

# 1 The Vespucci Family in Florence, Amerigo Vespucci's Education (1454-1491)

**Summary** 1.1 The Notary, Ser Nastagio Vespucci. – 1.2 Amerigo Vespucci's Family. – 1.3 Amerigo's Education. – 1.4 Amerigo in Paris and Later in the Service of Lorenzo, Son of Pierfrancesco de' Medici. – 1.5 Problems with the Medici Commercial House in Seville. – 1.6 Seville and its Port.

## 1.1 The Notary, Ser Nastagio Vespucci

In 1457, when the notary Nastagio Vespucci, son of the notary Amerigo Vespucci, declared his patrimony and income to the Florentine Land Register, he stated that his family comprised his wife Mona Lisa, twenty-two years old, and five children, Antonio, Girolamo, Amerigo, Bernardo and Agnoletta, with an age difference of just one year between successive siblings. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his declaration regarding his modest patrimony and equally modest income, but doubts remain about the fact that his wife began to bear children aged seventeen and continued to do so for the next four years without pause. In fact, in Nastagio's next declaration to the land register, thirteen years later in 1470, his age has increased by twelve and not thirteen years, the age of his wife by fourteen years and the ages of the first three sons by eleven years. The age of the youngest son is not mentioned, while the daughter Agnoletta does not appear among the mouths to be fed and therefore was presumably dead.<sup>1</sup>

The reading of the last declaration to the land register made by the notary in 1480 reveals further surprises. In these ten years Mona Lisa's age has increased by seven years, while that of each of her first three sons has increased by 15 years, consequently the gap between the age of the mother

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<sup>1</sup> The life of Amerigo in Florence has mainly been deduced from the work by Angelo Maria Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, partially available online, republished in *Onoranze centenarie a Paolo Toscanelli e ad Amerigo Vespucci*, and, above all, from the contributions by Ida Masetti Bencini and Mary Howard Smith entitled "La vita di Vespucci a Firenze". Claudia Tripodi has written a book, *Prima di Amerigo*, about the Vespucci who lived before Amerigo.

and her first-born is fifteen years. In contrast, the age of the declarant has increased by eleven years and corresponds with the real age of the individual, born in 1427, and therefore fifty-three years old.

This collection of contradictory information persuades us that ser Nastagio's memory had been very confused for some time and suggests that Pievano Arlotto, who insinuated in his satires that ser Nastagio drank too much of the wine from his own vineyard, was right.<sup>2</sup> The fact is that Amerigo's date of birth remains uncertain. The preferred date is usually the one on his christening certificate: 1454. In this case, Amerigo would be a contemporary of Bartolomé de Las Casas and Angelo Poliziano. The date 1452 is also plausible; in this case, Amerigo would have been the same age as Leonardo da Vinci, fra' Girolamo Savonarola and Piero Soderini, who later was elected to a lifetime term as *gonfaloniere* of Florence, that is, the town perpetual president.

## 1.2 Amerigo Vespucci's Family

The Vespucci were members of the minor country aristocracy and came from Peretola, a small town near Florence, today a suburb of the Tuscan capital. The family had moved to the great city, where several of its members had held important offices, two centuries before. In this city, always divided by opposing factions, the Vespucci traditionally sided against the Medici, who had been aiming to dominate the city for some time and had their eyes on other lands and cities in Tuscany. However, the Vespucci family was on good terms with Pierfrancesco de' Medici, cousin of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and subsequently with his sons Lorenzo and Giovanni, who were involved in trade on a European scale and showed no interest in political power.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Amerigo's branch of the family was well-off, owning several houses in Florence and at Peretola, together with a number of vineyards at Peretola and elsewhere and a small hospice for pilgrims in the Ognissanti quarter of Florence; in addition, it owned a frescoed chapel in the Ognissanti Church, which also functioned as the family tomb. Simone Vespucci, one of the most prestigious members of the family, had it built in the 1300s. In the main fresco, attributed to Ghirlandaio, the Madonna protects members of the Vespucci family who appear gathered beneath her mantle; in the fresco below, the young Amerigo can be seen next to his uncle Giorgio Antonio. Amerigo was born and grew up in this family and city environment and held vivid memories of it for the rest of his life.

