The History of Florence in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance: A Reexamination of Periodization Through Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* and Villani's *Nuova Cronica*

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THE HISTORY OF FLORENCE IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE: A REEXAMINATION OF PERIODIZATION THROUGH MACHIAVELLI'S *FLORENTINE HISTORIES* AND VILLANI'S *NUOVA CRONICA*

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Abstract: This article seeks to reexamine Medieval-Renaissance periodization as it has been presented by historians such as Jacob Burckhardt through the lens of Florentine historiography. By comparing and contrasting the *Nuova Cronica* by Giovani Villani and the *Florentine Histories* by Niccolò Machiavelli, this article will identify two significant intellectual developments that align with the conventional Medieval-Renaissance binary in historiography. This article thus proposes that what one might call 'proto-Italian nationalism' had emerged in the early Renaissance. In addition, this article will assert that while predestination played a significant role in medieval histories, Renaissance histories actively incorporated rational explanations for historical developments.

Since the birth of Renaissance studies, intellectuals have developed a distinct interest in periodization. Influenced by humanist and, in later periods, Enlightenment positivism, the attempt to periodize history into distinct categories often served in the construction of a homogenous, teleological narrative of linear progression—one that places our modern world at one end of the spectrum, representing civilization, and a distant, foreign world at the opposite end, embodying barbarism. Consequently, traditional historiography has long viewed the Middle Ages as primitive while presenting the Renaissance as a period of technological and cultural advancement. This binary paradigm, however, is flawed in many ways. In reconsidering the Medieval-Renaissance periodization—including its changes and continuities—we frequently find ourselves troubled by the issues of relativism, as certain characteristics of modernity often have roots in earlier historical periods. This article will first discuss the ways in which previous scholars attempted to draw chronological boundaries between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and then respond to past scholarship from the perspective of historiography.

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The modern concept of the Middle Ages, a period of cultural stagnation and disinterest in Greco-Roman antiquity, was invented by one of the earliest humanists, Francesco Petrarch, who applied it to the era preceding his birth. Successors of this humanist view of history, such as Flavio Biondo, reinforced this periodization by drawing chronological boundaries in the recording of history, thereby consolidating the notion of the Middle Ages.[1] The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rise of academic inquiries into the causes of the Medieval-Renaissance transition. Enlightenment thinkers typically viewed the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as two distinct periods with clear chronological boundaries. Voltaire, in fact, argued that "the awakening of the Italian genius" had given birth to a more rational culture that ushered in a period of scientific and social progress.[2] French Romantic historians Jules Michelet proposed that the revival of classical antiquity, scientific discoveries, and geographic exploration had facilitated European rediscovery of its true identity, thereby laying the foundation for cultural development during the Renaissance.[3] In 1878, Jacob Burkhardt synthesized a more comprehensive theory in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Like Voltaire and Michelet, Burkhardt identified the Renaissance as a transformative era of self-discovery fueled by reinvigorated interest in antiquity, increased rationality, and an enhanced human understanding of nature. In addition, he suggested that the political culture and social instability in Italy had created an individualistic culture that embodied what came to be known as the "Renaissance spirit."[4]

Throughout the twentieth century, however, opposition to this conventional view had garnered increasing support from medievalists who denied the Renaissance as a period superior to the Middle Ages. Charles Homer Haskins spearheaded the criticism towards the conventional perception of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages in his book, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century,* in 1927 — citing evidence in the advent of Gothic architectural style, the growth of vernacular literature, and the establishment of a new legal and education system: all of which originated in the Middle Ages and point to a vigorous and innovative society not surpassed by the Renaissance.[5] In 1933, Norman Nelson attacked the ambiguity of the term *individualism* touted by Renaissance proponents and argued that medieval-era Pope Innocent

[1] William Caferro, *The Renaissance Question* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1.
[2] Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations. Œuvres complètes*, vol. 7 (Paris: Garnier frères, 1883–5), 167.
[3] J. B. Bullen, "The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing," 1994, 16, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198128885.001.0001.
[4] Jacob Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Random House, 1954)
[5] Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Meridian, 1957).

