

JOHN M. NAJEMY

## Machiavelli Between East and West

A stampa in

*From Florence to the Mediterranean and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Anthony Molho,*  
edited by Diogo Ramada Curto, Eric R Dursteler, Julius Kirshner and Francesca Trivellato.  
Firenze, 2009, pp. 127-145

---

Distribuito in formato digitale da  
«Storia di Firenze. Il portale per la storia della città»  
<<http://www.storiadifirenze.org>>

JOHN M. NAJEMY

MACHIAVELLI BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Renaissance scholarship has in recent years turned ever more fruitfully to the cultural encounters and global perspectives that were changing contemporaries' sense of Europe's place in the world. From studies of both the dramatic transatlantic discoveries and of contacts with cultures east and south of Europe, the Renaissance can now be seen as a time of widening perceptions of, and influences from, a host of cultural others.<sup>1</sup> This essay adds Machiavelli to the discussion, asking how he absorbed, refracted, and contested familiar perceptions of East and West. Machiavelli wrote nothing about the epoch-making discoveries that were transforming ideas and maps of the world. His one apparent, indirect reference to the voyages, in the preface to the first book of the *Discourses on Livy*, compares the «dangers» involved in his self-assigned task of finding new political «modes and orders» with those of searching for «unknown seas and lands».<sup>2</sup> His silence is all the more curious in view of the fact that much significant searching of «unknown seas and lands» was done by a fellow Florentine, the explorer and cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, from the same family of Machiavelli's friend and chancery colleague Agostino Vespucci. Amerigo's famous letters describing the peoples he encountered spread the astonishing news of a «new world» as early as the first decade of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Contemporaries certainly recognized Vespucci's importance. In Thomas More's *Utopia*, Raphael Hythloday, who recounts his visit to the island realm, is said to have accompanied Vespucci.

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of this essay alludes to the stimulating book of my former doctoral student NANCY BISAHA, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Bisaha's rich and wide-ranging exploration of Italian humanist perceptions of the Ottomans is a seminal contribution to this field.

<sup>2</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. G. Inglese, Milan, Rizzoli, 1984, proemio A, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> A recent introduction: F. FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO, *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America*, New York, Random House, 2007.

Francesco Guicciardini mentions Vespucci in the *History of Italy* in describing the voyages of the Portuguese, Spaniards, and Columbus, commenting that «through these expeditions it has become clear that the ancients were deceived [*ingannati*] in many respects in their knowledge of the world». <sup>4</sup> Guicciardini may also have been pointing a critical finger at contemporaries who put too much trust in ancient texts. Although Machiavelli wrote little about geography, Guicciardini certainly had Machiavelli in mind when, using the same verb, he exclaimed (*Ricordi CIII*) «how much those who constantly cite the Romans deceive themselves [*si ingannano*]». <sup>5</sup>

Machiavelli's relationship to antiquity was more critical dialogue than trust. His scattered comments on Europe and its cultural identity implicitly interrogated, and, I think, rejected, the paradigms of East-West and Asia-Europe inherited from antiquity, in particular three prominent ancient discourses of cultural difference: the Greek view, formulated by Herodotus, of the epic conflict between Greece and Persia as the opening phase of a perpetual, 'civilizational' struggle between European liberty and Asian despotism; the Roman myth, poetically dramatized in Virgil's *Aeneid*, of Rome's origins as a fusion of European native Italians and invaders from Asian Troy, popularized against the background of Rome's conflicts with the Greeks, the Europeans who destroyed Troy, and with Carthage, the African rival of Asian origin that nearly destroyed, but was finally obliterated by, Rome; and the Christian sacred history fashioned by Augustine in which symmetrically predestined eastern and western empires, Assyria and Rome, were providentially linked by the pivotal prophetic role of Israel, and in which western, Roman Christianity became Israel's «spiritual heir». Although Machiavelli never directly addressed these master narratives of East and West, he silently undermined them all.

A half century ago, Federico Chabod placed Machiavelli at the origin of concepts of Europe that became common currency in the early modern period. Chabod claimed that Machiavelli gave «the first clear formulation, on the threshold of the modern era, of the idea of Europe as a community with precise and purely secular, not religious, characteristics». <sup>6</sup> More recently,

---

<sup>4</sup> FRANCESCO GUICCIARDINI, *Storia d'Italia* 6.9, in *Opere*, vol. 2, ed. E. Scarano, Turin, UTET, 1981, pp. 617-618.

<sup>5</sup> ID., *Ricordi*, ed. R. Spongano, Florence, Sansoni, 1951, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> FEDERICO CHABOD, *Scritti su Machiavelli*, Turin, Einaudi, 1964, pp. 403-406 (404), reprinted from *Europa: Erbe und Aufgabe*, Wiesbaden, 1956, pp. 29-32; also *L'idea di Europa. Prolusione al corso di storia moderna nell'Università di Roma, 22 gennaio 1947*, «Rassegna d'Italia», 2 (1947): pp. 3-17, 25-37; reprinted in CHABOD, *Idea di Europa e politica dell'equilibrio*, ed. L. Azzolini, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995, pp. 139-203: 149-151; and CHABOD, *Storia dell'idea d'Europa*, ed. E. Sestan and A. Saitta, Bari, Laterza, 1962.

