

Sculpting Modernity: Machiavelli and Michelangelo's *David*

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Abstract: Machiavelli attacks Christianity in various ways, but did not hope for, or expect, a secular world, or a revival of pagan civil religion. Rather, he hoped an entirely new religion would be founded that would be superior to Christianity and paganism, but which would incorporate elements of both. Using Machiavelli's explicit and veiled references to artists and sculptures, and especially Michelangelo's *David*, in *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *Art of War*, we get an indication that he hoped a new founder would, like a great artist, refashion material he had at hand in order to initiate such a new religion that would form the basis of the political order he hoped would emerge from the Renaissance.

On September 6, 1506, Biagio Buonaccorsi wrote his friend Niccolò Machiavelli a letter. The keys, he said, had been returned to Lady Marietta, Machiavelli's wife. Biagio had also arranged to have a sum of money from the mysterious Δ sent to Machiavelli. The money, he said, would be delivered "by the hand of the sculptor Michelangelo."¹ We do not have a response from Machiavelli. At the time, he was following Pope Julius II who was on his way to relieve the paricide Baglioni of Perugia, as recounted in *Discourses* 1.27 and *Prince* 7. What is clear, though, is that Machiavelli and Michelangelo knew each other. How well they knew each other, we do not know. They were both in Florence in the years before Biagio's letter, Machiavelli working as secretary to the Dieci; Michelangelo returned to Florence in 1501 after completing the *Pietà* and the *Bacchus* in Rome. Some have suggested that Machiavelli chose the subjects of Michelangelo's and Leonardo's murals in the Great Council, Florence's

¹ Machiavelli, *Opere II*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), 130. My translation. Subsequent letters from Biagio make it clear that Michelangelo did not in fact deliver the money, and did not meet Machiavelli on this occasion, but it is clear that Machiavelli and Michelangelo knew each other. See letters from Biagio on September 9, 1506, and September 11, 1506, in *Opere II*, 133–34.

victories at Anghiari and Cascina.² Michelangelo, moreover, was related to the Rucellai family, which included one dedicatee of the *Discourses* and one of the interlocutors of the *Art of War*, which is set in the Rucellai gardens.

Machiavelli, as far as I know, never mentions Michelangelo; at least by name. There is, however, one definite but oblique reference to him in the *Discourses on Livy*. In the midst of a discussion of the possibility of founding a new republic, Machiavelli says:

Without doubt, whoever wished to make a republic in the present times would find it easier among mountain men, where there is no civilization, than among those who are used to living in cities, where civilization is corrupt; and a sculptor will get a beautiful statue more easily from coarse marble than from one badly blocked out by another.³

This paper will be an analysis of this statement and its implications for Machiavelli's thoughts on religious foundings. To bolster my interpretation, I also discuss a nearly identical statement about sculpture in the *Art of War*, which Machiavelli applies to mercenaries and one's own troops. My first step will be to discuss the relevant aspects of Michelangelo's work.

MICHELANGELO'S *DAVID*

When Machiavelli speaks of a sculptor making a statue from a badly blocked out piece of marble, he is almost certainly referring to Michelangelo's *David*. Michelangelo worked on this masterpiece from 1501 to 1504.⁴ It was made from a block of marble that had been quarried thirty-seven years earlier for Agostino di Duccio, who was to sculpt the figure of David. After some preliminary work, Agostino abandoned the project, which was taken up next by Antonio Rossellino. The latter also failed to complete the project, and the piece of marble lay neglected for decades in the courtyard of the workshops

² Roslyn Pesman, "Machiavelli, Piero Soderini, and the Republic of 1494–1512," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 56.

³ *Discourses* 1.11, in *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35. To the best of my knowledge, the only scholar to make this connection is Vivanti, who notes, "Vien fatto di pensare che in Machiavelli fosse ancora vivo il ricordo della vicenda del *David* di Michelangelo, scolpito in un colossale blocco di marmo, giacente abbandonato da più di trent'anni nel cortile dell'Opera del Duomo perché già 'guasto' da Agostino di Duccio." Quoted in *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio, Dell'arte della Guerra e alter opere*, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Turin: UTET, 2006), 496. Vivanti, though, does not make anything of this observation beyond noting it.

