

# **The Pope, New Moses**

**From Eugene IV to the Medicean Popes**

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GAETANO LETTIERI

(EDIT)

# THE POPE, NEW MOSES

FROM EUGENE IV TO THE MEDICEAN POPES

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# ÍNDICE

Presentation. The Pope, New Moses. From Eugene IV to the Medicean Popes .....	7
Gaetano Lettieri	
Moses as Figure of the Pope. I. The Papal Centaur in Machiavelli's <i>Prince</i> .....	17
Gaetano Lettieri	
Moses as Figure of the Pope. II. A Christological-political Topos, from Eugenius IV to Clement VII .....	51
Gaetano Lettieri	
« <i>Quis es? Sacerdos magnus, summus Pontifex</i> ». Alcune tappe dell'elaborazione del primato pontificio e la tradizione veterotestamentaria tra XI e XII secolo .....	111
Umberto Longo	
Mosè <i>typus papae</i> nel decreto <i>Moyses vir Dei</i> (1439). Prima parte: la questione del papa eretico .....	131
Ludovico Battista	
Mosè <i>typus papae</i> nel decreto <i>Moyses vir Dei</i> (1439). Seconda parte: le radici nella dottrina teocratica.....	185
Ludovico Battista	
<i>In angulum Europae: on Moses and Crusades in Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini's Oration Moyses vir Dei</i> .....	257
Elena Cerqua	

<b>Dalla Roma imperiale alla Roma papale: destinatari, lettori e traduttori della <i>Vita di Mosè</i> di Filone di Alessandria</b> .....	285
Chiara Spuntarelli	
<b><i>Noster Moyses papa</i>. Una metafora teologico-politica nel conflitto fra Sisto IV e i Medici</b> .....	307
Niccolò Brandodoro	
<b>The Shrine of Heaven: The Organization of Curial Ceremony inside the Sistine Chapel in Late Quattrocento Rome</b> .....	331
Filip Malesevic	
<b>Savonarola alias Mosè. Il codice mosaico nell'azione di Girolamo Savonarola</b> .....	363
Virginia Lauria	
<b>Clemente VII nuovo Mosè a Bologna</b> .....	389
Maria Fallica	
<b>Mosè redivivo. Michelangelo e la Tomba di Giulio II</b> .....	421
Marco Ruffini	
<b>«Uno mero esecutore delle cose che li erano ordinate da Dio»: Tasso's Godfrey and Machiavelli's Moses</b> .....	461
Antonio Borrelli	
<b><i>De Consideratione ad Eugenium Papam</i>: un programa de re-espirtualización del pontificado</b> .....	491
Luis Javier García-Lomas Gago	

# Presentation

## The Pope, New Moses

### From Eugene IV to the Medicean Popes

Gaetano Lettieri

Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Moses became and remained a key figure within the symbolic self-representation of the Roman papacy: absolute sacral head, directly ordained by God, at the same time supreme divine mediator, source of the high priesthood (granted to Aaron) and earthly prince, spiritual and temporal monarch, prophet and king, legislator and legitimate holder of arms, his model allows the popes emerging from the crisis of the Western Schism to ideologically promote and strengthen their power. As the source of all spiritual and legislative authority, whose *imperatoria maiestas*, ready to defend even with weapons the freedom of the people of God, contains within itself the same theological *iustitia in terra* of the *civitas Dei*, Moses *typus papae* expresses the definitive liquidation of conciliarist positions through the affirmation of the pontifical *plenitudo potestatis* within the Church, but also a justification of the commitment to diplomatically and militarily guarantee the integrity and Italian expansion of its temporal dominion, thus registering a crucial process of transformation of medieval theocratic ideology, in the sign of the affirmation of the pontiff as sovereign of a truly new ecclesiastical principality. Starting from these considerations it will be understood that the present monographic issue does not intend to merely concentrate on one of the many typological figures of ecclesiastical treatises but, rather, to identify a fundamental symbol of the pontifical claim of the primary character of his own power, both spiritual and political, and so focus on some moments of a decisive trajectory for the Renaissance and the early modern age, both on a historical-political and historical-religious level, as

well as from a cultural, historical-literary and historical-artistic point of view.

