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Introduction

When the Uberti family went to war with the Florentine government in 1177, they were ready for a fight. Dotted across the neighborhood that would eventually become known as San Pier Scheraggio, lodged deep in the crowded and bustling city center, stood fortifications owned and operated by the Uberti and their allies. The interconnected houses of the Uberti themselves were clustered tightly between Via Magazzini and Via della Farine, near the Church of San Romolo and overlooking a spacious courtyard bearing their name, the *platea Ubertorum*. The narrow, twisting streets that laced their way around this extended family compound were easy to barricade and dense with Uberti partisans who could be relied on to assemble in their defense when called to arms. At the heart of this citadel stood a spectacular tower, more than 150 feet high and studded with balconies from which the Uberti could hurl rocks at enemy forces.[1]

The Uberti themselves were an ancient and vaguely noble family, distantly related to the counts of Montespertoli, a small municipality in the *contado* southwest of Florence.[2] Like many of Florence's most prominent families, they were a knightly clan and thus heavily armed, extensively trained in the arts of war, and eager to participate in the courtly manners and rituals of the feudal north. In the congested urban environment of Florence, the concern for personal honor and family prestige that stood at the heart of this style of aristocratic identity furnished the Uberti with endless reasons to quarrel with their neighbors, and they did so with

[1] On the social and political geography of medieval Florence, see Najemy 2006a. For developments into the Renaissance, see Kent and Kent 1982.
[2] Jones 1997, 580.

relish. Swaggering, belligerent, and thin-skinned, these *grandi* or "big men," as they were often called, were a constant source of civic disruption and unrest. Violent feuds among them were commonplace, and the city's social and physical infrastructure – its fragmentation into distinct neighborhoods; the practice of joint property ownership, whereby rival kin groups transformed entire city blocks into sprawling family compounds; and especially the proliferation of defensive associations in which members pledged their loyalty and assistance to one other – made it all too easy for even minor disputes to blossom into savage and debilitating civil wars.[3]

While rivalry among *grandi* was always fierce, and it seemed that virtually anything could trigger their competitive energies, they pursued seats on the city consulate with special enthusiasm. Of little wonder, as the consulate was the highest political body in Florence and therefore a prized source of visibility and influence. Like any noble clan, the Uberti viewed with indignation the ascension of others to this office; but they were particularly incensed when they found themselves passed over in favor of their longstanding foes, the Giandonati, in 1177. With an arrogance typical of their class, they responded to this perceived slight by withdrawing to their family enclave and preparing for battle. Documenting the ensuing warfare, the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani would later write that the Uberti "began war against the Consuls" because they were filled by "envy of the Government, which was not to their mind," suggesting (not unreasonably) that the Uberti resented the very idea of government itself.[4]

Villani describes the violence that engulfed Florence for the next two years as a veritable "plague" in which "many died . . . and much peril and hurt was brought upon the city."[5] As families aligned themselves with one or another party, fighting quickly radiated from the immediate vicinity of the Uberti houses to all the city's neighborhoods, with the consequence that "every day, or every other day, the citizens fought against one another in divers[e] parts of the city, from district to district, according as the factions were, and as they had fortified their towers," which, Villani explains, were now being outfitted with "engines to shoot forth

[3] On the social and political personae of Florentine magnates and the city's efforts to control them, see Salvemini 1899; Ottikar 1927; Lansing 1991 and 2010; Klapisch-Zuber 2001 and 2006; Becker 2002; and Vigueur 2003. On Machiavelli's usage of the term *grandi*, see Bonadeo 1969.

[4] Villani 1907, 5.9. [5] Villani 1907, 5.9.

at one another."[6] Other popular chroniclers of the *trecento* would echo Villani's lamentation of the intense bloodshed and destruction wrought by this conflict, including pseudo-Brunetto Latini, who stresses the "great mortality, robbery, and arson" precipitated by the Uberti, who "refused to obey . . . the Consuls" and "yet nevertheless formed no government of their own."[7] The Uberti themselves, however, were untouched by these losses, so consumed were they by family pride. And in the end, they got their way. In 1180, the Giandonati were forced to watch as Messer Uberto degli Uberti accepted the consulate, together with his ally Lamberto dei Lamberti.