⁴ My information about Michelangelo's *David* comes primarily from Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harper & Row, 1974), Charles Seymour, *Michelangelo's David: A Search for Identity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), and William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and His Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of the Opera del Duomo in Florence. As Vasari notes, in the first attempt to work on the stone, the sculptor “had managed to work so ill, that he had hacked a hole between the legs, and it was altogether misshapen and reduced to ruin, insomuch that the Wardens of Works of S. Maria del Fiore, who had charge of the undertaking, had placed it on one side without troubling to have it finished.”⁵ The official commission for the *David* called it “homo ex marmore vocato Davit male abbozzatum et supini.”⁶ This echoes Machiavelli’s statements about a statue badly blocked out by another in the *Discourses* and the *Art of War*: “uno male abbozzato d’altrui” and “un pezzo di marmo male abbozzato,” respectively.⁷

Marble is easiest to work with when freshly quarried, and this block became brittle and hard when left exposed to the elements.⁸ Michelangelo’s *David* had clearly been badly blocked out by another, and this was a well-known fact about it. The finished work was a remarkable accomplishment not only because others had worked on the marble, and it had been neglected for so long. It was also a particularly thin and tall piece of stone, which made the technical aspect of this achievement even more impressive.

It took Michelangelo several years to complete the sculpture, and during this time rumors began to circulate about the extraordinary *gigante* or giant, as the Florentines called it, emerging from the stone.⁹ Colossal statues existed in Rome, where Michelangelo had spent the previous several years, but there was nothing on this scale in Florence. The size is significant. The models for such a colossal work were mostly ancient Roman statues, with pagan subjects the enormous horse tamers Castor and Pollux on Quirinal Hill. Statues of this size in ancient times were also reserved for depictions of gods or demigods.¹⁰ The connection with paganism is underscored by the fact that Michelangelo’s *David* is completely nude. This was unusual and emphasizes the combination of Christian and pagan elements in the statue. The only possible reason David might be nude is that in the biblical story, he is said to have rejected Saul’s armor. This, though, seems a stretch, and Wallace concludes that the

⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, ed. Philip Jacks (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 351.

⁶ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 52.

⁷ *Discorsi*, 496, 1463.

⁸ Wallace, *Michelangelo*, 60.

⁹ Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David*, 8.

¹⁰ Wallace, *Michelangelo*, 59: “Michelangelo imagined and created a Hero—the epitome of Greek and Roman art, mastering the ancient ideal of the male nude in action, both physical and psychological.”

nudity, though “illogical,” “establishes the figure’s ancestry in ancient art.”¹¹ David’s nudity was also controversial to contemporaries. Some Florentines threw stones at the sculpture during its three-day trip from the Duomo to the Palazzo, and a garland was attached, perhaps around the waist, when it was publicly displayed.¹² Most other depictions of David showed him clothed with Goliath’s sword in hand, and Goliath’s severed head under his foot.¹³

Vasari, writing in 1550, said of the *David*, “When it was built up, and all was finished, he uncovered it, and it cannot be denied that this work has carried off the palm from all other statues, modern or ancient, Greek or Latin... with such just proportion, beauty and excellence did Michelagnolo finish it.”¹⁴ As Hibbard notes, “This is the first wholly successful union of antique inspiration with the new Florentine celebration of man; and from the time of its unveiling it was understood as the beginning of a new epoch in art.”¹⁵ And as Seymour adds, “The huge man of marble was designed by its artist to be a force in the creation of a new age.”¹⁶ More recently, Wallace has said that “the *David* surpasses all precedents.”¹⁷ The fact that the statue was recognized as superior to anything existing, both ancient or modern, and that it seemed to announce a new epoch, will turn out to be significant. Machiavelli would have had ample time to admire the *David*, as it stood outside the Palazzo delle Signoria, where his office as secretary was.

MACHIAVELLI’S THOUGHTS ON STATUARY

Machiavelli rarely mentions artists by name. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, the only instance is a passing remark about Brunelleschi in the *Florentine Histories*, where he says only that he was “a most excellent architect in Florence.”¹⁸ He certainly, though, must have been aware of the activities

¹¹ Wallace, *Michelangelo*, 61.

¹² There is a scholarly debate about whether the garland was placed around *David*’s waist, or on his head in the style of a Roman wreath. See Renzo Ristori, “L’Aretino, il David di Michelangelo e la ‘modestia fiorentina,’” *Rinascimento*, 2nd ser., 26 (1986): 77–97 and Franca Falletti, ed., *The Accademia, Michelangelo, the Nineteenth Century* (Livorno: Sillabe, 1997).

¹³ Donatello, for example, sculpted two versions of David in the fifteenth century. One of marble was clothed, while the other, also controversial depiction, was a mostly nude bronze. Michelangelo’s David was clearly depicted in the moments before killing Goliath.

¹⁴ Vasari, *Lives*, 352.

¹⁵ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 56.

¹⁶ Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David*, 55.

¹⁷ Wallace, *Michelangelo*, 60.

