

## Moses as Figure of the Pope. I. The Papal Centaur in Machiavelli's *Prince*

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**Abstract.** The appropriation the Roman Popes made of the theological-political figure of Moses is a powerful and pervasive dispositive, the correct reading of which is essential in determining the actual historical and ideological context of Machiavelli's *Prince*. The essay examines the figure of Moses in key points of the treatise, decripting Machiavelli's ambiguous, secularizing and courtly intentions, symbolizing in the *armed prophet* the historical power of the Medici pontiff engaged in a purely earthly power politics.

**Keywords:** Papacy, Theocracy, Secularization, Political Theory.

### [it] Mosè come figura del papa. I. Il Centauro papale nel *Principe* di Machiavelli

**Riassunto.** La figura teologico-politica di Mosè, di cui il papato romano si appropria a partire dal Concilio di Firenze fino al XVI secolo, diviene un potente e pervasivo dispositivo ideologico, la cui corretta interpretazione è essenziale per determinare l'effettiva realtà del contesto storico e culturale del *Principe* di Machiavelli. Il saggio esamina la figura di Mosè nei punti chiave del trattato, riconoscendo le ambigue intenzioni di Machiavelli, al tempo stesso secolarizzanti e cortigiane, nel simboleggiare nel *profeta armato* la potenza storica del pontefice mediceo impegnato in una politica di potenza puramente terrena.

**Parole chiave:** Papato, teocrazia, secolarizzazione, teoria politica.

**Summary:** 1. Aiming high to strike the centre. 2. The Pope as an ideological, pragmatic theological-political magnet. 3. *The Prince* as a Renaissance *enchiridion pontificis*. 4. The exemplar anomaly of the armed prophet: Moses, David, and the ambiguous secular prince. 5. The coming of the redeeming Prince: the *Exhortatio* as a recapitulation of the *speculum pontificis*. 6. References 6.1. Primary sources 6.2 Bibliography

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"I have put myself in the place of the Pope"<sup>2</sup>  
"If I were the Pontiff"<sup>3</sup>

It could be seen as rash or even gullible to pretend to propose a new interpretation of Machiavelli's most famous and fateful treatise; even more so, to propose for it a Papal contextualization which could appear bewildering, at first glance. However, maybe it was the ambiguous and intentionally daring nature of this masterpiece of modern political thought, as well as its immediate yet controversial fortune, that determined an ideological reading which obscured its primarily pragmatic intentions. Therefore, the *Prince* has been read as an irreligious text, diabolical in its nature, accomplice or censor of Catholic corruption,

"creator" of secular politics, proposing an absolute-ness of the political realm freed from any ethical and religious bond. And yet, the *Prince*, composed between 1513 and May 1515,<sup>4</sup> was not conceived by its author as a theoretical treatise directed to an abstract recognition of the laws of the political realm, but rather as an effectual work of state-building and government of the state, a political-military hortatory treatise written for courtly self-promotion. The focal point of the treatise is papal, as it is the result of a political elaboration made by putting himself in the Pope's place, as if Machiavelli were the Pope... In this perspective, the symbology of Moses as an armed prophet could help reconsider the relationship between religion/prophesy and politics in the *Prince*,

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<sup>2</sup> English translation in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Letters. A Selection*, ed. and tr. by Allan Gilbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 118. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettera a Francesco Vettori del 20 giugno 1513*, 968.

<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli, *The Letters. A Selection*, 118. Machiavelli, *Lettera a Francesco Vettori del 20 giugno 1513*, 968 and 971: "A me parrebbe, se io fussi il pontefice [...] Pertanto, se io fussi il pontefice".

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W.J. Connell, "Dating The Prince: Beginnings and Endings", *The Review of Politics* 75 (2013): 497-514; Marcello Simonetta, "L'aborto del Principe: Machiavelli e i Medici (1512-1515)", *Interpres* 33 (2015): 192-228. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1400/238893>.

re-contextualizing it in the historical reality which generated it and which it wanted to affect.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Aiming high to strike the centre

Therefore, my hypothesis is that the *Prince* can be read as an *enchiridion pontificis*, handbook and weapon at the same time, to be given to the Medici Pope, by whom Machiavelli hoped and asked to be “used”,<sup>6</sup> even in favour of the Papacy. Hence, the *Prince* became a double-edged knife, at the same time religious and irreverent, encomiastic and technical, meant to grant earthly power to the pontifical centaur, the Pope, the temporal and sacral “great animal” which was its actual target. If the Pope was the actual recipient of the treatise, as the real theological *caput* of the Church and the Medici family,<sup>7</sup> why did Machiavelli not address it directly to him? I think there were obvious reasons of courtly hierarchy and religious expediency for that: it would have been disrespectful for a layman, who had been recently imprisoned on serious charges, to address the sacred head of Christianity directly without going through the mediation of his lay relatives and without having been formally instructed or asked; it would have been unacceptable to openly present to the vicar of Christ the dys/human nature, meaning, both human and beastly, of the politician, forced to operate murderous violence, deception, and violation of the Christian faith. Machiavelli offers a technical work to the lay people, who, in the field, are called upon to deal with the actual construction of a principality. However, using Machiavelli’s own metaphor, one could say that the centre of the target of the dedication of the treatise (Giuliano de’ Medici, then Lorenzo) can only be hit by aiming higher (to Leo/Moses, the head of the Medici House):

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gabriele Pedullà, “Introduzione”, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe* (Roma: Donzelli, 2022), CXCIX-CC, for the need to interpret Machiavelli with the cultural categories of his age, not yet marked by the double watershed of the French Revolution and the Romanticism.

<sup>6</sup> See the letter to Francesco Vettori (April 16, 1513): “Io non posso credere che essendo maneggiato il caso mio con qualche destrezza, che non mi riesca essere adoperato a qualche cosa, se non per conto di Firenze, almeno per conto di Roma e del pontificato; nel qual caso io doverrei essere meno sospetto [...] Né posso credere, se la Santità di Nostro Signore cominciasse a adoperarmi, che io non facessi bene a me, et utile et onore a tutti li amici mia” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere*, n. 226, v. 2, 931-932).

<sup>7</sup> See Francesco Vettori, *Lettera a Machiavelli del 12 luglio 1513*, in Machiavelli, *Lettere*, n. 233, v. II, 985-994, in part. 987-989: “E cominciando al papa, diremo che il fine suo sia mantenere la Chiesa nella riputatione l’ha trovata, non volere che diminuisca di stato, se già quello che li diminuissi non lo consegnassi a’ sua, cioè a Giuliano e Lorenzo, a’ quali in ogni modo pensa dare stati [...] Che voglia dare stato a’ parenti, lo monstra che così hanno fatto e’ papi passati, Callisto [III, Borgia], Pio [II, Piccolomini], Sisto [IV, Della Rovere], Innocenzio [VIII, Cibo], Alessandro [VI] et Iulio [II]; et chi non l’ha fatto, è restato per non potere. Oltre a questo, si vede che questi suoi a Firenze pensano poco, che è segno che hanno fantasia a stati che sieno fermi e dove non abbino a pensare continuo a dondolare uomini. Non voglio entrare in considerazione quali stati disegni, perché in questo muterà proposito, secondo la occasione”.

