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OLIVET NAZARENE UNIVERSITY

THE VIRTUOUS STATE:
POLYBIUS, MACHIAVELLI, AND THE IDEA OF ROMAN VIRTUE

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THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
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MASTER OF ARTS IN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

BY

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The Virtuous State:

Polybius, Machiavelli, and the Idea of Roman Virtue

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Is it possible for two historians, separated by a millennium and a half of cultural and historical change, to address the same topic and come to the same conclusion? Or does the passage of so many centuries mean that each will by default be working within fundamentally different—and therefore mutually exclusive—paradigms? Those linked questions form the bedrock of the following discussion of the idea of Roman virtue. Secondary questions—what is ‘Roman virtue?’ How does it come about? What did it mean in its own time? And what does it mean for the future?—also function as guideposts and boundary markers for what follows.

To attempt to answer these questions, I will consider the writings of Polybius of Megalopolis (c. 200 BC – c. 118 BC) and those of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 – 1527) on the subject of Roman virtue, drawing on the major works of each author. I will examine the arguments and conclusions of each writer in parallel fashion, since both discuss the concept of virtue quite extensively by highlighting the conduct of specific Roman citizens, as well as by analyzing the Roman constitution and the wider culture from which it arose. The first section of this paper will set out the life and historical milieu of Polybius, outline his major contributions to the field of history, and end with an extended discussion of his conception of and thoughts on the idea of virtue in the Republican Roman context. The second portion will function much the same way, beginning with a brief biographical sketch of Machiavelli, listing his significant works and those under consideration in this paper, and conclude with an examination of the theme of Roman virtue as it emerged in his writings. In the third and final segment of the paper, I will undertake a comparison of various elements of each author’s argument, offer my analysis of their

differing conclusions, and close with some short remarks on the historian's purpose of considering ideas in history.

Regarding sources, primary materials are by far the most often referenced for support throughout the paper, though secondary books and articles have provided valuable insights and served to situate each author more clearly in his respective historical context.¹ Chief among these were Eckstein's *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius*, Sacks's *Polybius on the Writing of History*, Kristeller's *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, and Skinner's *Machiavelli's Virtue*. Finally, I am indebted to the guidance of professors Dean, Lowe, and Van Heemst in the preparation of this paper. Without them, this project would undoubtedly have remained an idea never set to paper.

¹ Robin Waterfield's translation of Polybius's *Histories* is the version referenced throughout the paper. For Machiavelli's *Discourses* and *The Prince*, I relied on the version by Ninian Hill Thomson (full citations located in bibliography).

Chapter One

The Greco-Roman: the life and works of Polybius of Megalopolis

Born between 198 and 203 BC in Megalopolis, a city in west-central Arcadia, Polybius's life was shaped from the start by his family's aristocratic station. Polybius's father, Lycortas, was a prominent official among the leadership of the Achaean League, and from a young age, his son appeared destined for a career as a politician and diplomat. Notable among the accomplishments on the young Polybius's resume was his role in bearing the ashes of Philopoemen in the latter's funeral procession.² No small honor, this: Philopoemen had been an eight-time *strategos* (a kind of elected general-in-chief with formidable executive powers) of the League who had humbled the vaunted Spartan military at Mantinea in 207 BC. Though familial connections certainly had something to do with Polybius's part in the city's remembrance of that hero, the poetic value of a young man who was to become one of the greatest historians of antiquity carrying the ashes of an influential figure in Mediterranean affairs is not something to be missed. Building on his parentage and education, when he came of age, Polybius was elected *hipparchus* (literally 'cavalry commander,' though the office was as much administrative as one of battlefield command, assisting the *strategos*) of the League in 170, apparently the perfect entry point into a life of political and military influence.³

However secure his fortunes may have been, Polybius's life was changed forever by a series of wars between several major Mediterranean powers: rising Rome, the pedigreed Hellenistic kingdom of Macedon, and the powerful Seleucid state. During these conflicts, Greece

² Polybius, *The Histories*, translated by Robin Waterfield, with introduction & notes by Brian McGing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), introduction, x.

³ Arthur M. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in The Histories of Polybius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 4.

under the Achaean League was nominally allied with Rome, although over the course of those wars there emerged in Greece several parties favoring “various shades of acquiescence” to the Roman agenda, with evidence pointing to Polybius and his father as among the least enthusiastic about Roman dominance.⁴ This fragmented domestic political situation may account for the fact that no Greek troops fought with Roman forces in the major engagements of the wars with Macedon, with the Seleucids, or in the second round of fighting with the son of the previous Macedonian belligerent. In any case, in the aftermath of Rome’s victory, several of the more outspoken pro-Roman Greek leaders were instrumental in securing the deportation of their own (ostensibly Rome’s) enemies who were somewhat less wholehearted about their support for the rising star of Roman imperialism.

Polybius was one of these approximately 1,000 hostage-exiles sent to Rome, arriving in 168 BC, and was rather quickly (though the details are a bit vague)⁵ able to connect himself with the family of the great Aemilius Paullus, the commander who had so famously defeated Hannibal at Zama in the wars of the previous generation. Through this friendship, Polybius grew close to Paullus’ sons, Quintus Fabius Maximus and Scipio Aemilianus, becoming a particularly intimate friend of the later. It seems that despite his exiled status, he was after all, aristocratic, educated, rich, and Greek—in other words, a perfect example of the culture from which his imperial hosts were forever borrowing. Polybius remained close to the family for many years, and it was his relationship to Scipio that afforded him many of the opportunities to provide information with himself as an eyewitness that later enriched his *Histories* and other writings.⁶ In his time at Rome, Polybius became involved with the intricacies of Italian politics (no doubt

⁴ Polybius, *The Histories*, from the introduction by McGing, x.

⁵ *Ibid*, introduction, xii.

⁶ Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 8.

drawing on his own experience as Achaean *hipparch* before his exile), and continued to gather firsthand information from and about prominent figures in Mediterranean affairs.⁷

Polybius remained in Rome and its environs, making acquaintances with others of similar background and completing a large part of his magnum opus, *The Histories*, until in 150, the Roman Senate allowed those Greek hostages still alive to return to the various towns and cities from which they had been expelled nearly two decades before. Polybius duly traveled home, after seventeen years as a political prisoner, albeit one with broad freedom of movement and the ability to research and write, not to mention having made a name for himself among the Roman elite through a position as a political advisor. Soon after arriving back in Achaea, however, war with Carthage loomed, and Polybius traveled back to Rome to accompany his friend Scipio Aemilianus—now a military tribune being sent to a command in Spain—in what became known as the Third Punic War. Scipio's skills in battle eventually won him the consulship and thus command of the force that besieged and sacked Carthage in 146, with Polybius present as an eyewitness. After the Roman victory, Polybius returned to Rome (having retraced the invasion route taken by Hannibal from Spain over the Pyrenees, Alps, and into Italy during the Second Punic War), and finally made his way back to Megalopolis in 145 or 144, perhaps with the intention of resuming his long-interrupted political career.⁸

On his return to Achaea, however, Polybius learned that the League and Rome had gone to war and after their victory, the Romans—among whom he had spent so long, becoming intimately familiar with Roman political and military practices—were behaving almost as odiously in victory over the Greeks as they had towards thrice-recalcitrant Carthage, a threat an order of magnitude greater than that posed by the Greek states. Still an Achaean to his bones,

⁷ Polybius, *The Histories*, introduction, *xiii*.

⁸ Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 14.

Polybius promptly traveled back to Rome in the winter of 145 to 144 where he leveraged his political experience and personal connections to alleviate some of the more onerous elements of the enforced peace, including taking pains to halt Roman looting of various Achaean statues and other cultural items.⁹ After this venture, the events of Polybius's later life grow increasingly dim, though it is apparent from remarks by contemporaries (Livy especially, who used *The Histories* liberally as a source in his own historical writings) and in *The Histories* themselves that Polybius eventually completed this, his most famous work, while remaining at Megalopolis.

As we shall see from comments he himself makes in *The Histories* about the importance of an active life if one is to write history of value, it is reasonable to assume that Polybius remained prominent in Greek (possibly Greco-Roman) political affairs in his later years. It also seems that Polybius maintained an active lifestyle, perhaps a combination of a desire to make up for lost time while at Rome and a holdover from his experiences on campaign in Spain and Africa with Scipio. While the details of his later years and the circumstances of his death remain opaque in terms of definite historical testimony, the tradition of his death at eighty-two years old from—of all possible causes of death for an octogenarian—complications after a fall from his horse seems wholly in keeping with his character as it emerges in better-attested periods of his life.

Virtue and excellence: Roman virtue in The Histories of Polybius

After his death, Polybius was honored in Greece with a statue and several inscriptions,¹⁰ more in reference to his actions in securing more tolerable conditions for the defeated Achaean cities than (predictably) out of gratitude for his accomplishments as a multi-disciplinary scholar

⁹ Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 15.

¹⁰ Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 14-15.

and historian of the Roman state. Yet for all his experience as a political and military advisor, Polybius is today remembered mostly as an historian's historian, given to frequent digressions on topics as far-flung as geography and philosophy, and rather a bore to read when compared with other Roman chroniclers.¹¹ The first two observations are true enough, for although Polybius was single-minded in his chosen project of tracing the origins and methods by which "in less than fifty-three years" Rome succeeded in conquering "almost the entire known world," that earnestness led him to discuss at length the complexities of human motivation and behavior behind and beneath the more straightforward historical realities of dates, events, wars, and treaties.¹² Indeed, in Polybius, more so than in any of his predecessors Herodotus, Xenophon, or Thucydides, we see for the first time the development of a truly universal history, which led him to explore more abstract topics than are usually discussed in historical writings precisely because of their influence on the rise and conduct of Rome, which was to him the most remarkable state to arise in the known world.

