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Apocalyptic Hope's Appeal: Machiavelli and Savonarola

By the end of 1494, Girolamo Savonarola was at the height of his powers. The Dominican friar, known for apocalyptic preaching, had established himself as a political force in Florence since arriving in 1490. His reputation had grown after he purportedly predicted the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494 and then negotiated the French king's departure from Florence without ruin coming to the city. This episode led some in Florence to believe Savonarola's claim that he was God's chosen prophet, bolstering his political influence. When the French invasion brought an end to the regime of Piero de' Medici, Savonarola used the opportunity to help usher in to Florence a brief but memorable period of republican rule. He revived republicanism and surprised many by bringing moral renewal to the city.[1] One contemporary observer, Francesco Guicciardini, explains the friar's impact in glowing terms: "The work he did in promoting decent behavior was holy and marvelous; nor had there ever been as much goodness and religion in Florence as there was in his time."[2] Savonarola's role in the political and spiritual life of Florence during the 1490s left a lasting impression.[3]

Among those impacted by Savonarola was Florence's most influential political thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli. From his early correspondence to his

[1] For more on Savonarola's life and influence, see Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Lauro Martines, *Scourge and Fire: Savonarola and Renaissance Italy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006); and John Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 375–413.

[2] Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Florence*, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498*, trans. and ed. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 360.

[3] For more on Savonarola's lasting impact in Florence, see Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494–1545* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

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mature works, Machiavelli shows an enduring interest in the friar who was at the center of Florentine politics.[4] Like so many political figures Machiavelli analyzes, Savonarola's success did not last. After Pope Alexander VI excommunicated him in 1497, Savonarola's power declined and he was executed in 1498. Upon the pyre, Savonarola's brief but spectacular political career met a sad end. His failure became for Machiavelli a lesson in the opportunities and perils of political life.

But what *exactly* Machiavelli takes that lesson to be remains the subject of much debate.[5] Sometimes Machiavelli criticizes Savonarola's hypocrisy,[6] while in other places he speaks of his greatness.[7] This ambivalent evidence gives rise to sharply different interpretations. Perhaps Machiavelli dismisses Savonarola as a religious fanatic who is hopelessly naïve about politics. Or perhaps he admires Savonarola and draws on his thought. Common to this debate are interpretations of Machiavelli that try to explain away the ambivalence in his writings, making his attitude toward Savonarola seem more one-sided than it actually is. That tendency has the unfortunate effect

[4] See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, trans. and ed. James Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), Letters 3, 222, 270; *The Prince*, 2nd ed., trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), VI: 24; *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), I.11.5, I.45.2, III.30.1; and *First Decennale*, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 3, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), lines 154–65.

[5] See Maurice Cranston, "A Dialogue on the State between Savonarola and Machiavelli," in *Political Dialogues* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1968), 1–21; J. H. Whitfield, *Discourses on Machiavelli* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1969), 87–110; Donald Weinstein, "Machiavelli and Savonarola," in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron Gilmore (Florence: Sansoni, 1972), 251–64; Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 311–15; Patricia Zupan, "Machiavelli and Savonarola Revisited: The Closing Chapter of *Il Principe*," *Machiavelli Studies* 1 (1987): 43–64; Alison Brown, "Savonarola, Machiavelli and Moses: A Changing Model," in *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein*, ed. Peter Denley and Caroline Elam (London: Westfield College, 1988), 57–72; Marcia Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 597–616; John Najemy, "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 659–81; John Geerken, "Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 579–95; Alison Brown, "Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John Najemy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 157–72, esp. 167; Mark Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 16–52; Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 63–104; and John Scott, "The Fortune of Machiavelli's Unarmed Prophet," *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2 (2018): 615–29.

[6] Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 3.

[7] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.11.5; and *First Decennale*, line 157.

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of obscuring important insights into his political thought. In particular, recognizing Machiavelli's ambivalence toward the apocalyptic figure of Savonarola is key to understanding his ambivalence more generally toward apocalyptic thought.

This chapter explores that ambivalence and how Machiavelli wrestles with Savonarola's adroit use of apocalyptic concepts in politics. On the one hand, Savonarola harnesses religious ideals to advance earthly ends – a fruitful strategy according to Machiavelli, who stresses that religion and politics must work hand in hand.[8] Savonarola takes initially rival concepts – the Eternal City from pagan thought and new Jerusalem from Christian thought – and fuses them together to offer a hopeful vision for Florence. In this vision, Florence plays a key role in God's plan for history, which calls on the city to engage in conquest and to expand its power. Most importantly from Machiavelli's perspective, Savonarola interprets apocalyptic doctrines to encourage bold action in the political sphere, not withdrawal from it.

Yet on the other hand, Savonarola's apocalyptic vision ultimately proves too utopian for Machiavelli. Despite desperately hoping for Florence's redemption and return to power,[9] Machiavelli cannot accept Savonarola's view that political renewal takes the form of an *eternal* polity. This point becomes evident in the *Discourses* as he considers whether a "perpetual republic" (*republica perpetua*) is possible.[10] Though drawn to the idea of a republic that endures forever, Machiavelli concludes in his *Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence* that it is a goal that remains always out of reach, even for the great who strive for it. In particular, his understanding of the world as subject to continual change and decay prevents him from embracing hope in a perpetual republic.[11] Machiavelli's attitudes toward Savonarola and the notion of a perpetual republic show why, despite recognizing the political power of apocalyptic hope, he must reject it. Without faith

[8] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.12. For more on this idea in Machiavelli's thought, see Samuel Preus, "Machiavelli's Functional Analysis of Religion: Context and Object," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 2 (1979): 171–90; Benedetto Fontana, "Love of Country and Love of God: The Political Uses of Religion in Machiavelli," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 639–58; Najemy, "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion"; and Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[9] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI.

[10] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.17.1, III.22.3. Quotes from the original Italian throughout this chapter come from Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971).

[11] Machiavelli, *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 1, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), 111–15; and *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura Banfield and Harvey Mansfield (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), V.1.

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in divine intervention to wipe away the ills plaguing politics and forever keep them at bay, Machiavelli sees no path to the ideal that in his mind surpasses all others – a perpetual republic.

THE PRINCE'S FINAL CHAPTER

In our examination of how Machiavelli engages with Savonarola and apocalyptic thought, it makes sense to begin with a popular approach to this question. Many interested in Machiavelli's views on apocalyptic thought, Savonarola, or both focus on the final chapter of *The Prince*.[12] This chapter, entitled "Exhortation to Save Italy and Free Her from the Barbarians," features Machiavelli's plea to Lorenzo de' Medici to seize the opportunity before him, redeem Italy, and save it from foreign forces.

Curiously, this chapter has gained its status as a source of insight into Machiavelli's attitudes toward Savonarola and apocalyptic thought despite never explicitly mentioning the friar or any apocalyptic texts. What attracts scholars to the chapter is its perceived apocalyptic rhetoric and tone, which represents a marked shift from the rest of the work. Throughout *The Prince*, Machiavelli takes a detached and scientific approach to understanding how a prince should govern in different circumstances. In the Exhortation, however, Machiavelli casts aside dispassionate analysis and makes an urgent call for Lorenzo to take decisive action to liberate Italy. More than just a prince, Lorenzo can become a "redeemer" who drives out of Italy the "barbarian domination [that] stinks to everyone."[13] The crisis caused by foreign invasion created an opportunity for Lorenzo to effect a new political order, increase his power, and secure a lasting reputation.[14] No longer content to simply analyze politics, Machiavelli concludes *The Prince* by urging dramatic intervention aimed at reshaping Italy's political future.

Many see Machiavelli as employing in the Exhortation language and imagery drawn from Savonarola. Donald Weinstein is an early interpreter to suggest this connection, though he ultimately concludes that apocalyptic thinkers like Savonarola are "a foil" for Machiavelli, who places his hope in

[12] See Weinstein, "Machiavelli and Savonarola," 262; Felix Gilbert, "Machiavelli's 'Istorie Fiorentine': An Essay in Interpretation," in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron Gilmore (Florence: Sansoni, 1972), 97; John Najemy, "Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History," *Renaissance Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1982): 553; Zupan, "Machiavelli and Savonarola Revisited"; Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City*, 16–52; McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 63–104; and Scott, "The Fortune of Machiavelli's Unarmed Prophet," 626–27.

