

“Singulis Etruriae populis”: The Political Mobilization of the Etruscan Foundation Myth in the Self-Conception of Renaissance Florence

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“How the humbled Lucumones of the great Etruscan commonwealth must have cursed the despotic levellers who demolished their government, destroyed their nationality, and obliterated their very existence!”

– E. C. Hamilton Gray, *Tour to the Sepulchres of Etruria* in 1839, 288 (London, 1843)¹

Introduction

As Florence became more imperially motivated and ideologically independent during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, Florentine humanists increasingly sought to promote the city’s allegedly autochthonous Etruscan origins, rather than claim any direct ancestral lineage from Ancient Rome. In making this historiographical shift, writers, including Giovanni Villani, Dante Alighieri, and Leonardo Bruni, strove to distance Florence—both ideologically and historically—from Roman influence, to provide an historical precedent for the aristocratic governing structure, and to present an ancient justification for a Florentine-led Tuscan imperial league. Yet, for Florentines, especially members of the ruling class, associating themselves with Etruscans also meant identifying themselves, quite undeniably, as the vanquished party in the ancient struggle against Rome. Recognizing the political precarity of relying on the Etruscan example, Niccolò Machiavelli, in contrast, attempted to dismiss the humanist and aristocratic claims on an ancient Florentine exceptionalism. In this refusal to romanticize the “ancient Tuscans,” Machiavelli challenges the prevailing historiographical assumption at the time that past glory and ancestral heritage determine the political trajectory of a regime. The changing status of the Etruscan foundation myth, then, not only makes manifest the frantic search for identity and turbulent political landscape of Renaissance Florence, but also offers important insight on how humanists mobilized or evaded history for the advancement of their political agendas and collective objectives.

This paper traces the changing historiographic status of the Etruscan foundation myth between late medieval and early modern Florence through the lens of the region’s prominent writers, scholars, and historians. Not only does the historicity of the myth prove to be quite malleable and contingent on socio-political context, but the study of history itself takes on various roles—*e.g.* an indictment of contemporary Florentine factionalism in the mid-fourteenth century, an endorsement of anti-papal politics and a celebration of city pride at the dawn of the Renaissance, a comparative lens on the development of Florentine political institutions, or as propaganda for the de’ Medici aristocratic regime. Whereas early Florentine writers saw the ancient Etruscans as forecasting the present conditions *for better or worse*, Machiavelli challenged this view, arguing that the modern Tuscans have little to do with their ancient “predecessors.”

¹ Elizabeth C. Gray, *Tour to the Sepulchres of Etruria, in 1839* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1843), 288.

The paper begins by considering the historical power of the “foundation myth” in regards to Roman inheritance and hegemony in the Florentine imagination. In the subsequent section, there is a discussion of the first mobilizations of the truly “Etruscan” foundation myth grounded in Florentine Thought. Sections III-V detail how the use of supposed Florentine “autochthony” lent support to the current regime in power and its imperial policies. Section VI summarizes the role humanists and public historians, especially those sponsored by the leading oligarchs, played in Renaissance historiography and mythmaking. The section that follows examines how Niccolò Machiavelli broke with the historiographic convention to provide a “dispassionate analysis” of the “ancient Tuscans” while exploring the normative political advice Machiavelli has for his fellow Florentines. The paper concludes with a brief recapitulation of the changing role and power of history, and of foundation myths in particular, in late medieval and early modern Florence.

I. The Power of the Roman Foundation Myth

“Sed debebatur, ut opinor, fatis tantae origo urbis maximique secundum deorum opes imperii principium” (“But in my view the fates ordained the founding of this great city and the beginning of the world's mightiest empire”), Livy begins, describing the providential circumstances that led to the foundation of Rome. He continues, “Romulum Remumque cupido cepit in iis locis ubi expositi ubique educati erant urbis condendae” (“Romulus and Remus conceived the desire of founding a city”), a city that became an empire, which, now in power was “second only to the power of the gods.”² In this way, Rome was, from its origins, blessed with a divine sanction and strong human drive for the creation and build-up of the city, and later, the empire. Florence, on the other hand, had no such ancient creation myth on which to lean to inspire its political development, or to guide it towards a heavenly greatness.

In the late Middle Ages, however, several Florentine chroniclers appeared, seeking to give their city ancient legitimacy by locating Florence’s historical rise within the context of Roman expansion. In the *Chronica de origine civitatis Florentiae* (1205; Chronicle of the Origin of the City of Florence), for example, a Florentine cleric contends that Julius Caesar founded the city to honor his friend, Florus, who had died there, protecting Rome from the invasion of Catilinarian forces.³ In this account, Florence, from its very foundation, is honorably linked to the security and perpetuation of the Roman name. In 1230, Sanzanome’s *Gesta Florentinorum* (Deeds of the Florentines) repeats the same myth, adding that, given the Roman origin of the “nobilissima civitas Florentia” (“most noble city of Florence”), the city is well-occasioned by God to live up to its origins (“cum eius occasione Florentia sumpsisset originem”) and collect the highest ruling privileges (“collectabantur excellentioribus privilegiis”).⁴ These early historical narratives, then, not only reveal how members of the *comune* conceived of themselves and their polity, but also how an ancient foundation was thought to determine and condition the present values and goals of the regime. To Nicolai Rubinstein, this novel “awakening of the interest in history” represents “the

² Livy, *The Rise of Rome: Books One to Five*, trans. T. J. Luce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, UK, 1998); Livy, *History of Rome*, trans. B. O. Foster (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1919). The translations are those of Luce and Foster.

³ Riccardo Chellini, ed., *Chronica de origine civitatis Florentiae*, 1st ed. (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 2009).

⁴ Sanzanome, *Sanzanomis Gesta Florentinorum. Chronica de origine civitatis. Florenz bis zum Anfang des 12. Jahrhunderts*, trans. Otto Hartwig, 1st ed. (Marburg: N.G. Elwer’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1875), 30. Translated by the author.

earliest indications of political ideology” and “[is] inseparable from the observation of existing conditions and from the expression of prevailing ideas.”⁵ Like Rome, the chroniclers argued, Florence too had a noble origin and grand design; the new age of political growth and expansion was a direct effect of the city’s Roman heritage.

This myth became so widely-held that, by 1307, Dante could uncontroversially proclaim Florence to be “la bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma, Fiorenza” (“the most beautiful and the most famous daughter of Rome”), even after his exile.⁶ Yet, in making this claim, Dante also contradicts the assertions of numerous classical historians, who considered the Etruscans, a non-Latin Italic people, to have been the original founders of the Tuscany. Pliny the Elder suggests that the Etruscans descended from the Raeti in the Alps,⁷ whereas Dionysius of Halicarnassus contends that the Etruscans had an autochthonous origin: “κινδυνεύουσι γὰρ τοῖς ἀληθέσι μᾶλλον εἰκότα λέγειν οἱ μηδαμόθεν ἀφιγμένον, ἀλλ’ ἐπιχώριον τὸ ἔθνος ἀποφαίνοντες, ἐπειδὴ ἀρχαῖόν τε πάνυ καὶ οὐδενὶ ἄλλῳ γένει οὔτε ὁμόγλωσσον οὔτε ὁμοδαίτον ὄν εὐρίσκεται” (Indeed [it is most truthful that] the [Etruscan] nation migrated from nowhere else, but was native to the country”). Later, he describes in detail the “καὶ πολιτευμάτων οὓς τινας κατεστήσαντο κόσμους, δυνάμιν τε ὅποσιν οἱ σύμπαντες καὶ ἔργα εἴ τινα μνήμης ἄξια διεπράξαντο, τύχαις τε ὁποίαις ἐχρήσαντο” (“forms of government they established, how great power they acquired, what memorable achievements they performed, and what fortunes attended them”).⁸ In short, the Etruscans were a decorated people, known well into the Middle Ages, even if not as highly regarded as the Romans.