Unfortunately, though not unexpectedly, the bulk of Polybius's works have suffered the same fate as countless other texts from antiquity. Of *The Histories*, his masterwork in forty books, now only books one through five are extant in their entirety, accompanied by large passages of book six and fragments of book twelve, with the others known only through Polybius's own remarks and references in his contemporaries. More grievous still is the utter loss of all of his other works, which included a treatise on military tactics, a work of geography, and a biography of the Achaean hero Philopoemen. For these, too, their existence is only known through passing references in *The Histories* and notes in later authors, especially Livy (59 BC –

¹¹ Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, tr. Church and Brodribb. Edited, with an introduction by, Moses Hadas (New York: Random House, 1942), ix-x.

¹² Polybius, *The Histories*, 1.1.2. In this and subsequent references to Polybius, I have adopted the book-section scheme, followed, where appropriate, by paragraph.

17 AD). While this loss presents significant difficulties in assessing the literary merits of the Polybian corpus, for the purposes of this section, I will focus on those books of *The Histories* still extant since, as the author's main work, they represent the fullest and best source of his scholarly and personal views on the rise and legacy of the Roman state. Selections from Livy's *The History of Rome* will be of some limited use, as Livy had access to the complete text of *The Histories* and drew heavily on Polybius's work as a source for his own historical writings.

Despite Polybius's previously mentioned unattractive literary qualities, since the advent of the early modern period, he has been mined variously as a source for tactical and technical military data in the 16th and 17th centuries; for his contributions as an important political theorist in the 18th; and as an authoritative source for early Roman history in the 19th.¹³ While *The Histories* do indeed represent a valuable repository of information on various aspects of specific Roman institutions in the years from 220 to 146 BC, their chief worth lies in their status as an attempt by a learned, experienced writer to detail and explain the reasons for the rise and continued vitality of the most successful state in Mediterranean history. Viewed in this light, Polybius's inclusion of what is often viewed as secondary and tertiary material (as it seems to deviate from his declared subject matter) in truth represents the complexity of his analysis of the source of Roman strength.

Throughout *The Histories*, Polybius refers to Roman virtue as a key element enabling their dominance of other powerful Mediterranean powers, shown in the following description:

Whenever a notable Roman dies, as part of the funeral proceedings he is carried in great splendor to the . . . Forum. With all the people standing around [an adult son or other relative] . . . delivers a speech in praise of the dead man's virtues and his exploits during

¹³ Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 17.

his lifetime. This acts as a vivid reminder of the facts for the assembled people, whether or not they had been directly affected by his achievements, and they become so moved that the loss seems to be everyone's in common, not just a private family matter. Afterwards . . . they set up an icon of the dead man [and it] consists of a mask that has been moulded and made up, to a remarkably exact likeness . . . Whenever a notable family member dies, they take them out for the funeral procession and put them on those who... bear the closest resemblance to the dead men . . . It is harder to imagine a finer sight for an ambitious young man who aspires to excellence . . . [Since] the most important thing is that young men are inspired to heroic feats of endurance, in order to gain the fame that accrues to the brave.¹⁴

Admittedly, the above quotation is not necessarily the most famous section on the subject of Roman institutional virtue, and of course, the Republican Romans were certainly not the only Mediterranean people to hold elaborate funeral ceremonies. Indeed, Polybius's own role as the young son of a Greek nobleman in carrying the ashes of the Hellenic hero Philopoemen so many years before is evidence of this. Nevertheless, Polybius was surely correct to point out that the Roman tradition of publicly remembering their honored dead and vividly retelling the deeds of illustrious ancestors did much to predispose their young men to the great deeds they were expected to perform in the next generation of Roman imperial ventures.

A better-known exposition of the virtues of the Roman state is found in Polybius's comparison of the constitutions and political practices of several Mediterranean polities, allowing the author to test the structure of Roman governance against the practices of Athens, Thebes, Crete, and Sparta. Instead of a straight point-by-point analysis of each with Roman

¹⁴ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.53 – 54.1.

political structures, Polybius adopts a genealogical approach toward the development of the now-famous three types of good government and their three “congenital vices:” kingship and monarchy; aristocracy and oligarchy; democracy and mob rule.¹⁵ In keeping with his chosen scope of universal history, he begins by detailing the evolution of early human “bands” headed by the “strongest and most aggressive man among them” into monarchy, equivalent to a tyranny or dictatorship, since the “determinant of these men’s rulership was their strength.”¹⁶ As humans began to develop value systems, they turned to their monarchs to be the guarantors of law through reason. Thus, argues Polybius, monarchy changed into kingship, which was handed down as a position consisting of both leadership of and service to one’s subjects. However, as kings became accustomed to absolute authority and the trappings thereof, they began to distance themselves from the people at large, sowing the seeds of discontent. Moreover, as both moral corruption and monarchic abuses of power multiplied, so too did the wealthiest and most powerful of the king’s subjects grow more restive.

As the socio-economic group immediately beneath the monarch rose up in revolt, they instituted the second type of good government, aristocracy. By ruling in concert, this newly empowered class more effectively “made the common good their top priority” than had the single ruler of the once-lauded kingship. Inevitably, peace and stability led to the breakdown of the moral character of the new ruling class, eventually degenerating into rule by what amounted to a licentious criminal organization: an oligarchy. After a period of “unrest and disgust” with the conduct of the aristocrats-turned-oligarchs, Polybius envisioned an uprising of the general populace and, having “murdered or banished” the offenders, with the citizenry undertaking to rewrite their constitution, assuming “administrative duties and responsibilities themselves.” Once

¹⁵ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.4.1-2.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 6.5.2.

more, after several generations had grown to maturity and had begun to take for granted the freedoms of democratic rule, the concern for good governance and general morality that led to the institution of democracy in the first place were increasingly abandoned as citizens of wealth and influence manipulated the populace into granting them power rivaling that of monarchs or oligarchs. At last, as these excesses became unbearable to those few still possessed of their morality, Polybius imagined a descent into civil war, accompanied by rounds of retributive violence and arbitrary land redistribution, until a single ‘strong man’ arose to begin the whole process again.¹⁷

Having thus traced the cycle by which the history and future of most states can be charted, Polybius returned to his plan of examining the merits of the Roman constitution alongside those of other Mediterranean powers. Beginning—naturally enough—in Greece with Thebes and Athens, he matter-of-factly stated: “the Thebans’ reputation for excellence . . . was actually due just to one or two outstanding individuals . . . not to their system of government.”¹⁸ Polybius went on to argue that the prominence of Thebes was so short-lived because it was due only to the brilliance of two Theban generals, Epaminondas and Pelopidas, both of whom scored stunningly one-sided victories over the legendary Spartan army in the mid-4th century BC. Despite their successes, less than thirty years after their deaths, Thebes—indeed, independent Greece—was no more, having been annexed by Alexander of Macedon. Polybius, at least, held the truth of his argument self-evident, in light of Thebes’ meteoric rise and equally rapid fall.

Having dispensed with Thebes, Polybius next turned his attention to the more famous Athenian democracy and constitution, drawing a similar conclusion:

¹⁷ All quotes from this paragraph found in Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.8-9.2.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 6.43.2.

“[Although] one might claim that Athens enjoyed several periods of success, none was more glorious than the one that coincided with Themistocles at the height of his powers, and shortly afterwards the inherent inconsistency of the constitution ensured that Athens suffered a complete reversal.”¹⁹

In simplest terms, he faulted the very democratic Athenian institutions so revered by others as chief among the causes of the many Athenian setbacks, citing the ability of demagogues to so easily sway the passions of the citizenry into ill-fated ventures.²⁰ In the same vein, he criticized the excesses of Cretan democracy, though the problem in Crete was not unregulated politicking but unfettered avarice. According to Polybius, nowhere else in Greece at the time was the acquisition of wealth and land such a high priority, since “[Crete] is the only place in the world where no gain of any kind is considered sordid.” And, in the very next sentence: “Moreover, political offices are filled there on an annual basis by democratic procedures.”²¹

Surprisingly, given the weakness of democracies to the demagoguery of charismatic leaders, and their demonstrable susceptibility to the corrupting influence of wealth, Polybius did not turn to analyzing hypothetical governments. For this historian—practical to a fault when it came to political institutions—unless a political system had actually been tried, a discussion of its merits and faults was not a topic for a work of political history such as his, thus allowing him to neatly dispose of the issue of Plato’s ideal state and others like it. Instead, after finding the political structures of Thebes, Athens, and Crete wanting, Polybius quickly moved on to what he viewed as the true predecessor of the manifestly successful Roman system: the Spartan

¹⁹ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.44.1.

²⁰ Not mentioned by Polybius—though he certainly knew of it as it was a significant piece of evidence in support of his case—is the Athenian expedition to Sicily between 415-413 BC, public enthusiasm for which was whipped up by the popular Alcibiades and ended in near-total disaster for the Athenians.