This broader aspect is the object of Gaetano Lettieri's two essays, dedicated to ideally drawing the overall parable of the present volume starting from its last point of arrival: that is, the importance of the figure of Moses within Machiavelli's *The Prince*. In fact, interpreting the Machiavellian masterpiece as a true *enchiridion pontificis*, dagger/government manual for the Medici prince, therefore as an "effective work of state construction and government, of political-military protreptics and of courtly self-promotion", the first essay highlights the Machiavellian pages dedicated to Moses, the armed prophet as a demonstration of a «systematic papal protreptic, nourished by prophetic-religious codes», which exalts in the prince of the church the decisive political subject called to seize an unrepeatable opportunity of the Italian and European historical reality. In fact, the irruption, at the heart of Machiavelli's purely political investigation, of the problem of prophecy and the constitutive relationship with religion, while testifying to how the theme of belief is completely structural in Machiavellian thought, is explained primarily as a pragmatic and courtly laudatory reference of the work, whose magnetic center could only be the Pope, of whom Moses is traditionally the *typus* and prefiguration. Far from being ironic, Moses' call into question thus responds perfectly to Machiavellian pragmatic objective, that is, to his unscrupulous exhortation of the Medici prince to take charge of the defense of Italy's freedom through his possibilities of religious persuasion and with the use of weapons. Moses, moreover, ideologically embodies the ambiguous and double meaning of the Machiavellian operation, intent on capturing the theological-political power that historically dominated the Italian political scene and, at the same time, offering a political wisdom capable of recognizing and declaring the ruthless laws of politics, therefore «the “earthly” substance of the celestial form, the knife of prophecy», the “political” truth of the theological: «whoever reads the Bible sensibly will see Moses having been forced [...] to kill infinite men» (Disc III, XXX,17).

To systematically demonstrate how Moses is a specific and traditional figure of the pontiff, who is interpreted as the absolute sacral head and supreme earthly *princeps*, the essay goes backwards, in its second part, to



document examples capable of focusing on the relevance and pervasiveness of the humanistic-Renaissance pontifical ideology relating to Moses, thus offering a synthetic cross-section of numerous significant moments that will return in other contributions of the volume: the bull *Moyses vir Dei* of Eugene IV and the anti-papal invective of Lorenzo Valla; the *Oratio Moyses vir Dei* by Enea Silvio Piccolomini; the curial theological production from Eugene IV to Sixtus IV; the anti-Florentine writing *Dissentio inter Sanctissimum dominum nostrum Papam et Florentinos suborta*; the theocratic iconography of the Sistine Chapel commissioned by Sixtus IV, with the cycle of Moses placed in dialectical relationship with that dedicated to the life of Christ, on the opposite wall of the Chapel; the orations on the Pope as Moses by Egidio da Viterbo and Cristoforo Marcello at the V Lateran Council; the new pope as a spiritual and warrior Moses in the *Libellus ad Leonem*, the Michelangelo's statue of Julius II, portrayed in the features of Moses in his tomb built in San Pietro in Vincoli; Clement VII new Moses and new David/Mercury in the paintings of Rosso Fiorentino and in the commendatory medal by Benvenuto Cellini; the official pasquinade of 25 April 1526, in which Machiavelli certainly participated, in which the Mercury/David *typus* presents a new figure of a biblical and mythological hero called to exalt the pope in war as a messianic liberator; the remarkable re-emergence of Moses, symbol of the pope, foundation of the universal church, against Protestant heretical sedition, even in Erasmus' *De amabili ecclesiae concordiae*.