No one should be astonished if in the following discussion of completely new principdoms and of the prince and of government, I bring up the noblest examples [...] he will act like prudent archers, who, seeing that the mark they plan to hit is too far away and knowing what space can be covered by the power of their bows, take an aim much higher than their mark, not in order to reach with their arrows so great a height, but to be able, with the aid of so high an aim, to attain their purpose.<sup>8</sup>

The political, military, temporal dimension can be attained only through the understanding and captation<sup>9</sup> of the theological-political power which governs it: Moses as an armed prophet. The pontiff, however, is by no means the inert ultimate donor of the treatise, but also its paradoxical inspirer, since only the historical equivocal identity of the Renaissance pontiff, Christian and Roman, peaceful and warlike, could account for the *Prince*, who pretended to recognise and declare the ruthless laws of a purely earthly politics active in the same supreme claim to the sacred foundation of the state, of history, of ethics, in short, of the “just” order of the human.<sup>10</sup> The ruthless phenomenology of power founded on violence and deception, was all the more lucid and serious, hence cynical and desecrating, the more sublime the “test sample” was: the vicar of Christ, who claimed to deploy the ultimate redemptive meaning of the political power. Indeed, the “impure” nature of the politician was manifested by the same ambiguous ideological strategy of sacredly justified ecclesiastical temporal empowerment and the particularized promotion of earthly claims, directed to the magnification of one’s family, albeit redeemed by the “mission” of liberating church and Italy from the “impious” foreign occupation. A power that asserts itself as sacred and Christianly inspired, but aims to build an earthly and *particular* greatness at all costs, justify-

<sup>8</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 7: Non si maravigli alcuno se, nel parlare che io farò de’ principati al tutto nuovi e di principe e di stato, io addurrò grandissimi esempi [...] e fare come gli arcieri prudenti, a’ quali parendo el luogo dove desegnano ferire troppo lontano, e conoscendo fino a quanto va la virtù del loro arco, pongono la mira assai più alta che il luogo destinato, non per aggiugnere con la loro freccia a tanta altezza, ma per potere con lo aiuto di sì alta mira pervenire al disegno loro”. English translation in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, tr. Allan Gilbert (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989<sup>5</sup>), 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> The courtly intention of the metaphor of the “higher” aim is confirmed by the daring *Dedica a Lorenzo*, where he who is at the bottom (“il popolare”) declares that he can see from afar the reality of the top better than he who is at the top (“il principe”). The invitation addressed to the prince, however, is to lower his gaze, redeeming the popular instrument that asks to be used: “E se vostra Magnificenzia da lo apice della sua altezza qualche volta volgerà li occhi in questi luoghi bassi, conoscerà quanto io indegnamente sopporti una grande e continua malignità di fortuna” (Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 7).

<sup>10</sup> Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, ed. by Costantino Panigada (Bari: Laterza, 1929) then ed. by Silvana Seidel Menchi (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), book IV, chap. XII, vol. I, 427-428, recognises a genetic corruptive turning point in the Renaissance Papacy starting with Eugene IV’s successors, who became more and more secular princes rather than Christian Popes.

ing it as a virtuous and glorious endeavor, capable of reincarnating the greatness of classical models, is “Machavellian” before Machiavelli. Italy – elected by God as the providential See of Rome centre of Christianity and culmination of classical antiquity – was therefore asked to recognize the Renaissance Papacy as a very equivocal *caput*, with the ambition to incarnate all in one the inheritance of Jewish history, Christian revelation and the Roman greatness. But which element was dominant and which was recessive in the Roman pontiff? Which Rome prevailed? Did Moses, the armed prophet, not reveal the “earthly” substance of the heavenly form, the knife of prophecy, the “sensible” (insofar as political and violent)<sup>11</sup> truth of Christian messianism, which claimed instead to be the ultimate spiritual meaning, the theologically pure reality of which the Jewish leader was the *typos*? Is Moses, in short, not the principle of the theological-political realm, which is consistent to the ancient Roman element, rather than to the eschatological spiritual truth of Christ? Did the papacy’s claim to theological absoluteness not conceal a purely earthly ideology of imperialist assertion? Certainly, for Machiavelli, papal ideology aids the deconstruction of the theological-political construct, hence the definition of a politics which is capable of staring at the deadly secret, the empty bottom of power and its pretended sacred foundation,<sup>12</sup> in order to generate greatness: precisely because it is necessary to aim high and hit a difficult target, one should plant their feet “properly” on the ground, knowing how to enter evil, recognise the emptiness, the fortune, and the will to power, that even the supposed apex of history presupposes.

Hegel perfectly understood how the deepest theme of Machiavelli’s *Prince* was the meditation on the “ethical” as rational, historical affirmation of the papal state through the violent subjugation of outdated dominions, in an attempt to establish a principality as a new, purely earthly national power:

[...] Warfare became a regular business. [...] A papal territory was likewise formed. There, also, a very large number of rulers had made themselves independent; by degrees they all became subject to the one rule of the pope. How such a subjugation was absolutely justified in terms of ethics is evident from Machiavelli’s celebrated work *The Prince*.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. by Giorgio Inglese (Milano: Rizzoli, 2000<sup>5</sup>), 17: “E chi legge la Bibbia sensatamente vedrà Moisè essere stato forzato, a volere che le sue leggi e che i suoi ordini andassero innanzi, ad ammazzare infiniti uomini, i quali non mossi da altro che dalla invidia si opponevano a’ disegni suoi. Questa necessità conosceva benissimo frate Girolamo Savonerola”.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Riccardo Caporali, “Immagini di Mosè (in Machiavelli e Spinoza),” *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* 16, 1 (2014): 67-91, 90. <https://www.openstarts.units.it/entities/publication/910e097a-48ca-43bb-b4df-5aadd6bcc99a/details>.

<sup>13</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History: Complete and Unabridged*, tr. Ruben Alvarado (Aalten: Wordbridge Publishing, 2011), 365.

And, indeed, the “heroic” ideal/effectual model of *The Prince* is Cesare Borgia, the son of Alexander VI, offered as a *speculum* to the new Medici prince. But in chapter XI,12, Cesare is defined as the “instrumento” through which Alexander VI “made” great policy and in XI,13 it is emphasised how his policy of personal affirmation, in a paradoxical heterogenesis of ends, “resulted in strength for the Church”,<sup>14</sup> as if history had forced his achievement to “reduce/bring back [the Church] to its beginnings”, to “take it back to the right position”,<sup>15</sup> that is, back to the enormous ideological and material power of the papal state that, through his father, he had been fortunate enough to “embody”, albeit in a purely earthly perspective.



Fig. 1. Anonymous, from France. Caricature of Alexander VI as demonic pope, “Ego sum Papa” (1500 ca.)

Similarly, the lay heir of the House of Medici (Giuliano, later Lorenzo) to whom the treatise is dedicated must also be interpreted as the “instrument” through which “the prince of the Church” (chapter

<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, III, 1, Eng. tr. in Gilbert, v. I, 419.



XXVI,8), the real “head” of the family, Leo X is urged to prevail as temporal sovereign of Italian history and main character of the European scene. It is no coincidence, then, that between 1525 and 1527, as the Medici lay heirs (Alessandro and Ippolito, the illegitimate sons of Clement VII and Giuliano) were still little more than children, the “person” of Italy’s liberator and redeemer would be recapitulated, albeit with a failed outcome, in Clement VII himself: the “instrumento” would be reabsorbed into the “capo stesso”, the spiritual and temporal leader.



Fig. 2. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Clement VII* (1525). Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples

Machiavelli’s political perspective is completely secular, even religiously and ethically relativistic, deeply influenced by Epicurean-Lucretian materialism. The inner depletion of any onto-theological foundation of the political realm<sup>16</sup> is revealed in the recessive nature of the Christian values in the treatise, which reveals politics as a “bottomless urn”<sup>17</sup> of

desire, ambition, greed. However, Machiavelli’s new and subversive concept of politics has to maintain a Christian form, precisely because, even while questioning it, presupposes a certain theological-political historical reality and aspires to affect it. Machiavelli’s action presupposes Christianity as the dominant religion and cultural system, the historical reality of ecclesiastical principalities and the sacral power of the pontiff, the assertion of the right of the absolute papal power and the decisive rhetorical influence of the symbolic imagery of the Bible. Even conceptual inheritances, re-processed and immanentised, such as the relationship between free will and divine predestination, providentialist messianism, the Christological dialectic between Head/Spirit and languishing/mortal body, the return to the beginnings as a reformation of ideological and social identity, are in different ways influential and present in Machiavelli’s works.

Of course, Machiavelli’s perspective is eminently secularising, desacralising, intent on discerning only the ideological background of Christianity, but the same critical radicality with which he interprets it theoretically continues to depend on it, all the more so in its becoming a pragmatic, secular will to act “here and now”, to operate politics in an inseparable, conditioning dialectical relationship with the Christian world in which he lives, thinks, acts.

In the following pages, I will limit myself to outline some of my interpretative theses on *The Prince*, without arguing them at length or documenting them: I will soon elaborate on them elsewhere, in a monograph dedicated to the theme. Instead, I will concentrate on the presence of the figure of Moses in *The Prince* and on its necessary historical contextualisation, recognising it as the biblical fil rouge of a real hortatory production, aimed at the realisation of a national political and secular affirmation of the house of Medici, thanks to the “divinely inspired” instrument of the papacy.