¹⁸ *Florentine Histories* 4.23, in *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 169.

of major public figures such as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo. We can note in passing that in an early letter to Machiavelli, his wife Marietta is reported as saying of their newborn son Bernardo that “Leonardo da Vinci would not have painted him better.”¹⁹ One possible connection between Michelangelo and Machiavelli is that scholars believe it was Piero Soderini, the gonfalonieri of Florence and Machiavelli’s boss, who gave the young Michelangelo the chance to prove himself with this block of marble.²⁰

The indirect references to Michelangelo in the *Discourses* and the *Art of War*, moreover, are not the only times Machiavelli mentions sculpture in his works. The preface of the *Discourses* begins with a description of those who are content to pay a great deal for a fragment of an ancient statue, “to be able to have it imitated by those who delight in the art.”²¹ Machiavelli contrasts this with the sad fact that “the most virtuous works the histories show us, which have been done by ancient kingdoms and republics, by kings, captains, citizens, legislators, and others who have labored for their fatherland, are rather admired than imitated.”²² When mentioning the imitation of ancient statues, Machiavelli says that he has chosen this from among many other possible examples.²³ This is an indication that there is more to this particular example than meets the eye. More significant still is that this example was in what was possibly the intended first paragraph of the preface.²⁴

It is true that an archeological mania gripped wealthy Italians, and that they sought to have what was dug up copied. The practice of digging up ancient statuary was popular during the Renaissance, and Michelangelo was present when the famous statue of Laocoön described by Pliny the Elder was unearthed in Rome in 1506. This was a famous event at the time and the statue became one of Michelangelo’s favorite models.²⁵ One of the clear models for the head of the *David* was the head of the colossus of Constantine, which was found in the Basilica of Maxentius in 1486.²⁶ But it is also true that the sculptors of the Renaissance created works that in technical skill and arguably

¹⁹ Letter from Luca Ugolino to Machiavelli, November 11, 1503, in *Opere II*, 86.

²⁰ Vasari, *Lives*, 351.

²¹ *Discourses*, Preface, 5.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Lasciando andare molti altri esempi” (*Discorsi*, 413).

²⁴ See Mansfield and Tarcov’s note on this at *Discourses*, 5.

²⁵ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 89–91.

²⁶ Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David*, 47.

beauty surpassed what the ancients had produced. Ancient statues on the scale of *David* were often made from more than one piece of stone. Arms were often bolted on, or attached with connecting pieces of stone or iron between arm and body. Vasari notes that Michelangelo was the only one with the courage to carve *David* without adding any marble, as others had thought to do. Vasari also, as we saw above, unhesitatingly claimed that *David* in particular surpassed all previous sculpture.

The technical superiority of Renaissance sculpture to ancient Roman would have been known to Machiavelli's contemporaries, and supplies a vital clue to his overall strategy in his political works. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli is ostensibly arguing for the imitation of Romans as presented by Livy. In fact, though, Machiavelli turns out to be highly critical of many aspects of ancient Rome.

To take just one relevant example, we can note that when Machiavelli in the chapter from which the quotation about badly blocked out marble appears first speaks about Numa, the second king of Rome, he says that he "found a very ferocious people and wished to reduce it to civil obedience," and "turned to religion as a thing altogether necessary if he wished to maintain a civilization."²⁷ Machiavelli goes on to claim that Numa in fact "would obtain the first rank" above Romulus as the most important figure in the creation of Rome.²⁸ "Everything considered," he concludes, "the religion introduced by Numa was among the first causes of the happiness of that city. For it caused good orders; good orders make good fortune; and from good fortune arose the happy successes of enterprises."²⁹ In *Discourses* 1.19, though, we learn that Numa was weak and that Rome's reputation declined under him. It was lucky that Rome was not attacked during his tenure, since it may well have been defeated. It turns out, in fact, that the virtuous mode of proceeding of Rome's first three kings was really due to fortune: "si vede come Roma sorti una fortuna grandissima" (one sees that Rome chanced upon very great fortune).³⁰ To say that Rome chanced upon the greatest fortune implies that what occurred in Rome was an accident.

²⁷ *Discourses* 1.11 (p. 34). There was religion in Rome, and Livy says that Romulus even adopted one foreign cult (1.7), but Livy claims that Numa pretended to speak with a goddess and that he instituted (*instituere*) religious rites on her behalf. Livy also says that Numa established the priesthoods in Rome (1.19–20). Machiavelli too understands Numa to have "constituted" (*contitui*) the Roman religion. It is fair to say that both Livy and Machiavelli regard Numa as a religious founder.

²⁸ *Discourses* 1.11 (p. 35).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Discorsi*, 543; *Discourses* 1.19 (p. 52).

In fact, a close reading of the *Discourses* reveals that a great deal of Rome's success was due to accidents. But in urging the imitation of ancient Rome, Machiavelli does not want us to rely on accidents and fortune, but to proceed according to what he calls virtue; rational control that defeats fortune, to the extent possible. Machiavelli, through his depiction of Numa, is exhorting his readers to do intentionally what Numa did only by accident. In other words, Machiavelli does not want his readers merely to imitate Rome, but to surpass her, just as Michelangelo surpassed all ancient sculptors.