The volume continues with the contribution of Umberto Longo dedicated to the reconstruction of some decisive medieval stages in the development of the papal primacy, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Starting from Bernard of Clairvaux, whose famous treatise, *De consideratione ad Eugenium*, composed between 1148 and 1153, described a set of papal typological attributions (such as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedek, Aaron, Moses) of extraordinary success, which would have marked the affirmation of primacy in the following centuries, presenting the pope as the compendium and fulfillment of all sacred history, Longo goes back to the Cistercian environment of its author and in particular to that gravitating around the monastery of the Tre Fontane in Rome, from where Pope Eugene III himself and Nicola Maniacutia came. In fact,

Bernardo's statements in *De consideratione* take on even greater importance if they are read in light of the tradition of recovery and valorisation of the symbolic value of the Old Testament which is taking shape within the Roman see and which already finds significant attestations, as in the first analogies between the Lateran basilica and the Temple of Solomon or Mount Sinai; as in Pier Damiani's Epistle 48, in which he claims that the cardinals are the realization of the oracle of Zechariah, or as above all in the case of another fundamental work, the *Descriptio ecclesiae Lateranensis*, in which these tendencies culminate in a reminder systematically to the symbols of the Ancient Alliance, moreover in the conviction that fundamental sacred relics of the Temple and of the passion of Christ are kept in the cathedral of the Most Holy Savior and of Saints John the Baptist and the Evangelist.

The essay in two parts by Ludovico Battista takes us forward within our trajectory by aiming to elucidate the ideological context that was the backdrop to the *decretum Moyses vir Dei* of Eugene IV, with which he presented himself as the new Moses, using the example of seditious revolt of the Levites Korah, Dathan and Abiron against Moses and Aaron to denounce the heretical and schismatic error of the Council of Basel. Battista argues in his essay how the image of the Levites was not at all random but resumed the use that had been made of it by the same council in its eighth session to order the Pope himself and his curia to obey the council, under threat of the penalties established by law against schismatics. Highlighting the canonical basis of the use of the episode of the punishment of the rebellious Levites, through a diachronic path that from Ockham, passing through Zabarella, D'Ailly and Gerson, reaches Ragusa and Segovia, the importance of the question of heretical pope and the hermeneutics of the *Causa XXIV, Quaestio I, C. Didicimus* (containing the episode) for the justification of the conciliar claims first of Pisa, then of Constance and finally of Basel. This allows Battista to more intrinsically reinterpret Eugene's bull as an explicit, violent attack against the conciliarist tradition that had found expression in the Basel decrees, in particular by overturning one of its key arguments: the clause deposing the pope for heresy, through which the council fathers, since Zabarella in Pisa, had affirmed the superiority of the council over the pontiff.

In the second part of the essay, the author instead focuses on the papal treatises of Pietro del Monte and Juan de Torquemada to highlight how the typological application of the model of Moses to the pope witnesses a slow but significant ideological transformation of his power, which led him to modify his universalistic projection, adapting it to the development of the European powers, and to split into two natures: one always spiritual and priestly, the other openly temporal and princely, with the birth of a true ecclesiastical principality. Battista suggests, however, that, precisely to understand the specificities of this ideological evolution, we must also read the elements of continuity that made it possible and developed it starting from the traditional universalistic and theocratic instances of 14<sup>th</sup>-century treatises on the power of the church. In this sense, demonstrating how the passages on the typological interpretation of Moses as a papal figure are largely dependent on authors such as Egidio Romano, Giacomo da Viterbo and Agostino d'Ancona, he aims to highlight on which ideological bases this evolution and on which aspects it was based. A new image thus emerges of the theoretical reasons and conditions of possibility for the transformation of papal sovereignty on the model of Moses, revolving in particular around the extraordinary theological-political elaboration of Egidio Romano, who had thematized the absolute supremacy of the pontiff as a reserve of power exceptional with respect to the law and order that he establishes, as well as the legitimacy of the extraordinary use of the temporal sword in order to defend spiritual good.