## 2. The Pope as an ideological, pragmatic theological-political magnet

After the overcoming of the crisis exploded with the Great Occidental Schism, the Council of Basel and the reaffirmation of the papal primacy by Eugene IV in the Council of Florence,<sup>18</sup> Christian Rome was more and more proudly intent on appropriating pow-

<sup>16</sup> See Gennaro M. Barbuto, “Machiavelli e il bene comune. Una politica ossimorica”, *Filosofia politica* 17, 2 (2003): 223-244. DOI: 10.1416/9079, and Id. *All’ombra del Centauro. Tensione utopica e verità effettuale da Machiavelli a Vico* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2019), 9-25, in particular 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *On Ambition*, tr. Gilbert, v. 2, 736. The text goes back to Cain and Abel to trace the universally destructive and furious root of the *libido dominandi*. Cfr. Gennaro Sasso, *Ambizione*,

1-60, in Id., *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi*, IV (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1997) 3-29; and Luca Sartorello, “L’“urna senza fondo” machiavelliana e l’“origine” della politica”, *Laboratoire italien* 5 (2005): 171-195. <http://journals.openedition.org/laboratoireit-alien/438>.

<sup>18</sup> After the political and military anarchy in Rome and the conflict with the Council of Basel supported by Emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg, Eugene IV and his curia took refuge in Florence in June 1434, thanks to the intensification of political and economic collaboration with Florence under the political hegemony of Rinaldo degli Albizzi, then during Cosimo’s exile from the city; see Eleonora Plebani, “Una fuga programmata. Eugenio IV e Firenze (1433-1434)”, *Archivio*

er, political-legal structures, cultural complexity, wealth, religious and earthly glory, the imperialistic ideology of pagan Rome and the entire classical culture, all directed to the exaltation of its own universal role of salvific mediation.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not this redemptive role was sincerely superordinate to that of the historical affirmation of a sacred and historical power that aspired to become universally *absolutus* is difficult to say. The theocratic treaties of the Roman curia, Querini and Giustiniani's *Libellus ad Leonem X*, Reginald Pole's *De summo pontifice*, or even the Erasmian *Iulius* and *Institutio principis christiani* or the Lutheran *De captivitate babilonica*, all represent different ideological assessments - courtly, functional, reformist, ruthlessly critical, apocalyptically destructive - of a striking historical phenomenon: the assertion of the papal "centaur", a Roman Catholic historical subject, characterised by a universal will to power and an absolute claim to truth and sacred and temporal government. In short, in Europe, and even more so in Italy at the beginning of the 16th century, the papal *princeps* was not only a decisive historical power, but also an irresistible theological-political magnet, and therefore a centre of exceptional attraction from an ideological, cultural and symbolic as well as pragmatic point of view.

Therefore, at the beginning of the 16th century, the Papal *princeps*, heir of Peter, could "legitimately" claim to be the vicar of Christ and even *god on earth*, but also the recapitulation not only of the whole of Jewish history, i.e. Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, but also of classical history, that is, of Alexander (whence the name Alexander VI), of Romulus, of the heroes of the Roman republic, from Scipio to Cicero, of Julius Caesar (whence the name Julius II), of Augustus (whence the ambition to realise the advent of the Virgilian *saeculum aureum*).<sup>20</sup> This concentration of power, prestige, cultural refinement, absolute ideological supremacy reached the highest possible (hence precarious!) point with the Medici Popes, which belonged to the family that in the new Athens - Florence - had ascended to the pinnacle of Renaissance culture and thus aspired to translate its primacy into secular political power and state expansionism.

Therefore, all relevant historical, political, religious, and cultural phenomena of the 16th century, at least in Italy, could not avoid a dialectical relationship with the Papal *caput*, either to exalt it or criticise it, to reform or overthrow it, in a relationship of subordination and celebration, sincere interest and inevitable instrumentalization and more or less radical contestation. Only one historical hypothesis can be

ruled out: that a conscious historical subject could consider the papal theological-political magnet indifferent, ignore it or ironically minimise it. Even Machiavelli's subversive *Prince* must be interpreted, as Dionisotti states, as grafting a secular principality onto the trunk of papal politics.<sup>21</sup>

In reference to the symbolic magnetism of the Renaissance Popes, in particular the Medici ones, an error made by Giorgio Vasari in his *Vita di Iacopo da Pontormo pittore fiorentino* ("The Life of Iacopo da Pontormo, Florentine painter") contained in the second edition of his *Lives*, seems symptomatic. It is well known how, in the carnival of 1513 (6-8 February), in Florence there were solemn celebrations financed by the Medici, who had just returned to power. The festivities culminated in a scenographic "competition" between the *Compagnia del Diamante*, led and financed by Giuliano, and the *Compagnia del Broncone*, guided by his nephew Lorenzo.<sup>22</sup> The latter organised triumphal processions, with seven floats inspired by mythological or classical historical figures, with panels by Bandinelli and Pontormo. In particular, the second float was dedicated to Numa, the religious founder of Rome, with an obvious allusion to the newly restored Medici government, a guarantee of peace and divine protection, thanks to Cardinal Giovanni.<sup>23</sup> In reality, Giovanni only became pope a month later (11 March), fulfilling in the highest degree the political prophecy ideologically celebrated in the Carnival. Yet, Vasari dates the allegorical processions described above to the Carnival of 1514 (following the papal election), and not 1513 (following the Medici's return to power in Florence), arbitrarily linking them to the election of the Medici pope.<sup>24</sup> The political symbolism of the 1513 Carnival is in Pontormo's mind irresistibly at-

*Storico Italiano* 170, 2 (2012): 285-310. Cosimo's return to power allowed him to deepen the collaboration with the Pope.

<sup>19</sup> See Paolo Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice. Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982), 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> On the Papal imitation of Roman ancient models, see Ingrid D. Rowland, *The Culture of High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001), 193-243.

<sup>21</sup> Carlo Dionisotti, "Chierici e laici nella letteratura italiana del primo Cinquecento", in *Problemi di vita religiosa in Italia nel primo Cinquecento*, (Padova: Antenore, 1960), 167-185, then in *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), 55-88, in part. 74.

<sup>22</sup> See Nicholas Scott Baker, "Medicean metamorphoses: Carnival in Florence, 1513", *Renaissance Studies*, 25 (2010): 491-510, and Maria Testaverde Matteini, "La decorazione festiva e l'itinerario di "rifondazione" della città negli ingressi trionfali a Firenze tra xv e xvi secolo", *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 32, no.3 (1988) 323-352, in particular 331-332.

<sup>23</sup> On the relationship between Numa and Leo X, see Adriano Prosperi, "Reginald Pole lettore di Machiavelli", in *Cultura e scrittura di Machiavelli. Atti del convegno di Firenze-Pisa* (Roma: Salerno, 1998), 241-262.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (Firenze: Giunti, 1568), part III, vol. II, 477-478, then edited in Novara: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1967 vol. VI, 145, 148 and 150: "Il carnevale del medesimo anno, essendo tutta Fiorenza in festa e in allegrezza per la creazione del detto Leone X, furono ordinate molte feste e tra l'altre due bellissime e di grandissima spesa da due compagnie [quella del Diamante e del Broncone]... Sopra il secondo carro tirato da due paia di buoi vestiti di drappo ricchissimo, con ghirlande in capo e con paternostri grossi che loro pendevano dalle dorate corna, era Numa Pompilio secondo re de' Romani con i libri della religione e con tutti gl'ordini sacerdotali e cose appartenenti a' sacrifici, perciòché egli fu, appresso i Romani, autore e primo ordinatore della religione e de' sacrificii".





Fig. 3. Benozzo Gozzoli, *Corteo dei Magi* (1459). Palazzo Medici, Florence

tracted to the papal magnet that would only be activated in 1514, leading to the confusion of dates: Numa was in second place within the series formed by Saturn, Manlius Torquatus, Julius Caesar, Octavian Augustus, Trajan, the dawning Golden Age, where the preponderance of representations of secular “princes” was evident. And yet, the second king of Rome, which originally indicated the regal religious component of Cardinal Giovanni who held the Medici political power, in Vasari’s restitution ends up “dictating the law” and orienting the entire political series of chariots in a pontifical direction. In Vasari’s recollection, the figure of political authority shifts from the secular level to the pontifical power, from competing princes to the prince of princes, so that Giuliano and Lorenzo (the two secular heirs of the family) are effectively removed in the epochal ascent to the papal throne of Giovanni de’ Medici, guarantor of the saturnine Golden Age.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 4. Raffaello Sanzio, *Leo X with the cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi* (1518). Uffizi Gallery, Florence

<sup>25</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, 152: “Nel mezzo del [settimo] carro surgeva una gran palla in forma d’ap<a>mondo, sopra la quale stava prostrato bocconi un uomo come morto, armato d’arme tutte ruginose, il quale avendo le schiene aperte e fesse, della fessura usciva un fanciullo tutto nudo e dorato, il quale rappresentava l’età dell’oro resurgente e la fine di quella del ferro, della quale egli usciva e rinasceva per la creazione di quel pontefice”.