²¹ This and the excerpt in the previous sentence quoted from *The Histories*, 6.45.2.

constitution. Under the scheme instituted by the fabled early ruler Lycurgus, equal land allotment among all Spartan citizens coupled with social emphases on simple living, the strengths of the community, and general piety all contributed to eliminating the race for material enrichment and chronic political instability which plagued Thebes, Athens, and Crete.

Yet the Spartan system, which apparently combined the merits of the three types of good governance through rule by a Council of Elders, suffrage for landed males who had attained an age of majority, and leadership by a king, also had a glaring defect. That is, the Spartans took advantage of their domestic political stability to aggressively expand their influence in the Peloponnese at the expense of their neighbors. This lust for power was what eventually led to their downfall, since in seeking the funds and allies necessary for extended campaigning, the Spartans managed to anger other powerful Greek states, triggering the destructive Peloponnesian War with the widespread subsequent exhaustion working to pave the way for conquest by Alexander of Macedon. For Polybius, the chief failure of the Spartan constitution was that it was essentially conservative, aimed at preserving the status quo of Spartan autonomy as a polity, without the flexibility required to support extended Spartan rule over a variety of conquered peoples.²²

Before moving on to Polybius's exposition of the merits of the Roman constitution, some of his remarks in the opening of Book Six bear treatment. He began that book by reminding his readers that his overarching goal was to show "how, and thanks to what kind of political system, an unprecedented event occurred—the conquest of almost all the known world in roughly fifty years, and its submission to just one ruler, Rome."²³ Thus, Polybius justified his project of constructing a universal history, which by its nature necessitates his occasional digressions on

²² Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.50.

²³ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.2.

causality, morality, and other more abstract concepts. The opening of book six also reveals why he gave such importance to the political foundations of a polity, as government forms the “wellspring, so to speak, which not only gives rise to all plans and practical initiatives but also brings them to fulfillment.”²⁴

It is from such a perspective, then, that Polybius undertook his analysis of the Roman constitution against its Greek predecessors. On the surface, Roman government combined the three best forms of government in the executive office of the consuls, the aristocratic assembly of the Senate, and the areas of responsibility for the general citizenry, as in the Spartan system. In the Roman case, however, each of the two consuls held power for one year only and returned to their previous careers after their terms were complete, thereby avoiding many of the excesses inherent in a system of lifelong, inherited kingship. These executive officials were responsible for raising and commanding armies, oversaw relations between Rome and the Italian allies, and were empowered to use the state treasury as they saw fit. In other words, they were “entirely responsible for carrying out the Senate’s decrees,” apparently giving them nearly unlimited powers over the operation of the state, especially in wartime.²⁵

Turning to the Senate, the author informed his readers that that assembly of representatives from Rome’s oldest aristocratic families was empowered to declare war, draw up treaties, receive or turn away foreign envoys, and draft legislation. Speaking more broadly of senatorial responsibilities, Polybius maintained that the most important was its management of the state treasury, since neither could war be waged nor could the numerous public building projects be undertaken without Senatorial approval. Though between the roles of the Senate and the consuls it appeared that little remained for Roman citizens to weigh in on, Polybius argued

²⁴ Ibid., 6.2.2-3.

²⁵ Ibid, 6.12.

that in fact, the role of the citizenry was actually the most important of the three, since they “controlled rewards and punishments . . . [And] without them human life has no coherence, let alone governments and constitutions.”²⁶ Practically speaking, it fell to citizens to ratify treaties and other legislation presented by the Senate, to approve sentences of those convicted of capital offences or those who committed crimes while in high office, and to appoint from among themselves men to serve as tribunes who accompanied the consuls in their endeavors as representatives of the wishes of the populace.

Having outlined the basics of Roman governance, Polybius next analyzed the machinery of the Republic in times of both war and peace with the aim of demonstrating its dynamism and vitality. In wartime, while the consul had sole power to prosecute the war, to summon allies, and other strategic matters, approval for necessary provisions, weapons, and other *matériel* had to come from the Senate, thereby checking what could otherwise be warped into a military dictatorship. Finally, since it fell ultimately to the people to approve or reject treaties or truces at war’s end, a consul’s time in the field was directly influenced by the decision of the general populace. Further, after a consul completed his term, he underwent an “audit by the people of his conduct while in office,” and was thus well served to bear always in mind both the opinion of the citizenry and the Senate as he went about the business of administration and command.²⁷

As for the operation of the Republic during times of peace, Polybius restricted his analysis to a series of statements that demonstrate to the reader the futility of an attempt by one

²⁶ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.14. This seemingly casual remark by the author in truth provides a valuable window onto his view of human nature, and by extension sheds light on his apparent preference for stability, order, and the community-over-the-individual-type governance that Machiavelli was later to be so derided for adopting. Though Polybius lived several centuries before the era of the ‘bread and circuses’ approach of the Emperors to placating the passions of the Roman populace, it seems he would have at least appreciated the reasoning behind the more elaborate gladiatorial festivals which meshed blood sport and food distribution *en masse*.

²⁷ Polybius, *Histories*, 6.15.3.

of the three aspects—democratic, aristocratic, or monarchic—to seize and hold sole power. For example, if a campaign or war had been won, processions—“triumphs, as they [the Romans] call them”—were commonly held to celebrate the merits of the Roman official who oversaw the victory. Yet these were nearly impossible to finance or organize without the backing of the Senate and its approval of the use of state funds, allowing the Senate to curtail the influence of a consul they felt had grown too great. The Senate, too, must mind the populace, since if it attempted to pass legislation not in keeping with the wishes of the citizenry, those laws went unapproved and the Senate was left without a substantial portion of its power. Finally, the people were kept from ignoring the Senate as the authority of that assembly extended primarily into the oversight of civil, criminal, and capital lawsuits as well as into the drafting of economic legislation. Likewise, the citizenry were discouraged from disobeying the wishes of the consuls, since “everyone, both individually and collectively, [fell] under their authority when out on campaign.”²⁸

With a structure and tone reminiscent of Polybius’s above-mentioned remarks at the outset of Book Six, the preface of his section outlining the machinery of Roman governance bears closer examination for the author’s views on the nature and importance of Roman virtue. To begin with, Polybius chose not one of the Greek polities as a foil for the excellence of Roman institutions, but instead selected her chief Mediterranean rival during the Republican period: the powerful maritime state of Carthage. Applying the genealogical paradigm of cyclical political structures to the city-state, Polybius judged a major source of Punic weakness and conversely, Roman success, to be that the Carthaginians were further advanced in the birth-growth-death political ‘life cycle’ than were the Romans at the time of what came to be known as the First

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.17.2

Punic War, fought between 264-241 BC. While Rome emerged victorious from this first conflict, Carthaginian strength appeared dangerously resurgent a generation later, embodied in the strategic and tactical brilliance of Hannibal Barca.

The fact that this Carthaginian general, who managed to invade Italy by crossing the Alps, scored four crushing defeats against sizable Roman armies, and remained undefeated on Roman soil for a more than a decade, did *not* break the Roman will to resist is emphasized by Polybius as a testament to the vitality and resilience of the Republican system. The Romans simply elected new consuls and tribunes, raised new armies, and changed their tactics, eventually electing an equally talented Roman commander—with a battle-plan influenced by Hannibal's own victories in Spain and Italy—who eventually brought the fearsome Punic warlord to defeat on the plains of Zama outside Carthage in 202 BC, ending the war on terms overwhelmingly favorable to Rome. The magnitude of the Roman victory put off Carthaginian power for another generation, but when a third war broke out in 149 BC, the Romans laid siege to and sacked the city mercilessly, an event the author himself bore witness to in 146 BC. A second proof of Roman dominance of the Mediterranean—and certainly the more personally distressing of the two for the author—was the suppression of a revolt by recalcitrant Achaean cities, punctuated by the sack of Corinth, also in 146 BC.

Revealing, though, is the fact that throughout the narrative of repeated Punic defeat at the hands of successive generations of Romans, Polybius did not mete out the same level of harsh criticism to the Carthaginian state as he did to the above-examined Greek polities, including Sparta. Carthage was an important Mediterranean power, but in simplest terms, its time (referring again to the political genealogy model) had come and gone, a fact signaled by the three Roman triumphs over it. And as those triumphs meant the end of an independent Carthage, able

to contend with other powerful maritime states around the Mediterranean, so too did they herald the ascendancy of Rome, a polity whose excellence in political structures fostered a culture of public and private virtue such that for centuries and into the foreseeable future (for Polybius, anyway), its imperial aims proved irresistible by virtually every other culture with which it came into contact.

In sum, despite the paucity of source material, the extant books of *The Histories* preserve a sufficient amount of Polybius's arguments that his view of the source of Roman virtue can be reconstructed along the following lines. Having passed through the genealogical stages of social disorder followed by a traditional kingship, the Romans managed to piece together a rugged and flexible system of governance that largely avoided the mistakes of any of the three 'pure' forms of rule. This system also overcame a conservative emphasis on the status quo at the expense of the dynamism required to maintain an expansionist state (the greatest weakness of the Spartan system). In socio-cultural terms, Polybius credited the Roman customs of communal celebration of their honored dead with elaborate funeral practices and familial veneration of deceased relatives as powerful tools with engendering the kind of popular fortitude and civil service that enabled the Republic to survive the strains of rapid geographic expansion and the pressure of repeated, costly military reversal.