Elena Cerqua's essay examines the exhortation to the anti-Turkish crusade addressed by the humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, ambassador of Emperor Frederick III, to Pope Nicholas V in the famous oration *Moses vir Dei* (1452): Moses is indicated to the pontiff as the model of chief, prophet, and liberator, capable of leading the Chosen People, understood in a universal sense, and freeing the world from infidels. In profound continuity with the anti-conciliarist polemic of the Florentine decree of 1439, which identified Moses as the only sacral foundation that guaranteed against the divisive logic of heresy, Piccolomini inscribes in the exodic image of the passage to the promised land the concept of a victorious Europe led by the pontiff and liberator from the Muslim threat. As stressed by Cerqua, the underlining of the role of liberator, which represents “a novelty with regard

to the Eugene IV's Decree, attributes a religious or metaphysical role to the pontiff, who heritages the Mosaic historical and supra-historical task of liberating Christianity both concretely and spiritually". Papal propaganda makes wise use of the eminently theological-political ideal of the Renaissance of classicism, carried forward by the philological care of the curial humanists with the intention of exalting the universal primacy of Christian Rome, capable of recapitulating and sacrally perfecting the political and cultural primacy universal of ancient Rome.

Chiara Spuntarelli's essay outlines the theological-political importance of Philoni's *Life of Moses*, on a double level. If the original strategy of Philo's text was aimed at showing the compatibility between Judaism and the empire through the figure of Moses ἄρχων νόμμος, in a political project aimed at the universalization of the Mosaic πολιτεία, it is the absolute historical relevance of the six-volume translation by Lilio Tifernate, between 1477 and 1485, dedicated to Sixtus IV, which consecrates its absolute contemporary value for the pontifical ideology.

The essay by Niccolò Brandodoro still revolves around the crucial pontificate of Sixtus IV, which analyzes the "propaganda war" fought by Pope della Rovere using the Mosaic figure. Brandodoro shows the coherence and continuity over time of the pontiff's recourse to the Mosaic figure, from the youthful *De sanguine Christi* up to the *De potentia Dei*, where a theology of the divine *potentia absoluta* is reflected in a first theocratic theorization, radicalized after the election to the pontifical throne, exploded in the conflict with the Medici and in the Pazzi conspiracy, where the Mosaic *typus* was brandished against the Florentine enemies, heretics because they were political rivals with respect to the papal projects of temporal and nepotistic expansion. From the bull *Ad apostolice dignitatis auctoritatem*, to the *Dissentio inter sanctissimum dominum nostrum Papam et Florentinos suborta*, up to the lateral frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, consecrated as a temple of the papal primacy, a coherent theological-political strategy of sacral consecration of the theological and temporal primacy of the pontiff is deployed forcefully.

Filip Malešević's text proposes an interpretation of the first pictorial program inside the Sistine Chapel in relation to the transformation of the curial ceremonial, so that the *restauratio urbis* program of Pope Sixtus IV,

aimed at exalting the theological-political glory of the Roman pontiff, was perfectly consistent with the relevant innovations introduced in the liturgical textures of the *Caeremoniale Romanae Curiae*. With the construction of a new chapel inside the Vatican Apostolic Palace, which effectively replaced the previous *Cappella magna*, an ambitious program of renewal of the Roman ceremonial was carried out with a view to the affirmation of papal ecclesiastical supremacy. For example, the scene of the temptations of Moses is represented in a landscape context with an oak tree dominating the central axis of the overall space of the image: the particular spatial proximity between the oak tree (the Della Rovere family symbol) and the papal throne in the Sistine Chapel establishes a direct association with Pope Sixtus IV, defining its central place within the sacred space and liturgical ceremonial in the high solemnities destined to be celebrated in the new chapel of the Apostolic Palace. The narrative program on the walls of the Sistine Chapel shows an interweaving of Christological episodes and mosaics that seem to design the liturgical spaces, expressing specific distances from the altar and the papal throne, incorporating them (thanks to the Roman architectural references present in the pictorial cycles) within the urban landscape; at the same time, Malesevic suggests that the events of Moses' life depicted on the south wall seem intended to openly support the ritual aspects of the new, revised ceremonial of the Roman liturgy: they contain references to fundamental elements of the pontiff's coronation ritual and to his position as Vicar of Christ within the organization of ecclesiastical government.