The Florentine government would remain under the control of Uberti partisans almost continuously for the next seventy years. In 1250, however, the Uberti lost forever the supremacy they had fought so hard to attain. Following their triumph over the Giandonati, they had made little effort to quell widespread popular irritation at their overweening presumption, nor had they shown any interest in tamping down the violence that continued to erupt among other *grandi*. Instead, they had devoted themselves wholeheartedly to "tyranniz[ing] over the people with ruthless extortion and violence and outrage," as Villani puts it, only confirming popular suspicions that "they of the house of the Uberti" were simply intolerant of civic peace and order.[8] By the mid-*duecento*, the Florentine people had already begun to organize among themselves – into guilds, military societies, and confraternities, all dedicated to promoting the safety and well-being of their overlapping memberships – and Villani recounts how they now mobilized their collective power behind a new regime, the Primo Popolo. Fed up with Uberti abuses, Villani writes:

> the good citizens of Florence, tumultuously gathering together, assembled themselves at the church of San Firenze; but not daring to remain there, because of the power of the Uberti . . . [they] went and took their stand at the church of the Minor Friars at Santa Croce, and remaining there under arms they dared not return to their homes, lest when they had laid down their arms they should be broken by the Uberti and the other nobles and condemned by the magistrates. So they went under arms to the houses of the Anchioni of San Lorenzo, which were very strong, and there, still under arms, they forcibly elected thirty-six corporals of the people, and took away the rule [of] the Podestà, which was then in Florence, and removed all the officials. And [when] this was done, with no further conflict they ordained and created a popular government with certain new ordinances and statutes.[9]

[6] Villani 1907, 5.9.
[7] Quoted in Villari 1901, 143.
[8] Villani 1907, 5.39.
[9] Villani 1907, 5.39.

These "new ordinances and statutes" were designed to limit the powers, formal and informal, that could be legitimately exercised by great families like the Uberti, who were now politically marginalized and militarily outmanned. Tower heights were strictly limited, *popolani* were banned from assembling outside the houses of nobility during periods of civic unrest, and the nobility were themselves prohibited from engaging in any further violence.

This was Florentine republicanism in its original and defining form. Its foremost task was minimizing the chaos and damage caused by the city's most powerful houses, and over the next century it garnered widespread institutional, procedural, and statutory expression as such: in a dizzying array of public magistracies, distributed through sortition and filled almost exclusively by guildsmen; in the promulgation of the Ordinances of Justice, which identified the city's most fractious lineages by name, forced them to pay substantial indemnities, and levied harsh penalties against their misbehavior; in the organization of twenty local militias for the purpose of defending common people against elite aggression; and so forth and so on.[10]

Still, as minimal as the goals of Florentine republicanism were during this period, they were not easily achieved. Under a series of popular regimes stretching into the fourteenth century, over 150 great families were publically declared "magnate" and subjected to a variety of restrictions, penalties, and humiliations designed to curb their lawless behavior. While some of these families were quickly pacified and absorbed into the ranks of the victorious *popolo*, many others refused to accept the terms under which they were now expected to live. These holdouts were destroyed – swiftly, mercilessly, and (as Machiavelli might have put it) "without respect." The Uberti, unsurprisingly, fell into this second category. Forever at the center of communal agitation and instability, they were discovered plotting to overthrow the Florentine government in 1258. Summoned to appear before the city magistrates to answer for charges of treason, the Uberti chose instead to launch a vicious attack on the household of the city's *podestà*.

Enraged by this affront to public authority, the Florentine *popolo* marched en masse to the Uberti houses and killed several family leaders. Other members of the Uberti clan were later tortured and executed, and

[10] Major treatments of the political and institutional history of Florentine republicanism include Becker 1960 and 1967; Brucker 1977 and 1999; Najemy 1979, 1982a, 1991, and 2006b; Fubini 1991; Stern 1995; Jones 1997; and Zorzi 1988.

its remaining members were permanently exiled from the city together with their Ghibelline allies, including the Fifanti, Guidi, Amidei, Lamberti, Scolari, Abati, Caponsacchi, Migliorelli, Soldanieri, Infangati, Ubriachi, Tedaldini, Galigari, della Pressa, Amieri, Cersino, and Razzani. Moreover, Uberti properties were confiscated by the city and razed to the ground, including the great family tower of which they had once been so proud. On the site where these buildings had formerly stood, a new public square was built: the aptly named Piazza del Popolo. The very rubble of the demolished Uberti palaces went toward the construction of the Palazzo della Signoria, an imposing fortress-like structure in which it was hoped that Florentine magistrates could now safely live and work. Even today, one can still find displayed on the Palazzo's walls the Uberti coat of arms bearing the inscription *Oh quali io vidi quei che son disfatti per lor superbia!* (Oh how many I saw who were destroyed by pride!).

