
A Shadowy Period

THE FIRST HALF OF HIS LIFE

It may seem curious that we are ignorant of almost everything about Machiavelli until 15 June 1498, when, at the age of twenty-nine, he became secretary of the Florentine chancery. It is almost as though his life began only when he entered the service of the city of his birth. He was so deeply linked to Florence that in a letter written in the final months of his life he declared: “I love my native city more than my soul.”¹

The scant information that we do have regarding his youth has reached us thanks to the *Libro di ricordi* (*Diary*) of his father, Bernardo.² The latter was a doctor of law and belonged to a family counted, in previous centuries, among the “middle class, noted families”; they were called upon on a number of occasions to occupy important positions as magistrates of the comune, but then the family fell into decline, especially following the ascent to power of the Medici.³ From Bernardo’s diary we understand that his financial situation was not robust, and the environment in which his son grew up was very modest. Machiavelli himself declared: “I was born poor and I learnt earlier to stint myself rather than to prosper.”⁴

At the age of seven, he began to study the basic elements of Latin and at twelve to write in that language. Although he

may not have received a refined humanist education,⁵ we should not take literally the statements of the historian Paolo Giovio, who wrote that Machiavelli had “no knowledge of Latin, or at least very little.”⁶ It is scarcely believable that—in the most glorious period of Florentine humanism—an almost unknown young man who was ignorant of the language then used in public affairs and international relations would have been called to fulfill the role of secretary of the second chancery, which was concerned not only with internal matters but also with war and therefore relationships with other states.⁷ Instead, Giovio’s statements should be interpreted to mean that he considered Machiavelli’s knowledge insufficient for composing works in that language, and we should also bear in mind that his encounter with Machiavelli happened when the latter was writing *The History of Florence*. Machiavelli’s decision to write the work in Italian, during the years when a lively debate had begun on the vernacular language, may have given rise to a certain disdain on the part of Giovio, who professed he was a historian who always wrote his works in Latin.

It appears, however, that Machiavelli had not learned the Greek language, even though in those times Florence was the chief center in Europe of the new Hellenistic culture, where Guillaume Budé, for example—the humanist who can be said to have introduced the new wisdom to France—perfected his teachings. One can quibble at length on Machiavelli’s ignorance of Greek only to be confronted by the fact that he was able to draw on the sixth book of Polybius, which did not yet have a published translation into Latin, when he used it in the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*.⁸

In the *Libro di ricordi* we note that Bernardo Machiavelli was an inquisitive reader both of recent works, such as the *Italia illustrata* and the *Decades of History from the Deterioration of the Roman Empire* by Flavio Biondo, and ancient texts,

from Cicero to Pliny to Ptolemy.⁹ Thus, on 22 September 1475 he noted having negotiated with the printer Niccolò Alamanno the editing of the index of geographic names contained in Livy's *Decades* and on 5 July 1476 of having kept "as a reward for my efforts" the printed pages of the work.¹⁰ The young Machiavelli therefore had the opportunity to read Livy at an early age, and besides we know from his father that, at seventeen years of age, he had the book rebound in half leather. Perhaps some discussions and hypotheses regarding the *Discourses* would have been clarified if this book had come down to us, or if at least we knew which edition was in Bernardo's possession.

Of the third decade of Machiavelli's life, a period that was decisive for his intellectual development, we have only a few glimmers.¹¹ A codex, transcribed in Machiavelli's hand apparently in this period, was found in the Vatican Library of the *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Lucretius, the work that had been rediscovered at the start of the fifteenth century in a monastery at San Gallo.¹² It is reasonable to suppose that Machiavelli would not have undertaken such a demanding work without a real interest in this text of the highest poetry; at the same time this text is essential for the knowledge of a branch of Greek philosophy, which he no doubt found congenial, as we are aware from the numerous echoes of Lucretius that we find in his works.

In any event, the studies of his youth must have concentrated principally on the historians and political thinkers of the classical era that recur in his works: Livy himself, Tacitus, Sallust, and, among the Greeks, Plutarch, Polybius, and Xenophon. These are the writers to whom it is permissible to suppose he referred when in 1513 he wrote the famous letter to his friend Francesco Vettori, telling him that he had written *The Prince*:

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and re clothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on that food which only is mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them.¹³

However, the legal texts his father owned were certainly not extraneous to his thoughts; a careful reading of his writings reveals echoes of them on some pages.¹⁴ Although notarial studies were no longer required at that time to be nominated to the Florentine chancery, a juridical training was part of Machiavelli's education.