Contested Moses: the decisiveness of the Mosaic *typos* is unequivocally confirmed by the irruption into the Florentine theological-political arena of an alternative to the papal Moses, in the person of Girolamo Savonarola. Virginia Lauria's essay reconstructs the homiletic strategy of the Dominican preacher in the decisive Lenten season of 1496, proposing a suggestive reversed reading of the Florentine Carnival, which Savonarola would have subverted by reinterpreting it as a Mosaic event, prematurely dissolving the festival into an "Easter" as a celebration of exodus and passage, where the symbols of worldly vanities are abandoned and burned, so that the chosen people can finally enter Jerusalem.

The Italian wars and the catastrophic epilogue of the Sack marked a moment of profound crisis for the city of Rome and the curia, as well as for the temporal ambitions of the second Medici pope. The imperial *maiestas* of the pontiff must deal with another power, the imperial one of Charles V, which demands the coronation in Bologna and which requires a wise negotiation that at least guarantees the preservation of the centrality and relevance of the pontiff (and of the Medici family) in Italy. Thus, with the essay by Maria Fallica the investigation on the figure of Moses moves to trace it in the symbolism that greets the triumphal entry of Clement VII into Bologna, precisely on the occasion of the imperial coronation: in this ritual moment with profound Christological and Eucharist accents, through a rich Old Testament iconography, with the liberator Moses at the center and Esther married to the Persian Ahasuerus, the Clementine curia proposes a model of harmonious coexistence with the winner of the Italian wars, Emperor Charles V, called to recognize the sacred centrality of Mosaic-papal symbol.

The singular anomaly of the centrality of the Mosaic figure in Michelangelo's tomb of Julius II, highlighted by Marco Ruffini's essay, clarifies once again, in the words of contemporaries, the symbolic power and evocative capacity of the *typos*: as Ercole Gonzaga said, according Condivi, «this statue alone is enough to do honor to the burial of Pope Julius». The essay proposes an important reconstruction of the relative chronology of the Tomb and Michelangelo's interventions, showing the absolute artistic coherence of the project. As underlined by Ruffini, Michelangelo, who came into contact with Machiavelli in a moment of crisis in his relationship with Julius II, in 1506, chose the Mosaic typology to celebrate the pontiff, entering into consonance with the Machiavellian model. In Michelangelo's statue, as Vasari writes, the sublime art of Michelangelo, interpreted as an instrument of grace, recreates and breathes life. Moses lives again, in the imperial papal *maiestas* and in the revivifying art of his favorite artist.

The essay of Antonio Borrelli studies the influence of the book of *Exodus* on the representation of the political relations between the Christian army and its captain, Goffredo di Buglione, in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. Borrelli shows how Tasso, in his poem, uses, as a

latent model for the difficulties encountered by Goffredo in leading the crusade, the events of Moses in the desert faced with the murmurings of the people, thus connecting Jewish epic and Crusader epic in the representation of torment religious and political captain. But this restitution of Goffredo as Moses, Borrelli notes, also implies, not secondarily, the accentuation of the political connotation of the prophet and an unscrupulous Machiavellian interpretation of him as a political leader who exercises an earthly and military government in order to establish a new Kingdom: ultimately, the parallel with the story of the *Exodus* helps us to understand how the relationship between the army and its captain embodies, in the *Liberata*, the relationship between a lord and his people, and how the actions of the first are strictly necessary for the life of the second. Tasso thus establishes an interesting dialectic between the ancient conception of chivalric war, represented by Rinaldo, individualistic, based on honor and personal protection, to the new one of Goffredo himself, aimed exclusively at the common objective of the collective good, to achieve it as quickly as possible and sacrificing the ethical-chivalrous imperative. Suggesting therefore how the Machiavellian characterization of Moses, the perfect example of a new prince who imposes his will even with weapons, influences the character of Tasso's poem, Borrelli illuminates the political use of one of the main biblical characters within the most important poetic work of the Counter-Reformation period and the role of the most controversial political treatise of the time in this new reading.

