

Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*: An Important Moment in the Evolution of the Historical Discipline

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Hannah West

Niccolò Machiavelli was a political thinker, diplomat, and historian who wrote during the early sixteenth century. Machiavelli only published one major historical work, the Florentine Histories, which he wrote on the cusp of a shift within historical writing from the trends associated with the Middle Ages to those of the Renaissance period. This essay seeks to discover whether Machiavelli's historical writing is in line with our current perception of the trends within medieval histories or whether his style is too divergent for Machiavelli to be considered a historian of the Middle Ages. This paper examines Machiavelli's source work and approach to writing in order to conclude that the Florentine Histories deviates from the trends present within histories written in the Middle Ages, indicating that Machiavelli should not be considered a medieval historian.

Niccolò Machiavelli was a political thinker, diplomat, and historian who wrote during the early sixteenth century. He is best known for the political reflections that are outlined in his book *The Prince*. Accordingly, scholars who studied Machiavelli in the twentieth century emphasized his political philosophy over his historical writing. However, a small cohort of scholars broke away from the mainstream to study his historical writing, which amounts to one major work, the *Florentine Histories*, and a shorter essay, *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*. This paper will attempt to add to the discourse around Machiavelli's historical scholarship by questioning the extent to which Machiavelli follows the historiographical patterns of his recent predecessors, whom modern writers consider scholars of the Middle Ages. This essay will begin by giving a brief overview of Machiavelli's historical writing, followed by an outline of the two themes that indicate his place within the evolution of the historical discipline: his source work and his approach to writing. This paper will demonstrate that Machiavelli's historical writing is distinct from the histories written in the Middle Ages due to his focus on the internal rather than the external operations of Florence, his negative views on the recent events that took place in the city, and his integration of political messages into the *Florentine Histories*.

Machiavelli's major historical work, the *Florentine Histories*, begins

with the Roman domination of Italy and continues until 1492, forty years prior to its posthumous publication.¹ Within the preface of the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli notes that he was attempting to fill a gap in the scholarship; his predecessors had adequately described the numerous wars to which Florence had been subjected but had not provided an in-depth analysis of Florence's internal social and political history.² Machiavelli was commissioned to write the *Florentine Histories* by Giulio de' Medici who was impressed by his historical writing in *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*, published ten years earlier.³ Machiavelli agreed to write the history of Florence for its new rulers, the Medicis, because the change in government had resulted in him losing his position in the employ of the Chancellor of the Republic of Florence.⁴ Machiavelli hoped that, by accepting a commission to write the *Florentine Histories*, he would gain favour with the new rulers and regain a prominent position within the government.

Although Machiavelli never regained his governmental position, he did write the *Florentine Histories*, a work that is considered a significant marker in the evolution of the historical discipline.⁵ However, Felix Gilbert points out that, due to Machiavelli's employment situation at the time the *Florentine Histories* were commissioned, the reader must be wary of judging Machiavelli's place within the historical discipline too quickly. Gilbert states that, because the *Florentine Histories* were commissioned, Machiavelli was less likely to significantly stray from the accepted writing style of the period for fear of angering the Medicis.⁶ As a result, it is impossible to say for certain if the trends observed within Machiavelli's historical writing are reflective of his preferred writing style. However, as Machiavelli's only other historical work, *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*, is not extensive enough to use for comparison, this paper will solely analyze the *Florentine Histories*, retaining an awareness of his vested interest in impressing the Medicis.

This paper will now engage with the sources of information that Machiavelli employed to write the *Florentine Histories*. The sources consulted varied widely across early modern historians. Some preferred first-hand accounts to archival work, while others considered their own observations to be the best source of knowledge on

1 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 369.

2 *Ibid.*, 6.

3 Corrado Vivanti, *Niccolo Machiavelli: an intellectual bibliography*, trans. Simon MacMichael (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 144.

4 *Ibid.*, 19.

5 *Ibid.*, 144.