Thierry Hentsch, tracing the emergence among Europeans of a perception of the Middle East as the predestined Other, has similarly seen in Machiavelli «an advance warning of the fissure between the Orient and the West, a chilling sense of political awareness of both self [...] and Other», and a consciousness of a European self accompanied «by a sense of special European destiny» buttressed by Machiavelli's positioning of Europe's roots in ancient Greece. Here, according to Hentsch, was the beginning of the «exclusive appropriation of the Hellenic heritage» by European intellectuals, which became the foundation of the myth of «immemorial confrontation» between Asia and Europe, East and West – a clear manifestation of «the political birth of the West, in and for itself, via a vision of the Other».<sup>7</sup>

But did Machiavelli in fact formulate a «European identity» and a notion of «the West» that posited Asia and Europe as eternally predestined antagonists? Is there, in short, an incipient 'orientalism' in Machiavelli? I begin with the frequency of the names themselves in his texts. «Europa» appears only thirteen times (eight of them in one crucial passage of the *Art of War*) and never in either *The Prince* or the *Discourses*. «Asia» and «asiatici» occur somewhat more frequently, a total of twenty-seven times, distributed fairly evenly among the major works. «Occidente» appears three times (all at the beginning of the *Florentine Histories* in discussions of the division of the declining Roman Empire) and «occidentale/i» thirteen times. Coincidentally, «Oriente» also appears just three times and «orientale/i» likewise thirteen times. This is a relatively meager harvest for concepts alleged to be so influential, but of course Machiavelli had ways of alluding to East and West, Europe and Asia, without naming them as such.

Chabod's and Hentsch's claims rest principally on two passages from *The Prince* and the *Art of War*. In chapter four of *The Prince* Machiavelli explains why Alexander and his successors, unlike many modern princes of «newly gained states», did not lose control of his Persian conquests. The answer rests on a distinction between two kinds of principalities, exemplified, respectively, by France and the Ottoman Turks. In France the king rules through barons who all have their own dynasties, prerogatives, indeed «states» and subjects of their own, and constitute a «long-established multitude of lords» whose occasional conflicts with the king might make it easier for an invader to gain a

---

<sup>7</sup> THIERRY HENTSCH, *L'orient imaginaire: la vision politique occidentale de l'Est méditerranéen*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1988, pp. 99-101; trans. F.A. REED, *Imagining the Middle East*, Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1992, pp. 63-65. For a critique of the idea that Machiavelli contributed to the emergence of the notion of 'oriental despotism', see L. VALENSI, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*, trans. A. Denner, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 55-60.

foothold in France, but whose autonomous power would ultimately make it more difficult for an occupier to maintain control. In the Turkish state the prince has supreme power and rules through administrators he selects and changes at will over subjects who are all «servi». The Turkish kingdom would be difficult to conquer because its «servile» subjects are unswervingly obedient and loyal to their prince; once subjugated, however, such a population, with no experience of resistance and no capacity for political agency, would be easier to control. Machiavelli argues that Darius's ancient kingdom was similar to the modern Turkish state, thus explaining the durability of Alexander's conquests. «Asia» appears twice in this analysis: in vanquishing Darius's kingdom, Alexander became «signore della Asia»; and the structure of that kingdom allowed Alexander's successors to «tenere lo stato di Asia». Although «Asia» seems a geographical concept here and Europe is nowhere mentioned, a basic difference between the political systems of Asia and Europe is nonetheless implied in Machiavelli's further comment that, unlike the Macedonians in Asia, the Romans faced many revolts in Spain, Gaul, and Greece, regions, not unlike modern France, whose numerous smaller principalities made them difficult to possess securely – until, of course, the Romans extinguished those smaller entities and became «secure possessors» of all three regions. Setting aside for the moment the significance of the suffocating effect of Roman hegemony, the argument (despite the absence of «Europe») suggests a fundamental political divergence between East and West.

The contrast implied in *The Prince* between Europe and Asia is complicated by passages in the dialogues of Machiavelli's *Art of War*, whose main speaker, the professional soldier Fabrizio Colonna, extols the superiority of Roman military methods, citizen armies, and infantry over cavalry. In book two, Fabrizio's interlocutor, Cosimo Rucellai, asks why, if infantry is so obviously superior, the ancient Parthians, who relied entirely on cavalry, were able to dominate the territories of the old Assyrian and Persian empires and «divide the world with the Romans». Fabrizio expresses reluctance to speak of anything beyond Europe: «I've told you [but in fact he hadn't and quickly adds that it was implicit in something he said: “o io vi ho voluto dire”] that my discussion of military matters does not pass beyond the boundaries of Europe. So I'm not obliged to account for the customs of Asia». He nonetheless provides a brief explanation of Parthian success (based on topography) but then repeats that he does «not intend to speak of military organization outside Europe».<sup>8</sup> This reluctance is curious, because in book one

---

<sup>8</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Dell'arte della guerra*, in *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, Del-

Fabrizio had praised the ancient Assyrians for the exemplary way they organized military commands. Recommending (as Machiavelli had similarly advised concerning the Florentine militia) that battalion commanders be regularly rotated from district to district to prevent soldiers from developing loyalties to their commanders rather than to the state or prince, Fabrizio cites the Assyrian kingdom as his example of the successful application of this policy and the Romans as his prime counterexample of the error of prolonging military commands, which led to the disastrous formation of private armies: «How useful such rotations are to those who have implemented them, and how damaging to those who have not, is known from the example of the kingdom of the Assyrians and the empire of the Romans. We see that the former kingdom lasted a thousand years without turbulence and without civil war, which resulted from no other cause than the annual rotation of army commanders from one place to another. Nor did the Roman Empire's many civil wars among army commanders and their many conspiracies against the emperors [...] occur for any other reason than their having continuously kept captains in the same commands».<sup>9</sup> In this instance, Asians provide the model of how to do things correctly, Europeans of how not to do it.