In the last article Javier García-Lomas Gago aims to highlight, in contrast to the figure of the pope as *Typus Moysis*, the portrait of the ideal pontiff outlined by Bernard of Clairvaux in his *De Consideratione ad Eugenium Papam*, written for Eugenius III. This papal portrait drawn by the abbot of Clairvaux is more concerned with self-knowledge and the practice of virtue (in line with the Platonic-Augustinian tradition) than with asserting its authority over secular powers. According to the author of the paper, the virtue of consideration is proposed by Bernard as a path towards an exercise of authority in the key of *ministerium*. Through an analysis of the Bernardian text, García-Lomas underscores that, although Bernard of Clairvaux resumes the medieval thesis of the two swords, he places it in a context where the spiritual aspect prevails over the political and the

organizational, being a more faithful reader of Saint Augustine than the so-called political Augustinism. So, the author of this essay concludes that the thesis of the two swords, a good reflection of the movements of political Augustinism during the Middle Ages, finds a more suitable interpretative framework that provides an alternative to the claims made by Eugenius IV in his bull of 1439.



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

Gaetano Lettieri

"I have put myself in the place of the Pope"<sup>1</sup>

"If I were the Pontiff"<sup>2</sup>

It could be seen as rash or even gullible to pretend to propose a new interpretation of Machiavelli's most famous and fateful treatise; even more so, to propose for it a Papal contextualization which could appear bewildering, at first glance. However, maybe it was the ambiguous and intentionally daring nature of this masterpiece of modern political thought, as well as its immediate yet controversial fortune, that determined an ideological reading which obscured its primarily pragmatic intentions. Therefore, the *Prince* has been read as an irreligious text, diabolical in its nature, accomplice or censor of Catholic corruption, "creator" of secular politics, proposing an absoluteness of the political realm freed from any ethical and religious bond. And yet, the *Prince*, composed between 1513 and May 1515,<sup>3</sup> was not conceived by its author as a theoretical treatise directed to an abstract recognition of the laws of the political realm, but rather as an effectual work of state-building and government of the state, a political-military hortatory treatise written for courtly self-promotion. The focal point of the treatise is papal, as it is the result of a political elaboration

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<sup>1</sup> English translation in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Letters. A Selection*, ed. and tr. by Allan Gilbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 118. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettera a Francesco Vettori del 20 giugno 1513*, 968.

<sup>2</sup> Machiavelli, *The Letters. A Selection*, 118. Machiavelli, *Lettera a Francesco Vettori del 20 giugno 1513*, 968 and 971: "A me parrebbe, se io fossi il pontefice [...] Pertanto, se io fossi il pontefice".

<sup>3</sup> Cf. W.J. Connell, "Dating The Prince: Beginnings and Endings", *The Review of Politics* 75 (2013): 497-514; Marcello Simonetta, "L'aborto del Principe: Machiavelli e i Medici (1512-1515)", *Interpres* 33 (2015): 192-228. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1400/238893>.

made by putting himself in the Pope's place, as if Machiavelli were the Pope... In this perspective, the symbology of Moses as an armed prophet could help reconsider the relationship between religion/prophecy and politics in the *Prince*, re-contextualizing it in the historical reality which generated it and which it wanted to affect.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Aiming high to strike the centre

Therefore, my hypothesis is that the *Prince* can be read as an *enchiridion pontificis*, handbook and weapon at the same time, to be given to the Medici Pope, by whom Machiavelli hoped and asked to be “used”,<sup>5</sup> even in favour of the Papacy. Hence, the *Prince* became a double-edged knife, at the same time religious and irreverent, encomiastic and technical, meant to grant earthly power to the pontifical centaur, the Pope, the temporal and sacral “great animal” which was its actual target. If the Pope was the actual recipient of the treatise, as the real theological *caput* of the Church and the Medici family,<sup>6</sup> why did Machiavelli not address it directly to him? I think there were obvious reasons of courtly hierarchy and religious expediency for that: it would have been disrespectful for a layman, who had been recently imprisoned on serious charges, to address the sacred head of Christianity directly without going through the mediation of his lay relatives

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gabriele Pedullà, “Introduzione”, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe* (Roma: Donzelli, 2022<sup>2</sup>), CXCIX-CC, for the need to interpret Machiavelli with the cultural categories of his age, not yet marked by the double watershed of the French Revolution and the Romanticism.