Given the array of classical sources that attest to the Etruscan civilization, why did early Florentine chroniclers tend not to draw upon this example? Foundation myths, especially ones that appealed to autochthony, were well-known from classical sources to be potent avenues for the creation and perpetuation of socially-cohesive and prosperous societies. Athenian citizenship, famously, was so tied to the land that Isocrates claimed “αὐτόχθονες ὄντες καὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων τοῖς αὐτοῖς, οἷσπερ τοὺς οἰκειοτάτους (“[we] address our city by the very names which we apply to our nearest kin”).⁹ Later, ancient Roman mythmakers, though not technically drawing on Roman autochthony, still “placed emphasis on repeated acts of selection, [sacrifice,] and commitment” to the territory when defining the paragons of Roman virtue.¹⁰ The Florentines, it seemed, were spoiling a historically well-attested strategy to draw on indigenous history to drum up support for an independent, imperial regime. According to Hans Baron, however, “the fact that Florence had not only a Roman but an Etruscan past had never been totally forgotten in Tuscany...but the recognition of this fact remained unfruitful so long as Rome was believed to be the sole source of political and cultural greatness.”¹¹ Etruria, for all its local greatness, was still surpassed by Rome as the political and cultural mother of Tuscany.

⁵ Nicolai Rubinstein, “The Beginnings of Political Thought in Florence - A Study in Mediaeval Historiography,” in *Editoria Italiana Online*, ed. Giovanni Ciappelli (Rome: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 2004) 1. See also: Nicolai Rubinstein, *Machiavelli e le origini di Firenze* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1967), 959.

⁶ Dante Alighieri, “The Convivio,” in *Readings in European History: From the breaking up of the Roman empire to the Protestant revolt*, ed. James H. Robinson, trans. C. E. Norton (Cambridge: Ginn & Company, 1904), 1.3.4, 524.

⁷ Pliny, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. John Bostock (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2012), III.20

⁸ Dionysius, *Antiquitates Romanae Books I-XX*, ed. Karl Jacoby (Leipzig: Lipsiae: Teubner, 1995). Translation from: Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities*, trans. Stephen Usher (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library), 1974, I.30.

⁹ Isocrates, *Isocrates*, trans. George Norlin. (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1980), 4.24-4.25.

¹⁰ Mary Jaeger, “Agriculture and Identity in Roman Myth,” in *A Companion to Greek Democracy and the Roman Republic*, ed. Dean Hammer (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 83-98, 97.

¹¹ Hans Baron, “A Changed Perspective,” in *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism, Volume 1: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 43-67, 53.

II. Early Mobilizations Of The Etruscan Myth

Despite the preeminence of Roman history, and even without holding up Etruscans as examples, early Florentine writers could not completely ignore their classically assigned lineage. For Dante, it was not the ignorance of the Etruscans, but a “deliberate exclusion” that kept them frequently “unnamed and unglorified” in his works.¹² He chose to depict Florence as the daughter of Rome, not necessarily out of loyalty to the ancient republic, but rather out of personal antipathy towards Tuscany, from which he had been banished. In *Inferno*, where Dante directly engages with Etruscan leaders, he assigns them positions in hell and accuses them of sowing the seeds of the factional violence in Florence that would eventually lead to his exile.¹³ Here the poet does not ignore the Etruscans, and instead suggests that they were the cause of the city’s strife.

Similarly, in his *Nuova Cronica* (1300), Giovanni Villani calls on the Etruscan example to explain the factional struggles in Florence at the time, but goes further than Dante in granting them a regional consciousness and independent Tuscan genealogy—a lineage that, somewhat surprisingly, later begets Rome. According to Villani, the two sons of the legendary Etruscan King Atlas each founded a city. One established Fiesole, a Tuscan city, and the other, Troy, the birthplace of Aeneas, the legendary progenitor of Rome.¹⁴ Here, despite his apparent Tuscan pride, Villani is unwilling to liberate himself from Roman bias. He prefers to shoehorn the legendary foundation of Rome into the foundation myth of Florence, instead of assigning the latter an autonomous, decidedly non-Roman Etruscan origin. Although this myth puts the Etruscans ahead of the Romans, it denies them the accomplishment of having truly “founded” Florence.

Villani’s account also carried politically informative implications: according to the chronicler, when the Romans came to battle with the Fiesolans, their arrival reignited primordial sibling tensions, such that now it “[non è da maravigliare che] i Fiorentini sono sempre in guerra e in disensione tra loro, essendo stratti e nati di due popoli così contrari e nemici e diversi di costumi, come furono gli nobili Romani virtudiosi, e’ Fiesolani ruddi e aspri di guerra” (“is not to be wondered that the Florentines are always at war and strife among themselves, being born and descended from two peoples [the Fiesolans and Romans] so contrary and hostile and different in habits as were the noble Romans in their virtue and the rude Fiesolans fierce in war”).¹⁵

Villani and Dante’s accounts of the Etruscans, then, point to a novel historiographical trend during the late Middle Ages. These early writers mobilized historical legends and foundation myths, like that of Etruria, not to define a regional identity, but rather to blame forbearers for

¹² Lucy Shipley, “Guelphs, Ghibellines and Etruscans: Archaeological Discoveries and Civic Identity in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Tuscany,” *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 23, no. 1 (2013): 4-9, 4.

¹³ In particular, at Canto XV.73-78, Dante writes: “Faccian le bestie fiesolane strame / di lor medesme, e non tocchin la pianta, / s’alcuna surge ancora in lor letame, / in cui riviva la sementa santa / di que’ Roman che vi rimaser quando / fu fatto il nido di malizia tanta” (“For let the beasts of Fiesole find forage / among themselves, and leave the plant alone— / if still, among their dung, it rises up— / in which there lives again the sacred seed / of those few Romans who remained in Florence / when such a nest of wickedness was built”). Later in XX.46-51, Dante condemns to the *bolgia* the Etruscan soothsayer Aruns, who, according to Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, had predicted the Caesar’s victory in civil war against Pompey. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: A Verse Translation*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1986). Italian edition: Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. C. H. Grandgent and C. S. Singleton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹⁴ Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica; Edizione critica a cura di Giuseppe Porta*, ed. Giuseppe Porta (Parma: Ugo Guanda Editore, 1991), 12-16. Translation from: Giovanni Villani, *Villani’s Chronicle Being Selections from the First Nine Books of the Croniche Fiorentine of Giovanni Villani*, ed. Philip Wicksteed. trans. Rose E. Selfe (London: Good Press, 2019), 8-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §38, 108.

various modern political problems and woes. In this era, the Florentine “foundation myth” is not a stable “truth” embossed in ancient tradition and legend, as it had been in Athens and Rome, but instead rhetorical fodder that both explains and exemplifies the political disposition of the contemporary regime.¹⁶ Thus, although “[Villani’s] description of the first foundation of Florence by the Romans is probably closer to historical truth,” Rubinstein writes, “the main point stressed by the *Chronica* is...[Florence’s] legendary construction.”¹⁷ Villani’s coy inclusion of the Etruscans, then, reflects not his own personal attachment to the ancient society, but rather his need for a sympathetic scapegoat to explain modern Florentine factionalism. Florentine writers during this era thus found a way to adopt, justify, and embrace their Etruscan past, even as they subtly pushed against it.