Despite having already lauded the Assyrians and acknowledged Parthian success, at the end of book two Fabrizio launches an extended argument for Europe's military superiority over Asia and Africa on the basis of political characteristics specific to Europe.<sup>10</sup> This speech is prompted by Cosimo Rucellai's question about why modern times are plagued by cowardice, disorder, and neglect of ancient military methods, a query that does not call for a comparison of, and does not even mention, Europe and Asia/Africa. Fabrizio's long answer is the second text often adduced to illustrate Machiavelli's 'orientalism', and this is the passage that has eight of the thirteen appearances of 'Europe' in Machiavelli's writings. Fabrizio's explanation for why, as he believes, there have been more good soldiers in Europe than in Asia or Africa is that a multiplicity of states needs and produces more men trained in warfare. Asia and Africa, he says, have each been ruled by one or two large kingdoms and thus brought forth relatively few skilled military men. Yet he names several and implies that there were more: in Asia, Assyria's first king, Ninus, the Persian kings Cyrus and Artaxerxes, and Mithridates, king of Pontus; in Afri-

---

*l'arte della guerra e altre opere*, ed. R. Rinaldi, vol. 2, Turin, UTET, 2006 (cited below as *Arte*, ed. Rinaldi), pp. 1286-1288.

<sup>9</sup> *Arte*, ed. Rinaldi, p. 1272.

<sup>10</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 1312-1318.

ca, «leaving aside the ancient Egyptians», Massinissa and Jugurtha, kings of Numidia; and the generals of the «Carthaginian republic», whom Machiavelli curiously allows Fabrizio not to name. By contrast, says Fabrizio, Europe has had «qualche regno» and an «infinite number of republics», and thus many more good soldiers. Europe's superiority seems initially to rest simply on its greater number of states, each fearing the rest and needing to keep military traditions vibrant by honoring those who excel in them: «the world», says Fabrizio, «has been more *virtuoso* where there have been more states that promoted *virtù*».

A second explanatory thread weaves through Fabrizio's analysis in potential competition with the purely quantitative argument that many states will generate many good soldiers. Republics, he says, more readily produce men excellent in warfare than do princedoms. Fabrizio slips into this idea when he contrasts the military traditions of Asia and Africa and notes that the Carthaginian republic alone produced more good soldiers than all of Asia. This was so because «in republics *virtù* is honored, but it is feared in princedoms, whence it happens that in [republics] men who are *virtuosi* are nurtured [*si nutriscono*], whereas in [princedoms] they dwindle and vanish [*si spengono*]». Greece is Fabrizio's first example of the martial valor promoted by Europe's republics: «except for the kingdom of the Macedonians», he says, Greece «was filled with republics, each of which produced many excellent men». Fabrizio does not attempt to reconcile the superiority of the Greek republics with the fact that the Macedonian kingdom soon swallowed them all up (something he will at least acknowledge at the end of book seven).

Ancient Italy, Fabrizio continues, also had many republics (Romans, Samnites, Etruscans, Cisalpine Gauls), and the regions that became France, Germany, and Spain likewise had large numbers of republics and principalities. If, apart from the Romans, we know but a few of the excellent men of these ancient European states, this, Fabrizio insists, is the fault of historians who pay attention only to the victors. Peoples like the Samnites and Etruscans who strenuously defended their liberty against the Romans must have had many valiant soldiers, even if their names are lost to history. But Fabrizio admits that Rome eventually destroyed all these states, and most of those in Africa and Asia, «leaving no space for *virtù* anywhere except in Rome itself». Roman hegemony ultimately meant less *virtù* everywhere, including Europe; with all the remaining *virtù* concentrated in Rome itself, Rome's eventual corruption entailed the corruption of the whole world. Rome extinguished the *virtù* of neighbors and enemies near and far without knowing how to maintain its own. Finally, Fabrizio adds, the triumph of Christianity made it certain that Europe's ancient military valor would never be resurrected, especially in

Rome. Fabrizio's arguments end, ironically, by emphasizing and explaining not Europe's superiority in arms or liberty but the obliteration of its pre-Roman and Roman traditions of military valor. If Europe once had distinctive traditions of *virtù* and liberty, Rome and Christianity combined to destroy them. Far from demonstrating a stable and superior European identity, as it proposes to do, Fabrizio's long speech ultimately destabilizes that identity and undermines his initial assertion of European superiority. Was Machiavelli in this way acknowledging the growing complexity of his own attitudes and indicating some need to modulate the sharp distinctions he had drawn between Asian and European states in chapter four of *The Prince*?

In the preface to the second book of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli had already given evidence of his evolving views of East and West. Reworking the old concept of *translatio imperii* into a *translatio virtutis*, he says that, while the world as a whole has always remained the same, the «good» and «bad» in it «move about from country to country». *Virtù* «first found a home in Assyria, then in Media and Persia», until it arrived «in Italy and Rome». After the fall of Rome, however, «no other empire managed to last and hold together the world's *virtù*, which was instead fragmented among many nations where men lived *virtuosamente*». The nations that shared this dispersed *virtù* once monopolized by Rome include the «kingdom of the Franks» (the Carolingian empire), the «kingdom of the Turks», «that of the Sultan» (the Mameluke kingdom of Egypt), «the peoples of Germany» (the Swiss-German cities), and «formerly, the Saracen sect», the first wave of Muslim expansion, «which did so many great things and occupied so much of the world after it destroyed the Eastern Roman Empire». Commentators have suggested Plutarch's *De fortuna Romanorum* (317E-318A) as the source for this passage, but Machiavelli did not simply reproduce the Greek historian's framework. According to Plutarch, Fortune first favored the Assyrians and Persians, «flitted lightly over Macedonia» and, after «quickly shaking off Alexander, made her way through Egypt and Syria, conveying kingships here and there, and, turning about, often exalted the Carthaginians». <sup>11</sup> In Machiavelli's version, *virtù* (rather than Fortune) proceeded directly from Assyria, Media, and Persia to Italy and Rome, curiously bypassing the Greeks. And whereas Plutarch, not surprisingly from his historical vantage point, saw Fortune «entering Rome with the intention of remaining», Machiavelli maintains that after Rome fell its *virtù* was fragmented in no fewer than five directions, three of them in

---

<sup>11</sup> PLUTARCH, *Moralia*, trans. F.C. Babbitt, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1927, vol. 4, p. 331.



the Muslim East (Turks, Mamelukes, and Saracens), and only two in Europe (the Franks and Swiss-German cities). Machiavelli here makes no sharp division between Europe and Asia/Africa; nor does he identify a specifically European *virtù* or preeminence. If anything, the *virtù* that came from the East in large part returned there.