<sup>5</sup> See the letter to Francesco Vettori (April 16, 1513): “Io non posso credere che essendo maneggiato il caso mio con qualche destrezza, che non mi riesca essere adoperato a qualche cosa, se non per conto di Firenze, almeno per conto di Roma e del pontificato; nel qual caso io doverrei essere meno sospetto [...] Né posso credere, se la Santità di Nostro Signore cominciasse a adoperarmi, che io non facessi bene a me, et utile et onore a tutti li amici mia” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere*, n. 226, v. 2, 931-932).

<sup>6</sup> See Francesco Vettori, *Lettera a Machiavelli del 12 luglio 1513*, in Machiavelli, *Lettere*, n. 233, v. II, 985-994, in part. 987-989: “E cominciando al papa, diremo che il fine suo sia mantenere la Chiesa nella riputatione l'ha trovata, non volere che diminuisca di stato, se già quello che li diminuissi non lo consegnassi a' sua, cioè a Giuliano e Lorenzo, a' quali in ogni modo pensa dare stati [...] Che voglia dare stato a' parenti, lo monstra che così hanno fatto e' papi passati, Callisto [III, Borgia], Pio [II, Piccolomini], Sisto [IV, Della Rovere], Innocenzio [VIII, Cibo], Alessandro [VI] et Iulio [III]; et chi non l'ha fatto, è restato per non potere. Oltre a questo, si vede che questi suoi a Firenze pensano poco, che è segno che hanno fantasia a stati che sieno fermi e dove non abbino a pensare continuo a dondolare uomini. Non voglio entrare in consideratione quali stati disegni, perché in questo muterà proposito, secondo la occasione”.

and without having been formally instructed or asked; it would have been unacceptable to openly present to the vicar of Christ the dys/human nature, meaning, both human and beastly, of the politician, forced to operate murderous violence, deception, and violation of the Christian faith. Machiavelli offers a technical work to the lay people, who, in the field, are called upon to deal with the actual construction of a principality. However, using Machiavelli's own metaphor, one could say that the centre of the target of the dedication of the treatise (Giuliano de' Medici, then Lorenzo) can only be hit by aiming higher (to Leo/Moses, the head of the Medici House):

No one should be astonished if in the following discussion of completely new principdoms and of the prince and of government, I bring up the noblest examples [...] he will act like prudent archers, who, seeing that the mark they plan to hit is too far away and knowing what space can be covered by the power of their bows, take an aim much higher than their mark, not in order to reach with their arrows so great a height, but to be able, with the aid of so high an aim, to attain their purpose.<sup>7</sup>

The political, military, temporal dimension can be attained only through the understanding and captation<sup>8</sup> of the theological-political power which governs it: Moses as an armed prophet. The pontiff, however, is by no means the inert ultimate donor of the treatise, but also its paradoxical inspirer, since only the historical equivocal identity of the Renaissance pontiff, Christian and Roman, peaceful and warlike, could account for the *Prince*, who pretended to recognise and declare the ruthless

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

<sup>8</sup> The courtly intention of the metaphor of the "higher" aim is confirmed by the daring *Dedica a Lorenzo*, where he who is at the bottom ("il popolare") declares that he can see from afar the reality of the top better than he who is at the top ("il principe"). The invitation addressed to the prince, however, is to lower his gaze, redeeming the popular instrument that asks to be used: "E se vostra Magnificenzia da lo apice della sua altezza qualche volta volgerà li occhi in questi luoghi bassi, conoscerà quanto io indegnamente sopporti una grande e continua malignità di fortuna" (Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 7).