Thus, the virtue of the Roman people, which gave rise to and was thus embodied in the political structures of the Republic, was the reason responsible more than any other for the subjection of "almost all the known world . . . to just one ruler, Rome."²⁹ More importantly, this cultural trait—manifest in political institutions—actually *justified* contemporary Roman dominance, since Republican Rome was in effect bringing other, less sophisticated peoples under

²⁹ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.2.

a mutually beneficial protectorate, not arbitrarily imposing rule by a single despot or a small class of wealthy citizens. In simplest terms, then, the Roman state (as Polybius knew it) achieved, maintained, and deserved its rule because of its virtuous political institutions.

Chapter Two

The Florentine: The Life and Works of Niccolò Machiavelli

Born in 1469 into a Florentine family with modest land holdings but dwindling financial means, Niccolò Machiavelli nonetheless received an excellent education in the humanities, as befitting a son of one of the leading creative centers of the burgeoning Italian Renaissance. Doubly blessed as a precocious and pragmatic student, Machiavelli was appointed to an important post in the Florentine municipal bureaucracy before his thirtieth birthday. He then spent the period from 1498 to 1513 as a civil servant of his native city, which afforded him many opportunities to observe firsthand the themes and techniques about which he later famously wrote. Entrusted to a number of “important diplomatic missions... [He] was sent to France on four occasions... to the papal court twice,” and also spent time among the retinues of Cesare Borgia and Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I.³⁰

More than just a keen observer or talented bureaucrat, Machiavelli was not only able to successfully navigate the labyrinthine international political environment of the day, but also had the opportunity to showcase his pragmatism in persuading the ruler of Florence to allow him to raise and train a citizen militia. A man of action and varied talents all his days, Machiavelli engaged in everything from personally directing Florentine forces in the field during actions against the city of Pisa to penning a biting satirical play and works of fiction/political commentary in his later years. In all, the course of Machiavelli’s personal life as well as his political experiences combined to produce a man eminently qualified for working through the matters of statecraft he addressed in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.

³⁰ Hallowell, John H. & Jene M. Porter. *Political Philosophy: The Search for Humanity and Order* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada, Inc., 1997), 230.

The year 1513 brought a political sea change to government of Florence, and despite his record of service and personal skills, Machiavelli was swept from his post by the retributive decrees of the ascendant Medici party, a process quite common in Italian politics of the 15th century. The Medici, previously expelled during the upheaval incited in 1494 by the incendiary Dominican monk Savonarola, successfully returned to power in Florence and proceeded to abolish the republican institutions set up during Savonarola's reforms. Machiavelli, as a prominent official of the now-defunct Florentine republic, was accused of plotting against the Medici and summarily imprisoned and tortured. Fortunately, after a period of several weeks, the charges against him were dropped, and Machiavelli went to live on a farm owned by his family in the hills outside the city.

Despite the personal misfortunes that led to his semi-exile, it was during that fourteen-year period that Machiavelli penned the books for which he is best known, *The Prince* and his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, in addition to several other works. He described this period of his life at length in the following terms, excerpted from a letter to a friend:

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and re clothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on the food which is only mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, [and] I am not frightened by death³¹

³¹ Hallowell & Porter, *Political Philosophy*, 233.

Machiavelli continued to petition his friends along with a range of secular and ecclesiastic officials to the end of securing his old position in the Florentine government. Yet despite his efforts (and the eventual thawing of relations between the Medici and himself), he never regained a role comparable to the key post he had once held. In spite of the frustration of his political ambitions, Machiavelli remained a man of affairs until his death in 1527, even leading a military action against a neighboring city on behalf of Florence as late as 1525.

One could surmise that Machiavelli died quite unpopular, known only within a small circle of pro-republican Florentine intellectuals, never having recouped the losses inflicted on his career by the return of the Medici, with his most famous works generally ignored in his own lifetime. *The Prince* was indeed placed on the Index some years after his death, never having been sent to the Medici official to whom it was dedicated. In fact, Machiavelli's cenotaph under his statue in the Basilica di Santa Croce di Firenze reads "no eulogy (would be appropriate to) so great a name," suggesting his other publications (including a history of the city of Florence, completed in 1525) attained a level of popular appeal not reached by his works of history and political science. In all, despite the misunderstanding and negative reception surrounding his now-famous works, it seems that Machiavelli died a well-remembered son of his native city, commemorated for his civil service as well as his other literary contributions.

Echoes of Rome: Virtue and Statecraft in Antiquity

Since the publication of his most famous works (*The Prince* posthumously and the *Discourses* at the end of his life), literary critics, political thinkers, philosophers, historians, and mainline ecclesiastic officials have denounced, praised, imitated, adapted, satirized, and analyzed nearly every aspect of the Machiavelli's writings. Since the late 16th century, readers of

Machiavelli have also applied the label of ‘Machiavellian’ to a person—often, though not exclusively, in political circles—who is ruthless and amoral in pursuing his or her goals.³² The particularly incendiary opinions advanced in *The Prince* even earned it a place on the papal Index exactly three decades after Machiavelli’s death, and the interpretation of the range of influential conclusions Machiavelli put forth will doubtless remain a dynamic scholarly battlefield for the foreseeable future.

My own interest in Machiavelli’s thought is much more limited, however. In the following pages, I plan to examine the theme of political virtue—if it existed, what it was, and how it was to be duplicated—in the political institutions of the Roman Republic as Machiavelli saw them. As his best-known works, *The Prince* and the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy* will form my primary source material on this topic. A range of secondary books and articles from Burckhardt’s classic piece, “The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,” to more recent scholarly contributions to the field will function as contextual material to Machiavelli’s own writings.

To Machiavelli, sitting in his study and communing with the luminaries of Mediterranean antiquity after a day’s work, histories of the Roman Republic preserved a wealth of knowledge about politics and society. From that perspective, Machiavelli’s selection of topic must have seemed an obvious one: the Roman state represented an eight century-long height of cultural and political achievement not approached during the medieval period and unrivaled even in his own day. In addition to his chief subject, in the *Discourses* and *The Prince*, Machiavelli also examined—however briefly— other Mediterranean states for their value either as foils to the political pragmatism of Rome or as predecessors to it. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli dealt primarily

³² Wootton, David, ed. *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, 2nd edition (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 2.

with the foundations and facets of authoritarian government, with constant reference to Roman as well as contemporary exemplars like the ruthless Cesare Borgia and Julius II, the “Warrior Pope.” Written several years later, the *Discourses* were, on the surface, presented as commentaries on the first ten books of Roman historian Livy’s *Discourses on the Roman Republic*. On a deeper level, though, Machiavelli wove into his analysis of Livy’s conclusions a *paean* celebrating the strengths and virtues of republican governance apparently at odds with his forthright acceptance of autocracy in *The Prince*.³³ The task of reconciling Machiavelli’s apparent endorsement of autocratic rule in *The Prince* and his love of republicanism on display in the *Discourses* continues to present a challenge to scholars.³⁴ I will attempt address this issue more fully below, but for now suffice it to say that I believe the two works do not present competing but in fact mutually compatible points of view, if examined with contemporary Italian and Machiavelli’s personal contexts in mind.

Unlike the philosophers who, from Plato to Cicero, fashioned ideal social and political structures with ultimate goodness as their goal, Machiavelli dispensed with purely theoretical governments and analyzed only those societies that had actually existed, from the Greek *poleis* to the Roman state. This approach in itself was not new, for writers in the Thucydidean tradition had ever made the workings of concrete historical and political realities their central focus. Machiavelli positioned himself squarely in that methodology, for what fascinated “him was how

³³ Wootton, *Modern Political Thought*, 4.

³⁴ Two of the main academic camps hold that Machiavelli must by necessity be writing in a satirical vein in either *The Prince* or the *Discourses*, depending on which view of the man the scholar in question prefers. The view of Machiavelli as primarily a humanist advocate for the virtues of republican governance has been set forth in detail and with great clarity by Skinner in *Machiavelli: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling, 2010), 78-80. For a competing interpretation of Machiavelli as destructively amoral and weakened by a tendency to vacillate between the differing views he outlined in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, see Mansfield in *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 6-7.

the problems of politics had remained unchanged for the last two thousand years.”³⁵ Coming to the heart of the matter, Machiavelli justified the adoption of such an approach in the following terms:

[It] seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them. For many Republics and Princedoms have been imagined that were never seen or known to exist in reality. And the manner in which we live, and that in which we ought to live, are so wide asunder, that . . . any one who would act up to a perfect standard of goodness in everything must be ruined among so many who are not good. It is essential, therefore, for a Prince who desires to maintain his position, to have learned how to be other than good, and to use or not to use his goodness as necessity requires.³⁶

Therefore, by delving deep into the histories of the Roman Republic, he planned to not only discover why and how the Roman state came to rule an empire of immense size and wealth for nearly eight hundred years but also to plot a political course that would function as a parallel and mirror of Roman success in his own time. In place of flowery passages praising the glories and goodness of Roman rule, a certain pragmatism, bordering on ruthlessness, marked the ‘heroes’ of most of Machiavelli’s works, with that theme coming to the fore most (in)famously in *The Prince*. Indeed, Machiavelli’s emphasis on stable rule and social order in *The Prince*—addressed differently though no less ardently in the *Discourses*—at the expense of personal morality, enforced through the unwavering application of force was what led to his caricatured portrayal in the decades after his death as a sinister schemer in favor of any and all means to achieve and consolidate political power.

