Preface

This book describes the way in which Florentines from Dante to Michelangelo interacted with one another, with foreigners, and with their divinities. The writers, artists, and politicians of Florence need no press; their accomplishments have long been part of the human heritage. Yet genius in Florence as elsewhere emerged from a collective way of life, from systems of formal communications that focused, identified, and evaluated the actions of its residents. The city has its own formal life. This book recognizes that fact, and studies one past city from that point of view.

I wrote this book in part for those who want to know more about Renaissance Florence. Yet from the start I wrote for another group—for those social scientists interested in social action and in the forms that give such actions their meaning in an urban context. This book examines general questions, therefore, from a particular historical experience: in its original topical format, through its study of individual and small-group psychology, to its analysis of Florence's collective forms, and finally in its historical account of the revolution of ritual forms during the Medici period.

All students of Florence bring to their work some familiar guide, some Virgilian spirit who first revealed Florence's importance to their own inner experience. Mine has been Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli allowed me to
see the primordial problems of urban life then, and now. We live in modern cities, yet Florence's incomparable historical resources—the great political scientist among them—permit us the shock of recognition in the midst of an enchanted past. This book is about history, system, and identity.