In the poem *On Fortune* (lines 130-144), probably from his chancery years, Machiavelli outlines a somewhat different 'translation of empire', this time governed by Fortune, in which the ancient Egyptians and Greeks each have their moment in her favor. Imagined wall paintings in Fortune's palace tell, first, of «how under Egypt the world stood subjugated, conquered» and at peace. Tiring of the Egyptians, Fortune let the Assyrians rise to power, then «turned a smiling face to the Medes, from the Medes to the Persians», and finally «crowned the Greeks with the honor she took from the Persians». Ultimately, however, Fortune abandons everyone. Depicted on the walls is a multitude of vanquished cities (in this order): Memphis, Thebes, Babylon, Troy, Carthage, Jerusalem, Athens, Sparta, and Rome, with no apparent distinction between eastern cities (Memphis, Babylon, and Jerusalem) and western cities (Athens, Sparta, and Rome).<sup>12</sup> Did Machiavelli mean Egyptian Thebes or Greek Thebes? Either way, Fortune clearly has no favorites and seems to blur boundaries between East and West.

In another passage from the *Art of War*, shifting boundaries remove even Greece and Rome from the West. In book six, discussing the optimum size of armies, Fabrizio says that Roman armies normally consisted of 24,000 men, or 50,000 when confronting an especially large enemy force, and that with such armies Rome defeated both Hannibal and the «two hundred thousand» Gauls who invaded Italy between the first and second Punic wars. Romans and Greeks, he explains, fought with relatively small armies whose effectiveness was enhanced by «ordine» and «arte». Fabrizio then distinguishes between methods of warfare practiced by «occidentali» and «orientali», and, as immediately becomes clear, Romans and Greeks belong in neither category. Both «occidentali» and «orientali» make use of large armies, but, whereas «occidentali» rely on «inborn ferocity [*furore naturale*]», the strength of «orientali» lies in the «great obedience» they owe their kings. Fabrizio insists that Romans and Greeks had neither of these qualities: «In Greece and Italy, since there was neither inborn ferocity nor inborn reverence toward kings, it was necessary to turn to discipline [*disciplina*], which is so potent that it allowed

<sup>12</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Capitoli: introduzione, testo critico e commentario*, ed. G. Inglese, Rome, Bulzoni, 1981, pp. 119-120.

the few to overcome the ferocity and the natural obstinacy of the many».<sup>13</sup> The notion that Romans and Greeks occupied a position between «easterners» and «westerners» echoes a passage from book seven of Aristotle's *Politics* (1327b) that locates the Greeks between Europe and Asia: «nations in cold regions», says Aristotle, «particularly in Europe, are full of spirit, but are deficient in intelligence and skill [...]. By contrast, those in Asia have intelligent minds [...] but they lack spirit, which is why they continue to be ruled and enslaved. But as for the race of the Greeks, just as it occupies an intermediate region, so it shares in both conditions. For it is both spirited and intelligent. And this is why it continues to be free [and] is governed in the best way».<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli omits the argument about climate, includes the Romans with the Greeks, and claims, *not* (as Aristotle had) that they combined the characteristics of Europeans and Asians, but that they *lacked both* western ferocity and eastern obedience. Fabrizio's «occidentali» are the ancient peoples who resisted Roman conquest in the West, including the Samnites and the Gauls, to whom Machiavelli similarly ascribes «furore» without «ordine» in *Discourses* 3.36. Undisciplined ferocity, of course, resulted in the subjugation of the «occidentali» to Rome, just as «obedience» and «obstinacy» in the «orientali» (terms that echo the characterization of Turks and Persians in chapter four of *The Prince*) led to the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks. The implication of Fabrizio's assertion that the victorious Greeks and Romans, possessing neither western ferocity nor eastern servility, have no inborn («naturale») temperament of any kind may be that their indeterminate nature, and thus their reliance on «ordine», «arte», and «disciplina», constitute a collective manifestation of the ability to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances that is the elusive essence of *virtù* as hypothesized in chapter 25 of *The Prince*.

Yet, just as Fabrizio's arguments for European military superiority ultimately collapse under the weight of their own contradictions, so also his neat tripartite division of the world – the different but equally inflexible temperaments of «occidentali» and «orientali» as opposed to the creative adaptability of Romans and Greeks – crumbles on close inspection of the examples of political and military success and failure adduced both by Fabrizio and elsewhere by Machiavelli. The Greek city-states had their time of glory, but Fabrizio himself notes (in book seven) that they were gobbled up by Philip of Macedon as they «sat idle and spent their time staging comedies».<sup>15</sup> In chapter

<sup>13</sup> *Arte*, ed. Rinaldi, pp. 1413-1414.

<sup>14</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Politics Books VII and VIII*, trans. R. Kraut, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Arte*, ed. Rinaldi, p. 1466.