6 Felix Gilbert, *History Choice and Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 136.

which to base their historical writing. Machiavelli chose to integrate both methods, writing the *Florentine Histories* from information he extracted out of previous historians' histories, interspersed with his own memories and first-hand accounts in the later sections of the work.⁷ Consequently, when Machiavelli describes events that occurred before his lifetime, he refers to the Florentine people in the third person.⁸ However, when considering events within his living memory, he refers to the Florentine people as "we," inserting himself into the situation.⁹ His use of language indicates a shift from relying on written sources primarily gathered through textual analysis to the insertion of oral history and his personal recollection of events.

Throughout the text, Machiavelli gives the reader clues to the written sources that he consulted, allowing historiographers to surmise which aspects of each source he incorporated into the *Florentine Histories*. At the beginning of the first book, Machiavelli considers Florence's place within the Roman Empire.¹⁰ As a result, he was obliged to consult Roman historians such as Pliny the Elder and Tacitus, whom he mentions intermittently by name.¹¹ Machiavelli's consultation of early Roman scholars is also indicated by themes within his text, such as the argument that "the internal divisions of Rome could be bridged by conciliation," a theme also present in much of Livy's writing.¹² Many modern scholars believe that Machiavelli, like his recent predecessors, did not only read the ancient historians for factual information but also imitated their writing style.¹³ However, this argument is problematized by Mark Phillips, who points to a difference between Machiavelli's imitation of the ancients and his recent predecessors'.¹⁴ Most scholars of the early sixteenth century would have merely re-recorded previous historians' descriptions of events, but because Machiavelli was interested in the internal rather than the external workings of Florence, he could not resort to re-recording facts given that information about the international functioning of the city had previously never been recorded. Therefore, Machiavelli was

7 Marks Phillips, "Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence," *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (1979): 89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1855661>.

8 Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, 9–184.

9 *Ibid.*, 193.

10 The *Florentine Histories* were divided into eight books.

11 Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, 55.

12 John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 287.

13 Gilbert, *History Choice and Commitment*; 137, 149; Paul Avis, *Foundations of Modern Historical Thought: from Machiavelli to Vico* (Kent: Croom Helm Ltd, 1986), 42.

14 Phillips, *Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence*, 95.

forced to critically read previous scholars' histories in order to infer the potential political motivations behind Florentine citizens' actions.¹⁵

Machiavelli's *Histories* continues into the Middle Ages, at which point he notes that he consulted historians of the time, such as Villani and Gregory of Tours.¹⁶ These historians, like the ancients, would not have had the political discourse with which to communicate internal political motivations to the reader, a fact which was compounded by their belief that tracing large conflicts was more important than recording internal strife. As a result, Machiavelli was left to infer the internal political motivations from the information that the medieval scholars included in their histories, combined with his own observations about human nature.¹⁷ Phillips illustrates the novelty of Machiavelli's consideration of political motivations with a comparison of the medieval scholar Villani's account of the 1343 revolt against tyranny (which the latter lived through) with Machiavelli's own account of the event.¹⁸ Phillips argues that Machiavelli adds language that would not have been present in Villani's text, such as "[the people's] indignation appears greater and wounds are graver when liberty is being recovered than when it is being defended."¹⁹ Machiavelli was asserting that liberty was the reason for the people's revolt, a concept alien to Villani and Machiavelli's recent predecessors Leonardo d'Arezzo and Poggio. In fact, Machiavelli was the first historian of Florence to consider the international function of the city and, by extension, the motivations behind domestic events. Many scholars of Machiavelli's history overlook this shift; however, it is important because it indicates a significant difference between how Machiavelli critically interpreted his sources and the historiographical trends of the late Middle Ages.

The second theme that reveals Machiavelli's place within the evolution of the historical discipline is his approach to writing the *Florentine Histories*. The first point of interest found in Machiavelli's writing is the presence of a predominantly negative outlook on the recent events that took place in Florence.²⁰ Machiavelli's negative view probably developed because the recent events in question led to the collapse of the republic he supported. Additionally, if he compared the current

15 This is not to say that there is not merit in the argument that Machiavelli took stylistic pointers from the ancients, only that he would have been forced to modify the style when inferring the internal relations that were never previously recorded.

16 Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, 53.