1.1 Machiavelli's *Histories* and the Rise and Fall of Florentine Republicanism

This book explores some of the ways in which Machiavelli's political thought can be said to bear the impression of this crucial phase of Florentine political experience. It is well-known, of course, that Machiavelli frequently invokes Florentine history in both *The Prince* (1513) and the *Discourses on Livy* (1518), typically in the form of negative examples. In this book, I use Machiavelli's extended analysis of Florentine politics in the *Florentine Histories* (1525) to illuminate these references and to argue that Machiavelli's republicanism is best understood as a critical response to the successes and failures of his own city's republican project. As I will show, Machiavelli knew only too well how difficult it was to sort the one from the other, not least because the historical record itself had since become subject to intense partisan manipulation. The *Histories* represents Machiavelli's most concentrated effort to take the proper measure of his city's republican aspirations and achievements, a task that he believes humanist historiographers before him had left unfulfilled to the detriment of all modern republicans, for whom knowledge about the Florentine case was, in Machiavelli's estimation, of vital importance.[11]

[11] Unfortunately, the *Histories* has occupied a largely peripheral position in the English-language scholarship on Machiavelli's political thought, including his republicanism. Most book-length studies of the *Histories* have been produced by Italian scholars (Garosci 1973; Anselmi 1979; Cabrini 1985 and 1990b; Sasso 1993) although this has

At its simplest, my claim is that Machiavelli admired the emergent popular republicanism of late medieval Florence for its suspicious and defensive political sensibilities, even as he lamented its ultimate failure to secure the city's liberty against the relentless ambitions of its own *grandi* – most notably the Medici, who at last converted Florence into a principality in 1434. Consistent with documentary evidence, Machiavelli presents early Florentine republicanism as having originated first and foremost as a popular reaction to the rivalrous and combative behavior of local elites. Its defining laws and institutions were intended to mitigate the vulnerability of common people to the pervasive, unpredictable, and often brutal violence to which they were otherwise subject – forms of abuse that he refers to (euphemistically, following his sources) as "oppression," "injury," and "offense." Thus Florentine republicanism was originally a matter of popular security, he argues, assured through the construction and exercise of state power and the policing of socially disruptive attitudes and actions on the part of *grandi*.[12]

In reflecting on this early phase of Florence's republican political history, Machiavelli found much worth admiring, as his regular appropriation of its core language, concepts, and values attests. His conviction that all political communities are divided between *popolo* and *grandi* (P 9; D 1.4; FH 2.12); his sense of their distinctive *umori*, which define *grandi* as those who want to oppress and the *popolo* as those who want not to be oppressed; his association of republican liberty with "being able to enjoy one's things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honor of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself" (D 1.16) – all of this reflects the depth of Machiavelli's theoretical investment in his own city's republican political heritage. But however much he may have admired its insight, spirit, and resolve, Machiavelli never allowed himself

started to change (Jurdjevic 2014). For briefer but still important studies of Machiavelli's political thought in light of the *Histories*, see Gaeta 1973; Marietti 1974; Gilbert 1977c; Najemy 1978 and 1982b; Phillips 1979 and 1984; Dionisotti 1980; Bock 1990; Di Maria 1992; Kukofka 1992; Martelli 1992 and 1996; Mansfield 1998c; Quint 2003; Cabrini 2010; Lynch 2012; and Winter 2012. On the *Histories* as an example of Renaissance historiography, see Bondanella 1974.

[12] Most treatments of Machiavelli's relationship with "Florentine republicanism" have focused on his stance with regard to key ideas and arguments put forward by Renaissance humanists (e.g., Baron (1955) 1966; Pocock 1975; Gilbert 1977b; Skinner 1978 and 1990; Viroli 1990 and 1998; Mansfield 2000; Nelson 2006) or older representatives of the city's intellectual tradition (Skinner 1990). Fewer have situated Machiavelli's work in relation to Florentine political history itself, although there are several noteworthy exceptions to this generalization (Gilbert 1965; Najemy 1978 and 1982b; Rubinstein 1990; Silvano 1990; Jurdjevic 2008; Ardito 2015).

the illusion that Florentine republicanism had ended in success. At the crux of the *Histories* is Machiavelli's tough-minded observation that, even after a century of aggressive popular reforms, Florence had succumbed nevertheless to what was, in all but name, a form of princely rule with Cosimo Medici's return from exile in 1434. This climactic event stands at the very center of the *Histories*, both literally and figuratively, and making sense of it against the backdrop of the civil conflicts out of which Florentine republicanism was born is a key objective of the work.