III, too, recognized the independence of the individual conscience.[6] In 1972, Colin Morris rejected Burkhardt's claims from another perspective in *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200,* arguing that the rise of cities and the schisms among the aristocracy had created an individualistic culture that found expression in the vernacular literature and eschatology of the Middle Ages, further proving that Renaissance individualism is not unique.[7]

The problem of Medieval-Renaissance periodization still exists at present. To reconcile the cultural flowerings and social changes throughout the Middle Ages with the traditional Medieval-Renaissance dichotomy, Erwin Panofsky famously established a distinction between the larger "Renaissance" and the smaller "renascences." He stresses the cultural and epistemological changes implicit in the radical shifts in artistic styles, such as the development of a linear perspective in quattrocento.[8] Many art historians such as Johanne Grave, however, point out that the emergence of new techniques in the representation of space only signifies "new approaches to satisfy much older functions and concepts of the image."[9] In a recent article, Robert Black argued against the Burckhardtian homogeneity of previous methods of periodization and views the Renaissance as multiple movements with various roots, such as the changes in Italian Latin education, literary style, and political climate.[10] Scholarly consensus, however, regarding the chronological boundary between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is still lacking. While some retain Wallace K. Ferguson's dating from 1300–1600, recent scholars like Stella Fetcher put the boundary in the mid-or-late fourteenth century.[11]

This article seeks to offer a new perspective on the existing scholarly debate by examining Medieval-Renaissance periodization through the lens of Florentine historiography. By comparing and contrasting portrayals of correlating historical events in the two Florentine histories, the *Nuova Cronica* by Giovani Villani and the *Florentine Histories* by Niccolò Machiavelli, this article will attempt to infer the respective historical biases and world-views of Villani and Machiavelli and will seek to emphasize two historiographical discontinuities

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[6] Norman Nelson, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 32, no. 3 (Jul. 1933): 316–334.

[7] Colin Morris. *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 188.

[8] Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965).

[9] Johanne Grave, "Brunelleschi's Perspective Panels. Rupture and Continuity in the History of the Image," in *Renaissance?: Perceptions of Continuity and Discontinuity in Europe, C.1300 - C.1550,* ed. Alexander Lee (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 180.

[10] Robert Black, "The Renaissance and the Middle Ages: Chronologies, Ideologies, Geographies," in *Renaissance?: Perceptions of Continuity and Discontinuity in Europe, C.1300 - C.1550,* ed. Alexander Lee (Leiden: Brill, 2010),

[11] Wallace K. Ferguson "The Interpretation of the Renaissance: Suggestions for a Synthesis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 483–95; Stella Fletcher, *The Longman Companion to Renaissance Europe, 1390–1530* (London: Routledge, 2016).

from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance — namely, the emergence of protonationalism and the emphasis of human agency in one's relationship with the divine. Together, they reflect larger socio-cultural changes, which can help us more confidently locate chronological boundaries between the two periods.

Machiavelli's works best exemplify the major differences between Renaissance and medieval histories because his ambivalent attitudes toward religion and expressed desire to see a reunified Italy corresponded with later intellectual developments. Born into the family of a minor Tuscan noble in 1469, Machiavelli received a humanistic education in his youth which laid the foundation for his political, philosophical, and military theories. Thanks to his opposition to the populist Savonarola regime, Machiavelli was elected Florence's chief magistrate in 1502 and assumed military duties during the offensive against Pisa. Commissioned by Giovanni de' Medici in 1520, Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* constructs a humanist narrative that starts from the city's origin to the Medicis' ascension to power with a distinct emphasis on the dynamic relationship among the *popolo* (people), the plebes, and the nobles, as well as the ever-evolving political factions in Florence. Machiavelli found himself privy to an abundance of medieval and Renaissance chronicles at his disposal such as works by Giovanni Villani, Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, and Leonardo Bruni. Scholars such as Anna Maria Cabrini have been quick to point out a particular pattern in Machiavelli's choice of sources, as he generally preferred medieval authors for their vivid portrayals of the protagonists during civil strife and used humanist historians for details of foreign and military affairs.[12] In moralizing historical figures and their conduct, Machiavelli constructed paradigms of virtue used to address the ruling citizens of the republic: one can maintain unity by learning from both their mistakes and their virtues. In this way, Machiavelli did not hesitate to modify historical details to build a consistent narrative.