Leo X, the vicar of Christ and the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, is precisely the symbolic magnet, capable of forcing a historical memory, transfigured into a proleptic celebration of the future pope. *Ubi maior; minores cessant*: his lay heirs depend on him as his projection and instrument, a variable function, ready to be reabsorbed by his symbolic power that depends on an impressive concentration of theological-political and cultural power, capable of bringing about new institutional arrangements. The pope is the supreme political subject, the man of Providence, the new (vicar of) the messiah, capable of guaranteeing the passage from the wars of Italy to a universal peace, the guarantor of power, wealth and happiness for Florence and all of Italy. The whole of Roman history, starting from the mythical rule of the god Saturn, passing through the pacific Numa, up to Trajan, is geared to fulfil itself in the advent of the papal redeemer, at once Florentine and Roman, intent on guaranteeing the future greatness of the politically hegemonic city of Florence on a national level.

Is it therefore possible that a political treatise written with the aim of entering the orbit of the irresistible Medicean theological-political magnet could deal with Romulus, Numa, Theseus, Moses, David, Cyrus, Alexander, Scipio, Caesar or even Chiron and Achilles, neglecting the reigning Pope? Obviously, these great classical figures were a common model of political virtue for a prince, in the typological perspective dominating the humanistic conception of history.<sup>26</sup> But, once these figures were inserted into a political dynamism in which the Pope was called upon as final *maiestas*, they could not but end up gravitating around him, even when there was reference to his lay satellites. In an alternative reading of Leo Strauss' thesis, we should ask ourselves if an allusive and courtly writing elegantly aimed at the Pope was not intent on concealing subversive and desecrating intentions, but rather on suggesting, through religious symbolism, politically "virtuous" practices and political-military actions. Yet in the interpretations of *The Prince* this hypothesis is, if not entirely absent, advanced only in a fragmentary and minimising manner. Focusing on the case of Moses, the predominant readings completely ignore the figure of the Pope, suggesting that Machiavelli would presuppose exclusively Jewish and even Islamic interpretations of the religious, political and juridical Old Testament *princeps*, in all cases modeled on pagan models and sub-

ordinate to them.<sup>27</sup> My reading of course presupposes that Machiavelli's actual interpretation of Moses as figure of the Pope, precisely in its secularizing nature, ended up bringing to the surface the original Jewish messianic-political device inscribed in the Christian matrix itself, which then ended up having greater points of contact with a classical restitution of the political realm.

Thus, Machiavelli's treatise is radically distant from a neo-guelf perspective: in the historical mediation of the two souls or natures of the papal centaur, it ambiguously attests to a reciprocal overturning between the sacred and the secular, in the perspective of an auto-nomization of the secular from the sacred, from which however it cannot free itself, precisely because it is surrogating its "sacred" prerogatives. This is the ambiguous nature of modern secularization, which starts a process of exit from Christianity without being capable to elude it. Christ's vicar becomes the figure of the earthly redeemer, the ideological "instrumento" of his temporal "instrumento", the sacred prophet of a national messiah: a human-beast centaur, who really does seem to be the other side of the evangelical Christ (as Nietzsche lucidly understands in his *Antichrist*). Hence the precocious rise of the myth of the atheist and evil Machiavelli. Is perhaps the papal centaur, Machiavelli's ambiguous prince, the reverse of Christ, hence an image of the Antichrist? If Machiavelli's treatise, particularly chapters XV-XIX, has been aptly described as an "*Anti-speculum principis*",<sup>28</sup> recognising it as primarily addressed to the reigning Pope as an (anti-silencic) "divine/animal" centaur that increases its paradoxical and disturbing nature,<sup>29</sup> which is religiously equivocal, at the same time formally religious, meaning pontifical, and substantially irreligious, because forced to radically enter the evil of history.

### 3. *The Prince as a Renaissance enchiridion pontificis*

Leo X is the gravitational centre of the treatise: Machiavelli's aim in the letters coeval to the compilation of *The Prince* is clearly that of going back to politics and thus being "used" by the Medici family. In December 1514, through Vettori, Machiavelli was consulted from Rome regarding the strategy of European alliances to be adopted, drafting missives that were read and appreciated in the curia. But, not surprisingly, it was finally Leo X, through Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, who responded negatively to the offer of *The Prince*, asking Giuliano on February 14<sup>th</sup> 1515

<sup>26</sup> It is well known how Cosimus I favoured his symbolic identification with Lycurgus, Solon and above all Moses and Numa: see Matteini, "La decorazione festiva", 171-172; Janet Cox-Rearick, "Bronzino's Crossing of the Red Sea and Moses Appointing Joshua: Prolegomena to the Chapel of Eleonora di Toledo", *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 1 (1987): 45-67; Emanuela Ferretti, Salvatore Lo Re, "Il ninfeo di Egeria sulla via Appia e la grotta degli Animali di Castello: mito e architettura tra Roma e Firenze", *Opus Incertum*, 4 (2018): 14-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13128/opus-25301>. This hyperbolic iconography was reasonable in the light of Cosimo's ancestors, the two Popes which represented the culmination of the dynasty, and was explained also by the hope for a third Pope in the person of Ferdinand (who will become Grandduke).

<sup>27</sup> See on this Miguel Vatter, "Machiavelli and the Republican Conception of Providence," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 605-623. DOI: 10.1017/S0034670513000612; Innocenzo Cervelli, "Savonarola, Machiavelli e il libro dell'Esodo", in *Savonarola. Democrazia Tirannide Profezia*, ed. by Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Firenze: Sismel/Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998), 243-298.

<sup>28</sup> Gennaro M. Barbuto, *Machiavelli* (Roma: Salerno 2013), 141-144.

<sup>29</sup> Barbuto, *Machiavelli*, 145-148.

through Pietro Ardinghelli not to get entangled with Machiavelli, frustrating the latter's illusions and expectations. It is necessary, then, to finally place the treatise in its historical context, restoring it as a pragmatic political work, intent on seizing a momentous, personal historical opportunity.

I propose to read the gift offered by Machiavelli to the Medici family as weaved with a double spinning: a technical one, addressed to the lay prince and ultimately to the Pope and a hortatory; a hortatory one, addressed to the papal prince. a) The technical spinning is a daring *summa* of the art of state and war, a practical and effectual wisdom through which Machiavelli presents himself as an expert matured in the long experience of the state and in the passionate study of political history. b) the encomiastic line is rendered in a systematic hortatory speech directed to the Pope and nourished by a profetic-religious codex, which exalts in the prince of the Church the decisive political subject who will have to grasp the unique opportunity presented by the current European and Italian scene. In other words, *The Prince* is at the same time a *speculum principis*, which offers to the lay Medici prince (and to the temporal side of the Papal power) the science of armed conquer and the art of the government of the state; and, on the other hand, a *speculum pontificis*, in which Leo X is celebrated and invited to assume the role of providential head of Italy's redemption and driving force of the new Medicean principedom. In the *medius* of the Pope the relation between neo-Roman politics and ethos-inspiring religion, decisive for Machiavelli is therefore concrete. The new prince has to be *also* a prophet, inevitably characterized by a Christian codex, even if prophecy is now a mere instrument of ideological persuasion, an "ideal" power of suasion, which has no onto-theological foundation. The Machiavellian prince is in fact a papal centaur, a sacred-secular dyad, with a religious head and a political-military arm: an *armed prophet*.