This book makes the argument that Machiavelli's *Histories* traces the failure of Florentine republicanism to its overemphasis on civic peace. As Machiavelli recognizes, the anti-elitism at the heart of early Florentine republicanism was certainly intense, but it was never absolute: its targets were always cruder displays of political ambition that disturbed, or threatened to disturb, the safety and tranquility of the wider community. Accordingly, while the Florentine *popolo* were uncompromising in their efforts to disarm the city's "thuggish" *grandi* (the Uberti, for example), they were also tolerant of softer, more sociable forms of elite power. In the *Histories*, Machiavelli tracks the process whereby Florentine elites learned to exploit this moderation, reinventing themselves as morally upright, public spirited, and popularly disposed community leaders in order to evade the popular scrutiny and resistance that had so consistently thwarted the princely designs of earlier *grandi*.[13]

Thus, according to Machiavelli, Florentine republicanism did not secure the city against princely rule: it merely effected a change in princely style. As early as the Ciompi Rebellion, Machiavelli shows, Florentine elites were beginning to redeem their power in the currency of honorable, pro-social qualities and intentions. By the mid-*quattrocento*, this style was on spectacular display in the form of Medici rule – and yet unrecognizable for what it was. In the *Histories*, Machiavelli sets out to expose and repair this deficiency of Florentine republicanism, which had since become a principal component of humanist reconstructions of the city's republican history, through a careful analysis of the rhetorical strategies whereby the Medici had successfully eluded republican scrutiny.[14] It is this lesson more than any other that Machiavelli wishes to teach the "liberal spirits" to whom he re-dedicates the *Histories* in Book 5, in the hope that

[13] Scholars arguing that Machiavelli's political thought became more conservative over time (e.g., Martelli 1996; Bausi 2005; Ascoli 2013; Black 2013; Jurdjevic 2014) have largely overlooked these features of the *Histories*, which testify to an abiding skepticism toward social and political elites.

[14] On the rise of the Medici, see Hale 1977 and especially Kent 1978.

they will more successfully "avoid and eliminate" the "deceits," "guile," and "arts" whereby princes like the Medici had finally triumphed over republican orders (FH 5.1).

1.2 What Was "Florentine Republicanism" Really?

Formally commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1520, the *Histories* was the first major assignment given to Machiavelli by the Medici following his arrest, imprisonment, and torture – on their orders – in 1513. Machiavelli's standing with the Medici had begun to improve in 1519 when, together with several other Florentines, he was invited by Cardinal Giulio de Medici to propose a schedule of republican constitutional reforms, apparently in an effort to placate the family's republican opponents in a moment of vulnerability following Lorenzo the Younger's death earlier that year. While Machiavelli's advice to the Medici in the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* was ignored, just as *The Prince* had been some years earlier, Giulio invited him soon afterward to write a new history of Florence. Machiavelli accepted this offer and presented Giulio (now Pope Clement VII) with the *Histories* in 1525.

If the *Histories* offers recommendations for how Florence might finally realize its long-held republican ambitions, perhaps akin to the advice that Machiavelli had just provided the Medici in the *Discourse*, it does so only implicitly. Explicitly at least, the *Histories* focuses on the past, and especially Florence's many political weaknesses, mistakes, and failures. While it contains moments of success, they are fleeting and quickly followed by more lasting failures. With regard to the Primo Popolo, for example, Machiavelli relates how the "military and civil orders" upon which Florentines "founded their freedom" in 1250 made their city "head of Tuscany" and "among the first cities of Italy" (FH 2.6) but were inadequate to the task of limiting elite power at home, which survived these measures in new and more elusive forms. For these reasons, the *Histories* is typically and appropriately characterized as a melancholy reflection on the lost promise of Florentine republicanism, one that anticipates and illuminates the dysfunctions associated with its more recent iterations.[15]

Against a seemingly imperturbable historiographic tradition, led by *quattrocento* humanists like Leonardo Bruni, in which Florentine republicanism was presented as a fait accompli, equal in splendor to Rome itself, the *Histories* advances a far less congratulatory view of Florence, a city

[15] See especially Gilbert 1977c.

that continues even today to be remembered as a model of republican government. Consistent with his stinging verdict in *Discourses* 1.49 that Florence had never in "two hundred years of true memory . . . *ever* had a state for which it could truly be called a republic," Machiavelli relays in the *Histories* the story of a city vacillating unsteadily between anarchy and princely rule without ever securing the free way of life that stood, at least nominally, as its defining objective.[16]