On the other hand, Giovanni Villani (1280–1348), a renowned banker, statesman, and diplomat in the late Middle Ages, came from a respected *arti maggiori* family of merchants. Serving on the Mercanzia council, which ruled over international trade disputes between Florentine and foreign merchants as well as domestic financial issues such as bankruptcy and debt, Villani familiarized himself with the various economic activities in the city, especially those of the lower guilds. As a shareholder in the Peruzzi bank, Villani possessed extensive traveling experience, having voyaged to France, Flanders, and Spain for business transactions.

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[12] Anna Maria Cabrini, "Machiavelli's Florentine Histories," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 128–43.

The *Nuova Cronica* and the *Florentine Histories* were written in drastically different contexts, as the former records the history of Florence with limited secondary literature available. Here, Villani stated the intention for which he wrote the chronicle in the first sentence of book one:

> Forasmuch as among our Florentine ancestors, few and ill-arranged memorials are to be found of the past doings of our city of Florence ... I, John, citizen of Florence, considering the nobility and greatness of our city at our present times, hold it meet to recount and make memorial of the roots and origins of so famous a city.[13]

The chronicle is divided into eleven books covering the origin of Florence to the 1300s when Henry, Count of Luxembourg, was made the Holy Roman Emperor. Similar to Machiavelli, the chronicler seeks to uncover the causes behind events and present lessons of virtues in times of adversity for the benefit of the republic. Thirty-seven copies of the Trecento survive to this day, attesting to their success in circulation and extensive influence during this period.[14] Being one of the most important sources for the history of medieval Florence, then, the *Nuova Cronica* serves as a privileged point from which to investigate the practice of history writing in the late Middle Ages.

To lay the contextual foundation for this comparative study, it is necessary to briefly summarize the shifting power dynamics in the Apennine Peninsula for the periods covered in both histories. The Guelph and Ghibelline division originated with Frederick Barbarossa's attempt to impose direct control over the prospering Italian urban communes in 1154. While Pope Alexander II, with the support of prominent Guelph cities such as Florence and Venice, forged the Lombardy League to deter imperial encroachment, other regions like Siena welcomed the Ghibelline military protection from neighboring powers. In a long string of battles, including the famous battle of Montaperti in 1260, the Ghibellines emerged victorious as a result of their tactical genius and superior cavalry and voted to reduce Florence to ruin in fear of revenge. Here, the two chronicles both suggest that Farinata degli Uberti single-handedly rejected the proposal, declaring himself to be a Florentine first and a Ghibelline second, thereby saving the city from destruction. Shortly after the Ghibelline victory, the introduction of new taxes by Count Guido soon infuriated the people of Florence. As a result, the Guelph party routed the ruling Ghibelline nobles in Florence and created the *primo popolo* in 1282, a democratic institution that enfranchised lower guilds and urban artisans in the political process. After the Guelphs dislodged the Ghibellines from Tuscany in 1289 at the

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[13] Giovanni Villani, *Villani's Chronicle*, ed. Philip H. Wicksteed, tr. Rose E. Selfe (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), 6.

[14] Porta, Giuseppe,"Censimento dei manuscritti delle cronache di Giovanni, Matteo e Filippo Villani (II)," *Studi di Filologia Italiana* 37 (1979): 93–118.

battle of Campaldino, however, a rift within the Guelph party emerged as the Florentine Guelphs split into the Black and White factions in 1300. The Blacks continued to support the papacy, but the Whites resisted papal influence, especially Pope Boniface VIII. In 1302, the Black Guelphs exiled the White Guelphs and took control of Florence, setting the stage for Villani and Machiavelli's writings.

The following paragraphs will compare the description of those historical events in the *Nuova Cronica* and the *Florentine Histories.* By analyzing the respective historical biases, political environments, and philosophical beliefs of Villani and Machiavelli, this article seeks to address some of the major similarities and differences between medieval and Renaissance histories and how they reflect larger cultural and intellectual developments. Specifically, this article proposes that their shared expression of local patriotism and reminiscence about classical antiquity reflect a continuous process that eventually gave birth to proto-Italian nationalism in at least several authors during the early Renaissance. This article will also compare the role of fortune in the *Nuova Cronica* and the *Florentine Histories* and in doing so, argue that a significant distinction between the two histories rests in their different interpretation of historical events and understanding of supernatural force in human history due to the rising influence of humanism.