In the Italian historical reality, starting from the fall of the Western Roman Empire (as Machiavelli emphasises in Book I of the *Istorie fiorentine*), the papal principedom has always played a decisive role, but for too long it has been divisive and corruptive, hence Machiavelli's very strong anticlerical, if not anti-Christian perspective, traditionally committed to defending the Florentine republic from papal and/or nepotistic expansionist aims, culminating in Cesare Borgia's attempt. Yet, the *Prince* pragmatically sees the rise of a young Florentine Pope as an exceptional opportunity for Italy, an extraordinary historical novelty capable of maximising the recent political-military strengthening of the church state, promoted by Alexander VI and Julius II, in this case to favour the constitution of a new lay Medici principality, capable of aspiring to national hegemony. The recipient of the treatise is the Medici centaur Leo X/Giuliano and/or Lorenzo, to whom a state has to be given: the liberation of Italy from the barbarians is in fact aimed at a policy of secular Medici affirmation, towards the

centre-north (Urbino, Emilia-Romagna, even the Duchy of Milan) and south (the kingdom of Naples).<sup>30</sup> If, therefore, Leo X is the gravitational centre that decides and governs the fate of the Medici secular princes, to fully understand the pontifical plot of the treatise it is necessary to document the system of curial, prophetic, messianic codes, which were common in the Italian political and religious culture in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century, irresistibly attracted by the symbolic magnet of the Medici Pope and profoundly influential on the *Prince*, although, until today, largely unacknowledged. In fact, all the key-points of the treatise offer a system of pontifical *exempla* addressed to the Pope.

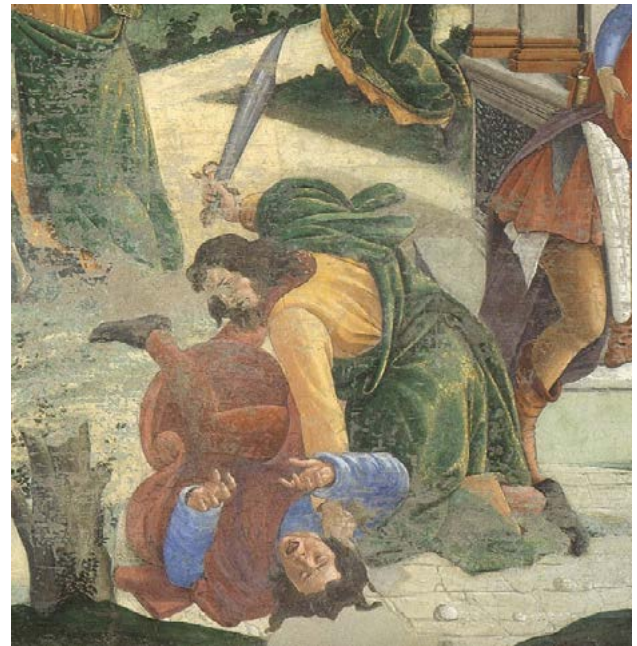


Fig. 5. Sandro Botticelli, Moses killing the Egyptian, a detail from *Events of the life of Moses*, 1481-82, fresco. Sistine Chapel, Rome

Chapter XI, which in Meinecke and Sasso's opinions was the last one of the treatise's first draft,<sup>31</sup> has a very original exposition on the ecclesiastical

<sup>30</sup> See Iacopo Nardi, *Istorie della città di Firenze [1553-1563]* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1858), vol. II, 36; Francesco Vettori, *Lettera a Niccolò Machiavelli del 16 maggio 1514*, in Machiavelli; *Lettere*, n. 252, v. II, 1150-1186, which describes the Pope as willing to acquire new domains and emphasises how the kingdom of Naples always was in the expansionistic ambitions of the Popes, especially Leo. Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*; book XII, ch. VII, vol. III, 1201, describes the negotiations between Francis I and Leo X, involving Milan and Naples (the latter was intended by the Pope for the Church or his brother Giuliano).

<sup>31</sup> See Friedrich Meinecke, *Anhang zur Einführung: Entstehung und Komposition des Principe*, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Der Fürst und kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Hobbing, 1923), 38-47; the hypothesis was rejected by Federico Chabod, *Scritti su Machiavelli* (Torino: Einaudi, 1964), 139-193. Meinecke's hypothesis was originally re-proposed by Chabod's great pupil, Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli. I. Il pensiero politico*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980, 1993<sup>2</sup>), 349; Id., *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi*, II (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1988), 214-233; also Emanuele Cutinelli Rèndina, *La reli-*



princedom, <sup>32</sup> especially on the pontifical state. It closes with the praise of Leo X, urged to be the heir of the expansionist policy of Alexander VI (operated through Cesare Borgia) and Julius II. The structure of the chapter anticipates that of the last part of the treatise; as a matter of fact, chapter XXVI is an exhortation to Leo X to become a virtuous dialectical synthesis of the great models of Alexander VI (ch. XVIII) and Julius II (ch. XXV), who are respectively examples of cautious and impetuous popes.

In ch. XIII we find David, figure of Christ and his vicar, as well as symbol of the republic of Florence elected by God and of the Medici themselves, as it is clear in Donatello's *David* commissioned by Cosimo or Verrocchio's *David* commissioned by his nephews Lorenzo and Giuliano. David is the highest example of a prince endowed with "arms of his own", summed up in the "knife", a "enchiridion" capable of making God's new prince triumph by decapitating the giant Goliath.

In chapter XVIII, the centaur prince, who is the recapitulative image of the entire treatise, is impersonated by Alexander VI and finally by an ambiguous prince, whose name is withheld out of reverence: he is not identifiable with Ferdinand the Catholic, but rather with "the double" Leo X, as Scichilone convincingly argued, taking up an intuition advanced but then strangely abandoned by Martelli. <sup>33</sup> Alexander VI himself has a dual nature: a fox, capable of deceiving, and a lion (through the instrument of the duke Valentino) capable of killing, but also a man, who honours (at least in appearance) faith, piety, humanity, religion and who above all is intent on assuring public *salus* and new statal power. Cesare Borgia is the archetype of the Renaissance papal centaur: if in ch. VII he is indicated as an eminent example of new prince, to be imitated, in ch. XI he is defined "instrument" through which his father did great things. Valentino's case proves how it is the papal power that inspires, sustains and even thwarts, with his death, the great ambition of the earthly prince: "Cesare Borgia, called by the people Duke Valentino, gained his position through his father's Fortune and through her lost it" <sup>34</sup> (ch. VII, 7). Although he had operated with truly extraordinary virtue, Caesar falls because he is unable to manage the fatal conclave of the election of Julius II: "In this choice, then, the Duke blundered, and it caused his final ruin." (VII, 49)! <sup>35</sup>

In Princ XXV, despite the doubts that Machiavelli expresses in some of his letters towards the figure of

Julius II, <sup>36</sup> the supreme and invincible example of adamantine virtue, certainly favoured by fortune, is still that of a Pope. On the contrary, with a contradiction that accentuates the encomiastic intention of the example, the elderly and ill Pope is indicated, for "energy and impetuosity", as the perfect model of the "impetuous youth" and erotic ruler, capable of beating Fortune, adopting an aggressive, even furious, but irresistibly successful military policy: because Fortune "like a woman, is the friend of young men, because they are less cautious, more spirited, and with more boldness master her". <sup>37</sup> Evidently, the exemplary insistence is aimed at stirring Leo X's prudent, wise, excessively cautious nature; not by chance, in the letters of December 1514, Machiavelli tries to divert Leo from neutrality and push him towards an alliance with France in the case of a conflict with Spain (and the Swiss). <sup>38</sup>

Ideological preconceptions have for too long obscured this coherent system of exemplary papal mirrors, in which Leo X is called upon to mirror himself. In this sense, the concluding *Exhortatio* is the culmination and recapitulation of this Papal hortatory, structured as an insistent messianic allegory, based on the Pauline typological relationship between Moses and Christ, marked by the oppositions *spirito/spiraculo* ("gleam") and the head/body-member relationship. It is precisely on the figure of Moses, then, that we must focus.

#### 4. The exemplar anomaly of the armed prophet: Moses, David, and the ambiguous secular prince

Chapter VI of the treatise, entitled *De principatibus novis qui armis propriis et virtute acquiruntur* ("New Princedom Gained Through a Man's Own Armies and Ability"), is decisive in indicating to the new Medicean prince how to gain a princedom without inheriting it, but with his own virtue instead, which Machiavelli considers fundamental for the gaining of one's own army. As we have seen, in the same way the archer takes an aim much higher so that his arrow reaches its mark, Machiavelli proposes "the noblest examples", <sup>39</sup> so that the aspiring prince may understand he should "imitate those who have been especially admirable", <sup>40</sup> to achieve inevitably lower goals, thanks to an effective virtue. Machiavelli proposes the highest possibile examples, such as Moses, Romulus, Cyrus, Theseus: the founders of the He-

gione, in Machiavelli, ed. by Emanuele Cutinelli Rëndina and Raffaele Ruggiero (Roma: Carocci, 2018), 268, prudently agrees.