[13] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 105.

[14] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 101–02.

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bold men rather than God to bring about redemption.[15] Others go further than Weinstein, arguing that the Exhortation shows Machiavelli's embrace of apocalyptic thought and Savonarola in particular. Patricia Zupan argues that Machiavelli concludes *The Prince* by abandoning his scientific approach to politics in favor of Savonarola's prophetic voice,[16] a move that "attempts resolution and closure through projecting a millenarian vision of unity and concord."[17] Taking a similar view, Alison McQueen writes: "The final chapter of *The Prince* . . . is an apocalyptic exhortation that reiterates the Savonarolan message in a secular way."[18] Likewise, Mark Jurdjevic claims: "Machiavelli was thinking about the Savonarolan example when he wrote that chapter and intended his audience to see that connection."[19] So for a number of scholars, Savonarola and his apocalyptic message serve as a source of inspiration for *The Prince*'s final chapter.

Though a popular way of linking Machiavelli's thought to Savonarola, this interpretation runs into several problems. Let's start with the claim that Machiavelli specifically has Savonarola in mind and wants his audience to think of the friar's example when they read the Exhortation. It is difficult to square this view with textual evidence found in the chapter and elsewhere in *The Prince*. Machiavelli spends much of the chapter urging Lorenzo to assemble a strong army.[20] In light of that advice, Savonarola – an unarmed prophet as an earlier passage from *The Prince* describes him[21] – seems like the last person Machiavelli would want to evoke for his audience in the Exhortation. Moreover, it is far from clear why Machiavelli would think that an apocalyptic prophet who ended up executed would be a compelling example to the Medici, *The Prince*'s stated audience. At the time Machiavelli wrote the work, the Medici regime was cracking down on apocalyptic preachers and followers of Savonarola.[22] This combination of historical and textual evidence casts doubt on the theory that one goal of the Exhortation is to direct readers' attention to the example of Savonarola.

Another possibility is that *The Prince*'s final chapter appropriates elements from the preaching of Savonarola, even if it does not intend to evoke his memory. To be sure, there are some similarities between the Exhortation

[15] Weinstein, "Machiavelli and Savonarola," 262.
[16] Zupan, "Machiavelli and Savonarola Revisited," 45.
[17] Zupan, "Machiavelli and Savonarola Revisited," 49.
[18] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 63.
[19] Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City*, 30.
[20] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 102–5.
[21] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 24.
[22] Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 346–73.

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and Savonarola's thought. The latter draws on apocalyptic texts and themes to craft a narrative that emphasizes crisis as a vehicle for bringing about the redemption of Florence. Likewise in the Exhortation, Machiavelli hopes for redemption as the ultimate outcome of the crisis facing Italy at the time. "[T]o know the virtue of an Italian spirit," argues Machiavelli, "it was necessary that Italy be reduced to the condition in which she is at present, which is more enslaved than the Hebrews, more servile than the Persians, more dispersed than the Athenians, without a head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, pillaged, and having endured ruin of every sort."[23] Similar to many authors of apocalyptic texts, Machiavelli infuses crisis with meaning by interpreting it as a path to redemption.

But despite a few similarities, the Exhortation departs in significant ways from the Christian apocalyptic tradition embraced by Savonarola. That tradition entails more than just hope for a better future following crisis. It espouses a truly utopian vision for the future – the perfect kingdom of God, which will surpass anything in human history. In contrast, Machiavelli does not anticipate such a radical break from the past. He instead frames the opportunity to redeem Italy as similar to opportunities faced by past founders. After discussing the examples of Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus, Machiavelli urges Lorenzo "to follow those excellent men who redeemed their countries" by establishing a strong army.[24] Rather than hope for something radically novel, Machiavelli wants history to repeat itself and for Lorenzo to imitate the boldness and virtue of past founders.

By overlooking this point, some interpreters exaggerate the utopian nature of the political vision outlined in the Exhortation. For instance, McQueen argues that the redemption of Italy envisioned by Machiavelli "marks an end to the variability, contingency, and contestation that define the political world," which shows his reliance on "a Savonarolan set of rhetorical maneuvers."[25] Though Savonarola certainly preached a future for Florence free from contingency and political strife (as will be discussed further), the Exhortation stops short of such utopian hope. Machiavelli never suggests in *The Prince* that the political renewal he calls for will endure forever. In making the case to Lorenzo to seize the opportunity before him, Machiavelli stresses the honor, love, and reputation that will come to him, not that his new orders will last forever.[26] Machiavelli expresses optimism that a leader will rise up and assemble an army

[23] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 102.
[24] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 104.
[25] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 87–88.
[26] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 105.

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capable of driving foreign troops out of Italy. This optimism, however, remains distinct from the utopian prediction that a new political order founded by Lorenzo can permanently escape contingency and variability – a claim Machiavelli avoids.

For this reason, a more accurate characterization of the closing of *The Prince* is as a redemption narrative rather than an apocalyptic one. Maurizio Viroli makes this point, noting that the Exhortation "shares some features of millenarianism" but that the more apt comparison is with the story of Exodus.[27] The redemption narrative found in Exodus details how God empowers a political and spiritual leader, Moses, to lead his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. There is strong textual evidence supporting this interpretation of the Exhortation. In it, Machiavelli specifically compares the Italians to "the people of Israel . . . enslaved in Egypt" and praises Moses as an "excellent [man]" to follow.[28] He uses imagery directly from Exodus to describe the opportunity before Lorenzo: "[T]he sea has opened; the cloud has escorted you along the way; the stone has poured forth water; here manna has rained; everything has concurred in your greatness."[29] Like Moses who led the Hebrew people out of bondage, the founder hoped for by Machiavelli will lead the Italians in emancipating themselves from foreign domination. But even in these flights of optimism, Machiavelli steers clear of the utopian hope characteristic of apocalyptic beliefs – a permanent end to woe for an elect group of people. Such hope is conspicuously absent from the Exhortation.

In sum, the Exhortation's links to Savonarola and apocalyptic thought end up being more tenuous than many claim. It is necessary to look elsewhere in Machiavelli's writings to understand his attitudes toward Savonarola and apocalyptic thought. Notably, Machiavelli shares with Savonarola a deep interest in the possibility of a polity that would endure forever. Their reflections on this possibility reveal affinities between them, but also why they ultimately must part ways over whether to embrace apocalyptic hope, as we explore later.

THE ETERNAL CITY AND NEW JERUSALEM

Machiavelli brings up the concept of the perpetual republic at two separate points in the *Discourses*. The first time he concludes that it would be impossible to realize a republic that lasts forever. Five chapters later, he strikes

[27] Maurizio Viroli, *Redeeming* The Prince: *The Meaning of Machiavelli's Masterpiece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 14–15.

[28] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 102, 104.

[29] Machiavelli, XXVI: 103. The miracles cited by Machiavelli come from Exodus 14:21, 13:21, 17:6, 16:4.

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a slightly less pessimistic tone and expresses the faint hope that a perpetual republic would be possible under certain rare conditions.[30] In these passages, Machiavelli gives voice to a hope going back to ancient Rome – the idea of the "Eternal City" (*urbs aeterna*). It was common for ancient writers to refer to Rome as eternal. One notable example is Livy, whose *History of Rome* is the focus of Machiavelli's *Discourses*.[31] Like the ancients he closely studies, Machiavelli entertains the notion of a polity that endures forever.

This hope for a city or kingdom that will last forever also appears in Christian apocalyptic thought. Whereas the Roman tradition places its hope in Rome as the Eternal City, the Christian tradition anticipates the coming of the kingdom of God or new Jerusalem, which will endure forever. These two concepts – the Eternal City and new Jerusalem – eventually merged together in the world that Machiavelli and Savonarola both inhabited, Renaissance Florence. The result was what Weinstein calls the "myth of Florence": the idea that Florence was chosen by God, imbued with eschatological importance, and destined to flourish like ancient Rome in wealth and power.[32]

That myth developed long after the concepts of the Eternal City and new Jerusalem first emerged. The reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus, which began in the first century B.C.E., inaugurated the Pax Romana, helped allay anxieties that Rome would be destroyed, and gave way to the hope that Rome would endure forever.[33] Formulations used to express Rome's immortality took various forms, but the term that initially came into widespread use was *urbs aeterna* or "Eternal City."[34] Praising Rome as the Eternal City was especially common in Roman poetry.[35] Perhaps most famously, Virgil in the *Aeneid* proclaims Rome to be "an empire that will know no end."[36] In the second century C.E., during the reign of Hadrian, *Roma aeterna* or "eternal Rome" emerged as another expression alongside *urbs aeterna*.[37]

Belief in Rome as the Eternal City initially existed in tension with Christian beliefs, especially its apocalyptic doctrines. Early Christians anxiously

[30] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.17.1, III.22.3.
[31] Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I–V of* The History of Rome from Its Foundation, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), IV.4.4, V.7.10.
[32] Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 27–66.
[33] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 135–36.
[34] Kenneth Pratt, "Rome as Eternal," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, no. 1 (1965): 25.
[35] See, e.g., Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. and ed. A. J. Boyle and R. D. Woodard (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), III.72.
[36] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), I.279.
[37] Pratt, "Rome as Eternal," 28.