Recent scholarship on nationalism can serve as a theoretical framework through which to understand the connection between nationalism and history. Anthony Smith, for example, highlights the importance of shared common myths and memories in the forging of a national identity.[15] Steven Grosby, on the other hand, describes a nation as a geographically bound community which, among other attributes, possesses "a history that both asserts and is expressive of temporal continuity."[16] The general agreement among scholars of nationalism, however, is that collective remembrance plays a vital role in the nature and development of national sentiment. Having highlighted this consensus, this article will discuss Villani's and Machiavelli's respective treatments of the past through the lens of Roman legacy and communal patriotism, both of which constituted a common founding myth for Florence and beyond.

While intellectuals during the Renaissance often associated themselves with the *revival* of Greco-Roman civilization, scholars throughout the Middle Ages often used Roman engineering and medical treatises for educational purposes. In particular, Villani — a late

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[15] Anthony Douglas Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

[16] Steven Grosby, *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Medieval writer — makes repeated reference to Ancient Rome in the *Nuova Cronica*. During the Jubilee celebration in Rome in 1300, Villani found inspiration in Roman architectural monuments and sought to record the history of his hometown. With a pronounced respect for Roman antiquity and envy for its well-preserved documentation of its greatness, Villani wrote,

> And I, finding myself on that blessed pilgrimage in the holy city of Rome, beholding the great and ancient things therein, and reading the stories and the great doings of the Romans, written by Virgil, and by Sallust, and by Lucan, and Titus Livius, and Valerius, and Paulus Orosius … [wished to] preserve memorials. ... But considering that our city of Florence, the daughter and creature of Rome, was rising and had great things before her, while Rome was declining, it seemed to me fitting to collect in this volume and new chronicle all the deeds and beginnings of the city of Florence."[17]

In describing Florence as Rome's daughter, Villani expresses a clear sense of patriotism based on the remembrance and glorification of Roman antiquity. One can see that Villani embodies the rhetorical essence of the Renaissance — that is, the claim to a restoration of Roman values in their former glory — while writing in a period intellectuals have previously dismissed as lacking in significant Greco-Roman influences.

Not only did Villani use claims to Roman antiquity to convey his Florentine patriotism, like many early medieval chroniclers, but he also inserted prophetic messages and anecdotes to glorify the city of Florence as one chosen by God and destined to victory. Villani opens the narration on the Farinata episode with a myth set during the *primo popolo* regime:

> A very fine and strong lion ... by lack of care on the part of the keeper ... escaped from its den, running through the streets, whence all the city was moved with fear...and there caught hold of a boy and held him between its paws. The mother ... on hearing what had chanced, ran up to the lion in desperation, shrieking aloud and with disheveled hair, and snatched the child from between its paws, and the lion did no hurt either to the woman or to the child, but only gazed steadfastly and kept still.[18]

Prophecies, divine visions, and even God's direct interference are all themes that are nearly ubiquitous in medieval historical narratives. Implied in this depiction of the defenseless child is an allegory of the Florentine Guelphs, who also found themselves in a dire situation. The mother's desperate attempt to protect the child resembles the catastrophic defeat at Montaperti, wherein the bulk of the Florentine cavalry was destroyed, their infantry routed, and their carroccio captured. In praising the lion as noble in its refusal to devour the mother and child, Villani writes a prelude to the heroic deed of Farinata in an almost cinematic way to show that

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[17] Grosby, *Nationalism,* 321.
[18] Grosby, *Nationalism,* 167.

it was God's will to protect Florence from destruction, a clear demonstration of Villani's Florentine patriotism.