<sup>32</sup> Pedullà, *Introduzione a Machiavelli, Il principe*, 169, n. 1 to ch. XI.

<sup>33</sup> Giorgio E. M. Scichilone, "Tagliare a pezzi". Cesare Borgia tra rimandi biblici e fonte senofontea in Machiavelli", in *Studi di storia della cultura. Sibi suis amicisque*, ed. by Domenico Felice (Bologna: Clueb, 2012), 59-106; in particular 78-90; the hypothesis was proposed by Mario Martelli, "Note su Machiavelli", *Interpres* 18, (1999): 91-145. Martelli in the end preferred to identify the anonymous character with Filippo Maria Visconti.

<sup>34</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> He is defined "instabile, rotto, furioso e misero" (Machiavelli, *Lettera a Francesco Vettori del 29 aprile 1513*, n. 229, v. II, 964).

<sup>37</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> See Machiavelli, *Lettera a Francesco Vettori del 10 dicembre 1514*, n. 258, v. II, 1195-1211, in part. 1208: "Papa Giulio non si curò mai d'essere odiato, purché fussi temuto e reverito; e con quello suo timore messe sottosopra el mondo, e condusse la Chiesa dove la è". The stress here is on the terrible nature of the Pope.

<sup>39</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 24.

brew, Roman, Persian and Athenian power, who had in common the ability to overcome a personal and political experience of misery and marginalization and transform it in an occasion for success and power. The Biblical example lays down the law to the other historical examples, all characterized by the providential turning of humiliation into glory.

Regarding chapter VI, which will be recapitulated and recalibrated in the final chapter XXVI, I think a very significant anomaly has been generally overlooked. Even if the major political founders, such as Romulus, the starting point of the Roman glory, are all presented, it is on Moses as an armed prophet that chapter 6 is focused on; and this is despite the fact that Machiavelli proposed the example, simulating an act of prudence by disregarding it whilst recovering it as politically exemplary:

And though Moses should not be discussed, since he was a mere executor of things laid down for him by God, nevertheless he ought to be exalted, if only for the grace that made him worthy to speak with God. But let us look at Cyrus and the others who gained or founded kingdoms. You will find them all amazing; and if you look at their actions and their individual methods, they seem not different from those of Moses, who had so great a teacher.<sup>41</sup>

A question of the utmost importance arises here: is the calling into question of Moses merely ironic, implicitly desecrating (as argued by the clear majority of scholars, from Russo to Ginzburg)<sup>42</sup> or, on the contrary, if certainly not “orthodox” (Pocock), very serious (Cutinelli-Rèndina and Bausi) and absolutely

strategic? I lean towards the latter hypothesis, believing that Machiavelli, while not believing in the actual divine inspiration of Moses,<sup>43</sup> takes nonetheless the theological claim and religious faith that recognises him as a man inspired by God, i.e. as a prophet and quite seriously as a shared effected political fact. A political admiration for Moses is generated by his capacity for persuasion that is both religious and armed, making him an exemplary model. Therefore, the hypothesis of Moses the prophet is by no means ridiculed, but rather becomes the decisive issue of the chapter. The example of Moses the prophet ends up swallowing up the historical-mythical figures of Romulus, Cyrus, Theseus, sparking tension with the figure of Savonarola, who bursts the chapter (chap. VI, 23) with a masterful actualising effect.

The complex ideation of chapter VI, 8-9, which recognizes Moses as a God-inspired prophet which acts in politics in an exemplary way, is recapitulated in the theme of the identity of the armed prophet, which clearly corresponds only to Moses and not to Cyrus, Romulus or Theseus, and which is opposed to the historical experience of Savonarola, the unarmed prophet. In fact, the name of Moses seems the least suitable for indicating a model of a prince virtuous thanks to his army, as compared against the other four historical examples. Whereas in Romulus and Cyrus, the element of political and military virtue is clearly predominant, in the case of Moses his dominant identity is prophetic. The exemplary character who steals the scene in the chapter devoted to the acquisition of one's own weapons seems the least suitable to do so, unless the gravitational centre of the Mosaic figure was pragmatically aimed at the Pope, who was invited to acquire his own army. Otherwise, why should the secular, unscrupulous New Medici prince, to whom Machiavelli's treatise is dedicated, take Moses the armed prophet as his highest example, rather than the “secular” ones of Romulus and Cyrus? In short, why is it that in the heart of a purely political investigation, the discussed themes are faith, persuasion, the ability to hold people firm in their faith in the prince through a sacred bond, prophecy and the relationship with religion? Why does the main core of the chapter become the opposition between armed and unarmed prophets? Why does the ability to arouse belief in the religious inspiration of one's political actions become so important, to the point that Savonarola gains a very relevant, even if dialectically negative, space alongside massive historical-mythical figures?

<sup>41</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 25. In ch. XI, 4-5, there is an ambiguous formula which corresponds perfectly with this (*ibid.*, 44: “I omit speaking about them [...] Nevertheless.” This formula reveals the political secret of the ecclesiastical principedoms: “These principedoms only, then, are secure and prosperous. But since they are protected by superior causes, to which the human mind does not reach, I omit speaking about them because, since they are set on high and maintained by God, to discuss them would be the act of a man presumptuous and rash. Nevertheless, if anybody asks me why the Church, in temporal affairs, has now attained such strength [...] though this situation is well known, I believe I am not superfluous in bringing it back to memory in some detail”). The exceptional “prophetic” or charismatic nature of the ecclesiastical principalities is explained on the basis of purely political-military reasons, referring to the policies of first Alexander VI and then Julius II, who are indicated to the reigning Leo X as exemplary Popes.

<sup>42</sup> Strongly in favour of an ironic and irreverent interpretation of the mosaic example is Carlo Ginzburg, *Nondimanco. Machiavelli, Pascal* (Milano: Adelphi, 2018) who speaks of an ambiguous homage to Moses (14); against Pocock, who assessed the reference to Moses in Princ VI as orthodox, Ginzburg comments how irony is an implicit figure, and not everyone understands it (38). Similarly, Giorgio Inglese, in Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 73, n. 2, identifies as “sarcastic” the notation dedicated in ch. XI,2 to the paradoxical political nature of ecclesiastical principedoms, in particular the Papacy, which has subjects which does not govern and kingdoms it does not defend. Valuable, on the subject, is the assessment of Pedullà, in *Il principe*, 171-173, n. 8 to chap. XI: in favour of the ironic interpretation of the chapter, he refers to many other studies (Lisio, Russo, Lefort, Sasso, Skinner, Bärberi Squarotti, Fournel and Zancarini, Vivanti, Inglese, Ruggiero, Black, Benner, Rehborn).

<sup>43</sup> See Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 17: “E chi legge la Bibbia sensatamente vedrà Moisè essere stato forzato, a volere che le sue leggi e che i suoi ordini andassero innanzi, ad ammazzare infiniti uomini, i quali non mossi da altro che dalla invidia si opponevano a' disegni suoi. Questa necessità conosceva benissimo frate Girolamo Savonarola”. This chapter of the Discourses also goes back immediately afterwards (III,xxx,18-20) to the antithetical relationship between Moses and Savonarola: “the prophet” Savonarola, precisely because he did not directly have the authority of an army, was unable to extinguish the political envy towards him.