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anticipated the coming of God's kingdom – the only kingdom, in their view, that would last forever. From this perspective, the notion of Rome as the Eternal City stood in direct opposition to God's divine plan for history. In the book of Revelation, one finds that the promise of God's everlasting kingdom goes hand in hand with fierce attacks on the Roman Empire's belief in its invincibility. As New Testament scholar Adela Yarbro Collins notes, Revelation's criticism of Rome's arrogance "was probably a response to Roman propaganda regarding the eternity and universality of Roman dominance."[38] The early Christian apocalyptic tradition took a hostile view toward the myth of the Eternal City because, if Rome ruled forever, that stood in the way of Christ's eternal kingdom.

John, the author of Revelation, specifically attacks the myth of the Eternal City by pointing to Rome's coming destruction. It is not a city destined to rule forever, and instead enjoys only fleeting glory. John emphasizes this point through a voice from heaven announcing Rome's fate: "As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief . . . . [H]er plagues will come in a single day – pestilence and mourning and famine – and she will be burned with fire" (Revelation 18:7–8).[39] In its vision of Rome's destruction, Revelation describes the shock of those who see that such a great city "in one hour . . . has been laid waste" (Revelation 18:19). Revelation closes with the vision of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, which marks the establishment of God's earthly rule and an end to all suffering (Revelation 21). Rome's greatness pales in comparison to the perfection of the new Jerusalem – a kingdom, unlike the Roman Empire, destined to endure forever.

So the Christian apocalyptic tradition offered its own vision of an everlasting kingdom, which competed with the idea of Rome as the Eternal City. In the words of theologian Barbara Rossing, beliefs in the Eternal City and new Jerusalem represented "dueling eschatologies."[40] Both the Roman and Christian traditions voiced hope in an eternal kingdom, but looked for it in different places.

Christianity's dim view of Rome as the Eternal City largely persisted throughout the Middle Ages.[41] Augustine in the *City of God* makes the case

[38] Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 122.

[39] New Revised Standard Version. All subsequent biblical quotes come from this version.

[40] Barbara Rossing, "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision for Earth's Future," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 207.

[41] Pratt, "Rome as Eternal," 31.

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for the superiority of the heavenly city compared to Rome. Notably, he takes Virgil's famous description of Rome in the *Aeneid* – "an empire without end" – and instead applies it to the heavenly city.[42] In this way, Christian writers subverted the intended meaning of the Eternal City so as to downplay Rome's greatness and glorify God's kingdom.

With time, though, Rome's designation as the Eternal City came back into use as it lost its blasphemous connotations. For intellectual and political leaders in Italy and the Holy Roman Empire, identifying Rome as the Eternal City was a way to express pride in their historical connection to the ancient Romans.[43] In *The Banquet*, Dante approvingly quotes Virgil's description of Rome as an "empire without end," with the added twist that the *Christian* God chose Rome as the empire that would endure with unrivalled power.[44] Rather than an affront to Christ's kingdom, the designation of Rome as the Eternal City comes from God. For Dante, the Eternal City and new Jerusalem no longer stand in conflict with one another – a marked shift away from Augustine's view that only the heavenly city could be eternal.

Dante, a native of Florence, gave voice to a view that became prevalent during the Renaissance. For many elites in Florence, republican Rome was a model for their city to follow. This view emerged in a context where apocalyptic preaching flourished and identified Florence as the new Jerusalem described in Revelation. As Weinstein explains, "The myth that celebrated Florence both as the New Jerusalem and as the New Rome in a dual mission of spiritual and political leadership was one with which Florentines of every class would have been familiar."[45] This idea helped shape Florentine political and religious thought at the time when Machiavelli became active in politics. Savonarola in particular represented this fusion of Christian and Roman thought, which sparked hopes for an eternal, expansive, and flourishing city.

SAVONAROLA'S APOCALYPTIC VISION FOR FLORENCE

Throughout his ministry in Florence, Savonarola displayed a strong interest in Christian apocalyptic doctrines and their relevance to contemporary events. After arriving in Florence in 1490 to become the lector of the monastery of San Marco, Savonarola preached a series of sermons on the book of Revelation.

[42] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), II.29: 87.
[43] Pratt, "Rome as Eternal," 32–33.
[44] Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1989), IV.4.10–IV.4.12.
[45] Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 146–47.

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These sermons emphasized that the events foretold in Revelation were imminent: a divine scourge was coming to wipe away corruption in the Church and society at large. Even before Florence's political revolution of 1494, great crowds flocked to hear Savonarola and his apocalyptic preaching.[46]

As his apocalyptic message developed, Florence took an increasingly central role in it. Weinstein describes this shift, which had major ramifications for Savonarola's political thought:

> At a certain point Savonarola's apocalyptic vision of future tribulations became millenarian and this-worldly, his ascetic piety made room for a materialistic promise of riches and power. At a certain moment his Christian universalism narrowed to a partisan civic focus, with Florence taking shape in his mind as the New Jerusalem and the future of her government and worldly fortunes becoming part of the divine plan.[47]

The idea that Florence's greatness is part of God's plan for history is largely absent from the early apocalyptic preaching of Savonarola. If he had remained wedded to an apocalyptic vision that left little role for political renewal in advancing God's plan, his religious message would have had limited significance for politics. But his message underwent a transformation, which became especially evident with the fall of the Medici regime in 1494.

At this critical juncture, Savonarola took to the pulpit to emphasize that God wanted the people of Florence to adopt republican rule. With this change, a righteous republic would emerge, flourish, and take on divine importance. On December 12, 1494, shortly after the end of Medici rule, Savonarola preached a sermon making the case that in Florence "government by the majority is better than that of a single leader."[48] Partly in response to Savonarola's preaching, the government implemented republican measures modeled after those in Venice. Savonarola proclaimed that these reforms, combined with spiritual renewal, would make Florence more glorious than ever before:

> [E]veryone go to confession and be purified of sins, and let everyone attend to the common good of the city; and if you will do this, your city will be glorious because in this way she will be reformed spiritually as well as temporally, that is, with regard to her people, and from you will issue the reform of all Italy.

[46] Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 75–76, 91–99.

[47] Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 77.

[48] Girolamo Savonarola, "Aggeus, Sermon XIII: 12 December 1494," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498*, trans. and ed. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 152.

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> Florence will become richer and more powerful than she has ever been, and her empire will expand into many places.[49]

Rather than simply focus on heavenly rewards, Savonarola details the earthly greatness that God has in store for Florence. In his vision for republican rule and a renewed spiritual life, Florence has the opportunity to greatly expand its earthly power.

Though it would be inaccurate to call Savonarola the author of the republican government implemented in 1494, it is important not to underestimate his role in its adoption. He persuaded many in Florence to see the new government as divinely inspired. As John Najemy puts it, "While the constitution of 1494 was not Savonarola's invention, its identification with sacred history and with divine will was indeed his, and of momentous consequence."[50] Savonarola used his religious authority to confer added significance to the political changes Florence implemented in 1494. Florence's political revolution without bloodshed was, in Savonarola's words, "a divine miracle."[51] Many in Florence, thankful for the peaceful transition, saw no reason to argue with him.