In a bold act in the context of his own Florentine political culture of the early fourteenth century, in which the Guelphs were prominent, Villani daringly praises the Ghibelline Farinata degli Uberti:

> By one good man and citizen our city of Florence was saved from so great fury, destruction, and ruin...We ought to commend and keep in notable memory the good and virtuous citizen, who acted after the fashion of the good Roman Camillus of old, as we are told by Valerius and Titus Livius.[19]

Known as "the second founder of Rome," Marcus Furius Camillus was a Roman patrician and dictator who triumphed five times in the Gallic War and the second regional war and addressed Roman class conflict through the founding of the praetorship. By alluding to a distinctly Roman figure to praise Farinata's commendable actions to save his country in a time of crisis, Villani unwittingly problemized the argument the argument of the Renaissance humanists who denied or rejected late medieval admiration of Roman antiquity. Furthermore, the *Nuova Cronica,* as one of the earliest historical records to glorify Farinata, created a legacy of Florentine patriotism. Villani took considerable political risk when he acclaimed Farinata's heroic deeds due to the city's still-fresh memory of the Guelph-Ghibelline division; however, in praising Farinata, Villani made a conscious decision to prioritize his tie with Florence over his political affiliation.

Machiavelli inherited Villani's legacy of Florentine patriotism and his concern for the *bene commune*. According to the *Florentine Histories*, as the victorious Ghibelline nobles discuss their plan to demolish Florence in fear of its future revolt, Farinata "defended [Florence] openly and without any hesitation, saying that he had not undergone so many perils with so much trouble not to be able to live in his fatherland."[20] Similar use of the word "fatherland" (*patria*) appears 119 times in other places of the *Florentine Histories*. The repetition of the word indicates Machiavelli's strong desire for a powerful Florence to emerge and dominate Italy in lieu of the chaotic political struggles between Italian city-states and duchies. Machiavelli's word choice as he described Farinata as the savior of Florentine people and the embodiment of virtue in his refusal to sack Florence clearly reveal his Florentine patriotism. Machiavelli's appreciation for King Theodoric the Ostrogoth also evokes ideals of classical antiquity. Despite Theodoric's barbarian origin, Machiavelli argued that he

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[19] Grosby, *Nationalism,* 186.
[20] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 59.

exemplified a virtuous Italian leader as he "enlarged Ravenna and restored Rome, and except for military training, allowed Romans every other honor … [and] built towns and fortresses from the head of the Adriatic Sea to the Alps in order to impede more easily passage of new barbarians who might wish to attack Italy."[21] The repeated references to Rome and the obvious patriotic agenda in both histories, thus, suggest a continuity between late medieval and early Renaissance Florentine historiography in that both sought to establish a collective identity in a prolonged period of political chaos.

However, while Villani and Machiavelli share similar expressions of Florentine patriotism, the two authors differ significantly in their expressions of nationalist sentiment. In praising Theodoric, Machiavelli emphasized the importance of having a leader who can defend the whole of Italy from foreign incursions. This proto-Italian nationalist sentiment found more explicit expression in Machiavelli's work, *The Prince*, wherein he urged Italians in the work's conclusion to seize Italy and free her from the barbarians.[22] Originally used as a geographical term to refer to the Apennine peninsula, Machiavelli's use of the term *Italia* transcended mere geography and assumed a political connotation In doing so, Machiavelli brought forth his imagination of Italy as a unified political entity for culturally and linguistically Italian people, which corresponds with a more modern definition of nationalism.

In comparison, even when Villani presented French intervention in Italy in a negative light, as is the case in his description of the rebellion of the Sicilians against the French in 1282, his motivation remained unclear.[23] According to the *Nuova Cronica*, the revolt commenced with a sexual offense wherein "a Frenchman in his insolence laid hold of a woman of Palermo to do her villainy."[24] The conflict between the two populations quickly escalated as "the [Sicilian] people being already sore and all moved with indignation against the French...began to defend the woman, whence arose a great battle between the French and the Sicilians."[25] In portraying the French as the oppressive despot and Sicilians as liberty-espousing people much like the Florentine people, Villani would have likely evoked a sense of compassion among the Florentine audience and elicited an unfavorable opinion toward the French; however, it is difficult to speculate if Villani did so out of his Guelphic political affiliation or his desire for a unified Italy in a modern sense, as he rarely conveyed any discontent toward foreign dominance over Italy in his chronicle. In fact, due to his Guelphic affiliation, Charles of Anjou, a member

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[21] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 13.
[22] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince,* trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 66–68.
[23] Villani, *Chronicle*, 286.
[24] Villani, *Chronicle*, 286.
[25] Villani, *Chronicle*, 286.

of the royal Capetian dynasty of France, found himself portrayed in the *Nuova Cronica* as a defender of the church and a man of great valor and intelligence.[26] Thus, at least in this specific instance, Villani hesitated to criticize foreign involvement in Italian politics due to the political culture and geopolitical situations in which he found himself.