five of the *Asino*, the narrator sums up the process by which well-ordered states with good laws and customs fall into corruption with the aphorism that «empires begin with Ninus and end with Sardanapalus».<sup>16</sup> Ninus, the legendary, heroic founder of the Assyrian empire, is in Fabrizio's list of great Asian soldiers;<sup>17</sup> and Machiavelli elsewhere includes him with Cyrus and Alexander among the princes who «did great things by arming their own peoples».<sup>18</sup> Sardanapalus is the equally legendary and infamously debauched last king of Assyria. Thus both ends of the spectrum of princely character are exemplified here with symbolic names from the East, both indeed from Assyria. In book seven of the *Art of War*, Fabrizio asserts that military captains who must make their armies «good and well disciplined» before leading them into battle are more deserving of praise than those who can rely on already trained and experienced armies. His examples of the former include Tullus Hostilius (Rome's third king), Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus (the great-uncle of the Gracchi who organized and trained an army of former slaves during the war against Hannibal), Philip of Macedon, Pelopidas and Epaminondas of Thebes, who liberated their city from the Spartans with an army they recruited from the peasant population, but also the Persian king Cyrus.<sup>19</sup> In chapter 6 of *The Prince* the four great founders who created new states and gave *ordini* to their peoples with their own *virtù*, and with no help from Fortune except the opportunity, include two from the East (Moses and Cyrus) and one each from Greece and Rome (Theseus and Romulus). In *Discourses* 1.1, the examples of countries that successfully overcame the potentially enervating mildness of their climates and topography with rigorous training of their armies include the Egyptians, who produced many «very excellent men» (about whom Machiavelli adds that «if their names had not been obliterated by their remoteness in time, we would see that they merit more praise than Alexander the Great and many others whose memory is still fresh»); the Sultanate of Egypt with the «organization of the Mamelukes and their militia»; and Rome. Two of the three are in the East.

The closest Machiavelli (as distinct from Fabrizio) comes to an explicit 'orientalism' is in *Discourses* 2.2, where he praises the ardent love of liberty that motivated Rome's early enemies to resist for so long. The growth and prosperity of families and countries depend on liberty, he says, and the oppo-

<sup>16</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Tutte le opere*, ed. M. Martelli, Florence, Sansoni, 1971, p. 967.

<sup>17</sup> *Arte*, ed. Rinaldi, p. 1313.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Francesco Vettori, 26 August 1513, in *Opere*, ed. Martelli, p. 1156.

<sup>19</sup> *Arte*, ed. Rinaldi, pp. 1458-1459.

site occurs in countries that lack freedom. As prosperity declines, servitude becomes more difficult to endure: «And of all the harsh forms of servitude the harshest is that which subjects you to a republic: first, because it lasts longer and there is less hope of escaping from it; second, because republics seek to enervate and weaken all other bodies in order to increase themselves». Such things are not done by «a prince who subdues you, unless he is some barbarian prince [*qualche principe barbaro*], a destroyer of countries [*destruttore de' paesi*], and a waster of all forms of civic life among men [*dissipatore di tutte le civiltà degli uomini*], as are the oriental princes [*come sono i principi orientali*]». Of course, these unnamed «oriental princes» are here likened to republics and above all to the voracious Roman republic, which not merely subdued its enemies but crushed their *virtù* and *civiltà*. In this passage it is the Roman republic that behaves like some «barbarous oriental prince».

The *Discourses* probe Rome's corruption and decline quite as much as its rise to power and empire. Rome is not the same through its long history and the different phases of its evolution. Yet republic and empire are inextricably linked for Machiavelli, not only because it was the republic that acquired the territorial empire, but also because the acquisition of empire paradoxically set in motion the destruction of everything that made the conquests possible in the first place. In *Discourses* 2.19 he argues that territorial «acquisitions made by republics that are not well organized, and which do not take place according to Roman *virtù*, will be their ruin, not the source of their well-being». This chapter initially maintains that Rome did indeed carry out its conquests according to «Roman *virtù*», but it also acknowledges that «conquered territories sometimes do no small damage even to the best-organized state, such as when it conquers a city or province full of pleasures [*delizie*] and picks up some of its customs». The first example alleges the corrupt influence of the dissolute city of Capua both on Rome and on Hannibal's armies: «thus do conquered provinces take bloodless revenge against their conquerors, contaminating them with corrupt customs and making them more vulnerable to assault». Machiavelli alludes to his next example with a literary quotation: «Juvenal could not have considered the question better in his *Satires*, saying that the acquisition of foreign lands caused foreign customs to enter into Roman breasts, and in place of frugality and other excellent virtues “gluttony and lust have fallen on us, avenging the world we conquered”». <sup>20</sup> No doubt Machiavelli read a few lines further on in Juvenal's poem that the customs that infected Rome were

---

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli added «gluttony» [*gula*].

more deadly than armies [...], and every crime and act of lust has become familiar since the demise of Roman poverty [...]. Our ancient hills have been flooded by Sybaris, Rhodes, and Miletus, and by that city of garlands – drunken, licentious, Tarentum. Filthy lucre paved the way for the importation of foreign morals. Flabby riches have rotted our age with revolting decadence.<sup>21</sup>

The cities Juvenal mentions were all Greek (Miletus in Asia Minor and the Greek colonies Sybaris and Tarentum in southern Italy), and all were bywords for self-indulgence and loose living. Juvenal was expressing the old Roman fear of the corrupting influence of Greece. In this chapter of the *Discourses* Machiavelli does not make explicit Juvenal's anti-Greek polemic, but in the *Florentine Histories* (5.1) he alludes to Roman mistrust of Greece in recounting Cato's decision to ban philosophers from Rome after seeing the admiration that the visiting Greeks Diogenes and Carneades won from Roman youth.

Machiavelli even hints that Rome eventually came to resemble the Turkish state whose emperor, as he says in *Prince* 19, «always keeps around him [a large army] on which the security and strength of his kingdom depend» and «must of necessity maintain the friendship of these troops». The inexorable logic of the prolongation of Roman military commands, made necessary by expanding conquests (as analyzed in *Discourses* 3.24), produced an analogous result by transforming Rome's armies into the private forces of commanders who vied with one another for the imperial throne. Although initially a good practice, «in time», Machiavelli says, the prolongation of commands «fece serva Roma», a judgment that echoes his description in *The Prince* of the Turkish state as «governed by one lord» and in which the people «are his *servi*». Among modern states, Machiavelli claims (in *Prince* 19), only the Turks and the Mameluke Sultanate are as dependent on their armies as was imperial Rome.