It was true, of course, that Florence's constitution was formally republican throughout this period, and it would continue to be so until Alessandro Medici assumed the title of duke in 1532. It was also true that within little more than a century, even Florence's most recalcitrant magnates had been tamed and the city itself had been "reduced . . . to a wonderful equality" (FH 3.1). For "the generality of men" who "feed on what appears [to be] as much as on what is" and "many times . . . are moved more by things that appear than by things that are" (D 1.25), these achievements were enough to prove that Florence was a genuinely free state.[17] But Machiavelli himself, ever attentive to the "effectual truth" of private power and personal dependence lurking behind Florence's republican façades, rejects this conclusion – and with it the commonplace, still popular today, that Florence was a republican holdout in an "age of princes."[18] According to Machiavelli, Florence's republican regime had amounted to little more than a fantasy, as imaginary as anything found in the books of Plato or Augustine, and the *Histories* exposes this ugly truth for all to see.[19]

In uncovering this truth of Florentine political history, Machiavelli takes himself to be fulfilling the first and most important responsibility of a historian: saying something *useful*. While the princely character of Medici rule had long since been exposed as such when Machiavelli wrote the *Histories*, no one had yet provided an account of Florentine

[16] Emphasis added.

[17] It should be noted that Machiavelli makes this observation about the "generality of men" in the context of discussing how important it is to conceal political innovations under "the shadow of . . . ancient modes" (D 1.25) – an apt description of the Medici strategy.

[18] Skinner 2001a, 119, 126–127. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Skinner inherits this naïve description of *quattrocento* Florence from Baron (1955) 1966. On the reality of Medici power, see Rubinstein 1997, Hale 1977, Martines 2003, Najemy 2006a, Brown 1992, Kent 1975 and 1978, and Molho 1979. On the ideological significance of humanism to the Florentine oligarchies of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Martines 1979, Najemy 1982b and 2000, Brucker 1979–1980, Jurdjevic 1999.

[19] Machiavelli famously describes himself as someone attentive to the "effectual truth of things," as opposed to "imagined republics and principalities," in chapter 15 of *The Prince*.

republican history that could be used to substantiate this conclusion – or, even more troublingly, to inform future judgments about such figures and the authenticity of their republican credentials. Indeed, Machiavelli's most famous predecessor, Bruni, had produced a history of Florence that seemed designed to leave readers profoundly handicapped in this regard, unable to critique Medici power as a betrayal of Florence's long-held republican principles. As I show in Chapter 2, Bruni's monumental *History of the Florentine People* (1415–1444) effectively gave Medici power the blessing of historical accreditation by re-describing Florentine republicanism as an effort to secure rule by a certain kind of elite, "the best" – all while enjoying, it must be noted, the generous sponsorship of those who had, or could plausibly be said to have, these distinctive qualities.

In support of this claim about the essentially elitist character of Florentine republicanism, Bruni and others had mobilized what they purported to be an accurate portrayal of the city's history, which was supposed to demonstrate that the slow accumulation of power in the hands of certain prominent Florentines was consistent with, and even necessary for, the full realization of Florence's long-held republican aims. Machiavelli, however, rejects Bruni's retelling of Florentine history as a misrepresentation of the facts. Notable for its inventiveness and ideological heft, the humanist thesis was wrong all the same, Machiavelli argues – not because it engaged in a wholesale fabrication of "facts," but because it misused those "facts" in such a way as to make the raw material of history tell a lie.

As a consequence, Machiavelli believed his first order of business in the *Histories* to be clarifying what Florentine republicanism actually *was*. Before he could render any final judgment about Florentine republicanism, positive or negative, he had to redefine it for an audience that had been led astray by earlier writers. Chapter 2 reconstructs Machiavelli's efforts along these lines. There I argue that, against a historiographic tradition that had twisted the history of Florentine republicanism out of recognizable shape in service to a political theory that was "republican" only in name, Machiavelli's *Histories* reorganizes the canonical memory of Florentine republicanism around a more faithful rendering of its defining ambitions and achievements.

One of Machiavelli's goals in formulating this corrected account of Florentine republicanism is to provide his readers with a more accurate sense of both the essential conditions of political life *everywhere* and the distinctive features of an authentically "republican" response to them, both of which he believed Florentine history had revealed. According to Machiavelli, a century of humanist historiography had worked to