One can see that Villani's chronicle focused mainly on the commune of Florence and addressed its internal divisions with past examples of Florentine patriotism. Machiavelli, despite sharing similar practices, expressed concerns well beyond the city of Florence. Thus, while similar in agenda, Villani and Machiavelli fundamentally differ in their expression of nationalist sentiment. By extension, the shared expression of communal loyalty and the invocation of historical figures by medieval and Renaissance historians reflects the persistent link between the practice of history-writing and the ideas of nationalism. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars in the field of nationalism studies discredited the proposition that various forms of nationalism had come into being in the pre-modern period. Recently, however, many historians have explored the possibility of identifying nation and nationalism before the eighteenth century. Much work has been done in the study of England as an archetypal modern nation. For instance, Adrian Hastings claims that, from the early fourteenth century, "Englishmen felt themselves to be a nation," and Liah Greenfeld suggests that England became "the first nation in the world" in the late sixteenth century.[27] Stefan Berger notes that the *Duke of Malmesbury's Deeds of the Kings of the English*, written during the twelfth century, "conveys a clear idea of the political and cultural unity of a nation called England."[28] Regarding the European continent, Bavarian historian and philosopher Johannes Aventinus contends that recognizable German nationalism emerged in the sixteenth century.[29] It's clear that nationalism in the early modern period, despite variations in its definition, can grow out of different temporal, social, and cultural contexts. The argument that nationalism cannot exist before a temporal boundary implies a homogenous view of history, already problematized by Robert Black. This article suggests that from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the writing of history has been consistently saturated with the kind of expressions of local and communal pride that provided Florentine elites and intellectuals with an enforced

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[26] Villani, *Chronicle*, 200.

[27] Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[28] Stefan Berger, "The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe," in Stefan Berger, ed., *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 30.

[29] Caspar Hirschi, *Wettkampf Der Nationen: Konstruktionen Einer Deutschen Ehrgemeinschaft an Der Wende Vom Mittelalter Zur Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005).

narrative through which to interpret their identity. The attempts by Renaissance and medieval historians to solicit solidarity through the construction of a communal historical narrative hence paved the way for the slow yet incremental development of Italian nationalism from Villani to Machiavelli, as examined earlier.

This argument, however, also has some weaknesses. One should caution that Machiavelli is a highly liminal writer. Specifically, Dante L. Germino, in his work *Machiavelli to Marx, Modern Western Political Thoughts*, points out that "Machiavelli was a nationalist before the emergence of nationalism."[30] Therefore, Machiavelli's nationalist sentiment and desire for Italian unification might not reflect the general intellectual trend in the Renaissance.

In addition to the development of protonationalism, another critical distinction between medieval and Renaissance histories lies in the divergent humanist and scholastic philosophies of the two eras, as revealed by the respective role of prophetic messages and the concept of *fortune* in Villani's and Machiavelli's works. The views of humanism and scholasticism differ in their emphasis on the supernatural. Subservient to the Roman Catholic church, scholasticism devoted a large portion of its study to theological works and their significance and hence always included faith in the supernatural. Humanism, on the other hand, did not focus on the supernatural as a necessary basis for study and work; instead, it placed more emphasis on human reasoning and achievement. As a result, despite medieval scholastic limitations, Italian Renaissance humanists and philosophers, without renouncing their Christian faith, highlighted human agency and capacity in understanding their earthly existence.[31] This intellectual trend finds expression in the difference in the conceptions of virtue and fortune in the histories of Machiavelli and Villani as it reflects a more general shift in the perception of individual agency from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