Savonarola's message and political vision bear the marks of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought. As is characteristic of this perspective, he sees pervasive corruption in the world, but has faith that God will wipe it away in a coming crisis, which will lead to a lasting utopia. Savonarola repeatedly identifies the Church as a source of corruption, which "has reached the dregs" and is in desperate need of renewal.[52] Savonarola also condemns "the haughtiness, pride, and countless hateful sins of [Italy's] princes and captains."[53] Spiritual and political corruption is leading to a crisis point, which will result in God's wrath and upheaval. "God's dagger will strike, and soon," warns Savonarola in a sermon from January 13, 1495.[54] With God's guidance, the coming crisis will remove the corrupt from power and realize his perfect kingdom.

The political significance of this vision is difficult to miss, since Savonarola singles out Florence as the city divinely chosen to fulfill it. Drawing on an end-times prophecy from the book of Matthew, Savonarola stresses that the gospel "must be preached throughout the whole world" to realize God's

[49] Savonarola, "Aggeus, Sermon XIII: 12 December 1494," 153.
[50] Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575*, 394.
[51] Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, trans. and ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 210.
[52] Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, 217–18.
[53] Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, 267.
[54] Savonarola, "Psalms, Sermon III: Renovation Sermon, 13 January 1495," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 74.

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eternal kingdom.[55] He adds to this prophecy the twist that Florence "is loved by God more especially than other" cities, and has been chosen by him to "propagate [his divine word] throughout the world."[56] For this reason, Florence is destined to increase in wealth and power, which are necessary to spread the gospel. Savonarola places special importance on Florence's establishing itself not just as a righteous republic, but also as a wealthy and expansive one. Indeed, Savonarola goes so far as to claim that these predictions of Florence's temporal greatness come directly from the Virgin Mary. He reports a heavenly vision where Mary tells him: "May the city of Florence become more glorious, more powerful, and richer than it has ever been before. May it stretch its wings farther than it ever has done before . . . . May it fully recover whatever it had . . . . May it acquire things that till now have never come within its power."[57] In short, divine and temporal goals become unified in Savonarola's vision for Florence.

Ancient Rome also plays a significant role in this vision. In his most explicitly political work, *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, Savonarola urges the citizens of Florence to perfect their government by emulating the ancient Romans. The "Romans greatly expanded their empire," he writes, "because they loved the common good of the city so much . . . . God gave such great power to the Romans, because they loved each other and remained at peace with each other in the beginning." Just as God rewarded the Romans for their virtue, he "will multiply both [Florence's] spiritual and temporal goods," so long as its citizens also uphold these virtues.[58] From Savonarola's perspective, the ideal embodied by ancient Rome is not in conflict with his vision for Florence. Rather, this vision incorporates Rome as an exemplary model for Florence to follow in perfecting its government.

According to Savonarola, Florence ultimately will exceed Rome's greatness because it represents the new Jerusalem, a concept that comes from the apocalyptic text of Revelation. He assures the people that, if they turn to God, "blessed will you be, Florence, for you will soon become that celestial Jerusalem (*quella Jerusalem superna*)."[59] Here Savonarola's apocalyptic hopes

[55] Savonarola, *A Dialogue Concerning Prophetic Truth*, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 107. See Matthew 24:14: "And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come."

[56] Savonarola, *A Dialogue Concerning Prophetic Truth*, 116.

[57] Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, 267.

[58] Savonarola, *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 201.

[59] Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Aggeo*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Rome: Angelo Belardetti, 1965), 151. Quoted in Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 142.

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for Florence come through most explicitly. By identifying Florence with the celestial Jerusalem described in Revelation that comes down to earth, Savonarola sets forth his vision of Florence as God's perfect kingdom. Given these divine plans for Florence, the only true king for the city could be Christ. "Take Christ as your King," urges Savonarola, "and place yourself under His law."[60] God has a special relationship with Florence and will bless it unlike any other city, as his eschatological promises are fulfilled.

As the new Jerusalem, Florence will embody perfection and endure forever. For Savonarola, the upheaval plaguing Italy is a necessary but temporary step in God's plan. From these difficulties, God's kingdom will emerge in Florence. Savonarola outlines this utopian future near the end of his *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence:*

> [I]n a very short time, the city shall return to such devotion that it will be like a terrestrial paradise, and will live in jubilation and in songs and psalms; boys and girls will be like angels, and they will be brought up to live both as Christians and as good citizens. In time, through these practices, the government of the city will become more heavenly than earthly, and the happiness of the good will be so great that they will enjoy a kind of spiritual felicity even in this world.[61]

This hope pervades Savonarola's writings and sermons during the turbulent years following the return to republican rule in 1494. In the midst of turmoil, he assures the people of Florence that unparalleled greatness lies ahead – spiritual righteousness, territorial expansion, wealth, and happiness. His message found a sympathetic audience among many in Florence, who came to believe his apocalyptic vision for their city. As one of his followers put it, when Savonarola led the city, "Florence was happy and blessed and seemed a new Jerusalem."[62]

The vision for Florence embraced by Savonarola and his followers is thoroughly utopian. He embraces a utopian ideal from the Christian apocalyptic tradition, the new Jerusalem, and claims that God has chosen Florence to embody it. But despite the utopian nature of Savonarola's message, it is not merely otherworldly and unconcerned with politics. To fulfill its destiny as the new Jerusalem, Florence must become great by expanding in wealth and

[60] Savonarola, "Aggeus, Sermon XXIII: 28 December 1494," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 171.

[61] Savonarola, *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, 203.

[62] Timoteo Bottonio, *La vita del Beato Ieronimo Savonarola*, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498*, trans. and ed. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 243.

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power like ancient Rome. Savonarola thus fashions an apocalyptic vision for Florence uniquely suited to advance political goals because it infuses them with divine meaning.

REASSESSING MACHIAVELLI'S VIEW OF SAVONAROLA

The general consensus among scholars, notes Jurdjevic, is that Machiavelli "had a rather dim view of Savonarola."[63] As an apocalyptic preacher who met political ruin, Savonarola is not a figure that many would expect Machiavelli to admire. In his discussions of politics, Machiavelli is brutally honest. It seems that he would have little patience for someone who relies on Christian eschatology to make far-fetched claims about politics. Well after Savonarola's death, Machiavelli does express exasperation with prophets in his city who preach doom and destruction, calling Florence "a magnet for all the world's pitchmen."[64] So when scholars argue that Machiavelli finds aspects of Savonarola's thought appealing, it is not surprising that they rarely point to the friar's apocalyptic message as the reason why.[65] The few who do focus on the last chapter of *The Prince* as evidence,[66] but that interpretation runs into problems because this chapter never embraces Savonarola's apocalyptic message and its utopian hope, as discussed earlier. Since that line of interpretation fails, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that Machiavelli "loathed" Savonarola's apocalyptic message.[67]

There are reasons, though, to resist this conclusion. The various remarks regarding Savonarola in Machiavelli's writings prove far more ambivalent than how many interpreters characterize them. At some places Machiavelli criticizes the friar, yet at others he praises him. When viewed together, this evidence reveals an important point: Machiavelli's criticisms of Savonarola do not stem from concerns over his apocalyptic vision for Florence but from other concerns. A likely reason why is that Savonarola avoids a message entirely filled with doom, which treats politics as futile and something to retreat from. Instead, he crafts an apocalyptic message full of hope for

[63] Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City*, 16. For a similar assessment, see also Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment," 612.

[64] Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 225: 267.

[65] See Weinstein, "Machiavelli and Savonarola"; Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet*, 311–15; Brown, "Savonarola, Machiavelli and Moses"; Whitfield, *Discourses on Machiavelli*, 87–110; and Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City*, 16–52.

[66] See Zupan, "Machiavelli and Savonarola Revisited"; and McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 63–104.

[67] Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment," 600.

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Florence's future – one that encourages political action and, for that reason, proves far harder for Machiavelli to dismiss.

Machiavelli's first remarks on Savonarola come in a letter to Ricciardo Becchi on March 9, 1498.[68] Becchi was an ambassador for Florence stationed in Rome. This role put Becchi in a tough spot: Florence still officially supported Savonarola, but at a time when Rome was increasingly frustrated with him, due to the friar's return to preaching after Pope Alexander VI had excommunicated him in 1497.[69] In response to a request by Becchi, Machiavelli provides in his letter a summary and analysis of Savonarola's sermons during February and March 1498.[70]

At times in the letter, Machiavelli takes a critical tone toward Savonarola. Because of Savonarola's shifting criticisms of the pope and Florentine government, Machiavelli writes that, "in my judgment, he acts in accordance with the times and colors his lies accordingly."[71] Here Machiavelli's attitude toward Savonarola is the most dismissive that one finds in his writings.[72] In his analysis, Machiavelli ultimately concludes that Savonarola's sermons reveal his hypocrisy, as well as his increasingly tenuous political position.