17 Gilbert, *History Choice and Commitment*, 142.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Phillips, *Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence*, 95; Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, 98.

20 *Ibid.*, 185–369.

situation in Florence with events in the past, the city would seem to have taken an undesirable departure from its previous trajectory. Although modern readers will never be sure of the reason, Machiavelli's negative outlook overshadows the second half of the text. Salvatore Di Maria and Corrado Vivanti point out that his negative views diverge from the historiographical trends of the period: Machiavelli's recent predecessors consistently attempted to place their subjects in a positive light.²¹

The second point of divergence from his contemporaries in Machiavelli's approach to writing history is the integration of his political arguments into the text. Machiavelli is believed to have thought that the point of writing history was to form "a basis for lessons of permanent political usefulness."²² Therefore, although less overtly than in his other texts, wherein every page there is a political opinion, Machiavelli subtly weaves his political lessons into the *Florentine Histories*.²³ The first clear instance of his political opinions concealed in the text appears in the third chapter of the *Florentine Histories*, in which he suggests that citizens were punished for small crimes while the government rewarded large crimes perpetrated by the powerful members of society.²⁴ This passage reflects Machiavelli's political message: that the rich need to consider how they are viewed by the people because there is nothing more dangerous to a ruler than dissatisfied citizens. Another clear instance of Machiavelli's political lessons is found in the first section of the eighth chapter, in which he excuses himself from discussing two conspiracies, one in Milan and one in Florence, because he had previously discussed them in the third book of his political work, *The Discourses on Livy*.²⁵ In modern literature, two books written on the same event, one written in the historical discipline and the other in political science, would analyze the event through different lenses. However, Machiavelli appears to believe that he would be repeating himself if he were to re-record the conspiracies in the *Florentine Histories*, indicating that he considered his historical and political writing to be very similar.

Modern scholars who analyzed Machiavelli's scholarship also agree that his inclusion of political messages sets him apart from his contemporaries. Hans Baron and Peter Mansfield claim that Machiavelli's history can be broken down into the contest between the fortune of man as against man's *virtù*, two concepts deeply rooted in his political

thought.²⁶ However, Machiavelli is not original in this regard. All historians are inherently influenced by their political beliefs, making politics and history inseparable. The difference between Machiavelli and his contemporaries is that he is more transparent about his political reflections.

Machiavelli was writing on the cusp of what John Burrows considers a "rupture" in the trends of historical writing, colloquially known as the divide between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period.²⁷ This essay has suggested that the *Florentine Histories* diverges from the trends present within histories written in the Middle Ages, indicating that Machiavelli should not be considered a medieval historian. There are three elements, based in Machiavelli's source work and in his approach to writing, that support this assertion: Machiavelli's focus on the internal rather than the external workings of Florence, his negative approach to the latter half of the book, and his integration of political messaging into the *Histories*. Future historians wishing to contribute to the discourse surrounding Machiavelli's historical writing could consider the same text in conjunction with the recognized historical trends of the Renaissance period to determine whether Machiavelli should be conceptualized as a Renaissance historian or whether, in fact, his writing lies between both periods—equally belonging to neither.



21 Vivanti, *Niccolo Machiavelli: an intellectual bibliography*, 166; Salvatore Di Maria, "Machiavelli's Ironic View of History: The *Istorie Fiorentine*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1992): 249, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2862748>.

22 Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 286.

23 Avis, *Foundations of Modern Historical Thought*, 33.

24 Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, 122.

25 *Ibid.*, 317.

26 Throughout the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli consistently attributes actions and events that he could not rationally explain to the fortune of man rather than to a divine influence, as medieval historians had done. When discussing *virtù* Machiavelli was referring to a collection of character traits that can guide a leader or a citizen to greatness. An interesting example of the interplay between these two concepts that Baron and Mansfield are referring to is located in the seventh book when Machiavelli describes Cosimo Medici's inheritance that he had left for his descendants: "with *virtù* they could equal him and with fortune surpass him." In this example, Machiavelli sees man's *virtù* only taking Cosimo's descendants so far. They would need luck to eclipse him; Machiavelli, *Florentine History*, 283; Hans Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 42.

27 Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 276.

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