The Vespucci family's situation had declined somewhat when the notary ser Amerigo di Stagio, young Amerigo's grandfather, got into great debt and committed serious administrative irregularities, reducing himself to poverty. His youngest son Giorgio Antonio rose above this, becoming a cultured man and esteemed humanist and tutor to Lorenzo, son of Pierfrancesco de' Medici. Subsequently, Giorgio Antonio took holy orders and joined the Dominican Order. As we have seen, his elder brother ser Nastagio got himself into trouble by overindulging in wine.

By now elderly, ser Nastagio was abandoned by his wife who went to live with her eldest son Antonio, also a notary and married with children. Ser Nastagio lived with his other three sons: Amerigo, Girolamo and Bernardo.

<sup>2</sup> Facezia LXV in Folena, *Motti e facezie del Piovano Arlotto*.

A notarial act drawn up just before his death consists of two parts. In the first part, which is untidy and confused, ser Nastagio names his son Amerigo as his legal representative in all senses. In the second part, also incoherent and signed by different witnesses, ser Nastagio abandons a dispute with his father-in-law regarding one hundred 'florins of good mint', the dowry of his wife Mona Lisa, which he claimed not to have received from her father. In giving up this dispute, he excuses himself saying he is unable to remember properly "as human memory vacillates". It seems that this second part of the document was drawn up on the wishes of Amerigo who had agreed to be his father's legal representative only if he gave up the rather squalid dispute.

Ser Nastagio died in 1485, the year the act was drawn up, leaving the three sons who still lived with him without means.

### 1.3 Amerigo's Education

Ser Nastagio's sons had learnt to read, write and count as befitted most Florentine boys in the second half of the 1400s. Antonio, having also learnt Latin and acquired other pertinent notions, was able to attend Pisa University where he studied law. In contrast, the brothers Gerolamo and Bernardo did not continue their studies and were waiting to find employment. Amerigo was tutored by his erudite uncle Giorgio Antonio, but with modest results: his school exercise books have come down to us but contain no more than the most elementary notions. A piece of Latin homework, done when he was twenty-two years old, shows that he knew no more about the language than an adolescent of the time.<sup>3</sup> However, later he was able to read Latin without difficulty. At the age of fifty, Amerigo, aware of his own limits and reflecting upon his wrong choices, wrote to his fellow student Piero Soderini:

remembering how at the time of our youth [...] going to listen to the principles of grammar under the good guidance and doctrine of the venerable religious friar of San Marco, my uncle Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, whose advice and doctrine it would have pleased God that I followed so that, 'I would be a different man to the one that I am', as Petrarch states.<sup>4</sup>

In actual fact, Amerigo had studied a great deal, but in a disorderly fashion. He was well-versed in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and had read the works of renowned authors such as Pliny, and knew Aristotle's naturalistic works.<sup>5</sup> He also studied astronomy and geography, a much-cultivated discipline in Florence, the city where a precious Greek codex by Claudius Ptolemy (2nd century AD) had arrived some decades earlier and was subjected to critical analysis by humanists and translated into Latin and Italian.

Furthermore, at that time, the cosmographer Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli enjoyed well-deserved prestige, and in a letter to the King of Portugal had indicated that the easiest way to reach the great emporia of southern Asia was to cross the "Ocean Sea" sailing westward.

<sup>3</sup> See Bandini, *Vita e lettere di Amerigo Vespucci*, XXVII.

<sup>4</sup> "Lettera a Soderini". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 101ra.

<sup>5</sup> References to the Aristotelian tradition can be found, for example, in "Frammento Ridolfi", in Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci: lettere di viaggio*, 29, ll. 24-5.

In such a cultural climate, the young Amerigo was excited to the point of buying a large map of the known world, painted on leather, for the conspicuous sum of 130 gold ducats, a sum that seems greatly exaggerated.

#### **1.4 Amerigo in Paris and Later in the Service of Lorenzo, Son of Pierfrancesco De' Medici**

The industrious city of Florence, which traded with all of Europe and financed its most profitable initiatives, had diplomatic relationships with several important European states. When necessary, delegations would be sent to these states led by an 'orator', that is, an able and eloquent man, who would expound the city's problems and intentions. This occurred after the Pazzi plot whose conspirators, in agreement with Pope Sixtus IV, had attempted to murder Lorenzo the Magnificent. Florence sent a delegation to France to gain its support against Papal interference.

The delegation, led by Guidantonio Vespucci, departed in 1478. Amerigo, second cousin to Guidantonio, was the delegation's secretary. The negotiations lasted nearly two years and provided Amerigo with important opportunities, including learning French. However, on his return to Florence he found himself unemployed.