It makes sense why Machiavelli came to this conclusion at the time. In 1498 when Machiavelli wrote to Becchi, Savonarola's political power was in sharp decline, and his maneuverings to regain his grip on it only made the situation worse. The first major event precipitating this decline was the pope's excommunication of Savonarola in 1497. Though not the death knell of his political career, it certainly hurt his support in Florence. His support took another hit in 1497 when he failed to speak in favor of the law of appeal in the case of Medici conspirators, who were sentenced to death for trying to overthrow the republic. The law of appeal empowered the most democratic element of Florence's government, the Great Council, to make the final decision on severe sentences like death.[73] Previously, Savonarola had championed adoption of the law and praised it as a key reform that provided stability

[68] Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 3.

[69] See "Letters 1497–1498," in Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 4.

[70] Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 3: 8.

[71] Machiavelli, Letter 3: 10.

[72] The closest competitor is probably a letter from 1521 to Guicciardini, where Machiavelli briefly mentions Savonarola and calls him "wily." See Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 270: 336. It is not clear, though, that this remark counts as criticism, since elsewhere Machiavelli suggests that rulers should be wily. See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XVIII: 69–70. For more on this point, see Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City*, 38.

[73] Lauro Martines, *Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 441–48.

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to Florence and helped restore its glory.[74] By not wanting to apply the law when it proved inconvenient, Savonarola looked hypocritical and alienated some of his own supporters with Medici sympathies – a point Machiavelli makes in the *Discourses*.[75] Savonarola's fortunes continued to wane in March 1498 with the arrival of new members to the Signoria, Florence's ruling body, which resulted in a government more hostile to him.[76]

The opposition Savonarola faced was starting to overwhelm him. During the couple of months after Machiavelli's letter, Savonarola would be imprisoned, tortured, hanged, and burned. It is important to keep this context in mind when drawing conclusions from Machiavelli's letter. Its dismissive comments toward Savonarola in 1498 – right before his downfall – reflect his weakness at the time, but need not imply that Machiavelli consistently held this view without ever revising it.

Over time, Machiavelli's assessment of Savonarola became more nuanced and even reverential in tone, as he reflected on the friar's career with the benefit of time.[77] In numerous places, Machiavelli uses terms of respect for Savonarola – so frequently, in fact, that it is difficult to chalk his comments up to irony. When first mentioning him in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli refrains from judging Savonarola's claim that he spoke with God and adds: "one should speak with reverence of such a man."[78] Later, Machiavelli praises Savonarola's writings, which "show the learning, the prudence, and the virtue of his spirit."[79] And in his poem the *First Decennale* on Florentine history, he speaks of the "great Savonarola."[80]

This reverential language shares much in common with that used by Machiavelli's friend Guicciardini. Like Machiavelli, he refuses to say whether Savonarola "was a true prophet." Either way, Savonarola was an impressive figure from Guicciardini's perspective: "[I]f he was good, we have seen a great prophet in our time; if he was bad, we have seen a great man." Guicciardini continues by noting that, "if he was able to fool the public for so many years on so important a matter without ever being caught in a lie, he must have had great judgment, talent, and power of invention."[81] In line with Guicciardini's

[74] Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, 207.
[75] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.45.2.
[76] For more on the events in 1497 and 1498 leading to Savonarola's downfall, see Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 280–88; and Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 397–400.
[77] Weinstein and Martines also suggest that Machiavelli's view toward Savonarola changed with time. See Weinstein, "Machiavelli and Savonarola," 255; and Martines, *Scourge and Fire*, 244.
[78] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.11.5.
[79] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.45.2.
[80] Machiavelli, *First Decennale*, line 157.
[81] Guicciardini, *The History of Florence*, 362.

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judgment, Machiavelli also describes Savonarola as a great man from Florence's recent past.

Admittedly, Machiavelli's praise of Savonarola often comes with caveats, as he points out failures and constraints that ultimately forced the friar from power. Unfortunately, interpreters too often restrict their focus to these caveats while failing to take seriously remarks praising Savonarola.[82] That approach hinders an honest assessment of Machiavelli's views of Savonarola, in all their nuance and complexity. It thus is important to consider *both* Machiavelli's praise and criticism of Savonarola, with the goal of understanding how they fit together in his political thought.

Chapter 6 of *The Prince* proves key for understanding the tensions in Machiavelli's reflections on Savonarola. The chapter focuses on "new princes" who acquire principalities through their "own arms and virtue." Machiavelli begins it by explaining that he will "bring up the greatest examples" of new princes.[83] He proceeds to examine an impressive list of founders: Moses who founded Israel, Cyrus who founded Persia, Romulus who founded Rome, and Theseus who founded Athens. In the context of discussing these great men, Machiavelli includes the example of Savonarola. He makes clear that Savonarola fell short of achieving the greatness of founders like Moses. For unlike Moses, Savonarola was an unarmed prophet, which led to his ruin and prevented him from maintaining the principality he had acquired.[84]

Despite Savonarola's ultimate failure in politics, Machiavelli still sees him as a founder of new orders. For this reason, Savonarola counts as a great man in the eyes of Machiavelli, and one who had the potential to achieve even more. Indeed, throughout his writings, Machiavelli exhibits a deep admiration for founders. The most famous example is his plea at the end of *The Prince* for Lorenzo to seize the opportunity to found new political orders. Such action, stresses Machiavelli, will establish for him a reputation of lasting greatness.[85] In a less well-known passage from *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, Machiavelli makes clear that no human achievement can rival the act of founding new orders:

> [N]o man is so exalted by any act of his as are those men who have with laws and with institutions remodeled republics and kingdoms; these are, after those who have been gods, the first to be praised. And because they have

[82] See, e.g., Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment."
[83] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 21–22.
[84] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 24.
[85] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 105.

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> been few who have had opportunity to do it, and very few those who have understood how to do it, small is the number who have done it. And so much has this glory been esteemed by men seeking for nothing other than glory that when unable to form a republic in reality, they have done it in writing, as Aristotle, Plato, and many others, who have wished to show the world that if they have not founded a free government, as did Solon and Lycurgus, they have failed not through their ignorance but through their impotence for putting it into practice.[86]

This passage illustrates Machiavelli's profound respect for founders, who according to him are second only to gods. No glory compares with that of founding a government. In fact, Machiavelli identifies this desire for glory as the motivation behind philosophers who outline new orders for the ideal government, but whose impotence in politics prevents them from realizing their visions.

In conjunction with Chapter 6 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli's praise of founders in *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence* brings into sharper focus why he sees greatness in Savonarola. Like Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers, Savonarola wrote about new orders in works such as his *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*. But Savonarola went beyond just writing about new orders: he worked to realize them by using his pulpit to call for republican rule in Florence. By *taking action* to put new orders in place, Savonarola surpassed in greatness philosophers who only *contemplated* new orders. When the opportunity presented itself, Savonarola aimed for great things – in fact, the greatest achievement possible. And his bold action succeeded in establishing new orders, at least for a period of time. Understanding the immense challenges that face anyone attempting to found new orders, Machiavelli treats Savonarola's achievement as no small feat and cannot help but admire him.

This admiration, of course, comes with important qualifications since Savonarola represents a failed founder. The republican form of government that he championed did not endure, nor did Savonarola, who met his demise four short years after rising to power. Machiavelli studies Savonarola's example to pinpoint the causes behind why some founders fail.

He consistently identifies two shortcomings that doomed Savonarola. First, the friar lacked arms to guarantee continued support for the measures he helped introduce in Florence. Machiavelli makes this point both in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.[87] Second, Savonarola exhibited political hypocrisy,

[86] Machiavelli, *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, 114.
[87] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 24; and *Discourses*, III.30.1.

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which undermined his authority as a religious leader committed to the common good, making him instead look like a political partisan.[88] His political duplicity is a target of Machiavelli's criticism in the letter to Becchi, as well as in a passage from the *Discourses* that discusses Savonarola's shifting support for the law of appeal. By championing the law of appeal but then not calling for its observance in the case of the Medici conspirators, Savonarola irreparably damaged his reputation. "This exposure of his ambitious and partisan spirit," writes Machiavelli, "took away reputation from him and brought him very much disapproval."[89] Wary of those pursuing partisan ends, Machiavelli is quick to criticize this tendency in Savonarola, which undermined his ability to unite Florence behind the republican government established in 1494.