III. Babylonian Captivity And Tuscan Irredentism

Despite this increased willingness to engage with Etruscan history during the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries, however, it was still more politically astute for the Florentines “to downplay the importance of the Etruscans, and to present themselves as closely linked to Rome.”¹⁸ Not only were the Etruscans, who were perceived as pagan barbarians, “not a people to credit with the foundation of Italian cities,” but, more pragmatically, emphasizing the city’s independent origins also cast into doubt the strength of the city’s pro-papal Guelph stance. “During this period,” Lucy Shipley writes, “the victorious Guelph party had divided into two factions, one of which, the ‘White’ Guelphs, had been expelled from the city by the victorious ‘Black’ Guelphs, who were more loyal to the papacy and fanatical in its support, and ensured the kind of continued loyalty to the vision of ancient Rome.”¹⁹ Although the historical knowledge of Etruscan society began to be treated in a manner similar to that of ancient Rome, any headway towards the complete identification with or mobilization of a truly autochthonous Florentine myth was tempered by present papal politics. Knowledge of the Etruscans was thus never forgotten, but also could not be publicly deployed beyond regional curiosity or aesthetic appeal.

However, the relocation of the Pope to Avignon (1309-1377) and the modest success of Florentine regional expansion over northern Italy during the War of Eight Saints (1375-1378) “eroded Florentine papal allegiance and replaced it with confidence and self-reliance.”²⁰ With these changes, the Florentine relationship to the Etruscans and the Romans inverts: the Florentines no longer needed to rely on Rome to motivate or justify their imperial ambitions. Ironically, it is Livy himself who provides the ample historical fodder for what would emerge as Tuscan irredentism: “quamquam tanta opibus Etruria erat ut iam non terras solum sed mare etiam per totam Italiae longitudinem ab Alpibus ad fretum Siculum fama nominis sui inplesset” (“Etruria was then so powerful that its fame had filled both land and sea throughout the entire length of Italy, from the Alps to the Sicilian strait”).²¹ It is not unsurprising, then, that “the next explicit reference

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of the difference between foundational “legend,” as operated in ancient Athens and Rome, versus foundational “myth,” see: Craig B. Champion, “Imperial Ideologies, Citizenship Myths, and Legal Disputes in Classical Athens and Republican Rome,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012). In particular see pages 85-87 and 94-97.

¹⁷ Rubinstein, 7.

¹⁸ Shipley, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ Livy, *The Rise of Rome*, I.2.

to the Etruscans materialised” in the context of Florentine regional (re-)conquest of territory loosely allied to the Roman-led papal states.²²

In his letter to the Perugians in 1383, for example, Coluccio Salutati, chancellor to the city of Florence, explicitly draws upon Livy’s text, inciting his fellow Tuscans to join his city in reconquering all the “divinarum et umanarum rerum” (“divine and human things”) of Etruria’s ancient past.²³ Salutati’s reference to this glory was, according to Giovanni Cipriani, “l’esplicito richiamo di Salutati alla passata dottrina...era un invito per il presente, l’indicazione di una via da seguire” (“the explicit recall to the past doctrine was an invitation for the present, the indication of a path necessary to follow”).²⁴ To Salutati, the Tuscans were a “singulis Etruriae populis” (single Etruscan people)—definitively not Roman—and as such, they owed it to their forbearers to reclaim the splendor of their past and “di lottare, in nome dei suoi antichi ideali, contro ogni forma di tirannide” (“to fight, in the name of ancient ideals, against every form of tyranny”).²⁵ This meant not only reclaiming lost Etruscan lands through domestic alliances, such as with Perugians, but also fighting, as their liberty-loving ancestors did, against the expansion of Roman hegemony in the Tuscan region, embodied in that moment by the papal-allied Milanese Duke Gian Galeazzo Visconti. Salutati’s mobilization of the Etruscan imagery did not relate to Florentine foundation as such, but rather “offered its heirs a historical precedent for aggrandizement and possibly, therefore, a legitimation of ambitions to the political leadership of the peninsula.”²⁶ Florence, in this way, represented not only the city and its people, but also served as a symbol of the struggle against tyranny and a testament to the endurance of ancient ideals.

Although the “association between the Etruscans and the values of erudition and independence...increased as the Florentine Renaissance developed from the wreckage of the fourteenth century,” the domestic political implications of a distinct Etruscan heritage were hard to make out.²⁷ Foundation myths, according to Nico Roymans, work “by means of creative adaptation,” where “relationships and group identities from the present are projected back into the past to become part of the collective memory.”²⁸ The Roman model, ironically, played a fundamental role in the Florentines’ collective imagination—largely due to humanists’ own desire to associate themselves with classical models. In Leonardo Bruni’s *Laudatio Florentinae urbis* (1403; Praise for the City of Florence), for example, he not only declares Florence to be the daughter of “Vobis autem populus Romanus, orbis terrarum victor dominusque, est auctor” (“Roman people—the lord and conqueror of the entire world”)—but uses a classical Athenian panegyric form, modeled after Aelius Aristides’ *Panathenaicus*, to celebrate the Florentine public and motivate its imperial ambitions.²⁹ The image of the free city-state of Florence—heir to

²² Shipley, 3.

²³ Coluccio Salutati, *Lini Coluci Pieri Salutati Epistolae, Vol. 2*, ed. Giuseppe Rigacci (Florence: Bibliopola Fiorentina, 1742), 84.

²⁴ Giovanni Cipriani, *Il mito etrusco nel Rinascimento fiorentino* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1980), 3. Translated by the author.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Collins, Amanda L. “The Etruscans in the Renaissance: The Sacred Destiny of Rome and the ‘Historia Viginti Saeculorum’ of Giles of Viterbo (c. 1469-1532),” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 27, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 107-137, 111.

²⁷ Shipley, 4.

²⁸ Nico Roymans, “Hercules and the construction of a Batavian identity in the context of the Roman empire,” in *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity: The Role of Power and Tradition*, eds. Ton Derks and Nico Roymans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 219-238, 220.

²⁹ Latin edition: Leonardo Bruni, *Panegirico della città di Firenze. Testo italiano a fronte di Frate Lazzaro da Padova. Presentazione di Giuseppe De Toffol*, ed. Giuseppe De Toffol, trans. Lazzaro Da Padova (Florence: La Nuova Italia,

the Roman Republic and cultural successor to Athens—dominates the piece and grants the citizens an ancient prestige. The Etruscans, despite their regional hegemony, were hard-pressed to overcome the intellectual influence of more famous classical civilizations.

IV. Autochthonous Politics And Tuscan Identity

Even if the *city* of Florence derived its republican origins from Rome, these origins did not necessarily define the broader cultural and political heritage of the entire *region* of Tuscany. As the Florentine “state” expanded, so too did its perceived progenitors. Within ten years of Bruni’s *Laudatio*, Florence had acquired a modest empire of proud non-Florentines—Perugians, Aretines, Sienese, and, most crucially, Pisans. This expansion of “Tuscan” sovereignty under the Florentine regime necessitated the full conceptualization of a new political subject—the greater Florentine *people*, not just *Florentinae urbis* itself. Thus, in Bruni’s *Historiarum florentini populi* (History of the Florentine People), “the *populus florentinus* is presented as a sovereign entity whose legitimacy is not solely dependent on the Roman legacy. Its true origins can indeed be traced back in time much further than those of Rome itself, back to ancient Etruria.”³⁰ Indeed, if the protagonist of the *Laudatio* is the city of Florence, the protagonist of Bruni’s *History* is the people, “a fact that is also reflected in both title and contents.”³¹ As Bruni explains, the Etruscan people possessed “*imperium longe maximas totius Italiae opes maximamque potentiam, ac prae caeteris vel bello vel pace inclitum nomen etruscorum fuisse*” (“the greatest wealth and power in Italy and the greatest fame in war and peace”). In Bruni’s time, some of Florence’s colonized Tuscan towns—notably Capua and Mantua—acted as “*novo colono repletae memorantur, quarum veluti indices eorum potentiae adhuc extant*” (“a continuing monument to their former power”).³² Etruria, then, was not only illustrious in war, but also regionally-unifying.