³⁵ Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

³⁶ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 15.2 (quoted from *Part 36 Harvard Classics*. Charles W. Eliot, ed. New York: Collier & Son, 1910), 53.

In reality, Machiavelli espoused the sentiments expressed in the above quote and admired such men as Cesare Borgia because he thought that the ends of all political activity should be to consolidate and maintain power *so that* peace, stability, and order may be established and preserved. Power was not an end in itself; rulers who abused their position through cruelty and personal avarice as well as those who were unable to keep order (whether the disruption was domestic uprising or foreign incursion) were to be despised equally, for both betrayed the primary purpose for the office they held. At its core, the motivation for Machiavelli's choice of the Roman state as the avatar of virtue in the political sphere lay in the ability of its institutions to create and maintain stability in times of war and peace and in periods of intense imperial expansion as well as eras when the borders were relatively static.

The relationship of violence to political efficacy was very close, in Machiavelli's thought, and he mined Roman history for examples on both sides of the question of "whether it is better to be loved or feared."³⁷ On one hand, the general Hannibal Barca, in whose army "no dissension ever arose . . . against their leader, either in his good or his evil fortunes. This we can only ascribe to the [cruelty] which, joined with numberless great qualities, rendered him . . . venerable and terrible in the eyes of his soldiers."³⁸ On the other end of the spectrum lay the conduct of the troops of Hannibal's opponent, Scipio, whose "armies rose against him in Spain from no other cause than his too great a leniency in allowing them a freedom inconsistent with military strictness."³⁹

The fact that Scipio was the eventual victor in the wider Roman-Carthaginian conflict seemed to have been of little importance to Machiavelli. It is reasonable to assume that, future

³⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 17.1.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 17.8.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 17.9.

victory aside, had Scipio been a general more ‘venerable and terrible’ in the estimation of his soldiers, Hannibal’s fifteen year-long war of attrition on Italian soil may have been ended much more quickly instead of the conclusion of the war being put off until the battle at Zama in 201 BC. In the same way, Hannibal’s well-documented cruelty—sentencing captured Romans to a tortuously slow death by exposure and starvation, for example—was justified because without it, he would likely not have been remembered in the annals of military history as one of the greatest commanders the world has ever known, achieving victories against the vaunted Roman legions scarcely equaled before or since.

There hardly exists a clearer example of several of Machiavelli’s foundational themes to which he returns time and again in *The Prince*. First, Machiavelli was careful to portray the conduct of Hannibal versus that of Scipio as an exception to the rule, as it took a strategic virtuoso with very few peers in the annals of military history to overcome the flexible and resilient Roman martial tradition. For proof of that exception, one must only look to the overall history of the Second Punic War. Even after suffering several catastrophic defeats and repeated changes of overall military command, the triumph belonged ultimately to Rome, due in no small part to the resilience of its military and political institutions and the resolve of its soldiery and general populace. Taking the opposite tack, after suffering a number of military reverses near the end of the First Punic War, instead of a citizen army gathering strength from a dangerous enemy on its own soil, the (mostly mercenary) troops of Carthage mutinied and actually attacked the city of their employer, despite the fact that they were led by Carthaginian citizens.⁴⁰

Second, Machiavelli’s harsh judgment of Scipio showed his commitment to the idea that in times of conflict, the best course of action consisted of the overwhelming application of

⁴⁰ Machiavelli, *the Prince*, 12.6.

maximum force to bring about the return of peace and stability as rapidly as possible. Scipio's lax discipline led to the mutiny of his troops, drastically decreasing their combat effectiveness and thus prolonging the war unnecessarily. Such a doctrine was applicable to domestic and civil disturbances as well, for in constructing his state, a Prince was to "lay a solid foundation" by maintaining "good laws and good arms."⁴¹ Support for these laws came from the creation and maintenance of a robust, permanent national army modeled after the ancient states of Rome and Sparta, the "armed and free" states of antiquity, as well as after the contemporary Swiss confederation, the population of which is "at once the best armed and freest . . . in the world."⁴²

Machiavelli addressed the same theme with greater respect to the historical development of Roman political institutions in the *Discourses*, largely by shifting his perspective from individual examples to a wider view of the Roman state as a whole. In the opening few chapters, he described at length the condition of the Roman state while in its monarchical stage (as it had been set up in the distant past) as possessed of basically good laws. But, when the state transitioned to a commonwealth under the Senate, it was found "wanting [several provisions] which in the interest of liberty it was necessary to supply, since [the ancient kings] had not supplied them."⁴³ These characteristics were provided for by the creation of the consular posts, the temporary, electoral nature of which embodied the spirit and authority of the kingship without the potential for abuse of sole power and succession-centered instability, both of which so often accompanied lifelong, hereditary rule.

⁴¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 7.2.

⁴² *Ibid*, 7.5.

⁴³ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Discourses upon the first ten books of Titus Livy*, 1517 (translated by N.H. Thomson, 1883. Etext edition: Jim Manis, 2007. Referenced at <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/machiavelli.htm>), 2.10.

Despite the positive influence of the addition of the consuls, Machiavelli still believed the Republic to be in a transitional period of relative instability until the creation of the offices of the tribunes. Elected from among the general populace, these officials acted as ombudsmen on behalf of the citizenry to check any potential ignorance of their wishes by either the powerful consuls or the affluent, well-connected Senators.⁴⁴ Machiavelli found an opportunity to expand on his idea of the relationship of good laws and good arms in the offices of the tribunes, which were able to stop Senate from trampling or ignoring the good of the commons in legislative and diplomatic matters. Further, at least one tribune always accompanied the consuls in the field on during military campaigns, since consular authority was at its height (and therefore represented the greatest potential for degenerating into a military dictatorship) during wartime.

Apart from discussions of overarching themes of the relationship of virtue to statecraft, in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, Machiavelli elaborated on the idea of political virtue with reference to specific individuals drawn from the annals of Roman history. In keeping with his foundational interest in the business of statecraft at the highest level—a term and discipline he created almost singlehandedly—the Roman examples were chiefly Emperors or consuls, and included exemplars ranging from the famous Marcus Aurelius to the ineffectual and virtually unknown (but instructive) Pertinax. This survey of numerous rulers who either embodied or rejected the qualities that Machiavelli argued were most valuable in obtaining, maintaining, and strengthening a state led him to make some of his most disturbing statements (to conventional political philosophers), one of which was his infamous lion-and-fox metaphor for the behavior of rulers.

⁴⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 2.11 & 3.3.

For example, Machiavelli discovered the conduct of Emperor Septimius Severus, who seized power by undertaking a series of secret forced marches to first position his troops in Italy, then systematically destroyed rival claimants to the imperial purple in Africa and Gaul, achieving ascendancy both by “arms . . . and by artifice” to be entirely worthy of emulation.⁴⁵ Where other writers might have (justly) seen a chaotic, Darwinian period of scheming usurpers and legion-backed pretenders, Machiavelli instead concluded that Severus’s traits of courage, ambition, and ruthlessness combined with his supple sense of honor left him specially well-fitted to rule the Empire. In contrast, the aged, hapless, and effeminate Pertinax of Machiavelli’s account functions as a ready-made foil to Severus as the dynamic ‘new man,’ unable to hold on to his throne and therefore, unworthy of it. Put another way, since Severus’s opponents clearly lacked the qualities necessary to do what must be done to get and/or maintain a position of imperial authority (demonstrable in their defeats at his hands), Severus, though a usurper, was justified in taking power.

Using a similar argument, Machiavelli favored the emperor Marcus Aurelius as another ‘great man’ of history to whom aspiring princes ought to look for inspiration in maintaining a successful rule over their citizens. He portrayed Marcus as the opposite of Severus in virtually every area with regard to character, as possessed “of a temperate disposition, [loving] justice, [an enemy] of cruelty, gentle, kindly,” and a man of his word.⁴⁶ These qualities Machiavelli judged to be useful to Marcus because they resulted in a long reign, beneficial to the Empire inasmuch as it enjoyed a time of stability as a result of his even-handed rule, and the educated Emperor’s writings on Stoicism a boon to posterity.

⁴⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 19.23.

⁴⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 19.16.2.

Important, however, is the caveat Machiavelli added with respect to the conditions surrounding Marcus's succession to the throne: it was a peaceful one, received through lawful inheritance when he was at an age of majority, "not through the favor of either the soldiery or of the people."⁴⁷ In other words, Marcus the Philosopher could afford to act as such because he was not indebted to a social class or to the army, and he did not have to continually fear usurpation or an uprising, having attained the throne in a lawful manner. Machiavelli concluded his analysis of Marcus by arguing along similar lines, adding that in many instances, it was necessary for rulers to be "other than good" in order to win and keep the support of the general population. In other words, since "hatred is incurred as well on account of good actions as of bad," princes must be prepared to do what is necessary to guarantee order and stability in their state.⁴⁸

Having set the two very different figures of Marcus Aurelius, last of the five 'Good Emperors' and Stoic philosopher, and the ambitious, unscrupulous, and warlike usurper Septimius Severus before his readers, Machiavelli ultimately came out in favor of the latter as a paradigm for the aspiring ruler. The actions of Severus represented the perfect balance of fear and respect—the importance of which Machiavelli had already demonstrated in comparing Hannibal Barca to Scipio Africanus—and he acted neither too rashly nor too timidly. Rather, Severus confronted his fellow claimants to the throne with responses appropriate to each; that is, an overwhelming attack in one case and deception (until he had gained an irresistible advantage) in the other. Justly, then, could Machiavelli famously argue that Severus's character as a ruler had "all the fierceness of the lion and all the cleverness of the fox," and that the advantages of being other than good—that is, sole rule of the most powerful Empire in Europe and the Mediterranean—far outweighed the benefits of being judged a man who keeps his word in all

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.16.7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.17.

circumstances. According to Machiavelli's reasoning, had Marcus Aurelius been in the same situation as Severus, it would have been far more likely that he would have played the role of one of Severus's outclassed and defeated opponents rather than that of the conquering victor, benevolent ruler, and wise man all rolled into one.