Interestingly, none of Machiavelli's criticisms of Savonarola focus on his religious views – contrary to what one expects from reading the secondary literature on Machiavelli. After all, a common view among scholars is that Machiavelli finds little value in Savonarola's religious message. But in fact, the textual evidence suggests that Machiavelli admires Savonarola's approach to religion, most notably his ability to harness its power to advance political ends. This point comes out even in Machiavelli's earliest remarks on Savonarola, the 1498 letter to Becchi. In addition to criticizing him, Machiavelli notes Savonarola's prediction that Florence would "prosper and be dominant in Italy."[90] From an early time, Machiavelli recognized the political vision at the heart of Savonarola's religious message: God's plan for Florence to flourish and expand in wealth and power.[91]

By no means, then, does Savonarola's Christianity represent those forms that Machiavelli criticizes – namely, a weak Christianity counseling retreat from politics. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli famously attacks Christianity for glorifying "humble and contemplative more than active men" and asking them "to be capable more of suffering than of doing something strong."[92] Some commentators believe that Machiavelli has figures like Savonarola in mind when making these remarks. John Geerken, for instance, writes that Savonarola "represented the effort to replace vigor with delicacy. In place of

[88] Similarly, Guicciardini singles out "simulation" as Savonarola's lone vice. See Guicciardini, *The History of Florence*, 360.

[89] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.45.2.

[90] Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 3: 9.

[91] Similarly, Guicciardini describes Savonarola as "continually preaching of the great felicity and expansion of power destined for the Florentine Republic after many travails." See Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, trans. and ed. Sidney Alexander (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 116.

[92] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II.2.2.

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glory-seeking *virtù*, physical action, and vengeance, Savonarola sought humility, contemplation, suffering, and patience."[93] This characterization of Savonarola deeply misreads him.

It is true that Savonarola urged the people of Florence to practice traditional Christian virtues, such as doing penance and accepting suffering as a way to purify themselves.[94] At the same time, though, his apocalyptic worldview never counseled retreat from the world. Savonarola believed that Florence must expand its power and engage in conquest to fulfill God's plans for the end times. His sermons assure Florence that it will retake Pisa as one of its territories and take control of other possessions it had never had before.[95] Florence had to expand in wealth and power so that it could spread the Christian faith across the world and bring about the kingdom of God. This apocalyptic vision championed by Savonarola, which sanctifies conquest and expansion, hardly sounds like the type of Christianity that comes under withering criticism from Machiavelli.

Furthermore, Machiavelli's suggestions for religious reforms share much in common with views embraced by Savonarola. In the *Discourses* and the *Art of War*, Machiavelli explains that religion is essential for political life. Once people lose respect for religion, they soon will lack unity, military valor, and a strong state.[96] When discussing how to foster strong religious commitments in society, Machiavelli notes the central role of belief in miracles: "[T]he prudent enlarge upon [miracles] from whatever beginning they arise, and their authority then gives them credit with anyone whatever."[97] It is doubtful that all miracles are true, implies Machiavelli, but the prudent know how to interpret events as miracles so as to bolster their authority. No one in Florence embodied this strategy better than Savonarola, who constantly reminded the city of predicting the arrival of the French King Charles VIII to Italy – one of his many prophecies that purportedly were fulfilled.[98]

[93] Geerken, "Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics," 592.

[94] See, e.g., Savonarola, "Sermons on the Book of Haggai, Sermon No. 1 (1 Nov. 1494): 'Do Penance,'" in *Girolamo Savonarola: A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, trans. and ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003), 81–97; and "Ten Rules to Observe in Times of Tribulation," in *Girolamo Savonarola: A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, 177–79.

[95] Savonarola, *Prediche sopra i Salmi*, vol. 1, ed. Vincenzo Romano (Rome: Angelo Belardetti, 1969), 203–4. Cited in Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 146.

[96] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.12.1; and *Art of War*, trans. and ed. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), VI.125.

[97] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.12.1.

[98] Savonarola, *The Compendium of Revelations*, 201–06; and "Psalms, Sermon III," 68–71.

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Machiavelli notes Savonarola's effectiveness in making sure that all of Florence knew that his prophecies came true. "[E]veryone," he writes, "knows how much had been foretold by Friar Girolamo Savonarola before the coming of King Charles VIII of France into Italy."[99] Machiavelli is not prepared to say that God actually told Savonarola of the coming French invasion, but he credits Savonarola with persuading the people of Florence "that he spoke with God."[100] Founders must cultivate such myths to establish their authority. Savonarola did exactly that in becoming known as a prophet and using that reputation to found new orders. In this way, he exemplified Machiavelli's recommendation on how to use religion to advance political ends.

In addition, Machiavelli makes specific recommendations for Christianity that echo themes found in Savonarola's sermons and writings. Like Savonarola, he bemoans the corruption plaguing the Catholic Church. Though some believe that the Church promotes Italy's well-being, Machiavelli disagrees. He draws attention to "the wicked examples of that court" in Rome, which have caused Italy to lose "all devotion and all religion – which brings with it infinite inconveniences and infinite disorders."[101] Savonarola levels similar criticisms against the Church, calling it an institution "full of simony and wickedness."[102] One of the consistent themes throughout his ministry was calling for and predicting the renewal of the Church, which would soon arrive and eliminate entrenched corruption.[103]

There is further evidence of Machiavelli's sympathies with Savonarola in his emphasis on the importance of religious renewal. Machiavelli specifically cites Saint Francis and Saint Dominic as figures who strengthened religion by fostering such renewal. Their Christ-like examples "brought back into the minds of men what had already been eliminated there." That is, they reversed the erosion of faith caused by "the dishonesty of the prelates and of the heads of religion."[104] Similarly, Machiavelli identifies "Savonarola's life" as one of the factors that strengthened people's faith in his religious message, suggesting that his exemplary nature bolstered the friar's influence.[105]

This view of Savonarola as a virtuous figure, whose godly life contributed to his religious and political authority, was common in Florence and appears in

99 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.56.1.
100 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.11.5.
101 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.12.2.
102 Savonarola, "Psalms, Sermon III," 68.
103 See, e.g., Savonarola, "Psalms, Sermon III," 59; and *The Compendium of Revelations*, 196.
104 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.1.4.
105 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.11.5.

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other accounts. Guicciardini describes Savonarola's virtue in the following terms: "Those who observed his life and habits for a long time found not the slightest trace of avarice, lust, or of any other form of cupidity or frailty. On the contrary, they found evidence of a most devout life, full of charity, full of prayers, full of observances not of the externals but of the very heart of the divine cult."[106] For Machiavelli, this reputation for piety was an asset for Savonarola, since it enabled him to promote the sort of religious renewal needed for political renewal.

So when Machiavelli discusses Savonarola, he consistently avoids criticizing the friar's religious message and instead expresses admiration for it. The one passage that stands as a potential exception is Chapter 6 of *The Prince*. Here Machiavelli notes that Savonarola "was ruined in his new orders as soon as the multitude began not to believe them."[107] Savonarola's apocalyptic message, which merged religion and politics together, proved persuasive when republican institutions were founded in 1494, but eventually the people of Florence began to doubt it. In making this point, does Machiavelli intend to criticize Savonarola's religious message as ill-suited for commanding durable belief, which politics demands?

If one looks at the context of this passage, it quickly becomes clear that Machiavelli is not criticizing Savonarola's approach to religion. The people did not grow skeptical of Savonarola because his religious message was defective. Rather, Machiavelli explains, doubts *always* arise in response to new orders introduced by founders, even those most revered:

> Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would not have been able to make their peoples observe their constitutions for long if they had been unarmed, as happened in our times to Brother Girolamo Savonarola . . . . Men such as these . . . find great difficulty in conducting their affairs; all their dangers are along the path, and they must overcome them with virtue. But once they have overcome them and they begin to be held in veneration, having eliminated those who had envied them for their quality, they remain powerful, secure, honored, and happy.[108]

Great founders all run into the same problem Savonarola did: inevitably, at some point, challengers arise who try to cast doubt on the new religious and political orders introduced. When such doubt gains strength, only coercion through arms can combat and prevent it from overturning new orders. What separates Savonarola from successful founders, according to Machiavelli, is

[106] Guicciardini, *The History of Florence*, 360.
[107] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 24.
[108] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 24–25.

