that on one side all have their foreheads

towards the castle and go in the direction of St Peter’s;
on the other side they go towards the mountain.

~ 916 ~
I would also like to point out: although “have their foreheads” (hanno la fronte) and “they go” (vanno) are in the present tense, probably for reasons of metrics and construction, “arranged” (hanno colto) is in the past tense and even the phrase “on the year of the jubilee” seems to refer to the past, to something that has taken place, not that is still in progress (cf. also Tommaseo, 1865, I: 303–304). Among other things, these lines do not prove, as many claim, that Dante was in Rome during the jubilee, since he could have heard the circumstances narrated by other Florentine pilgrims or by Romans he met during his mission the following year (Petrocchi, 1997: 78; 2005: 34). One final remark: Dante is known
to have harshly condemned the institution of indulgences on the proclamation of the jubilee in *Par. XXVII*, 52–54 and XXIX, 118–126.

6.2 1300 As A Symbolic Year

Many commentators have inclined to 1300 on the basis of its symbolic value i.e. the renewal connected with the beginning of a new century whereas in fact, it does represent the ending of the previous one. A further unconvinving argument in favour of the symbolical value of 1300 is that it would coincide with a positive and fundamental moment in Dante’s life—for it was in that year that he was appointed as one of the Priors in Florence, while he himself disapprovingly put it: “All my ills and inconveniences from the inauspicious meetings of my priory had cause and beginning …” (*Epistles, Dante, 1921: 448*).

6.3 Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita

And probably not even this line is probative. Those in favour quote the *Convivio* (IV, XXIII, 9–10) where Dante says that “… the highest point of this arc [the middle of life] … in those perfectly shaped by nature it to be in the thirty-fifth year.” Therefore, since the poet was born in 1265, the action can only be set in 1300. But if the whole quotation is fully reported:

> Where the highest point of this arc is, because of the aforesaid inequality, is hard to know; but for the most part I believe it to be between the thirtieth and fortieth year, and I believe it to be in the thirty-fifth year in those perfectly shaped by nature. And I am moved by this reason: that our Saviour Jesus Christ, who was optimally shaped by nature, had wanted to die in the thirty-fourth year of his lifetime; for it was not fitting that the divinity should remain in a diminishing thing …

one can see how the indication is much more general, and the “highest point of this arc” lies anywhere between the thirtieth and fortieth year, unless one wants to accept that Dante modestly attributes to himself the qualification of “perfectly shaped by nature”, even more so than Christ, “optimally shaped by nature”, who wanted to die at 34, not 35. A further indication in favour of a loose use of the sentence (cf. *Vedovati, 1864: 16*), is to be found in *Convivio*, I, III, 4, where Dante mentions his exile from Florence, where, he says, “I was nourished to the peak of my life”, having been exiled from Florence in early 1302, when he would have been 36 and a half years old. I am using a conditional because it should be remembered that knowledge of Dante’s time of birth rests exclusively on indications taken from the *Divine Comedy* (cf. *Petrocchi, 1997: 9; Petrocchi, 2005: 3–6*), based in turn on the assumption that the time of the journey is precisely the spring of 1300. The only certain date is that of his baptism, 26 March 1266, a Holy Saturday. On that date, according to Davidsohn (*Storia di Firenze*, I, 1066, cit. by *Petrocchi, 2005: 6*), all those born in the last year were baptised in Florence while other scholars deny the claim, given the large size of the Florentine population at that time: at most, only those born in Lent were baptised on that day (cf. *Barbero, 2020: 286*).

6.4 Theological Symbolism

If the journey had begun on 25 March 1300, it would be hard to trace any liturgical symbolism in it: as mentioned, Holy Week ran from Holy Monday 4 April to Easter 10 April in that year, so the date would have been untimely. If the journey had begun on Good Friday 8 April 1300 and the exit from Hell had taken place on Easter Day, the symbolism would certainly be more significant but the rest of the journey would be taking place on days of no liturgical significance. Assuming the journey began on 4 April and were completed with the arrival in Paradise on Easter Day (Manuguerra, 1997: 7), the conclusion would instead be significant.

However, the strongest and most evocative symbolism would involve a journey beginning on 25 March 1301, the Saturday before Palm Sunday, with arrival in Paradise on 31 March. Good Friday with the Paradise stage presumably developing over a couple of days, an estimation that would disregard chronologically accurate time seeming to stop and dissolve until Easter.

7 CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, among the 25 references we have examined, 11 of them (4.1, 4.6, 4.7, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.11, 5.12, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4) do not provide decisive indications to fix the date, 12 of them (4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 5.1, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 5.9, 5.10, 5.13, 6.1) suggest the end of March 1301 as the most probable time for the beginning of the journey (in particular, as we have seen, with some agreement on 25 March), and only two (5.8, 5.14) seem to refer to the spring of 1300.