Machiavelli constantly emphasizes the malleability and impermanence of states and societies. Growth, decline, and corruption made it impossible for any city, province, or empire, East or West, Rome or Greece, to stay the same for very long. As he says in *Discourses* 1.2, some basic instability of forms lies behind changes of government: the good kinds are said to be «so easily corrupted that they come by themselves to be pernicious»; the bad kinds «depend on» the good ones, and

---

<sup>21</sup> JUVENAL, *Satires*, ed. J.D. Duff, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, satire VI, lines 292-300, pp. 32-33; trans. N. Rudd, *Juvenal: The Satires*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 47.

each [good one] is so much like the [bad] one closest to it that they easily jump the one into the other [...] so that if someone organizing a republic establishes one of these [...] governments in a city, he creates it for a short time only, because no remedy can prevent it from slipping into its contrary.

More directly pertinent to his sense of the impermanence of cultures is Machiavelli's view of history as a vast kaleidoscope of migrations of peoples uprooted and thrown down into new and strange surroundings, phenomena that preclude or at least complicate any identification of «essences» of East or West, Asia or Europe. In *Discourses* 2.8 Machiavelli meditates at length on «why peoples leave their native places and flood [*inondano*] the countries of others». He considers the conflicts resulting from these displacements and occupations the most dangerous of all: peoples driven by necessity, hunger, war or oppression «are forced to seek new lands» and «violently enter the countries of others, killing the inhabitants, taking possession of their property, setting up a new state, and changing the name of the country, as did Moses, and also the peoples who occupied the Roman Empire». Machiavelli is haunted by the changes of names caused by conquests and migrations: Lombardy used to be Gallia Cisalpina, France was Gallia Transalpina, Slavonia Ill- yria, Hungary Pannonia, England Britannia, and Moses «gave the name Judea to the part of Syria he conquered». Machiavelli found particularly poignant the odyssey of the Mauri, or, as he calls them, Maurusii, a people from ancient Syria who were displaced by the arrival of the Hebrews and fled to North Africa, where they in turn drove the inhabitants away. He reports Procopius's claim to have found in Africa inscriptions on columns proclaiming, «We are the Maurusii, who fled before the face of the brigand Joshua». Machiavelli also recalls the waves of migrations that came out of Scythia in southern Rus- sia, entire peoples driven by poverty and cold, and, still in the same chapter, cites Aeneas and Dido, who led their peoples in flight from their places of origin to found Rome and Carthage. In *Discourses* 1.1, he compares Aeneas and Moses as leaders of peoples «forced to abandon their native lands and find new homes», with the difference, he says, that Moses (here obviously a synec- doche for his people) occupied conquered cities whereas Aeneas built a new city in an empty land. These comparisons and contrasts, like the migrations themselves, freely cross cultural and religious borders.

Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* open with the crisscrossing migrations, displacements, and occupations of the Cimbri, Visigoths, Vandals, Alani, Franks, Burgundians, Huns, Zepidi, Heruli, Thuringi, Suevi, Ostrogoths, and Longobards, which destroyed the old Roman world (1.1-4), to which he adds the «Saracens who under Muhammad came out of Arabia» (1.9). In

these chapters, almost no people stays put: entire populations crossed from east to west, west to east, and north to south, bringing new languages, laws, and customs as they absorbed and transformed those of the lands they occupied. Machiavelli imagines the sense of bewilderment and fear among the inhabitants of Italy and the other former Roman provinces, as they saw «not only changes of government, but also of laws, customs, ways of life, religion, language, dress, and names» (1.5). Old cities disappeared; new ones, like Venice, arose; others, like Rome, were destroyed and rebuilt. «Among these ruins and new peoples, new languages appeared, as can be seen in the speech now used in France, Spain, and Italy, which, mixing the native speech of those new peoples with the old Roman speech, have made a *nuovo ordine di parlare*». Regions, lakes, rivers, and seas changed names, and men, who «used to be named Caesar and Pompey, have now become Piero, Giovanni, and Matteo». Ancient Roman civilization was replaced by something radically different, indeed by a whole series of new and distinct cultural realities. Even the empire was displaced and transformed beyond recognition; having abandoned Rome and become, in Machiavelli's frequent characterization, «greco» and «orientale», it no longer served as a focal point of western identity.

Nor does Machiavelli build a European identity around Christianity, at least not in a positive sense. «Cristianità» appears only three times, all in the *Florentine Histories*, twice in connection with the efforts of fifteenth-century popes to organize European states against the Turks (6.33, 6.37). Referring to the first crusade as the «impresa di Asia contro a' Saraceni» (1.17), Machiavelli underscores the power religion «then» had to move men to an undertaking he defines as «initially glorious» for its conquest of «Asia minore», Syria, and part of Egypt. It brought fame to many men and nations and «reputazione grandissima» to the Pisans, Venetians, and Genoese, but he never says that Europeans were fighting for the honor of Christ. Indeed he highlights the overall failure of the crusades, noting that, after less than a century, «discord among Christians» and the «virtù» of the Muslim leader Saladin deprived the crusaders of «all the glory» of those early conquests. Machiavelli occasionally refers to the princes and states of Europe as «Christian princes», «Christian republics», or simply «Christians», often in the context of the Turkish threat. But he did not place Christianity at the center of European or western culture, except in a polemically negative way. His famous diatribes (in *Discourses* 1.12 and 2.2) against Christianity provocatively blame it for Europe's weakness: for having debilitated and enervated the states in which it took hold and for having made Christians less aggressive defenders of freedom than the ancients. Indeed, the region most negatively affected by Christianity is Italy, because it has the corrupt papacy at its center: «there is no bet-

ter measure of the decadence [of Christianity] than to observe how those peoples who are closer to the Roman Church, the capital of our religion [*religione*], have the least piety [*religione*]. Not only has the Church made «us Italians» wicked and lacking in piety; it was also neither strong enough to unite the Italian provinces nor willing to let any other state become powerful enough to do so and has thus kept Italy divided and unhappy (*Discourses* 1.12). Christianity and the Church thus deny Italy its identity and deform its history.