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his lack of arms. Importantly, it is *not* his apocalyptic message that made him ill-suited for politics. Far from it – his apocalyptic preaching and prophecies helped establish his authority among the people of Florence and found new orders. But without arms, these orders could not endure.

Even in identifying this shortcoming in Savonarola, Machiavelli is careful to avoid characterizing him as politically naïve and unaware of his need for arms. His analysis of Savonarola's downfall in the *Discourses* begins by citing the slaughter of 3,000 Israelites carried out by Moses and his men against those who worshipped the golden calf (Exodus 32:19–28). In Machiavelli's interpretation of this story, "Moses was forced to kill infinite men ... opposed to his plans" to ensure that "his laws and his orders" went forward. Machiavelli then adds: "Friar Girolamo Savonarola knew this necessity very well." Unfortunately, Savonarola was unable to use arms against his opponents, as did Moses, "because he did not have the authority to enable him to do it ... and because he was not understood well by those who followed him, who would have had the authority."[109] According to Machiavelli, Savonarola understood that he needed arms to preserve the new orders he founded. Since his position as a friar prevented him from directly taking up arms, he had to encourage his supporters to do so.

When making this observation, Machiavelli may have had in mind some of the bellicose language common to Savonarola's sermons. In a 1513 letter to Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli says that he agrees "with the friar [Savonarola] who said, 'Peace, peace, there will never be peace!' "[110] A similar remark appears in one of Savonarola's sermons discussed by Machiavelli in his 1498 letter to Becchi. In the sermon, Savonarola proclaims: "I do not ask for peace, my Lord, but I call out 'War! War!' "[111] His followers, though, failed to heed his calls to take up arms. So despite his shrewd use of religion to found new orders, Savonarola fell victim to constraints that doomed hopes for these orders to continue.

To summarize, Machiavelli's attitude toward Savonarola turns out to be more complex than is often assumed. Rather than portray this apocalyptic figure as an object of scorn, Machiavelli casts him in a different light: Savonarola possesses many of the qualities he admires in leaders who found new orders through religious renewal. Machiavelli does criticize Savonarola – specifically, for his lack of arms and political duplicity – but not for his

[109] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.30.1.
[110] Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, Letter 222: 257.
[111] Savonarola, "Sermon No. 1 on the Book of Exodus, 11 Feb. 1498: 'Renovation Sermon,' " in *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, 168.

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religious message and apocalyptic vision for Florence. In fact, Savonarola uses religion in just the ways Machiavelli recommends for politics. After criticizing Savonarola in his early correspondence, Machiavelli with time sees the friar as an example of religion's power to persuade people to embrace new orders. If Savonarola had had the benefit of arms to preserve his new orders, he may have joined Machiavelli's pantheon of great founders. Still, Savonarola remains a "great man" – what should be read as a sincere compliment by Machiavelli – because he used his religious authority to aim at the greatest achievement possible, the founding of new orders.

MACHIAVELLI'S AMBIVALENCE TOWARD APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

Given Machiavelli's appreciation for the power of Savonarola's religious message, how should we understand his view of apocalyptic thought? At the very least, the seriousness with which Machiavelli treats Savonarola shows that he does not dismiss apocalyptic thought as bizarre and wholly unsuited for politics. Machiavelli recognizes the power of apocalyptic thought to shape politics, sometimes in positive ways. More than anyone, Savonarola made that point clear in the context of Florence.

Beyond this implicit respect for apocalyptic thought, Machiavelli develops his political philosophy in ways that bear some resemblance to it. Drawing on apocalyptic texts like the book of Revelation, Savonarola preached that there was pervasive corruption in the world, especially within the Church, and that this corruption had reached a crisis point. Out of this crisis, Florence would establish its greatness and usher in the new Jerusalem. Likewise, Machiavelli in his analysis of politics sees crisis as creating conditions from which greatness can emerge. He most famously makes this case at the end of *The Prince*. A similar argument appears in the *Florentine Histories* when discussing how conditions within states evolve: "once they have descended and through their disorders arrived at the ultimate depth, since they cannot descend further, of necessity they must arise."[112] As is often the case in apocalyptic narratives, Machiavelli identifies crisis as a vehicle for renewal.

It is important, though, to recognize what distinguishes Machiavelli's political thought from Savonarola's vision for politics. Because of his faith in Christian apocalyptic doctrines, Savonarola proclaimed the coming of a perfect and eternal government to Florence. God would assure this outcome. Machiavelli does not allow himself the luxury of such faith. In contrast

[112] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, V.I.

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to Savonarola, Machiavelli sees a limited role for divine intervention in establishing new orders – that task ultimately falls to human beings. At the end of *The Prince*, Machiavelli tells Lorenzo that God has made conditions favorable for founding new orders and redeeming Italy, but the "remainder you must do yourself. God does not want to do everything, so as not to take free will from us and that part of the glory that falls to us."[113]

Machiavelli lacks Savonarola's faith that divine intervention will take care of the difficult task of establishing and preserving new orders. Nevertheless, the utopian ideal of an eternal polity, which occupies a central role in Savonarola's apocalyptic vision, clearly tempts Machiavelli. His interest in an eternal polity is closely linked with his interest in founders, who hope that their new orders will last forever. This point comes out in the *Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, where Machiavelli urges Pope Leo X to institute new orders. Machiavelli explains the challenge facing Leo: "to give the city [Florence] institutions that can by themselves stand firm."[114] Achieving this goal, according to Machiavelli, would be Leo's greatest achievement and make him "immortal."[115] If new orders preserve a polity long after the founder is gone, they serve as an enduring sign of the founder's greatness. The most lasting institutions imaginable, of course, are those that continue without end. So the greatest act a founder could achieve is crafting institutions that preserve a state and its people forever. It is this daunting goal that founders aim for.

When Machiavelli considers the possibility of an eternal polity, he faces the challenge of reconciling his strong desire for this ideal with its implausibility. In Book III of the *Discourses*, he addresses the prospect of achieving a perpetual republic. At first he makes clear his doubts about ever achieving this ideal: "[I]t is impossible to order a perpetual republic, because its ruin is caused through a thousand unexpected ways."[116] Five chapters later he returns to the subject, and here he allows himself to speculate about the possibility of a perpetual republic. He writes: "[I]f a republic were so happy that it often had one who with his example might renew the laws, and not only restrain it from running to ruin but pull it back, it would be perpetual."[117] So after first rejecting any hope for a perpetual republic, Machiavelli later finds himself looking for *some* scenario to keep that hope alive. Perhaps if a republic benefitted from a long series of wise founders – an unlikely scenario, given

[113] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXVI: 103.
[114] Machiavelli, *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, 115.
[115] Machiavelli, *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, 114.
[116] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.17.1.
[117] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.22.3.

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their rarity – they could preserve and keep strong a republic's institutions forever.

In *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, similar considerations emerge in Machiavelli's discussion of what is necessary to found firm orders. Using language reminiscent of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli argues that, under its current government, Florence faces the risk of "a thousand dangers."[118] New orders are necessary to eliminate these dangers. Machiavelli outlines an initial set of reforms that Leo should implement in Florence, and expresses confidence that these reforms will benefit and sustain the city. He tempers this confidence, though, with a caveat: these new orders' effectiveness may wane after the founder (Leo) dies. The new orders could persist indefinitely if Leo "were going to live forever," but as Machiavelli bluntly points out, at some point he "must cease to be."[119] In response to this unavoidable challenge, Machiavelli outlines additional reforms, with the hope that a slightly altered set of new orders will continue even after Leo's death. Throughout this discussion, Machiavelli is acutely aware of the dangers that government institutions face after a founder dies and tries to offer solutions in response. Notably, Machiavelli avoids the claim that the new orders he recommends can last forever. Leo's reputation could become immortal if he successfully implements new orders, but Machiavelli never uses this language for the orders themselves, even as he tries to think of ways to prolong them.