Others, as we have seen, may have come to different conclusions on the basis of the same data. On the other hand, in this context one cannot possibly provide certainties as one may at the most put forward hypotheses that are more probable than others. One might be surprised that the indications are not all consistent with each other and one might even
suspect that Dante was deliberately obscure in a fit of *ante litteram ermetismo*. To the contrary, I believe that he meant to give chronologically homogeneous as well as rather precise indications, as was his custom, against the backdrop of his vast knowledge: not surprisingly, his clues may be hard to decipher. If there appear to be contradictions on a historical level, I believe they are due to the fact that, years later (the *Commedia* was written between 1306 and 1321), Dante might not have remembered all the details of the various events with absolute precision. As an exile, he did not have any access to directories or registry documents (these were often not available or did not even exist); nor did he always have easy access to large city libraries. Therefore, the astronomical indications may constitute a more reliable frame of reference, on which Dante scholars should perhaps dwell more. Dante is known to have been well aware that “… the positions of the stars … could … at any time be found by means of mathematics …” (Angelitti, 1897: 2). Could he therefore have run the risk of reporting them incorrectly, thus tarnishing his lasting reputation as a universal genius, versed in every branch of knowledge, including and especially astronomy? Let us recall then what he wrote about astronomy in the *Convivio* (II, XIII, 30):

> And yet it is far higher than all the others. Therefore, as Aristotle says in the beginning of the Soul,7 science is high in nobility because of the nobility of its subject and its certainty: and this, more than any of the above, is noble and high because of its noble and high subject, which is the movement of the heavens; and it is high and noble because of its certainty, which is without defect, like that which comes from the most perfect and regulated principle. And if anyone believes that there is a defect in it, it does not pertain to it, but, as Ptolemy says, it is because of our negligence, and to that must be imputed.

> The poem abounds with astronomical quotations, almost a hundred of them, some of which are quite extensive, all sufficiently exhaustive, correct and precise, as required by a sacred poem (just to please Moore), not a treatise on astronomy. It would therefore be peculiar if only those of chronological significance were wrong. Nor is it conceivable that these were ideal or imaginary: if the former are not, why should the latter be? Those who support this thesis tend to claim that scientific precision cannot be expected of Dante in a work of poetry. In short, astronomical accuracy would be sacrificed to art. But it is hard to see why Dante should have deliberately chosen such a self-defeating approach, one that would have damaged his cultural image and reputation.

To counteract this claim, let me recall what Scartazzini (1890: 441–442) wrote:

> In this vast poem everything, down to the most minute particularities … is premeditated, calculated and proportioned with the greatest precision and accuracy …

> a view which I fully share. I believe we can say that Dante’s scientific culture was such that he was capable of setting his journey within a grandiose astronomical frame that was completely correct, and that he did it, and that he succeeded in doing it, and it would have been strange if he had not done so. He did it from a cosmological point of view, sketching the properties of the Ptolemaic Universe as a poet in a superb manner; he did it from a geographical-astronomical point of view, illustrating in a sumptuous manner, also from a poetic point of view, the themes of orientation, geographical coordinates, the passage of time; he did it from a uranographic point of view, giving us wonderful poetry in describing how the sky appears to the naked eye. Why would he have failed in the astronomical-chronological passages? Frankly speaking, it does not seem credible.

To conclude, let us return to the collection of the historical-symbolic indications: I believe I have at least demonstrated that they do not provide such a solid unshakable foundation for the supporters of the year 1300, something which was a surprise for me. I hope that this paper can at least raise doubts for those who, like Del Lungo (1921: 16), have always held that

> The astronomical hints that indicate, instead, 1301 cannot be of any value, when compared to the irrefutable historical arguments for the commonly received date of 1300.

8 NOTES

1. All quotations from Dante are taken from: Dante. *Le Opere*. All translations are mine.

2. All astronomical data were configured with *Starry Night Pro Plus 8*, a very reliable software for historical astronomy studies, for the precessional epochs corresponding to the indicated dates, expressed in the Julian Calendar.

3. The attribution of which to Dante is current-
Ly considered reasonably probable (Stocchi, 2005: 337).

4. However, I would like to point out the doubts nurtured e.g. by D’Ovidio (1901: 552) to whom I also refer for a more extensive and slightly different treatment of the whole subject.

5. Who runs into incredible mishap, which I found pointed out by Foscolo (1852: 279): in fact, in the first edition of the Storia della Letteratura Italiana he states without any doubt that Dante’s hesitation reveals that Guido is dead, and that he does not want to give his father the news (Tiraboschi, 1777: 263–264). In the second edition he repeats the assertion (Tiraboschi, 1783: 358–359), except that he notes that, 60 lines later, Dante states that Guido is still alive!

6. For the Catholic Church, a jubilee is a year-long period during which plenary indulgence, or the remission of all sins, is granted by the pope to the believers who travel to Rome and perform specific religious practices. However, as early as the first jubilee, the one instituted by Boniface VIII in 1300, the practice of acquiring indulgences through monetary offerings became widespread.

7. On the Soul, writings of Aristotle.

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