Fortunately, in 1483 he found employment with Lorenzo, son of Pierfrancesco de' Medici and Semiramide Appiani, daughter of Jacopo, lord of Piombino. The couple were about ten years younger than Amerigo. This important position was perhaps found for him by his uncle Giorgio Antonio, preceptor and close friend of Lorenzo, or by Semiramide, distant cousin-in-law to Amerigo. This was certainly a position that suited him well.

The brothers Lorenzo and Giovanni, Pierfrancesco's heirs, were very wealthy. They owned well-cultivated and productive lands including the estate of Cafaggiolo, which extended over the bottom of a lake that had been drained. It was very fertile land, protected by a splendid castle which can still be admired today in the lower part of the Mugello valley, on the road from Florence to Bologna. Another source of wealth was the bank, which had branches in some European cities where it was associated with various types of enterprises.

Amerigo's position was that of 'maggiore', which corresponds to today 'butler', but in actual fact he was a factotum. Semiramide would turn to him for simple matters such as the children's clothing, or the arrangements for a party; the farm managers would ask him about decisions regarding the price of wine and other products, while Lorenzo, the master, sent him on errands in nearby towns. Above all, he dealt with the crowds of common people, prisoners, debtors, failed artisans who turned to him as a go-between to the powerful Lorenzo, who would have been able to help them resolve their problems.

His correspondence of those years shows how the poor and the wealthy of Florence lived and what problems assailed them five hundred years ago: a way of life that overall is not very different from the modern one, plagues, means of transport and communications apart. These antique letters also provide information about Amerigo's private life: a bachelor about thirty years old who frequented beautiful women of loose morals. His cousin Pietro, captain of the garrison at Pisa, wrote him confidential letters about one of these women, whom he had fallen with and wished to reward.

## 1.5 Problems with the Medici Commercial House in Seville

The heirs of Pierfrancesco de' Medici owned a bank in Seville, capital of Andalusia. In 1489, Donato Niccolini, its administrator, arrived in Florence from Spain. He brought bad news: Tommaso Capponi, who directed the bank, had made mistakes and committed administrative fraud, which needed to be rectified quickly. The Medici also owned a large business that dealt in the slave trade and a naval yard for the repair and fitting-out of ships in Seville, which Donato Niccolini suggested should be entrusted to Giannotto Berardi. The latter had gained wide experience in these areas working in Lisbon with Bartolomeo Marchionni, another Florentine businessman. This was arranged and Giannotto Berardi moved to Seville to begin work.<sup>6</sup>

Two years later, the business was flourishing, as Giannotto told Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, informing him that he needed a trusted collaborator. Lorenzo suggested to his factotum that he move to Seville in order to help Berardi, thus abandoning, at the age of almost forty, a pleasant and comfortable life to move to a faraway place and face a new and more demanding job. Amerigo accepted and left in December 1490 or the following January.

## 1.6 Seville and Its Port

In the late fifteenth century, the ancient city of Seville, which stood on the left bank of the Guadalquivir River, was home to about 70,000 inhabitants and surrounded by high walls; it was made lively by its markets, its artisans and the port, the splendour of its Moorish architecture overlaid by magnificent Gothic and Renaissance buildings.

The city port, situated on a wide bend in the river, had one particular characteristic that made it very safe; it stood 80 kilometres from the ocean, in the interior of the Iberian Peninsula. The great Atlantic tides, up to ten metres high, pushed the water, boats and ships as far as Seville and beyond, and regularly drained the riverbed, keeping it clean. The outgoing tide carried the boats back to the river mouth where there was a smaller port, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where other boats waited for the rising tide.

However, there was a narrow point on the river constituted by the pillars of a Moorish bridge that had collapsed in the distant past.

Although Seville was unique as a river port, like many other ports it was hospitable: whoever arrived there burdened by the many needs of all types accumulated during weeks and months of navigation, and also with experiences to compare with those of others, found someone who could provide help and information, in a mixture of nationalities and languages. A so-called 'lingua franca' was spoken in the port, an ephemeral language with simple grammar and a mixture of Castilian, Portuguese, Genoese, Catalan and even Arabic words and phrases.

When Amerigo reached Seville, aged about forty, he learnt the port's idiom and used it throughout his life, even forgetting the correct use of the Tuscan language.

<sup>6</sup> Luzzana Caraci, *Per lasciare di me qualche fama*, 56.