Two answers are possible. The first one is that for Machiavelli lofty politics is not possible without a relationship with religion, as it is proved by the double foundation of Rome attributed to Romulus and Numa: the prince's virtue is always fulfilled in an act of foundation or in a pretence of religious inspiration, even if in this case Romulus, who is lacking in this sense, has to be completed by Numa.<sup>44</sup> The theme of the religious belief and the violent power of inspiring it (either with charisma or armed coercion) is introduced by a political consideration. To introduce new political orders, one must assert or possess some kind of exceptional authority, to overcome the natural unbelief of men and the proverbial fickleness of the people's approval, inducing them to believe willingly or not in the new prince, imposing themselves on both the interested defenders of the old order and the lukewarm indifferent to a political power that previously excluded them.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the virtue of the new prince must be capable of inspiring faith in seizing power, boasting some divine vocation, and of holding his subjects firm in this faith in order to maintain it, thanks to the possession of his own army.<sup>46</sup>

The second possible answer does not contradict the first, it completes it: the real, implicit core of the political reasoning of the chapter is the Pope, whose

figure is Moses, which is invited to build on virtue and not fortune. By bringing into play the unarmed prophet Savonarola, Machiavelli makes a dialectical reference to the institutional armed prophet, namely, the Renaissance Pope, against whom the friar from Ferrara had vainly tried to claim a superior charisma. The strong exhortation to the prince to be an armed prophet, showing him the example of the unarmed prophet, the friar, as ruinous, is a precise and courtly stance. It is an exaltation of the ambiguous nature of the Renaissance Pope, the only historical figure which has a universally recognized religious institutional charisma; even though the Pope was now increasingly violently engaged, with diplomacy, money and arms, in being a prince at war, both to defend/expand his ecclesiastical possessions and to create political possessions for his own relatives.

The fact that the papal centaur is the gravitational centre of chapter VI is unequivocally demonstrated by the next chapter, its apparent reverse, as the title proves: *De principatibus novis qui alienis armis et fortuna acquiruntur* ("New Princedoms Gained With Other Men's Forces And Through Fortune").<sup>47</sup> As a matter of fact, this chapter is governed by the most direct historical example which is indicated to the new Medici prince, namely Cesare Borgia, whose driving force was his father the pope, the cautious Alexander VI, author of his son's fortune and indirect cause, through his death, of his final misfortune.<sup>48</sup> The duke Valentino was not capable of dealing deftly with the conclave in which Pope Julius II was elected, being deceived by the latter's promises of an alliance.

## 5. The coming of the redeeming Prince: the *Exhortatio* as a recapitulation of the *speculum pontificis*

This coherent and hammering system of exemplary mirrors of prophets/popes in war – the armed prophets Moses and David as Christological-pontifical figures, then the Borgian Alexander VI/Valentino dyad, finally the impetuous Julius II –, has been hidden by ideological preconceptions or distracted disregard to the theological-political codex of this age. In the final exhortation the hortatory and encomiastic papal dialectic finds its recapitulation, involving again Leo X, who in the closing lines of ch. XI had already been exalted as coming virtuous synthesis of Alexander VI and Julius II, the popes who had chosen the name of the Macedonian king and of Caesar, the greatest imperial figures of the past.

The final chapter of the treatise brings to its peak the system of *specula principis*: the model proposed to the lay prince through Moses' mediation is Christ himself, of whom the pope is living image. As I have

<sup>44</sup> See the passages from the *Discorsi*: "E vedesi, chi considera bene le istorie romane, quanto serviva la religione a comandare gli eserciti, animare la Plebe, a mantenere gli uomini buoni, a fare vergognare i rei. Talché se si avesse a disputare a quale principe Roma fusse più obligata, o a Romolo o a Numa, credo più tosto Numa otterrebbe il primo grado; perché dove è religione facilmente si possono introdurre l'armi, e dove sono l'armi, e non religione, con difficoltà si può introdurre quella" (*Discorsi* I, XI, 8-9); "E veramente mai fu alcuno ordinatore di leggi straordinarie in uno popolo che non ricorresse a Dio, perché altrimenti non sarebbero accettate; perché sono molti i beni conosciuti da uno prudente, i quali non hanno in sé ragioni evidenti da poterli persuadere ad altri. Però gli uomini savi che vogliono torre questa difficoltà ricorrono a Dio" (*Discorsi* I, XI, 11-12). It is no coincidence that, even in this context, the indissoluble relationship between politics and religion moves on to discuss the lofty, yet imperfect, therefore negative example of Savonarola: "Al popolo di Firenze non pare essere né ignorante né rozzo; nondimeno da frate Girolamo Savonarola fu persuaso che parlava con Dio. Io non voglio giudicare s'egli era vero o no, perché d'uno tanto uomo se ne debbe parlare con riverenza; ma io dico che infiniti lo credevono, senza avere visto cosa nessuna straordinaria da farlo loro credere, perché la vita sua, la dottrina, e il soggetto che prese, erano sufficienti a fargli prestare fede" (*Discorsi* I, XI, 24-25).

<sup>45</sup> The model of David in *Discorsi* I, XIX, 6-7 and I, XXVI, 2 is a Biblical example of a prince which takes the power and imposes new orders overturning the old ones, through an extraordinary power of persuasion, which is understood more as a coercive violence than a prophetic charisma. Erasmus himself understood the violent nature of David, even questioning his role as a *typos* of Christ, preferring to him his son Solomon, the peaceable builder of the Temple of Jerusalem: see Desiderius Erasmus, *Querela pacis vndique gentium eiectae profligataeque*, ed. by O. Herding, (ASD IV-II) (Amsterdam/Oxford: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1977), 61-100, in part. 72.

<sup>46</sup> See Pedullà, in Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 171-173, note 9 to ch. VI, which has valuable references to Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca*, to Justinus' *Epitome*, to Landino, to the Savonarolian preaching. Pedullà however neglects the Papal value of the figure of Moses, even if he mentions the iconographic apparatus in the Vatican and Michelangelo's *Moses*.

<sup>47</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> See ch. VII, 10, and 32.

already shown,<sup>49</sup> the “marvelous, unexampled signs that God is directing you”<sup>50</sup> (XXVI,12) – the journey through the desert in Exodus 13:21, the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14:21-22), the miraculous nourishing through the manna (Ex 16:14-15), and the water which pours out of the rock that Moses strikes (Ex 17:6) – are either not derived directly from Exodus or they are the fruit of a casual memory. Instead, they are all indicated in the First Letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 10:1-4), in reference to Christ, in a systematic typologicalisation. In fact Paul, in 1Cor 11:3; 12:12-14 and 26-27, indicates in Christ the head of his “mystical” body whose members come to life only if animated by his “Spirit”. Therefore, when Machiavelli identifies “a man newly risen” in “reverence and awe”<sup>51</sup> as being capable to make himself “the leader of this redemption” (XXVI,8) in an Italy “as though without life”<sup>52</sup> waiting for “her redeemer”,<sup>53</sup> the imaginary field is consciously and systematically Christological: as in Paul, the typos of Moses is resolved in Christ. Not only the expression “Italian spirit”<sup>54</sup> immanentise the miraculous charisma of the Pauline Christ/“head” (as opposed to the “gleam” as an illusory vital breath) but even the providentialistic dialectic between abjection/redemption, misery/glory, passion and death/resurrection, suffering members/awaited and exalted head is transparent in its reference to the *Christus patiens*’ body. In short, Machiavelli transfers the Pauline typology of Moses and Christ in the contemporary historical reality: the lay Medici prince is metaphorically the eschatological effective redeemer of Italy, of whom Christ, prefigured by Moses, is a figure. Let us not forget, then, how at least from Dante onwards the image of Italy and the church itself as a fallen woman, derelict, raped, at the mercy of the barbarians, runs through the Italian theological-political imagination, culminating in the pontificate of Julius II characterised by his pontifical and Mosaic project to “liberate Italy from the barbarians”.<sup>55</sup> And, of course, since much of the intellectual ferment that took place under the Leonine pontificate had its origins in the previous decade,<sup>56</sup> it would be peculiar to believe that only Machiavelli, who had known Julius II personally and followed him for a long time, was completely immune even to the symbolic influence of the guiding images of that pontificate.

The Mosaic images in ch. XXVI are not a futile play, but rather a profound theological-political dispositive, which in Machiavelli has a secularizing value, through which the sacred prince mirrors himself in the secular prince, of which he is at the same time the inspiring figure and the historical figure able to promote him. The Mosaic-Christological figures have the encomiastic value of stressing the supreme power of the pope as effective political power: the millenary Christian soteriology is called into question to justify the lay historical endeavor of the Medici prince.