Religions, moreover, come and go, as do states and peoples. In the chapter of the *Discourses* (2.5) that defends the thesis of the eternity of the world, Machiavelli asserts that new religions appear on average two or three times every five or six thousand years, displacing and seeking to obliterate their predecessors. They also move about and find new homes, much as peoples migrate to new lands and *virtù* relocates from place to place. Machiavelli witnessed Islam, once dominant in Spain, being simultaneously driven from there and yet returning to Europe from the southeast with the Ottomans. He knew that Christianity, once widespread in the Middle East, Asia Minor, and Africa, had been largely expelled from those regions and yet was spreading farther east in Europe; he may also have had an inkling of its ominous future in the western new world. And he beheld with empathy the transformed fate of the Jews, once conquerors and occupiers of Palestine, now victims themselves of the «pious cruelty» of Ferdinand of Spain, who, making cynical use of religion, was hunting them down, seizing their property, and expelling them from his kingdom – a persecution that «could not be more worthy of compassion» (*Prince* 21).

Machiavelli's acute awareness of the transient nature of states, cultures, and religions engendered in him a skeptical reluctance about identifying or defining their essences and caused him to reject, at least implicitly, the three major narratives of East and West bequeathed by antiquity to medieval and Renaissance Europe. The Herodotean narrative was grounded in the historic confrontation of Greece and Persia, in a «belief in the perpetual enmity» of «Asia with its various foreign-speaking peoples belonging to the Persians» against «Europe and the Greek states», which were «quite separate and distinct from them».<sup>22</sup> Among Machiavelli's references to the Persian wars, he recalls (in *Prince* 7) that some Greeks accepted money from the Persian emperor, becoming puppet princes and holding their cities for him; he also recounts the dishonorable counsel and subsequent treason of Themistocles

---

<sup>22</sup> HERODOTUS, *The Histories*, trans. A. de Sélincourt and A.R. Burn, New York, Penguin, 1972, p. 42.



(*Discourses* 1.59 and 2.31), who sided with the Persians and urged them to attack Greece. Both stories mock the legend of a civilized Europe saved from Asiatic barbarism by heroic Athenians. When Machiavelli explains (*Discourses* 2.24) why fortresses and walls are useless unless cities have good armies, he gives an anti-Athenian twist to a saying attributed by Plutarch to the Spartan king Agesilaus. In Plutarch's *Sayings of the Spartans* (*Apophthegmata Laconica* 212E), someone in an unnamed foreign land asks Agesilaus if the massive walls of the city look grand, to which the king replies, «Yes, grand indeed, not for men though, but for women to live in». In Machiavelli's retelling, a Spartan gives the same answer to an Athenian who asks about the walls of Athens. Machiavelli's Greece produced wise lawgivers (Lycurgus), well-organized and well-armed cities (Sparta, Thebes), and skilled military leaders (Pelopidas, Epaminondas, Philip, and Alexander), but just as many instances, not infrequently Athenian, of the corruption and idleness that bring states low. In the poem of the same name, Ingratitude is said to have made her nest in Athens «più che altrove brutto» (*Dell'Ingratitudine* 131-132),<sup>23</sup> and in the *Asino* Athens (with Sparta) is among the states whose excessive territorial ambitions are identified as the cause of their ruin.<sup>24</sup>

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil represents Troy, from whose destruction by the Greeks Rome's future founders flee, as Asia, and King Priam as the «regnator», or sovereign, «of Asia». Although «Europe» appears only three times in the poem («Asia» nine times), it is always paired with Asia, and twice in the context of the war between Troy and Greece, which is figured as Europe: «what destiny made the worlds / Of Europe and of Asia clash in war, / Has now been heard in the most distant lands». Aeneas is westward-bound, destined for Italy, but thrown off course to Carthage by angry Juno, who «cared more for Carthage» and wanted the African city to be the «ruler of the world». Reminded of his duty, Aeneas leads his band on to Italy, where, after many wars with the native populations, the gods finally settle the terms of the peaceful merging of Italians and Trojans. Virgil gives Rome a complex triangulated relationship to the East: Rome was heir to an Asian city crushed by perfidious Greeks; yet, for love of Carthaginian Dido, queen of another transplanted Asian people that later almost destroyed Rome's power, Aeneas temporarily loses his way and nearly aborts Rome's birth. Virgil's Roman readers certainly spied the implicit parallel between Aeneas's love of Dido and the scandalous contemporary 'seductions' of Caesar and Antony by

<sup>23</sup> *Capitoli*, ed. Inglese, p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> *Opere*, ed. Martelli, p. 966.

Egypt's Cleopatra (whose dynasty was Greek). Rome was ever liberating itself from being engulfed by both the East and Greece. In the *Aeneid's* last book, when Juno yields and accepts the Trojan presence in Italy, she wins the concession that, when «Latins» and Trojans «merge their laws and treaties», Jupiter will «not command the land's own Latin folk / To change their old name [...] / [...] never make them alter / Dialect or dress. Let Latium be. / [...] and let Italian valor be the strength / of Rome in after times. Once and for all Troy fell, and with her name let her lie fallen». Jupiter agrees: «I grant your wish [...] / [...] Ausonian [Italian] folk will keep / Their fathers' language and their way of life, / [...] The [Trojans] / will mingle and be submerged, incorporated. / Rituals and observances of theirs / I'll add, but make them Latin, one in speech».<sup>25</sup> It is a strange victory for the Trojans, «submerged» and «incorporated» into everything Latin and Italian. Troy is dead, and Rome is western, Italian, purged of Asian influences.