laws of a purely earthly politics active in the same supreme claim to the sacred foundation of the state, of history, of ethics, in short, of the “just” order of the human.<sup>9</sup> The ruthless phenomenology of power founded on violence and deception, was all the more lucid and serious, hence cynical and desecrating, the more sublime the “test sample” was: the vicar of Christ, who claimed to deploy the ultimate redemptive meaning of the political power. Indeed, the “impure” nature of the politician was manifested by the same ambiguous ideological strategy of sacredly justified ecclesiastical temporal empowerment and the particularized promotion of earthly claims, directed to the magnification of one’s family, albeit redeemed by the “mission” of liberating church and Italy from the “impious” foreign occupation. A power that asserts itself as sacred and Christianly inspired, but aims to build an earthly and *particular* greatness at all costs, justifying it as a virtuous and glorious endeavor, capable of reincarnating the greatness of classical models, is “Machiavellian” before Machiavelli. Italy – elected by God as the providential See of Rome centre of Christianity and culmination of classical antiquity – was therefore asked to recognize the Renaissance Papacy as a very equivocal *caput*, with the ambition to incarnate all in one the inheritance of Jewish history, Christian revelation and the Roman greatness. But which element was dominant and which was recessive in the Roman pontiff? Which Rome prevailed? Did Moses, the armed prophet, not reveal the “earthly” substance of the heavenly form, the knife of prophecy, the “sensible” (insofar as political and violent)<sup>10</sup> truth of Christian messianism, which claimed instead to be the ultimate spiritual meaning, the theologically pure reality of which the Jewish leader was the *typus*? Is Moses, in short, not the principle of the theological-political realm, which is consistent to the ancient Roman element, rather than to the eschatological spiritual truth of Christ? Did the papacy’s claim to theological

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<sup>9</sup> Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, ed. by Costantino Panigada (Bari: Laterza, 1929) then ed. by Silvana Seidel Menchi (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), book IV, chap. XII, vol. I, 427-428, recognises a genetic corruptive turning point in the Renaissance Papacy starting with Eugene IV’s successors, who became more and more secular princes rather than Christian Popes.

<sup>10</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. by Giorgio Inglese (Milano: Rizzoli, 2000<sup>5</sup>), 17: “E chi legge la Bibbia sensatamente vedrà Moisè essere stato forzato, a volere che le sue leggi e che i suoi ordini andassero innanzi, ad ammazzare infiniti uomini, i quali non mossi da altro che dalla invidia si opponevano a’ disegni suoi. Questa necessità conosceva benissimo frate Girolamo Savonerola”.

absoluteness not conceal a purely earthly ideology of imperialist assertion? Certainly, for Machiavelli, papal ideology aids the deconstruction of the theological-political construct, hence the definition of a politics which is capable of staring at the deadly secret, the empty bottom of power and its pretended sacred foundation,<sup>11</sup> in order to generate greatness: precisely because it is necessary to aim high and hit a difficult target, one should plant their feet “properly” on the ground, knowing how to enter evil, recognise the emptiness, the fortune, and the will to power, that even the supposed apex of history presupposes.

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

[...] Warfare became a regular business. [...] A papal territory was likewise formed. There, also, a very large number of rulers had made themselves independent; by degrees they all became subject to the one rule of the pope. How such a subjugation was absolutely justified in terms of ethics is evident from Machiavelli's celebrated work *The Prince*.<sup>12</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Riccardo Caporali, “Immagini di Mosè (in Machiavelli e Spinoza),” *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* 16, 1 (2014): 67-91, 90. <https://www.openstarts.units.it/entities/publication/910e097a-48ca-43bb-b4df-5aadd6bcc99a/details>.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History: Complete and Unabridged*, tr. Ruben Alvarado (Aalten: Wordbridge Publishing, 2011), 365.

<sup>13</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, III, 1, Eng. tr. in Gilbert, v. I, 419.

and material power of the papal state that, through his father, he had been fortunate enough to “embody”, albeit in a purely earthly perspective.



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

Similarly, the lay heir of the House of Medici (Giuliano, later Lorenzo) to whom the treatise is dedicated must also be interpreted as the “instrument” through which “the prince of the Church” (chapter XXVI,8), the real “head” of the family, Leo X is urged to prevail as temporal sovereign of Italian history and main character of the European scene. It is no

coincidence, then, that between 1525 and 1527, as the Medici lay heirs (Alessandro and Ippolito, the illegitimate sons of Clement VII and Giuliano) were still little more than children, the “person” of Italy’s liberator and redeemer would be recapitulated, albeit with a failed outcome, in Clement VII himself: the “instrumento” would be reabsorbed into the “capo stesso”, the spiritual and temporal leader.



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