In simplest terms, Severus gained the Empire on the strength of his personal traits and maintained it with those same qualities, ending a vicious cycle of weak emperors backed by fickle, over-powerful legions, and went on to found a dynasty that was to last over a century. Therefore, based on a simple accounting of Severus's actions, Machiavelli deemed the attributes that allowed him to do so virtuous and worthy of imitation by any who desired to be politically effective. Through the pair of examples in character juxtaposition reviewed above, it is clear that for Machiavelli, the fact that Rome produced such figures as Septimius Severus and (ironically) Hannibal Barca, meant it was a state whose political institutions were worthy of study in all eras, by autocrats and republicans alike.

Virtue to Machiavelli, then, consisted of the group of traits that allowed a ruler to achieve, consolidate, and maintain authority over a principality or republic with the least possible bloodshed and disorder. A successful ruler was to study and imitate the various 'great men' and 'captains' of history for guidance in civic and military affairs, for states—whether republics or principedoms—have ever been founded on robust laws and as well as strong arms. Necessary, too, was a supple sense of honor (i.e. keeping faith when possible but never being unequivocally *bound* by a moral code to do so), aided by a sense of 'public relations' balance with regard to the proper proportions of fear and respect to keep the easily swayed general citizenry in check. In the same vein, rulers were to avoid the grosser vices, but those character attributes usually defined as flaws by philosophers—chiefly boundless ambition, ruthlessness, and personal duplicity or

public treachery—were in fact necessary to meet and overcome the challenges presented by the realities of politics.

Of all the eras of history he had at his disposal, Machiavelli chose to examine the individuals and institutions of the period dominated by the Roman state for the very reason that it was *the* dominant polity of the Mediterranean for such an extended period. The Roman political system produced men and practices that proved uniquely able to triumph over enemies as varied as hordes of howling Britons, disciplined ranks of Macedonian phalangites, destructive internal political wrangling and weak rulers, and extended foreign incursion. And in examining the Roman citizens and institutions forged in those crucibles, Machiavelli perceived the reason for Roman success as the blend of the very traits listed above as present in those commanders, rulers, and political structures.

Virtue, it seemed, consisted of the ability to rule well, and nearly any practice was justified in the course of achieving that end, as long as stable, ordered rule was in fact attained. Failure to do so was the result of the lack of one or more of the necessary qualities inherent in successful rulers and long-lived states, demonstrable in the Roman victories over the maritime power of Carthage, the Seleucid heirs to Alexander of Macedon's Greco-Persian empire, and the formidable Gallic and Germanic chiefdoms. In short, Rome provided the single best source of guidance to aspiring rulers and new principalities because of its virtue, summed up in the personal and civic attributes described above, the combination of which allowed its ascendancy and dominion over most of Europe and the Mediterranean for nearly eight hundred years. For Machiavelli, then, Roman virtue was synonymous with long rule, and by extension, whatever practices led to public order and stability were virtuous, and eminently worthy of imitation in all eras.

Chapter Three

Comparing Roman Virtue Through the Ages: The Greco-Roman and the Florentine

Before engaging in a multi-point comparison of the views of Rome and Roman virtue in the respective works of Polybius and Machiavelli, some review is in order. As a starting point, I examined the life of Polybius of Megalopolis, a 2nd century BC Greek citizen who managed to witness some and write about most of the major Mediterranean political events of his day. After a survey of his major works, their themes and their fates, I outlined Polybius's understanding of the existence, definition, utility, and legacy of virtue in the context of the Roman state as it grew from a regional Italian kingdom in the midst of aggressive neighbors into the powerful and expansionist Roman Republic that existed in his own time. In the second section, I moved ahead some fifteen hundred years to the life and works of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), who was a citizen, civil servant, ostracized political opponent, and writer of history and political science of the city of Florence. After a brief discussion of his personal life and career, I investigated Machiavelli's analysis of Roman virtue as expressed in Roman political structures and cultural traits.

Through a careful reading of Polybius's magnum opus, *The Roman Histories*, mainly covering the period from 220 to 146 BC (but with some comments on early Roman history), it seems that Polybius chose the medium of a universal history because it afforded him the scope he felt was necessary to examine not only events themselves but the human element impelling them. Polybius placed great stock in the Roman culture as one that valued and therefore cultivated virtue, piety, and devotion to duty in its members, especially the impressionable young. Doubtless his own participation in equally elaborate Greek funerary practices while still a youth inclined him to be especially mindful of Roman customs of remembrance. However,

Polybius's point—that the Roman tradition of making masks of honored relatives and carrying them along with the newly deceased in a funeral procession was a powerful method of instilling the belief that one's ancestors were expecting one to live up to their glorious example—is nonetheless a convincing one.

In addition to this cultural element, Polybius justified his argument that Rome was the ruling power in the Mediterranean due to its virtuous political institutions by undertaking an extended comparison of noteworthy (chiefly Greek) states and their political structures to those of Rome. After ruling democracy dangerously open to the corrupting influence of wealth and manipulation by charismatic personalities and refusing to consider the hypothetical states constructed by the philosophers, Polybius found in the Spartan political structure a near-perfect form of government. In Sparta, rule by a hereditary king was balanced by the voice of a council of elders and the suffrage of landed males of an age of majority, thereby combining all of the three types of 'good government' while seemingly avoiding the related three types of corrupt government: monarchy, oligarchy, and mob rule. Whatever the merits of this arrangement, in the end, Polybius found the Spartan state wanting as well, for in his mind it was too conservative and therefore inherently inflexible, unable to cope with the rigors of imperialist expansion, despite its reputation for producing fierce warriors and a robust and wealthy culture.

Over against all these examples, Polybius set the case of Rome. As it degenerated from a benevolent kingship into an abusive monarchy, its citizens rose up, overthrew the kings, and remade it into a blend of the three types of good government vaguely modeled on the Spartan system, though with several key differences. First, as it was the area with the most potential for corruption, the Romans changed a hereditary kingship into two executive positions called consuls (with terms of one year in length) that were filled by appointment and not able to be held

consecutively by the same individual. Consuls were responsible for the mustering and leadership of citizen armies in wartime, and of the great civic engineering and monument projects for which Rome became so famous. Second, the traditional class of landed nobility found their voice in the creation of the Senate, a regulatory body that drafted legislation, controlled the treasury, oversaw the reception of treaties and foreign embassies, made declarations of war, and had the ability to review the conduct of the consuls while in office. Finally, the general citizenry had a central role in ratifying domestic and foreign legislation, determining the verdicts and punishments for capital crimes, and appointing officials called tribunes who acted as representatives of their wishes to check the power of the consuls.

Polybius argued that as a result of these various strands of government, which acted in concert to allow the members of the Roman state work toward a common goal while balancing one another against potential abuses of power, Rome was able to withstand the intense pressures of war on foreign soil and the invasion of its own, as well as the strain of rapid imperial expansion and rule over a diverse array of conquered peoples. This inherent flexibility was the factor that set Rome apart from its neighbors, and was the direct result of the culture of honor, piety, and devotion to duty glorified in Roman funeral traditions. The fact that the Romans came to rule nearly the whole inhabited world was the central theme Polybius celebrated in his *Histories*. Roman virtue was such that Rome deserved to rule, and its citizens did so by crafting a state that was not a dominion but a protectorate, granted its position by the exalted character of its culture and institutions.

Some fifteen hundred years later, the works of Niccolò Machiavelli present a somewhat different interpretation of the definition of Roman virtue and the reasons for it. By accident of birth and his family's station, Machiavelli grew up blessed with a humanist education, allowing

him a deep knowledge of classical Mediterranean history, and served to sharpen his already powerful intellect and keen observational skills. Due to his prodigious administrative talents, Machiavelli was appointed to an important post in the Florentine bureaucracy before he had reached the age of thirty and subsequently enjoyed a fifteen-year career in municipal government, including a number of diplomatic missions to the courts of the leading royals of the contemporary European political scene. Though further advancement up the echelons of Florentine government was curtailed by the return of the Medici family, after a period of imprisonment, Machiavelli retired to a family home in the countryside and proceeded to synthesize his observations on the inner workings of the various political ‘machines’ into which he had come in contact during his career with his wealth of intellectual talents and knowledge of classical history. The results of this period of semi-exile included two great works of political science, *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, works which, when taken together, present both an interpretive challenge to scholars as well as invaluable foundational reasoning for the discipline of political science as separate from the field of political philosophy.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli structured the many addressed topics around the task of justifying the existence of a principality, or rule by a single individual. The basis for his assertion is that rule by a single official possessed of sole executive powers is the most effective method for securing order and stability in a state. Without the possibility for the stagnation that comes with a closed assembly composed of an hereditary aristocracy or the danger of ‘mob rule’ inherent in an out-and-out democracy, Machiavelli argued that the principality was the state best fitted to respond to whatever challenges may arise, whether foreign invasion or civil unrest. However, the state he advocated in *The Prince* was not an intolerant military dictatorship but one in which the rule of law was supreme. Both “good laws and good arms” were of vital importance

in shoring up the authority of the prince *and* in helping to strengthen the state against potential threats.⁴⁹ Viewed in that light, the prince functioned merely as the executor of the national laws and the leader of the army, which was composed of citizens, on the model of the Swiss, who were at once the best-armed and freest in the world.⁵⁰

Machiavelli argued that the highest political aim for a leader was the achievement and maintenance of stability and order in his state. The best way to secure that goal was for princes to be not moral or immoral but amoral, responsible for selecting the behavior—keeping faith and being honorable, or breaking promises and acting with ruthlessness, et cetera—that best fit the situation. To support these arguments, Machiavelli constantly referred his readers to exemplars produced by Rome in both the Republican and Imperial periods. The centerpiece in his argument for the conduct of a ruler was the juxtaposition of the usurper Septimius Severus, who came to power as a result of his variety of skills at deception, generalship, and overall determination, with the emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius who succeeded without recourse to the legions or by deposing a rival. In Machiavelli’s estimation, Severus was the greater ruler because of his ability to act as the situation demanded rather than being bound by a specific code of behavior in the greater interest of establishing and maintaining order.