These discussions in the *Discourses* and *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence* reveal Machiavelli's desire for a perpetual republic, but also his resistance to embracing this hope. This reluctance stems from his cyclical view of history and time, which precludes human institutions from ever achieving a permanent state of perfection. Rather than embrace a linear conception of time in which history moves inexorably toward perfection, as found in Christian eschatology, Machiavelli sees history as confined to a pattern that continually alternates between degeneration and progress. Good governments inevitably degenerate into bad ones until they reach a low point from which they must improve, and the cycle starts anew.[120]

Machiavelli expresses this general principle in his play *The Golden Ass* where he writes: "[I]t is and always has been and always will be, that evil follows after good, good after evil."[121] Such constant flux means that

[118] Machiavelli, *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, 114.
[119] Machiavelli, *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, 111.
[120] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.2.
[121] Machiavelli, *The [Golden] Ass*, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 2, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), Ch. 5, lines 103–5. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing my attention to this passage.

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perfection, if ever achieved, can only be fleeting. As Machiavelli emphasizes in the *Florentine Histories*, "worldly things are not allowed by nature to stand still. As soon as they reach their ultimate perfection, having no further to rise, they must descend."[122] Machiavelli makes a similar comment about "worldly things" (*cose del mondo*) at the start of Book III of the *Discourses*: "It is a very true thing that all worldly things have a limit to their life."[123] So throughout his writings, a basic tenet of Machiavelli's thought is that nothing on earth is immune to decay, especially those things that have achieved perfection. When he applies this rule to republics, Machiavelli finds himself unable to embrace Savonarola's utopian hope in one that would last forever.

Machiavelli's explicit use of the phrase "worldly things" brings attention to the limits of his secular vision for political renewal – that is, secular in the sense that it does not rely on divine intervention to achieve it. Savonarola places his faith in God to ensure the apocalyptic vision for Florence detailed in his preaching. Machiavelli, on the other hand, lacks this apocalyptic faith. He recognizes the power of apocalyptic thought in establishing new orders, and for this reason respects Savonarola. But he cannot fully embrace Savonarola's apocalyptic vision because political renewal occurs entirely within the realm of worldly things for Machiavelli. New orders will always be mortal, subject to decay. This foundational principle in Machiavelli's political philosophy stands in tension with his desire for a perpetual republic – the ultimate achievement for any founder. Given this tension for Machiavelli, perhaps part of Savonarola's appeal lies in the friar's ability to wholeheartedly place his faith in the ideal of a perpetual polity – something Machiavelli desires but cannot expect because of his realism. Machiavelli shares Savonarola's hope for renewal in the midst of crisis, but not the totality of his apocalyptic vision, which culminates in an eternal and perfect kingdom. Such a tantalizing ideal ultimately has no place in Machiavelli's political universe. Here human founders are the creators of new orders, which, like the founders themselves, at some point must cease to be.

THE PYRE OF SAVONAROLA

In his earliest writings, Machiavelli takes a mostly negative view of Savonarola. His 1498 letter to Becchi notes the power of Savonarola's preaching but criticizes his hypocrisy at a time when his power was in rapid decline. With the benefit of time and distance to assess Savonarola's impact on Florence,

[122] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, V.I.
[123] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.1.1.

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Machiavelli comes to have a greater respect for him. From his perspective, Savonarola stands out as that rare contemporary figure who used religion's power to found new orders. Savonarola specifically achieved this goal through preaching an apocalyptic vision for Florence, which merged heavenly and earthly hopes together. Machiavelli's writings on religion suggest his recognition of the power that Savonarola's apocalyptic message had in advancing political ends. Still, Machiavelli cannot fully accept Savonarola's vision – specifically, its utopian belief in a perfect and enduring polity to come.

As Machiavelli's views evolved, one wonders whether the image of Savonarola's fiery execution came to mind. It is unknown whether Machiavelli witnessed Savonarola's death, though it would not have been surprising if he did. Savonarola's execution was a spectacle: officials built a scaffold and pyre in the middle of the bustling Piazza della Signoria, where many came to watch the execution (see Figure 3.1). Machiavelli was curious enough about Savonarola to attend his sermons – he very well may have made his way to the Piazza della Signoria on May 23, 1498, to watch his

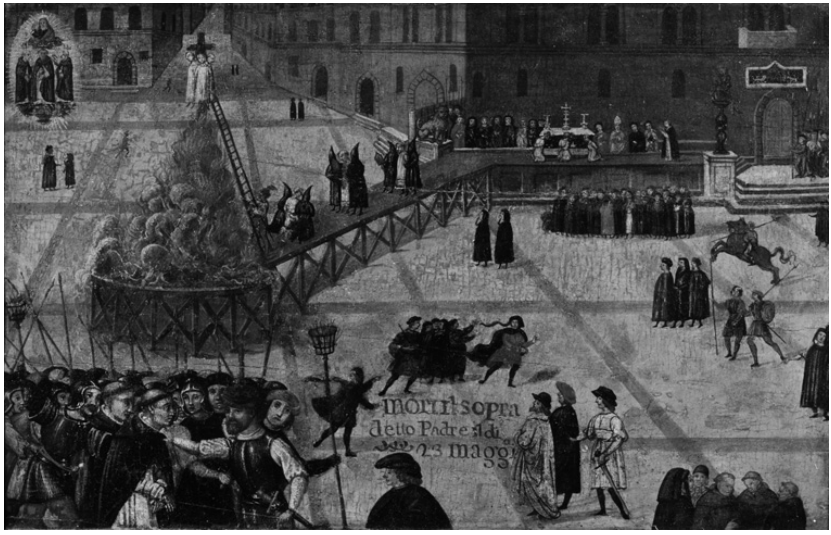

FIGURE 3.1 Execution of Savonarola
Painting by Filippo Dolciati at the Museum of San Marco in Florence[124]

[124] This image is in the public domain and available on Wikimedia Commons at the following link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Filippo_Dolciati_(1443_-_1519)_Execution_of_Girolamo_Savonarola._1498,_Florence,_Museo_di_San_Marco.jpg.

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final moments. Even if he did not, he at least would have read some of the vivid accounts of the execution. Luca Landucci, a follower of Savonarola, paints the scene:

> When all three were hung, Fra Girolamo [Savonarola] being in the middle … a fire was made on the circular platform round the cross, upon which gunpowder was put and set alight, so that the said fire burst out with a noise of rockets and cracking. In a few hours they were burnt, their legs and arms gradually dropping off; part of their bodies remaining hanging to the chains, a quantity of stones were thrown to make them fall, as there was a fear of the people getting hold of them; and then the hangman and those whose business it was, hacked down the post and burnt it on the ground, bringing a lot of brushwood, and stirring the fire up over the dead bodies, so that the very least piece was consumed.[125]

It was a pitiful end to a short life that left its mark on Florentine politics.

This image of Savonarola on the pyre may not have evoked much sympathy from Machiavelli as a young man, if his 1498 letter to Becchi shortly before the execution is any indication. At the time, Machiavelli described a political figure who was losing his grip on power and resorting to ineffective tactics that only worsened the situation. But later on, Machiavelli came to express a deeper appreciation for the challenges faced by those who fail while attempting great things in politics. His direct experience with political failure may have contributed to this shift. When a new regime came to power in Florence in 1512, Machiavelli found himself tortured, imprisoned, and stripped of his political post.[126] He knew all too well the vicissitudes of politics and that no one is immune to their dangers.

So though Savonarola failed in politics, Machiavelli's later writings treat him with greater sympathy, as someone who endeavored to bring political renewal to Florence despite the perils involved. In the same chapter of *The Prince* that identifies Savonarola as a founder, Machiavelli emphasizes the incredible dangers founders face: "[N]othing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders."[127] The image of Savonarola upon the pyre illustrates in dramatic fashion the dangers that always loom for those who take on the task of founding new orders. Despite these risks, Savonarola took action to advance republican rule and his apocalyptic vision for Florence.

[125] Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 352.
[126] Maurizio Viroli, *Niccolò's Smile: A Biography of Machiavelli*, trans. Antony Shugaar (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 131–40.
[127] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 23.

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For this reason, the image of Savonarola likely became more for Machiavelli than just a symbol of failure. Yes, Savonarola's burnt corpse hung for all to see as an example of a failed founder. But at the same time, the scene represented the perils that great individuals are willing to accept in pursuit of glorious ends. By using his religious authority and apocalyptic message to found new orders – at great risk to himself – Savonarola represents for Machiavelli a figure who merits respect.

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