Bruni was thus the first to “clearly identify the Florentine state as the modern successor to ancient Etruria.” In making this historiographic shift, Bruni conveniently managed to dismiss any lingering debts owed to Rome for Florence’s ancient foundation. Beyond previous mobilizations of Etruscan imagery, in the *History* Bruni also identifies important parallels between ancient Etrurian domestic politics and modern Florence—parallels that he interprets as both a guide to how Florentine politics ought to be conducted and as the prescribed fate for what would occur. In Book I of his *History*, he records that:

“Totam vero etruscam gentem in duodecim populos divisam fuisse veteres tradidere: sed eos omnes ab initio Rex unus gubernabat. Tandem, ut regia potestas gravior illis visa, ex singulis populis singulos Lucumones (sic enim magistratum vocitabant, qui comuni Consilio totam regeret gentem) creare coeperunt. Eorum unus certo tempore aliis praeerat, ita tamen ut auctoritate et honore, non potentia

1974), 48. Translation from: Leonardo Bruni, “On Civic Humanism - Panegyric to the City of Florence,” in *Florentine Political Writings from Petrarch to Machiavelli*, eds. Mark Jurdjevic, Natasha Piano, and John P. McCormick (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 106-144, 116. For the relationship between Bruni’s *Panegyric* and the *Panegyricus* of Aelius Aristedes, see: Aléssio Alonso Alves, “Reflexões acerca da fundação de Florença na *Laudatio Florentine urbis* de Leonardo Bruni,” *Revista Crítica Histórica* 8, no. 15 (2017): 154-184.

³⁰ Gary Ianziti, “Florence under the Oligarchy,” in *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 89-166, 104.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³² Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People: Books I-I*, trans. James Hankins. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), I.13, 21.

princeps esset.”³³

(“According to ancient sources, the Etruscans consisted of twelve tribes. Originally, however, they all obeyed one king. Eventually, as royal power seemed burdensome to them, each tribe began to elect a separate *Lucumo*, as was called the magistrate who, with the help of a communal council, ruled the whole tribe. One such *Lucumo* came to be supreme over the others, but in prestige only, not in actual power.”)

The parallels to contemporary Florentine politics—the withdrawal from allegiance to the Pope and the Emperor, the polity’s seeming transition to popular self-rule—were obvious to Bruni’s readers. Later, Bruni compares the role of the *lucumones* with the Florentine *podestà*, and lauds the “condordiae fructus esse solet” (“internal concord”) brought by the Etruscan council.³⁴ Although Dante, Villani, and Salutati refer back to Florence’s origins, none of them sees Florence’s ancient foundation as forecasting its present political institutions and conditions as strongly as Bruni does. Here, Bruni presents the Etruscans as a successful, organized, and liberty-loving people that, notably, did not depend on a familial relationship to Rome.

Indeed, “Bruni’s rejection of the version of origins enshrined in the chronicle tradition,” Ianziti writes, “is in fact only the first in a series of steps geared to bringing the city’s history into line with a new set of priorities.”³⁵ Not only were the Romans completely absent from Bruni’s account of the Etruscan origin, but they were also blamed for having stifled the tribe’s ancient liberty and promising political future. “Crescere tamen civitatis pot entiam ac maiorem in modum attolli, romanae magnitudinis vicinitas prohibebat” (“Only the nearness of Rome in her grandeur limited Florentia’s rise to power”), Bruni writes. In this way, “Neque sane lines augere bello poterat sub imperio constituta, nec omnino bella exercere: nec magistratus satis magnifici, quippe eorum iurisdictio intra breves limites claudebatur, et haec ipsa romanis magistratibus erat obnoxia” (“being under imperial rule she could not augment her borders by war, nor indeed wage war at all; nor could she boast splendid magistrates, since their jurisdiction was narrowly circumscribed and subject to Roman officials”).³⁶

These functions, limited by the Romans—the right to wage war, to conquer and administer new territory, and to invest her magistrates with the fullness of power within her dominions—were also, critically, “the very rights and prerogatives that formed the core of the Florentine oligarchy’s claim to sovereignty.”³⁷ The modern ruling aristocrats, then, acted as bastions of ancient Etruscan liberty and self-rule; they were the new *lucumones*, who justly reclaimed power from their malevolent Roman overlords. In this way, Bruni used the Etruscan myth not only to liberate Florence from the ideological baggage associating her with Rome, but also to justify the current aristocratic governing structure—one easily veiled in rhetoric of Etruscan republican self-rule. Bruni’s critical approach to the past thus “mirrors the values of the post-1382 Florentine oligarchy,” those being “territorial expansion throughout Tuscany and the establishment of the Florentine state as a great power with sovereign status...expressed in the motto *libertas*.”³⁸ The Etruscan myth of autochthony thus provided an independent and ancient rationale for the oligarchy’s claims to

³³ Ibid., I.13, 19-21.

³⁴ Ibid., I.13, 21.

³⁵ Ianziti, 105.

³⁶ Bruni, *History of the Florentine People: Books I-IV*, I.10, 17.

³⁷ Ianziti, 105.

³⁸ Ibid., “Conclusion,” 301-313, 303.

Florentine rule over Tuscany, with no need for genealogical legitimization under Roman framework.

V. The Restoration Of King Porsenna

Despite the power of the Etruscan myth of autochthony, rhetorical calls for Tuscany to unite—especially based on its shared Etruscan heritage—still lacked real political draw and, for the fledgling Florentine republic-empire, “the most influential and lasting impact of the Etruscan past on Tuscan Renaissance culture was aesthetic.”³⁹ Although Brunni tried to grant the *lucumones* ancient grandeur, their eminence was barely attested in classical sources. In such sources, they instead appear as nameless, indistinguishable provincial magistrates with no notable victories attributed to their names. Their vagueness diluted any precise political relevance.