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli adopted a stance more akin to that of an ancient political philosopher than the ruthlessly pragmatic political realist he appeared to be in *The Prince*. With a genealogical eye, he argued that as the kingship of Rome became corrupt, the citizens rose up and created a state that resembled an improvement on the Spartan model. However, this state was still a transitional one, able to be hijacked by a single branch of government overstepping its intended parameters. But on the creation of the offices of the tribunes, representatives of the

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 7.2.

⁵⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 7.5.

general citizenry whose role was to balance the power of the mostly aristocratic consuls, Machiavelli viewed the Romans to have constructed a form of government that was resilient and balanced, capable of dynamic expansion into an imperial state. With his argument in favor of the importance of the tribunes, Machiavelli revealed another side of his emphasis on order and stability set forth from the perspective of the sole executive. That is, the best way to rule a state was through a combination of autocracy, aristocracy, and democracy. Without the democratic element, Machiavelli implied that the Roman state would have been brittle, less able to withstand the pressures of imperial expansion, foreign incursion, and civil unrest.

Comparing Roman Virtue through the Ages: The Eyewitness and the Political Scientist

Regarding the personal lives and contexts of each writer, the similarities between the two men are remarkable. For example, both Polybius and Machiavelli came from families of some considerable financial means, both were well-educated and gained valuable experience with contemporary political processes early in life, both were either set up for or well into promising political careers, and both were interrupted by political circumstances beyond their control. Moreover, each man proved able to transform his respective period of exile into a productive season of scholarship, synthesizing political acumen with eyewitness experience and a well-developed knowledge of history into works of great importance to the fields of history and political science.

Until the end of their days, both Polybius and Machiavelli continued to place a premium on action as well as reflection, with both returning to an active life as soon as circumstances permitted. In a very real sense, then, *The Histories* of Polybius and *The Prince* and the *Discourses* of Machiavelli may be read as attempts by educated, world-wise men to overcome

personal adversity and danger to their native cities from outside political forces. In confronting those obstacles to personal and civic stability, both writers managed to produce path-breaking works that interwove specific philosophies of history with those of statecraft containing pictures of a state that successfully functioned as a bulwark against inroads by foreign powers in addition to preserving domestic order by bridling the passions of both the citizenry and the ruler(s).

However, the parallels between the two figures end there. For all their similarities, Polybius possessed an inherently different view of the course of history than that guiding Machiavelli's writings. For Polybius, standing on the plains outside Carthage in 146 BC, watching as his close friend Scipio presided over the sack of the chief city of Rome's greatest adversary in the Mediterranean, it must not have seemed likely that the rule of Rome would end at any time in the near future. That fact was doubtless driven home in an intensely personal manner when Polybius learned of the sack of the leading Greek city of Corinth and the effective end of the Achaean League in the same year as the destruction of Carthage, no less. Polybius's statement of purpose at the outset of the first book of *The Histories* is instructive here:

“[Is] there anyone on earth who is so narrow-minded or uninquisitive that he could fail to want to know how and thanks to what kind of political system almost the entire known world was conquered and brought under a single empire . . . in less than fifty-three years—an unprecedented event?”⁵¹

That Polybius recognized the unrivaled nature of the Roman accomplishment is one matter, but the fact that he ascribes their greatness to their political structure sets the course for the rest of *The Histories*.

⁵¹ Polybius, *The Histories*, 1.1.2

As a son of a major city of the Achaean League and having taken part in the political process in roles from *hipparchus* of the League to tutor of a prominent Roman family to field advisor to a Roman consul back to political advocate for Greek rights, Polybius predictably placed a premium on the power of Roman political structures. Having had the opportunity to observe each branch of the Roman constitution combined in effective action with the result being dominance of the Mediterranean, his analysis of the efficacy of the Roman political system as it existed in his day ought to be considered authoritative. It was with all of the above factors in mind, then, that Polybius could argue that the combination of popular input, aristocratic oversight, and executive authority with the culture of devotion to duty and public veneration of honored dead meant that the Romans were a force to be reckoned with and would remain so long into the future, so long as the elements mentioned above remained in place. The future was to be one dominated by Rome, not Carthage, Megalopolis, Athens, or Sparta, so far as he could tell. Moreover, the reason for Roman success lay in their political structures as outgrowths of a culture that fostered virtue.

Over against Polybius's view to the future with respect to Roman rule, Machiavelli was essentially backward looking. Both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* seem to have been written with a mind to spur an educated, politically motivated Italian audience to take action aimed at welding the contemporary chaos of a patchwork of feuding Italian cities into a unified, stable Italian nation-state. Evidence for this is supplied by his impassioned conclusion to *The Prince*, appropriately (if ethnocentrically) titled, "An Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians." Despite the heading, it seems that, based on the foci of both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, Machiavelli was not primarily concerned with creating a militant, xenophobic autocracy, but was enamored with Rome for having achieved the kind of order and stability that was non-existent in

his own day. The heroes of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* are not only the lion-and-fox, Septimius Severus, who took power through violence and deception (guided by a moral compass composed of gray-scale rather than black and white distinctions to boot), but also those elected officials who held the office of tribune, whose purpose was to check the influence of the consuls, and by extension, the Senate, and thereby keep the general populace safe from potential abuse of either office.

The intervening medieval centuries, from which the culture Machiavelli was born into was only just emerging, may be at least partially responsible for his backward focus. To Machiavelli, the political chaos of 16th century Italy was nothing new; it was merely the unfortunate continuation of the political practices that had become the norm in the many hundreds of years since the capitulation of the Roman Empire in the West. The next major political entity to emerge after 476 AD was the Carolingian ‘empire,’ though even that was barely the size of Roman Gaul, required annual campaigns to maintain its borders, and did not long outlast the death of its founder.

Indeed, for the next several centuries, successive groups of invaders—Scandinavians in the north and west, Avars in the east, and various Muslim peoples from the south—battered the remnants of Carolingian state and the other kingdoms that had arisen in the meantime. From the 8th century to the 11th century, as these waves of intruders crashed against the kingdoms of Europe, their attacks no doubt contributed to the mentality of a fragmented, decaying civilization under siege that had arisen in the Roman psyche in response to the inroads of various Gothic and Germanic peoples at the twilight of the Roman Empire in the West.⁵²

⁵² For the strain of barbarian invasion on the Roman consciousness in the late Imperial period, see the remarks and attitude of Augustine of Hippo. Augustine, *City of God*, in Peter J.

In such a culture, it is little wonder that what emerged in Machiavelli's writings was an essentially past-focused solution to the problems of the present. What *was* new, however, was the way in which Machiavelli approached and defined those problems. Rather than speaking in religious terms of good and evil or in ethical terms of right and wrong, Machiavelli recognized that the issues at stake transcended trite religious and ethical answers, and were indeed problems of humanity itself.⁵³ "The problems of politics [have] remained unchanged for the last two thousand years," he declared, a statement that surely justified his selection of the Roman state—despite its ancient status—as the primary example of the kind of statecraft he wished to apply to contemporary Italian politics.⁵⁴ In that sense, the best course for the future was to mine the past for the most effective ways to solve the problems of the present, with the resulting feel in Machiavelli's best-known works being one that was less of a bold departure into a new era of political reasoning and more of a refit of old but brilliant concepts with a new conceptual (amoral) framework.

More important than—though perhaps because of—their opposite views of history, Polybius and Machiavelli each possessed a fundamentally different definition of Roman virtue: what it was, how it came to be, and what it meant for the future. As we have seen, Polybius was essentially future-focused, writing to justify the rule of Rome out to the undefined chronological horizon based on what he knew and had witnessed of the dynamism and resilience of Roman cultural, political, and martial institutions. This approach in turn directly influenced his definition

Steinberger, ed. *Readings in Classical Political Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

⁵³ That is, by arguing that the Christian defenders were on the side of God and the pagan/Muslim invaders were not; or, that the invaders, by their presence, were violating the rules of right and wrong by pillaging and looting, while the defenders were fighting merely to keep safe what was theirs.