Let us go back to the encomiastic sentence which is the real center of gravity of the *Exhortatio*:

There is not, at present, anyone in whom she can have more hope than in your glorious family, which, through its fortune and its wisdom and strength, favored by God and by the Church-of which it is now head-can make itself the leader of this redemption.<sup>57</sup>

The passage is highly revealing for both political-institutional and courtly reasons, and because of the inner mechanism of political and symbolic magnetism that we could define *ubi maior minor cessat*: it is the most powerful Pope who attracts into his orbit and governs his satellites and political instruments. The political-social reality of the Medici house is related to theological terms, which were traditionally connotated in sacral terms such as “prince of the Church”, “head”, “spirit”, “redeemer”, “a man newly risen”. Moreover, the recapitulation in the figure of the Pope of the power of the Medici family opens the possibility of the temporal action of his lay instrument, the new earthly prince. In the *medius* of the Pope, Christ himself is evoked as the sacral figure of a new political secular subject, in a translation/redemption of the dead and unworthy body from the spiritual-theological realm to the political one.

The terrible secularizing ambiguity of the *Prince* is now clear: sacral in its form, earthly and even desecrating in its substance: the one and the other are linked together by the ambiguous papal centaur, who is man-and-god-on earth and demonic leonine and vulpine beast. In my previous essay, I have insisted on the the secularizing double play and double bind inherent in the *Exhortatio*: the real Christ is the secular prince. In history, the Pope is the *princeps principum*: the vicar of Christ who is the absolute *caput* of all secular power, thus he is the foundation of the secular prince. If, on the one hand, Machiavelli’s perspective ends up reducing the Christian theological device, typologically structured, to the figure of the earthly prince, emptying the theological dimension of its sacredness, on the other hand he cannot but continue to presuppose it as equivocally active, precisely because ideologically the pontiff is the true Christ and continues to be a very powerful political subject, as believed to be the absolute foundation of

<sup>49</sup> Gaetano Lettieri, “Lo «spiraculo» di Machiavelli e «le mandragole» di Savonarola. Due misconosciute metafore cristologico-politiche”, *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 87, vol. 1 (2022): 285-321, in particular 294-308.

<sup>50</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 94.

<sup>51</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 96.

<sup>54</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 93.

<sup>55</sup> See Massimo Rospocher, *Il papa guerriero. Giulio II nello spazio pubblico europeo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 141-170.

<sup>56</sup> Rospocher, *Il papa guerriero*, 46, who mentions Sadoletto, Bembo, Inghirami, Casali, Egidio da Viterbo; I would like to add Tommaso de Vio, Antonio Maria Ciochi del Monte, Cristoforo Marcello. See Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance*, 141-192.

<sup>57</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 93.



his own temporal power and the mediator between God and every earthly power. At the same time, Christian typology is the law of translation from a surpassed sacred historical reality (“the Old Testament”) to an incoming sacred historical reality (“the New Testament”), it retains in itself a further dynamism, which continues to take it out of itself, reducing it to the figure of another horizon of meaning.<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 6. Niccolò Machiavelli, *La Mandragola o Comedia di Callimaco & di Lucretia*.

Printed without indication of place, year, or printer

Therefore, chapter XXVI identifies in the “virtue of an Italian spirit” (in his double nature of lay new prince governed by the prince of the Church) the Medici redeemer of Italy, which is a humiliated body which waits for her head, which will resurrect her. I would like to mention how the role attributed by Machiavelli to the Medici redeemer had already been assigned to Julius II, who was exalted as resuscitator of a half-dead Italy.<sup>59</sup> This confirms how the prophetic tone of the *Exhortatio* is fulfilled in the exaltation of the institutional prophet, that is, of the pontiff heir

of Moses and vicar of Christ, inspirer of the lay messiah of the languishing Italy. Only the sacred papal *caput* can explain the role of Christ himself as supreme *exemplum* of Italy’s redeeming *princeps*. The Machiavellian providentialist prophecy is papal, therefore anti-Savonarolan, in its replacement of Christ’s civil reign in Florence with the worldly and aggressive principality of a Medici political redeemer, supported by papal authority: a new Moses as an armed prophet. In the secularising mediation of the papal centaur, Christ himself becomes a figure, a rhetorical sign, a spiritual metaphor of the effectual reality of the new secular and warrior prince. But this epochal reversal is made possible precisely by the mediation of the Roman pontiff, vicar of Christ and supreme secular prince.<sup>60</sup>

In conclusion, it is impossible that the theological-political principle of the Pope as Moses, supreme sacred head and absolute earthly *princeps*, was unknown by Machiavelli, who was constantly engaged in a confrontation, both concrete and theoretical, with the expanding power of the State of the Church, whose absolutist ideology he could not be unfamiliar with. Many examples of this engagement are possible: in addition to the numerous legations to duke Valentino, the two legations to the papal court in October-December 1503 and August-October 1506, the first to Rome following the death of Pius III, with the election of Julius II; the second following Julius II’s military campaigns in central Italy. Moreover, there was the third legation to France between June and September 1510 attempted to normalise the serious crisis that followed Julius II’s anti-French twist; or Machiavelli’s extremely delicate mission between September and November 1511 to Borgo San Donnino to the five schismatic cardinals, then to Milan and Blois to the king of France, namely, the so-called conciliabolo of Pisa. The Florentine Secretary managed to transfer the council from Pisa to Milan, then tried to overcome the bewilderment of Florence in the face of the aggressive and violent punitive action of Julius II. As the protagonist of such a delicate endeavor, Machiavelli could not ignore the very high stakes at hand:<sup>61</sup> the Papal theocratic claim to identify with Moses, as inspired by God and liberator of Italy from the barbarians, against the claim of a conciliarist reform of Christendom supported by the aspiration for a new angelic Pope, sustained by the kingdom of France.<sup>62</sup> The following year, the resolution of the

<sup>58</sup> Lettieri, “Lo «spiraculo» di Machiavelli”, 295. See also Gerd Blum, “Vasari on the Jews: Christian Canon, Conversion, and the Moses of Michelangelo”, *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 4 (2013): 557-577 which interprets Vasari’s *Lives* as the secularization of a theological scheme in which Michelangelo is the culminating figure as Moses.

<sup>59</sup> See Rospocher, *Il papa guerriero*, 144.

<sup>60</sup> Ridolfi openly indicated Leo X as the last, decisive addressee of the *Prince*; Machiavelli was perfectly aware of the latter’s ambitions for temporal principality, hence his desire to give state to his own family. The entire concluding *Exhortatio* is rightly referred to the Pope, supreme Medici prince: see Roberto, Ridolfi, “De principatibus”: unica redazione”, *La bibliofilia* 84, no. 1 (1982): 71-73.

<sup>61</sup> See on this Raffaele Ruggiero, *Machiavelli e la crisi dell’analogia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 120-143, where the relationship with the theocratic production of the cardinal Gaetano is studied.

<sup>62</sup> See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Legazioni, Commissarie, Scritti di governo (Tomo VII, 1510-1527)*. Edited by Jean-Jacques Marchand, Andrea Guidi and Matteo Melera-Moretini (Roma: Salerno, 2011), documents 30-41, September 10 to November 6, 1511, 85-102; then 235-

conflict will determine Pier Soderini's fall from power, the Medici's return to Florence, the papal election of Giovanni de' Medici and the end of Machiavelli's political role in Florence. In short, the victory of a powerful vindication of theocratic absolutism is the one defining factor of Machiavelli's political career.

The *Prince* will try to study in a secular way this phenomenon, moving, however, in the space of action of the papal Mosaic centaur, who was affirming his *maiestas absoluta*.<sup>63</sup> The analysis of the Pope as the New Moses is therefore decisive to a real understanding of the historical and political context of the *Prince*.

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240, the *Minuta di un dispaccio di Roberto Acciaiuoli*, redacted by Machiavelli for the Florentine legate to Luis XII. Machiavelli meets with the King of France and various cardinals, referring to them the Florentine demands for the Council to be moved from Pisa and the strong fears of engaging the Pope; see Jean-Jacques Marchand, *Introduzione*, in Machiavelli, *Legazioni*, 21.

<sup>63</sup> See on this again Ruggiero, *Machiavelli e la crisi dell'analogia*, 140-143; he stresses how the doctrinal foundations outlining the figure of the princeps as *solutus ab omni vinculo* were dictated (especially in the writings of Gaetano) in the midst of a heated politico-ecclesiological controversy (the one between the "Pisan" cardinals and Julius II), precisely when the decisive events for the Florentine republic and for Machiavelli's life were taking place. This is the ideological background for chap. XV-XXIV of the *Prince*: I would add, also ch. XXV-XXVI.



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