Despite his fascinated meditations on powerful myths from Moses to Romulus to Numa, Machiavelli evidently did not find the legend of Rome's Trojan origins particularly compelling. He mentions Troy just once (in the poem *On Fortune*) and Aeneas three times, twice in *Discourses* 1.1, where, after contrasting Aeneas's building of a new city with Moses's occupation of existing cities in Palestine, he comments that, if one takes Aeneas as Rome's founder, it belongs in the category of cities built by foreigners, but that, if one assumes Romulus as its founder, Rome was built by native inhabitants. Clearly, Machiavelli preferred Romulus. Except for one last mention of Aeneas (in *Discourses* 2.8) among those (including Dido) who successfully occupied new homelands with skill («arte») rather than overwhelming numbers, Machiavelli ignores him. We may wonder if he rather liked the *Aeneid's* erasure of the Trojans from Roman identity, or at least their incorporation into the native population to the point of invisibility. Submerging «foreign» founders and imagining Rome as self-generated, dependent on no one, particularly Fortune, and thus free to cultivate its own *virtù*, reinforces the central myth of Machiavelli's thought: *virtù* as autonomy.

Augustine deconstructed the Virgilian myth of the Romans as law-giving civilizers of the world, demonstrating how violent and warlike they actually were. But he recuperates Rome for sacred history by claiming that God rewarded the Romans' love of country and their admirable zeal for its well-being with «the earthly glory of an empire which surpassed all others» (*City*

---

<sup>25</sup> *Aeneid* 2.556-557, 7.223-224, 1.15-16, 12.819-837; trans. R. Fitzgerald, *The Aeneid*, New York, Vintage Books, 1984, pp. 52, 203, 34, 398.

of *God* 5.15). The «kingdoms of the East» («regna Orientis»), says Augustine, «had enjoyed renown for a long time, when God decided that a Western [*Occidentale*] empire should arise, later in time, but more renowned for the extent and grandeur of its dominion. And, to suppress the grievous evils of many nations, he entrusted this dominion to those men, in preference to all others, who served their country for the sake of honour, praise and glory [and] who looked to find that glory in their country's safety above their own» (5.13). «Two empires», says Augustine (18.2),

have won a renown far exceeding that of all the rest. First comes the Assyrian empire; later came that of the Romans. These two powers present a kind of pattern of contrast, both historically and geographically. For Assyria rose to power in earlier times; Rome's emergence was later. Assyria arose in the East; Rome in the West. And, to complete the pattern, the beginning of the one followed hard on the end of the other.

Assyria dominated all of Asia (which Augustine considered half the world, the entire East), but just as Assyria «reached the end of her long history», Rome was «in the process of being born» (18.21).<sup>26</sup>

Augustine's providential reading of history made Israel the link between the destinies of the eastern and western empires through a series of chronological correspondences. Abraham was born under the Assyrian empire in the time of Ninus (16.17), and Solomon was Israel's king when Alba Longa (later the birthplace of Romulus and Remus) was founded (18.20). Particularly crucial for Augustine was the emergence of a new kind of prophecy among the Israelites – «writings with a more openly prophetic import, prophecies that would be of value to the Gentile nations» – precisely «when this city of Rome», which «was to have dominion over the nations», «was being founded» in the eighth century by Romulus and Numa Pompilius. These

springs of prophecy gushed out together, at the time when the Assyrian Empire failed, and the Roman Empire started. It was obviously designed that, just as in the first period of the Assyrian Empire, Abraham made his appearance and to him were given the most explicit promises of the blessings of all the nations in his descendants, so in the initial stages of the Western Babylon [Rome], during whose dominion Christ was destined to come, in whom those promises were to be fulfilled, the lips of the prophets should be opened, those prophets who [...] gave testimony to this great event in the future (18.27).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson, New York, Penguin, 1986, pp. 204, 201-202, 762, 787.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 677, 786, 794-795.

By making Christians and Romans the «spiritual» heirs of the promise to Abraham, Augustine invented the 'Judeo-Christian West'. That Christianity fulfilled the prophecies and the promise to Abraham had long been articles of faith among Christians; that it was destined to do so in the Roman West was Augustine's fateful design.

Of course Machiavelli had no use for sacred histories, but ancient Israel, and especially Moses, held a place of importance in his thought. Although he dubbed Moses a «mere executor» of things ordained by God (*Prince* 6), he nonetheless included him among the four exemplary founders of supreme *virtù*. That Moses recognized the necessity, as Machiavelli says in *Discourses* 3.30, of killing «countless men» so that his «laws and *ordini*» could take effect was evidently no obstacle to putting him in such company. Machiavelli regarded David (*Discourses* 1.19) as a «most excellent man in arms, learning, and wisdom, whose *virtù* was so great that he defeated all his neighbors and left a peaceful kingdom to his son Solomon». Ancient Israel was for Machiavelli a nation of notable *virtù*, but a country and people like others, with victories, good lawgivers, kings and soldiers, but also defeats and cruelties perpetrated on the peoples they invaded and occupied. Machiavelli ignored notions of a providential link between ancient Israel and the modern European and Christian West – which also allowed him to ignore the notion of Jews as enemies of Christianity resisting some divine plan. He probably knew the *City of God* and its version of the succession of world empires, and he too paired the Assyrian and Roman empires, but in a comparison of their military organizations, not in a providential scheme linking (or opposing) East and West. And the historic alliance of Rome and Christianity, far from being part of the Almighty's plan – or even a good thing – was for Machiavelli the debilitating and corrupting poison that cut Europe off from the *virtù* of the pre-Romans and early Romans.

Machiavelli's travels took him only as far as Italy, France, and southern Germany, and he wrote nothing about the great discoveries of his time. But he offered to the new and uglier world that was dawning something as valuable as any discovery: liberation from the myths, assumptions, preconceptions, and old stereotypes with which contemporaries continued to view East and West, Europe and Asia, Christian, Turk, Muslim, and Jew – preconceptions that would soon, and catastrophically, structure attempts to force the newly encountered peoples into familiar categories. Implicitly, he urged his readers to adopt a more critical, historical, and contingent approach to such categories. For many of them, his invitation to ponder what was new and different without the old preconceptions would be as disorienting as the «unknown seas and lands» then coming into view.