⁵⁴ Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

of what Roman virtue actually was. In the same way, Machiavelli's philosophical starting point, that the foundational purpose of the state—whether principality or republic—and therefore, its ruler—whether monarch or assembly—was to function as the guarantor of order and stability. The best way to achieve that goal of stability was to apply the lessons taught by the greatest state of antiquity, which had attained and held its exalted position for so long because of the excellence of its political institutions.

In Polybius's eyes, Rome deserved its position as the supreme state of the powers around the Mediterranean because of the virtuous nature of its institutions, which—because of their essentially good nature—allowed it to govern itself, fight, and rule others with such effectiveness. The idea was that Roman citizens would have grown up in a culture defined by respect for the honored dead (who were honored often because of their excellence in public service, civic and/or military) and would have been trained to emulate the deeds for which their ancestors had been celebrated. All this so that when they achieved positions of leadership in the political arena or in the legions, they were fitted—unlike their counterparts even in the great city states of Greece—to accomplish feats that would also earn them a place on the rolls of their native city's honored dead, where their memories would serve to begin the process anew for the next generation.

For Polybius, then, it was from *this* powerful combination of cultural elements that the Romans built upon the Spartan model of governance in constructing their constitution's balance of powers between the three traditional types of 'pure' government. Moreover, it was from that same culture that their successors, generations later, managed to rebound from the immense pressure of Hannibal protracted invasion of Italian soil to ultimately defeat him and subdue Carthage. Simply put, in Polybius's mind, the Romans arose from a culture that was superior, in

regards to politics, to those of their neighbors (including the celebrated states of Greece, the powerful Near Eastern Seleucid and Parthian empires, and the maritime giant of Carthage). With that culture as a basis, they crafted political structures that enabled military performance a class above those same neighbors. In all, the Romans were justified in ruling the Mediterranean as they did by their virtuous political institutions.

Machiavelli's construction of the definition of Roman virtue, however, lay completely on the other end of the spectrum from Polybius's virtue-equals-success equation. Whether the state in question was ruled as a principality or as a republic, the most important function of the ruler was to maintain order. Personal flaws (excessive cruelty, pursuit of individual enrichment at the expense of the state and/or its citizens, et cetera) and bureaucratic incompetence were to be shunned in equal measure. But rulers were also never to shy away from applying maximum force with all swiftness (on the battlefield as well as in response to domestic unrest) in the interest of returning the state to a stable, prosperous condition.

Writing as he did in the tumultuous political environment of feuding families, warring political parties, clashing cities, and foreign incursion of 16th century Italy, Machiavelli, after a long day spent working on a family farm in the hills outside Florence, could find no better example of the path to peace and stability than that of ancient Rome. The character of the Republic and the conduct of the emperors were such that Roman rule was extended and maintained over a wide variety of peoples and cultures, from wave-washed Britain to the hot, dry lands of the Levant. Especially instructive was the emperor Septimius Severus, whose ability to be 'other than good' when circumstances called for a more supple sense of honor than most would allow themselves meant that he eventually triumphed over a number of rival claimants to the imperial purple, ended a cycle of destructive civil wars, and even founded his own dynasty.

In broader terms, equally of value was Roman foresight when it resulted in the creation of the offices of the tribunes to check the potentially dangerous powers of the consuls by guaranteeing that the aims of the general citizenry would literally be present when the consuls were making executive decisions on civil matters or on campaign during times of war.

In addition, the centuries of the medieval period doubtless did Machiavelli no favors in his valuation of more recent efforts at achieving and maintaining political continuity. During that era, there was without question no single state that could command the same level of respect and awe and the same breadth of rule than that achieved by even Republican, let alone Imperial, Rome. Moreover, between the end of the 5th and the middle of the 16th century, the closest successor to the overarching authority of the Roman Empire was the Roman Catholic Church, and it was almost constantly at war (often figuratively, sometimes literally) with the more earthly European powers for absolute hegemony in the area once unequivocally ruled by the Emperors.⁵⁵ Despite the range of positive accomplishments achieved by the Church and by churchmen during those centuries, writing as Europe was on the cusp of the Protestant Reformation, the Church must have seemed a poor substitute for the glories of imperial Rome.

What alternative did Machiavelli have, then, but to long for the relative stability and order as existed under the rule of Rome during antiquity? And if that was his position, what conclusion could he come to but that whatever political and martial institutions enabled the most

⁵⁵ See *The Civilization of the Middle Ages* (by Norman F. Cantor, Harper Perennial Publishers: 1994), chapters 1 and 2 for a masterful treatment of the bequests of the ancient Mediterranean culture to the medieval world and chapter 8 for the relationship of the Church to the various states of Europe. For detailed discussion of the most intense—prior to the Protestant Reformation—period of that conflict, see *The Crisis of Church and State: 1050 – 1300* (Brian Tierney, University of Toronto Press: 1988). For the quickly shifting and unstable relationship of the European states with one another, see *Chronicles of the Crusades*, particularly Joinville's account of the Crusaders' assault on the city of Constantinople (compiled accounts of the 4th and 7th Crusades by Jean de Joinville and Geffroy de Villehardouin, respectively, trans. Frank Marzials: Digireads edition, 2010).

prosperous, stable, and longest-lived rule were by default the most virtuous? In essence, despite the otherwise quite amoral political character of Machiavelli's writings, the highest good—to borrow from philosophy—was the orderly state. Therefore, the political institutions of ancient Rome were virtuous precisely because they allowed for long, stable (relatively speaking) rule the likes of which the Western world had not seen before or since. More importantly, because of their tendency toward the facilitation of long, stable rule and thus political virtue, they were singularly worthy of imitation or even recreation in contemporary political ventures.

Conclusion: Rome through the ages and Rome for the ages

So far, I have examined *The Histories* of Polybius of Megalopolis, eyewitness to the power of Republican Roman political and cultural practices in action, and discussed at length the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, a 16th-century Florentine who studied Roman politics and history in detail and who took part in the cutthroat political atmosphere of his own day. Both men surveyed the materials they had to hand and the world they saw around them and synthesized their observations and abstractions into powerful works on the nature and legacy of Roman history. Yet both ultimately adhered to a diametrically opposed definition of what he saw as the key element in Roman success: virtue.

For Polybius, the Roman culture of reverence for and emulation of honored dead and their capitalization on past political models led to a society that, because of its virtuous foundations, proved able to rule the almost the whole known world. In Machiavelli's estimation, precisely the opposite was true, since virtue in the political sphere ought to be defined as long, stable, (relatively) peaceful rule. As the Romans managed achieve and maintain dominion over

much of Europe and the lands surrounding the Mediterranean for some eight hundred years, by extension, whatever means and methods they employed must have been virtuous.

In light of this discrepancy, the question that remains to be asked is simple (though it leads to a number of others): why? Why is it that two educated men with similar personal backgrounds and a wealth of source material came to such divergent conclusions? Is one or the other of them correct; perhaps neither? It seems appropriate to answer the question with another: why not? Why should not two men so far removed in time and culture come to opposite conclusions, even when considering essentially the same subject? To use a broad contemporary example, present-day scholars who attend the same conferences and write on the same topics rarely agree whole-heartedly on the answers to those issues. Surely it is less surprising that two authors separated by a millennium and a half—the rise and fall of the whole of medieval civilization—disagree on the final answer to a subject. It is of incredible importance to historians and political thinkers alike that these two prodigiously gifted writers even considered the same issue at all, and we ought to be even more grateful that their writings survive at all for our education and enrichment.

Viewed in another light, “why did they disagree?” or “who is correct?” are the wrong questions. Whether or not the Romans were virtuous *per se*, and in what fashion, is beside the point. The true value of comparing two writers so far removed who use the same subject and same term is that through their answers, we can understand more about the world of each writer, and what that tells us about their view of human nature. For Polybius, the general citizenry, who controlled “rewards and punishments . . . without which human life has no coherence, let alone governments and constitutions,” were the true heart and soul of the Roman culture and system of

governance.⁵⁶ Though not stated in the Roman constitution, it was they who served in the legions, wore the masks of the honored dead in the funeral processions, listened to the speeches of the deceased's family members extolling his virtues, and raised their children to emulate those heroes of the past, just as much as it was they who reviewed the conduct of the consuls while in office and decided on punishments in capital legal cases as *was* stated in the constitution.

The role and importance of the strong ruler emerges just as clearly in the work of Machiavelli. His prince was to be both good and not good, both lion and fox, both cruel and benevolent as situations demanded. He was to know and follow the examples of great men of the past as well as managing the passions of the citizens in the present, and he was ever in all things to pursue and maintain an orderly, prosperous, and stable state. For Machiavelli, the ruler was the embodiment of the state, and vice versa, as was the Rome and the Roman emperors he so admired from the annals of antiquity. To him, men had to be guided by a strong hand to achieve great things, and the emulation of the political practices of the Republican and Imperial Romans provided the most effective avenue to do just that.

In that sense, then, it matters little whether or not the Romans deserved to rule, as Polybius argued, and it is rather inconsequential what Machiavelli thought about the value of 'power politics' and their birth in the constitution of the Romans. The true aim of studying the genesis and evolution of abstract concepts in the historical record is more than just the discovery of a morality figure to imitate or the uncovering of a political ethos to secure long-lasting peace. When we study ideas—as they move through cultures and historical eras—the more we can see of ourselves in both the writers and their subjects, the more we stand to gain.

⁵⁶ Polybius, *The Histories*, 6.14.

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