Brunni’s novel historiographic method of appealing to the ancient Etruscan past to legitimate the current political structure did not, however, go without notice. Indeed, Brunni’s thesis was taken up, edited, and elaborated upon by successive Florentine leaders—the Medici. What the Etruscans lacked in broad republican appeal, the Medici realized, they nonetheless made up for in a singular monarchial figure: the Tuscan king Porsenna. Lars Porsenna, who was well-attested to have fought bravely and virtuously against the Romans offered to the Medici “a positive exemplar of princely rule.”⁴⁰ Although Porsenna did not stave off the Romans, he was, according to Livy, able to establish peace and mutual understanding between the two societies.⁴¹ Valorizing his persona and myth allowed the Medici to transfer the “image of a sovereign Etruria” from a republican vision, to an absolutist and monarchic one.⁴²

Moreover, the nobility afforded to Porsenna’s reign helped the Medici signal the political position of their regime, “vivifying their aim to restore the grandeur of Florence.”⁴³ Thus, just as Brunni traced the Florentine republic’s origins to the Etruscan *lucumo* council to give historical precedent to the Albizzi oligarchs and attest to Florence’s historical empire, the Medici “claim[ed direct] descent from Porsenna” to signify their present political aims. The election of Giovanni de’ Medici as Pope Leo X in 1513 and the political ascendance of his brother, Giuliano, over Florence, also conveniently allowed the Medici to position themselves as fulfilling Porsenna’s legacy and restoring “what the de Medici wanted others to perceive as their traditional inheritance: the lands between the Tiber and the Arno Rivers that were occupied by their Etruscan ancestors.”⁴⁴ Giovanni and Giuliano thus drew upon the Etruscan foundation myth to position themselves as the new saviors of ancient Etruscan hegemony, which finally extended to the present Roman domain. In this way, the Medici were largely able to reject Brunni’s complete condemnation of Rome, while otherwise appropriating his historiographical method—his appeal to Tuscan unity, regional

³⁹ Collins, 112. On the aesthetic importance of the Etruscans to modern Tuscan identity, Collins writes: “The language and art of the Etruscans, it would seem, offered a model of Tuscan ‘origins’ and of ‘precedents’ to both periods—ancient and medieval—of cultural renaissance. I do not mean to suggest that a revival of Etruscan aesthetics or studies of the original Tuscan language and beliefs played a greater part in Renaissance elite culture of the fifteenth century than did the philosophical or artistic heritage of ancient Greece. But such a revival did play a role in what we might call Tuscan ‘self-expression’: it has been demonstrated satisfactorily that Etruscan visual motifs may be found throughout the work of fifteenth-century architects, sculptors and painters” (110).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴¹ Livy, *Rise of Rome*, I.4.

⁴² Cipriani, 23.

⁴³ Erik Schoonhoven, “A literary invention: the Etruscan myth in early Renaissance Florence,” *Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 4 (2010): 459-471, 464.

⁴⁴ Shipley, 1.

superiority, and self-proclaimed self-rule.

The propagandistic use of Etruscan imagery came to an apex under the *Accademia Fiorentina*, a state-sponsored Medici institution that promoted apocryphal Florentine foundation myths.⁴⁵ In his pseudo-archeological treatise *Antiquitatum Variarum* (1498), Annio da Viterbo, for example, “gave Tuscany a cultural and religiously superior status, equal to that of the Holy Land and the Roman Empire...[claiming] that, after the deluge, Noah had settled in Italy and adopted the name of Janus (Vertumno in Etruscan), where he and his descendants established their culture, religion and cities.”⁴⁶ Though the legend was criticized even shortly after its publication, the *Accademia* brought it into popular favor once again under Medici sponsorship. The promotion of the myth demonstrates the extent to which the Medici attempted to manipulate public historical consciousness in order to defend the superiority of the Etruscan people and their right to rule. Another myth, promoted by Leo X and supported by forged Etruscan runes, purported that Hercules had founded Florence and begun the Medicean lineage.⁴⁷ These attempts to manipulate the Etruscan foundation “related as much to the city’s past as to contemporary scholarly debates, the promotion of Florentine cultural supremacy, and, ultimately, praising the Medici with their grandiose visions of Florentine history.”⁴⁸ Unlike Bruni’s *History*, these apocryphal myths did not forecast or reveal any specific political insights about the governing regime, but served only to lend mythical support to predetermined theses about Florence’s past.

VI. Historiographical Foundations And Humanist Myths

“Historiam vero,” writes Bruni, “in qua tot simul rerum longa et continuata ratio sit habenda, causaeque factorum omnium singulatim explicandae, et de quaque re iudicium in medio proferendum” (“History requires at once a long and connected narrative, causal explanation of each particular event, and the public expression of one’s judgment about every issue”).⁴⁹ For civic humanists, including Bruni himself, history was not an abstract concept; it had precise, undeniable human origins that logically led to tangible political outcomes. The very existence of the Etrurian myth meant that Bruni could not downplay or ignore it. Instead, it had to be understood in the context of, and as the context for, the contemporary regime. Thus, Bruni’s concern in his *History* is not “to espouse a normative political conception of justice or right,” but “to demonstrate the

⁴⁵ For a more detailed explanation of the *Accademia Fiorentina* and its aims, see: Judith Bryce, “The Oral World of the Early Accademia Fiorentina,” *Renaissance Studies* 9, no. 1 (1995): 77-103. On the political aspects of the group, see Inge M. Werner, “Antonfrancesco Grazzini ‘Il Lasca’ (1505-1584) and the Burlesque Poetry, Performance and Academic Practice in Sixteenth-Century Florence,” PhD diss., Universiteit Utrecht, 2009. Werner writes that “to Cosimo and to several men of letters the founding of this Academy satisfied a need: the time was ripe for a formally constituted literary society that tickled the imagination of many. The Academy provided the regime with a propaganda machine” (37).

⁴⁶ Schoonhoven, 463. See also: Joannes A. Viterbiensis, *Antiquitatum variarum voluminal*, ed. Eucharius Silber (Rome: Johannes Parvus, 1512), Liber V, Folio XLVII.

⁴⁷ Collins, 135. “Giles portrayed [Leo X, and thus, the preceding Medici] as the ultimate manifestation of God’s purpose for the Etruscan people, and the herald of the last things, i.e., of the twentieth of the twenty ages of the *Historia*. The name Leo, of course, was inextricably woven into Etruscan history through the connection with Hercules’ insignia, the lion skin; the Aramaic name of which, according to Annio, survived in the name of the river Arno, on which Florence lies.” Likewise, according to Schoonhoven, “Although the quality of [Viterbo’s] work came to be doubted during the sixteenth century, the legend remained popular, particular under the reign of Cosimo I de’ Medici (1519–1574)” (463).

⁴⁸ Caroline S. Hillard, “An Alternative Antiquity: The Etruscans in Renaissance Florence and Rome.” PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2009, 203.

⁴⁹ Bruni, *History of the Florentine People: Books I-IV*, Preface, 5.

historically-grounded character of the Florentine state's interests and to offer practical counsel."⁵⁰ History was not as malleable as the Medici mythmakers of the *Accademia Fiorentina* asserted, but it also was not completely neutral in its manifestations.

All Florentine historiographers, Caroline Hillard argues, must therefore be understood as the “creators of ideologies, or myths...that organize experiences, aspirations, fears, and memories into more or less coherent accounts of how the world is perceived to be and how it ought to be,” but, importantly “not how it actually is.”⁵¹ The view of history they espoused was proto-deterministic: communal past glory and ancestral heritage were seen to both justify contemporary politics and determine the long-term political trajectory of a regime. In this way, they shared an aim with the Medici mouthpieces; the only difference between their accounts, then, was the actual, verifiable historicity of their subject. Whereas the members of the *Accademia Fiorentina* were able to weave fictitious stories, Brunni, as Florence's publicly-sponsored historian, sought to appear more objective.⁵² Still, there were limits to the truth-value of Brunni's Etruscan narrative, as he was supported by the Albizzi oligarchs. Gary Ianziti writes:

“Brunni and his fellow humanists were for the most part closely associated with the inner circle of the Italian ruling elites. Their job descriptions as humanists required them, among other duties, to elaborate accounts of the past that would be compatible with the needs and tastes of their readership...[Therefore] it needs to be recognized that Brunni's critical insights were intimately linked to an exceptional political moment. They were also accompanied by the elaboration of new mythologies, geared to the interests of the ruling elites, and destined to become a powerful tool in their hands.”⁵³

In this way, the pseudo-historical “foundation myth” became an essential tool for Florentine statecraft even as it adapted to new historiographic methods for narrating, explaining, and legitimating the city's political structure and imperial pursuits. In Florence's case, the myth of Etrurian autochthony was initially promulgated solely to oppose Roman authority; only later was it deliberately promoted by Florentine elites to lend historical validity to the inchoate regime's aristocratic government, imperial ambition, and claims to regional sovereignty. The myth of a sovereign Etruria became, in all its intents and purposes, an elite-sponsored political juggernaut, invoked only to legitimate a series of relatively unpopular, aristocratically-imposed Florentine regimes. Subject cities—notably Mantua—resisted the myth, whereas the citizen-led Florentine regimes hardly felt the need to invoke to their supposed Etruscan forbearers to legitimate their rule.⁵⁴ Etruscanology—as both archeological study, and historiographical investigation—became

⁵⁰ Richard Devetak, “Historiographical Foundations of Modern International Thought: Histories of the European States-System from Florence to Göttingen,” *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 1 (September 2014): 62-77, 67.