Derived from the name of the ancient Roman goddess of luck named *Fortuna*—who has an earlier Greek equivalent, *Tyche*—fortune plays an important role in both the *Nuova Cronica* and the *Florentine Histories*. The concept of fortune, often symbolized by the *rota fortunae*, the wheel of fortune, appears frequently in literature from the classical period to the Renaissance to show the capricious nature of life. Roman authors like Marcus Pacuvius used it extensively in the declamation and lamentation of a person's fate. Fortune also served as an allegory in medieval literature and art. The late-Roman philosopher Boethius, widely

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[30] Dante L. Germino, *Machiavelli to Marx: Modern Western Political Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 43.
[31] Charles Edward Trinkaus, *Renaissance Transformations of Late Medieval Thought* (Aldershot, Great Britain: Ashgate, 1999).

considered a major figure in the transition from Roman to medieval philosophy, played a key role in integrating the concept into medieval thinking. In his *Consolatio Philosophiae* (Consolation of Philosophy), he warns against indulgence in worldly possessions and compares fortune to a deceitful friend, "who leaves them [its victims] reeling in agony beyond endurance."[32]

Borrowing from this Greco-Roman cultural symbolism, Villani, much like his medieval counterparts, used the concept of fortune in the *Nuova Cronica* to explain human powerlessness and lack of agency. There are multiple instances in which fortune is used in this fashion. In book two of the *Nuova Cronica*, he foretells the fate of Ugolino della Gherardesca, the Ghibelline ruler of Pisa, writing that "he abode only a short time in the government, for Fortune turned against him, as it pleased God."[33] Although the wheel of fortune can dispense both benefits and harms, medieval writers often focused on its tragic ability to bring about the downfall of the mighty. In Villani's writing, fortune typically represented the might of the divine. The juxtaposition of human powerlessness and God's ability to shape historical events through the intervention of fortune reveals Villani's belief that humans are merely the agency through which God manipulates the world and are hence incapable of fighting against fate. One can see that Villani used the concept of fortune within a scholastically oriented theological framework as he regards fortune as a force with which God manipulates human society according to his desires.

Although the two authors both use fortune to explain political events and historical developments, Machiavelli places more weight on the agency of voluntary human action in shaping history, which reflects the developing influence of humanism on Florentine historians over time from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. All societies, Machiavelli argued, have different fortunes that shape the destiny of the individual and the state. Machiavelli, in fact, saw Florentine misfortune as the cause of repeated factional disputes throughout the city's history. Contrary to Villani, Machiavelli argued that virtue, including human qualities such as bravery and humility, can empower an individual to act against, or at least alongside, the influence of fortune. Machiavelli's description of Farinata exemplifies his understanding of humankind's relations with fortune: "[Farinata] would not now stop wishing for that which he had sought so long or renounce what had already been given him by fortune...And if some among them feared his fatherland and would ruin it, he hoped to defend it with the same virtue

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[32] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy,* trans. David R. Slavitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19–20.
[33] Villani, *Chronicle*, 281.

by which he had expelled the Guelph."[34] Although fortune enables the Ghibellines to conquer Florence with ease, the virtue of Farinata reacts to the effects of fortune. Machiavelli viewed history not merely as a reality predestined by God but as a dynamic conflict between supernatural tendencies and human wills. While the model of fortune versus virtue was not the only legitimate understanding of the human relationship to the world during the Renaissance, Machiavelli's political philosophy reflects a general humanist tendency to highlight human control over history. This humanist mindset during the Renaissance is notably distinct from the medieval scholastic understanding of human history — and one can see here, from a purely historiographic perspective, the validity of the traditional periodization.

Not only do the two authors differ in their interpretation of fortune and, relatedly, the mode of human interaction with the divine, but Villani's recurrent use of providence in aggrandizing the history of the Florentine Guelph party conveyed a sense of divine predestination that is less easily traceable in Machiavelli's historical narrative. For example, in the *Nuova Cronica*, Villani reconstructed a scene after the battle of Montaperti in which the cardinals discuss the results of the Florentine defeat; Cardinal Bianco, under the Pope's command, professes his vision that "the conquered shall conquer victoriously, and shall not be conquered forever."[35] Villani further explained the prophecy by stating, "This was interpreted to mean that the Guelfs, conquered and driven out of Florence, should victoriously return to power, and should never again lose their state and lordship in Florence."[36] In foretelling the future domination of Florence over Tuscany, Villani glorified the Guelph party by stressing God's favor of the Papacy over the imperial court.

