

SAVONAROLA.

CHAPTER I.

ITALY IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY.

IN order to understand the character and work of a man who belonged so entirely to his own age as Savonarola, it will be necessary to attempt some estimate, however slight and imperfect, of the times in which he lived. We must try to understand something of the state of the Roman Empire, of which Italy was, in theory at least, the centre ; of the condition of the Papacy, the great fountain of authority in the Western Church ; of the religious orders ; of the intellectual and moral condition of the people at large.

Although it would be quite impossible to understand the course of Florentine history, with its fierce struggles between Guelfs and Ghibellines, apart from the history of the Empire, these struggles had long ceased before the age of Savonarola. They had, indeed, left behind them political parties which had sprung out of them, and party feelings whose roots were buried deep in those ancient animosities ; but as a practical question, the state of the Empire hardly concerns the student of Italian ecclesiastical history in the fifteenth century. The Empire was at its lowest point, and the Papacy at