⁵¹ Caroline S. Hillard, “Mythic Origins, Mythic Archaeology: Etruscan Antiquities in Sixteenth-Century Narratives of the Foundation of Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016): 489-528, 497.

⁵² On Brunni's willingness to upend previous myths, see also: Gary Ianziti, “Leonardo Brunni: First Modern Historian?” *Parergon* 14, no. 2 (January 1997): 85-99. “Brunni's critique of city legends is not dictated by some abstract concern to ‘discover the truth about the past;’ it springs from the need to project a version of the city's past which will correspond to the requirements of a new ruling formation” (94).

⁵³ Gary Ianziti, “Florence under the Oligarchy,” in *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Brunni and the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 89-166, 107.

⁵⁴ See: Angelo Mazzocco, “Dante, Brunni and the Issue of the Origin of Mantua,” *MLN* 127, no. 1 (2012): 257-263, doi:10.1353/mln.2012.0051.

just another political maneuver in the hands of Florence's political and social elite.⁵⁵

This reading of history, John Najemy writes, was not even in the eyes of its promoters “a dispassionate analysis of political realities; it was a normative discourse that couched itself in hortatory and educational rhetoric, even when it ‘described’ the institutions of the republic.”⁵⁶ In order to gain the historical premises needed to validate the presiding regime, humanists and scholars had to manipulate history, choosing which foundation myths to uphold, which to reject, and when to do so. Hence, history became fluid, even for particular authors. In his Funeral Oration for Nanni Strozzi (1427), for example, published roughly a decade after Book I of his *History*, Bruni reverts to Villani’s mixed foundation myth, writing: “Tusci veteres Italiae dominatores, & Romani, qui terrarum omnium virtute fibi & armis imperium pepererunt” (“To the origin of the city the two noblest and most distinguished peoples of all Italy contributed: the Etruscans, who were the ancient lords of Italy, and the Romans, whose virtue and arms enabled them to establish an empire over the world”).⁵⁷ Similarly, Leo X also breaks with the Medicean-Etruscan rhetoric, bestowing on his godson Cosimo the baptismal name *Romolo*, not *Porsenna*, as would be assumed.⁵⁸ In short, as much as the Florentine mythmakers sought to emphasize their autochthony and Tuscan pride, there was no way to obfuscate the truth of the matter: the Etruscans were, culturally and historically, the vanquished.

VII. A Dispassionate Analysis Of The “Ancient Tuscans”

It was another noteworthy Florentine, however—Niccolò Machiavelli—who was critical of these shallow projections of ancient Roman exemplarity onto contemporary Florentine politics. He even went so far as to blame the writers who, “non [avendo] vera cognizione delle storie” (“not having a true knowledge of histories”) could not derive any normative political insight from ancient regimes.⁵⁹ However, though these self-proclaimed “historians” delved deeply into Etruscan history, in Machiavelli’s view, they were choosing the wrong regime to idolize and imitate. “Era dunque...già la Toscana potente, piena di religione e di virtù, aveva i suoi costumi e la sua lingua patria,” Machiavelli asserts, “il che tutto è suto spento dalla potenza romana. Talché...di lei ne

⁵⁵ For discussion for archeological Etruscanology during the Renaissance, see: Andrea M. Gáldy, “Antiquities: power and display of anticaglie at the court of Cosimo I de’ Medici,” *Renaissance and Reformation / New Series* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 45-57. Gáldy writes that: “As in the case of Cosimo’s scrittoio dedicated to the Muses, the earlier Medici study was not an exclusive showcase for antiquities, but they formed an important part of the display. In the Scrittoio della Calliope, Cosimo could present himself as a collector of (mainly) Etruscan antiquities, Tuscan all’antica art, and exotic objects from the Near East and the New World. He could emphasize his strong links with the main branch of his family as collector and ruler over Florence, thus legitimizing his political claims. And finally, he was able to accentuate artistic and political Tuscan independence” (51).

⁵⁶ John M. Najemy, “Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics,” in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 75-104, 81.

⁵⁷ G. D. Mansi, *Stephani Baluzii Tutelensis Miscellanea Novo Ordine Digesta Et Non Paucis Ineditis Monumentis Opportunis Animadversionibus Aucta, Vol. 4*, ed. Etienne Baluze (Lucca 1764), 3. Translation from: Leonardo Bruni, “On Civic Humanism – Funeral Oration for Nanni Strozzi,” in *Florentine Political Writings from Petrarch to Machiavelli* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), II, 137.

⁵⁸ Josephine Von Henneberg, “Two Renaissance cassoni for Cosimo I de’ Medici in the Victoria and Albert Museum,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 35, no. 1 (1991): 115-132. Interestingly, scenes of Romulus’ life were later carved into Cosimo’s coffin. Etruria thus symbolically frames the beginning and end of Cosimo’s life. Cosimo literally, then, began and ended his life with Ancient Rome, not Etruria, in mind.

⁵⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Machiavelli. Tutte le opere: Secondo l'edizione curata da Mario Martelli* (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1971). Translation from: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

rimane solo la memoria del nome” (“Tuscany was...*once* powerful, full of religion and of virtue, and had its customs and ancestral language all of which were eliminated by Roman power [such that] the memory of its name alone remains of it”).⁶⁰ Then, throughout *The Discourses*, Machiavelli belittled the Etruscans even further: he refused to grant them their ancient title, preferring instead to refer to them as the “i Toscani antichi” (“the ancient Tuscans”). To Machiavelli, then, these “ancient Tuscans” had neither the name recognition nor the cultural capital to impart their political wisdom or institutions onto contemporary Florentine psyche. Machiavelli reminded his readers that the Etruscans and their culture were obliterated. Their legacy, whatever it could have been, was interrupted and co-opted by the much more impressive Romans, who were truly worthy of study.⁶¹