In upholding the validity and prevalence of divine intervention, Villani also emphasized the role of fortune in the origin of the second Primo Popolo regime and the exile of the Ghibellines. To eliminate imperial influence in the kingdom of Sicily, Charles of Anjou, the brother of King Louis IX, through the Pope's invitation and support, defeated King Manfred at the battle of Benevento. As the news of Manfred's defeat reached Florence, discontented Guelph leaders uprooted the Ghibelline government and gave King Charles lordship over the city, resulting in a desperate circumstance in which a mob of Guelph defenders faced a cohort of well-equipped and battle-seasoned German cavalry. Villani attributed the ultimate success of the popular uprising to the work of providence: "It was more the work of God than any other cause for that great and puissant body of horse had not been opposed...when the judgment of

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[34] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 59.
[35] Villani, *Chronicle*, 184.
[36] Villani, *Chronicle*, 184.

God is ripe, the occasion is ever at hand."[37] According to Villani, Count Guido's fatal order to withdraw from the city denotes that God favored the Guelphs' return to power. The manipulation of perceived providential messages as political propaganda shows Villani's intention to emphasize the role of divine intervention in the course of human history. Villani's frequent invocation of the divine in the narration of historical events reveals an eschatological view of history, common throughout early Christian history, wherein historical events serve as a theatrical process leading to redemption. This connection between salvation and history allowed for the politicization of divine grace, as seen in Villani's pro-Guelph political stance. Unlike Villani, Machiavelli considered Count Guido's tactical flaws as the cause of the Ghibelline defeat, writing, "So powerful was this imagination in him that without thinking of any other remedy, he decided to save himself rather than fighting."[38] By attributing this victory to the timidity and impudence of the Ghibelline leader, Machiavelli reiterated his humanist emphasis on history as the creation of human actions. This reading of Machiavelli's philosophy aligns with past scholarship, and especially Quentin Skinner's *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, which proposes that Machiavelli's paradigm of opposing fortune and virtue has roots in Augustinian Christianity and fourteenth-century humanism.[39]

Since the nineteenth century, academic discussion regarding the validity of the Renaissance as a unique historical period has attracted a wide range of scholarship on topics ranging from the evolution of Latin literature to the development of artistic styles. By looking at Villani's *Nuova Cronica* with Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, this article has proposed that significant continuity exists in the expression of Florentine patriotism, which signifies the gradual formation of proto-nationalist sentiments from the late Middle Ages to the early Renaissance, a significant point of reference that can be used in the field of periodization. Nevertheless, more analysis of Medieval and Renaissance writings needs to be done to substantiate this claim.

Furthermore, histories from the two periods differ in their understanding of the human relationship with the divine. On the one hand, Villani wrote history as a series of events whose results are predestined by God. Fortune, as a result, became the agent by which God intervened in human affairs. On the other hand, Machiavelli viewed history as the dynamic struggle between fortune and virtue, one in which humans can play a more active role in crafting their

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[37] Villani, *Chronicle*, 223.
[38] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 61.
[39] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 152.

own futures, individually and collectively. What thus emerges from this focused study is a confirmation that noteworthy distinctions between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages indeed do exist, such as an evolving perception of an individual relationship with the divine. By extension, one can propose that the humanist emphasis on the strength of individual virtue in shaping human history corresponds with earlier claims of individuality.[40]

In addition, this article proposes that historiographical shifts may reflect general cultural and intellectual changes that can help us draw the chronological boundary between the two periods. However, as Robert Black has noted in previous works on periodization, the Renaissance is only a collection of movements with shared characteristics. For this reason, any future periodization derived from the historiographical trend may only reflect one of these movements instead of the period in general. Despite this limitation, historiographical inquiries still present immense potential for future scholars to explore the boundary between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

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[40] Douglas Biow, *On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

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