“Coloro che leggeranno quale principio fusse quello della città di Roma,” Machiavelli writes, “non si maraviglieranno che tanta virtù si sia per più secoli mantenuta in quella città; e che dipoi ne sia nato quello imperio al quale quella repubblica aggiunse” (“Those who read what the about the origin of Rome will not marvel that so much virtue was maintained for many centuries in that city, and that afterward the empire that the republic attained arose there”).⁶² Although Machiavelli, like previous historians, “affirms his conviction that the character [that a regime] receives at its foundation determines its subsequent development,” he rejects the supposedly “autochthonous” and “free” circumstances of Florence’s founding.⁶³ Machiavelli writes that, Florence, “per avere avuto il principio suo sottoposto allo Imperio romano, ed essendo vivuta sempre sotto il governo d’altrui, stette un tempo abietta, e senza pensare a sé medesima: dipoi, venuta la occasione di respirare, cominciò a fare suoi ordini; i quali sendo mescolati con gli antichi, che erano cattivi, non poterono essere buoni” (“having had its beginning subordinate to the Roman Empire, and having always lived under the government of another...remained abject for a time, without thinking about itself. Then, when the opportunity came for taking a breath, it began to make its own orders, which could not have been good, since they were mixed with the ancient that were bad”).⁶⁴ Indeed, it was not freedom, but servitude, that defined the origins, and perhaps even the contemporary political outlook, of the Florentine regime. “Following Livy,” Anna Makolkin suggests, “Machiavelli believed that the Etruscans, just as so many others before them, were creatively assimilated into the Roman Empire.”⁶⁵ The freedom of the Etruscan people, their hatred for the tyrannical absolutism that had been so much underlined previously, had, for Machiavelli, validity only for the historical lesson that could be derived from it. The Etruscans could provide political motivation for, but not a direct explanation of, the contemporary outlooks of the Florentine regime.

Nor could the ancient Tuscans give modern Florentines a dependable model for empire-building. “E veramente, alcuna provincia,” Machiavelli writes, “non fu mai unita o felice, se la non viene tutta alla ubbidienza d’una repubblica o d’uno principe” (“And truly no province has ever been united or happy unless it has all come under obedience to one republic or to one prince”).⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Ibid., II.5, In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 480 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 140. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ Or, as one anonymous review put it, Machiavelli, in calling the Etruscans the “ancient Tuscans” is “subsuming Etruscan history into a larger Tuscan history of which it is, according to him, a relatively minor part.” I thank the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comment here.

⁶² Ibid., I.1, In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 309 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 7.

⁶³ Nicolai Rubinstein, “Machiavelli e le origini di Firenze,” (Naples: *Edizioni scientifiche italiane*, 1967), 952. Translated by the author.

⁶⁴ *Discorsi*, I.49. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 428 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 100.

⁶⁵ Anna Makolkin, “Machiavelli’s Roman Nostalgia and his Critique of Christianity,” *E-Logos – Electronic Journal for Philosophy* (2008): 1-29, 7.

⁶⁶ *Discorsi*, I.12. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 351 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 38.

The Tuscan league, on the other hand, was ruled under the diffused power of the twelve co-regent *lucumones*. They could not provide the centralized governance needed to acquire or maintain an empire. Machiavelli lists three qualities that posed existential problems for the ancient Tuscan regime:

- “1. La cagione del non potere ampliare è lo essere una repubblica disgiunta e posta in varie sedie: il che fa che difficilmente possono consultare e deliberare.
2. Fa, ancora, che non sono desiderosi di dominare: perché, essendo molte comunità a partecipare di quel dominio, non stimano tanto tale acquisto quanto fa una repubblica sola, che spera di goderselo tutto.
3. Governonsi, oltre di questo, per concilio, e conviene che sieno più tardi ad ogni deliberazione, che quelli che abitano dentro a uno medesimo cerchio.”

- (“1. The cause of its inability to expand is its being a republic that is disunited and placed in various seats, which enables them to consult and decide only with difficulty.
2. It also makes them not be desirous of dominating; for since there are many communities to participate in dominion, they do not esteem such acquisition as much as one republic alone that hopes to enjoy it entirely.
3. Besides this, they govern themselves through a council, and they must be slower in every decision than those who inhabit within one and the same wall.”)⁶⁷

This disunity and diffusion of power not only led to the Etruscans’ inability to expand, but also destined them for conquest by the Romans. However much virtue the Medici attempted to grant Porsenna, there was no way for them to avoid the reality that his last politically significant act was one of subservience and unwilling deference to Rome. Moreover, as Machiavelli makes clear at the beginning of the *Discorsi*, if a state “avendo ordinata una repubblica atta a mantenersi, non ampliando, e la necessità la conducesse ad ampliare, si verrebbe a tor via i fondamenti suoi, ed a farla rovinare più tosto” (“has been ordered so as to be capable of maintaining itself does not expand, and necessity leads it to expand, this would come to take away its foundations and make it come to ruin sooner”).⁶⁸ To Machiavelli, the Florentine writers’ sincere desire that the modern Tuscans avenge their ancient ancestors must be tempered by the Etruscans’ obvious historical inability to expand their domain.

The “Tuscan league” was, therefore, neither as adequately free as Bruni suggests, nor as imperially illustrious and monarchically united as the Medici would like to imply. “La lezione politica etrusca era stata importante, ricca di significato,” Cipriani writes, but to Machiavelli “non così attuale e presente da poter competere con quella romana. Solo come modello alternativo a quello romano poteva infatti essere valida” (“The Etruscan political lesson had been important, rich in meaning not so current and present as to compete with the Roman one. Only as an alternative model to the Roman one could it be valid”).⁶⁹ Not only did *libertas* and empire not flourish under the Etruscans, but their lack of political development actually hindered them from

⁶⁷ *Discorsi*, II.4. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 476 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 137.

⁶⁸ *Discorsi*, I.6. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 330 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 23. Sullivan writes that, to Machiavelli, “If a state is unwilling or unable to wage a constant succession of wars, it will face collapse from the domestic turmoil that is sure to flourish in times of peace.” In: Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli’s Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 219.

⁶⁹ Cipriani, 62.

governing successfully, and therefore, from bestowing any worthwhile political traits upon Florence. Thus, Machiavelli qualifies his aspirations for his present compatriots:

“E quando la imitazione de’ Romani paresse difficile, non doverrebbe parere così quella degli antichi Toscani, massime a’ presenti Toscani. Perché, se quelli non poterono, per le cagioni dette, fare uno Imperio simile a quel di Roma, poterono acquistare in Italia quella potenza che quel modo del procedere concesse loro. Il che fu, per un gran tempo, sicuro, con somma gloria d’imperio e d’arme, e massime laude di costumi e di religione.”

(“And if the imitation of the Romans seems difficult, that of the ancient Tuscans should not seem so, especially to the present Tuscans. For if they could not, for the causes said, make an empire like that of Rome, they could acquire the power in Italy that their mode of proceeding conceded them. This was secure for a great time, with the highest glory of empire and of arms and special praise for customs and religion.”)⁷⁰

In these words, Machiavelli accepts and even endorses the “basic *factual* elements” of the Etruscan foundation myth, but “rejects the *meaning* and *significance* that humanists had assigned to these facts.” Of course, Machiavelli’s fellow Florentines could emulate the Etruscans if they chose to do so, but the “ancient Tuscans” feats had a large degree of difficulty with an abysmal success rate. Bruni’s humanists and the Medici scholars had accepted the myth of Etruscan autochthony, without having dutifully scrutinized the implications of idolizing the Etruscan model and condemning the Roman one. Thus, Machiavelli says that “non posso fare che insieme non me ne maravigli e dolga” (“I can do nothing other than marvel and grieve”) at the willingness of his contemporaries to reduce fine examples of ancient virtue, worthy of active imitation, to the objects of passive contemplation, as they instead devote themselves wholeheartedly to less worthy Etrurian ones.⁷¹

Still, Machiavelli does grant some respect to the Etruscan model; it represents a rational improvement on the otherwise unorganized Florentine political structure. If Florentines were to succeed in forming a defensive Tuscan league in the way of the ancient Etruscans, then the *comune* might—theoretically—be able to withstand an invasion by outside forces, even if it could not subsequently expand its borders. Rome succeeded for so long not only because it could counter outside invaders, but also because it could conquer and subdue them. On the other hand, the Etruscans became a mighty enough civilization because they could, at least, temporarily hold off the Romans, garner their respect, and maintain independent political and cultural institutions. Thus, Machiavelli writes: “benché delle cose [etrusche] non ce ne sia particolare istoria, pure c’è qualche poco di memoria, e qualche segno della grandezza loro” (“although there is no particular history of [the Etruscans’] affairs, there is [...] some little memory and some sign of their greatness”).⁷² A renewed Tuscan league, then, would be able to stave off the French and Spanish troops, like those who had recently invaded Florence under papal directive, even if the League could not hope to “reconquer” their ancient forbearers’ patrimony.

⁷⁰ *Discorsi*, II.4. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 478 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 138.

⁷¹ *Discorsi*, *Prefazione*. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 474 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 3.

⁷² *Discorsi*, II.4. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 351 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 135.

Moreover, a defensive Etruscan-style federation would also prevent citizens from becoming corrupt and idle: so long as Florentines perceived a threat to their league—a threat that Machiavelli rightly assumed would be insurmountable—the government would always have needed to train and maintain a citizen army to defend itself.⁷³ The Etruscan structure thus offered republics a “way [to] provide themselves with an effective defense, without falling prey to either the internal corruption that infects a people who no longer fear external aggression or to conquest by a foreign power.”⁷⁴ The Etruscans failed, not in their vision of expansion, as Machiavelli attests that “innanzi allo Imperio romano, furono i Toscani per mare e per terra potentissimi” (“before the Roman Empire, the Tuscans were very powerful by sea and by land”), but rather in their effectual governing structure.⁷⁵

Conclusion: Re-Invoking and Remodeling the Etruscan Past

To Machiavelli, the Etruscans provided a model worthy for Florentines to study only if emulating the Romans would be impossible. It is wrong, he maintained, for humanists to insist that “Etruscan autochthony” explains or determines all the present realities of the Tuscan regime. The Etruscans were, after all, extinguished by the Romans; their political culture survived only through texts, which could motivate, but not dictate, how the Florentines ought to establish and rule their own government and empire *in the short term*. The Roman republican model, on the other hand, “holds such promise for Machiavelli that he claims it could be perpetual.”⁷⁶ In this way, Machiavelli treated the “foundation myth” differently than previous historiographers had: he denied that there is anything politically cogent at all that derives directly from Tuscany’s ancient orders. Indeed, never in his works does Machiavelli connect the existing Florentines with their supposed “ancient” forbearers. In the Etruscan case, the “verità effettuale” (“effectual truth”) of their existence was weaker than the “immaginazione di essa” (“imagination of it”).⁷⁷ There was nothing, according to Machiavelli, politically exceptional about the Florentines that derived from their supposed autochthonous origins. For his contemporary historiographers to invoke the “Etruscan foundation myth” was not only spurious, but politically feeble. Instead, to Machiavelli, they should have claimed political inheritance—based on love of liberty, empire, even cultural superiority—from the Athenians, the Spartans, or, even, if they would be so bold, the Romans. The widespread claim to autochthony that allowed Florentine elites to break free of Roman influence and justify their narrow rule, was, ironically, unsustainable and tenuous.

Therefore, although it is necessary, according to Machiavelli, for historiographers to gain a “true knowledge of the histories” of ancient societies, it was not obligatory for them to mobilize those examples equally—especially in the foundation and subsequent self-development of a

⁷³ *Discorsi*, I.6. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 329 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 23. Machiavelli writes: “Così, dall’altra parte, quando il Cielo [alla repubblica] fusse sì benigno che la non avesse a fare guerra, ne nascerebbe che l’ozio la farebbe effeminate o divisa; le quali due cose insieme, o ciascuna per sé sarebbero cagione della sua rovina” (“So, on the other hand, if heaven were so kind that [the republic] did not have to make war, from that would arise the idleness to make it either effeminate or divided; these two things together, or each by itself, would be the cause of its ruin”).

⁷⁴ Catherine Zuckert, “Machiavelli’s Democratic Republic.” *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 1-33.

⁷⁵ *Discorsi*, II.4. In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 473-474 and Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 135.

⁷⁶ Sullivan, 175.

⁷⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Turin: Einaudi, 2013), 115. Translation from: Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince: Second Edition*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), XV, 61.

regime. Whereas early, noble-supported Renaissance writers attempted to reread the historical record in favor of the ancient Etruscans, Machiavelli was more discriminating in his historiographic method. If the “effectual truth” of a thing determines its practical political value, then the “Etruscan myth” has too nebulous a historical foundation to be able to contribute to Florence’s political development.⁷⁸ Thus, although Machiavelli bemoaned the aestheticization of ancient parables—which are honored more like “un frammento d’una antiqua statua” (“fragment of an ancient statue”) rather than studied like shrewd political advice—he contended that there are some myths that indeed ought to be turned to stone.⁷⁹ “Since the early fifteenth century, the Etruscan legacy was a matter of civic pride to Florentines, who regarded the Etruscans as illustrious, pre-Roman ancestors,” Hillard writes, “Florentine authors agreed that these ancient forbearers were supreme in the arts of warfare, religious ritual, statecraft, and art and architecture.”⁸⁰ The Etruscans were lauded by the Romans and the contemporary Florentines alike for their cultural output and religious rites; to Machiavelli, modern Tuscans should only relate to the “ancient Tuscans” in this shallow, politically insignificant manner.

⁷⁸ Indeed, Machiavelli remains dubious about the exact historical circumstances of Florence’s establishment. In *The Discourses*, he maintains that Florence was founded under Roman domination from its onset, whereas in *Florentine Histories*, he proposes that an independent commercial settlement (hardly a foundation) preceded the Romans. According to Cipriani, in *Florentine Histories* Florence was settled for “motivi di ordine logistico e commerciale” (121; [“for logistical and commercial reasons”]). Machiavelli writes that “[e]gli è cosa verissima, secondo che Dante e Giovanni Villani dimostrano, che la città di Fiesole, sendo posta sopra la sommità del monte, per fare che i mercati suoi fussero più frequentati e dare più commodità a quegli che vi volessero con le loro mercanzie venire, aveva ordinato il luogo di quelli, non sopra il poggio, ma nel piano, intra le radice del monte e del fiume d’Arno. Questi mercati giudico io che fussero cagione delle prime edificazioni che in quelli luoghi si facessero, mossi i mercatanti da il volere avere ricetti commodi a ridurvi le mercanzie loro; i quali con il tempo ferme edificazioni diventerono; e di poi, quando i Romani, avendo vinti i Cartaginesi, renderono dalle guerre forestiere la Italia sicura, in gran numero moltiplicorono” (“It is a thing very true, as Dante and Giovanni Villani have shown, that, since the city of Fiesole had been placed on the summit of a mountain, to make its markets more frequented and more convenient for those who might want to come to them with their merchandise it had ordered the place for them not on the hillside but in the plain between the foot of the mountain and the Arno River. These markets, I judge, were the cause of the first buildings that were put up in those places, as the merchants were moved by the wish to have convenient shelters to hold their merchandise, which in time became solid buildings. Afterwards, when the Romans had conquered the Carthaginians, rendering Italy safe from foreign wars, the buildings multiplied to a great number”). In: . In: Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 1740-1741 and Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), II.2, 53.

⁷⁹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 6.

⁸⁰ Hillard, “Mythic Origins,” 490.