SCULPTING CHRISTIANITY

If we return now to the indirect reference to Michelangelo in *Discourses* 1.11, we get a very different picture of what Machiavelli is in fact saying. In the third paragraph of the chapter in which the comment about sculpture occurs, Machiavelli says that all great founders have had recourse to religion. These founders have always understood that there are “many goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others. Thus wise men who wish to take away this difficulty have recourse to God.”³¹ Numa, the subject of this chapter, made use of religion with the Romans in this way “since he could easily impress any new form whatever on them.” This was particularly easy for Numa since “those times were full of religion and the men with whom he had to labor were crude.” This is the point at which Machiavelli compares a founding with sculpture, which I will repeat here for the sake of closer analysis:

Without doubt, whoever wished to make a republic in the present times would find it easier among mountain men, where there is no civilization, than among those who are used to living in cities, where civilization is corrupt; and a sculptor will get a beautiful statue more easily from [a] coarse marble than from one badly blocked out by another.

Religion, and especially the creation of new religious orders, is essential to a new founder. Although it is easier to found religion among mountain men, this does not mean that it is impossible to do so with those who believe themselves more civilized.³² Machiavelli takes up this possibility in the final paragraph of the chapter, in which he says,

Although coarse [*rozi*] men may be more easily persuaded to a new order or opinion, this does not make it impossible also to persuade

³¹ *Discourses* 1.11 (p. 35).

³² Compare with passages on Romulus being the king of civilized or barbarous people—Cicero, *Republic* book 1.

to it civilized men who presume they are not coarse. To the people of Florence it does not appear that they are either ignorant or coarse: nonetheless, they were persuaded by Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he spoke with God.... I do say that an infinite number believed him without having seen anything extraordinary to make them believe him.³³

The first thing to note here is the implication that Christianity, the old order and the old opinion, is like a badly blocked out piece of marble. It is not a fresh piece of marble, but one that has been laying neglected for a long time, and which has been worked over by incompetents. Machiavelli stresses in more than one place that the interpretation of Christianity is responsible for the corruption in contemporary Italy. In *Discourses* 2.2 he famously states that “the world appears to be made effeminate and heaven disarmed, it arises without doubt more from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue.... These educations and false interpretations thus bring it about that not as many republics are seen in the world as were seen in antiquity.” Attempts have been made to renovate Christianity, and give it a new interpretation. His examples are Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, who

brought back into the minds of men what had already been eliminated there. Their new orders were so powerful that they are the cause that the dishonesty of the prelates and of the heads of the religion do not ruin it. Living still in poverty and having so much credit with the peoples in confessions and sermons, they give them to understand that it is evil to say evil of evil, and that it is good to live under obedience to them and, if they make an error, to leave them to God to punish.³⁴

These saints, it turns out, reinforced the corruption of the church in their attempts at renewal. In Machiavelli’s eyes, they are chiefly responsible for the fact that the world is “prey to criminal men,” and that men, “so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them.”³⁵ Francis and Dominic, in other words, are among those who tried to rework Christianity, but failed. They left out the badly blocked out material for someone else to reshape.

Machiavelli was fully aware that the corruption of the church had reached a breaking point, claiming that “without doubt... either its ruin or its scourging is near.” It is also clear that, at least after writing the *Discourses*, if

³³ *Discourses* 1.11 (p. 36).

³⁴ *Discourses* 3.1 (pp. 211–12).

³⁵ *Discourses* 2.2 (p. 131).

not before, Machiavelli was aware of Martin Luther and the religious turmoil in the states north of Italy. In a letter to Machiavelli dated August 5, 1526, Vettori speaks about “Lutherans” in Germany. That he does so without any explanation of who these Lutherans were suggests that he expected Machiavelli to be familiar with the sect.³⁶ Viroli also notes that “even before they began to hear about Martin Luther, the Florentines had an idea of Germany as a land of peoples who lived in accordance with a sincere Christian faith,” which contrasted sharply with the “bad customs of the Italians.”³⁷ Viroli further notes that in 1512 Vettori “was able to hear from the mouths of several Germans returning home, the disgust with which true Christians judged the papal court.”³⁸ In short, Machiavelli was very likely aware of the rumblings that prefigured the Reformation. He was, moreover, interested in steering the course of the approaching attempts at religious renewal.

In particular, Machiavelli’s position seems to be that Christianity is susceptible to an interpretation that would make it more like ancient religion. That is, it would produce more republics, focus men’s eyes on this world rather than the next, and eliminate the corruption of the world. From this point of view, Savonarola was just another in a long line of failed interpreters, or one more inept sculptor who had tried his hand in reworking an old piece of marble. It is more than likely that Machiavelli had serious reservations about Christianity itself, and not just its interpretation. Exploring this possibility would be outside the scope of this paper, but it is safe to suggest that for Machiavelli, Christianity was the block of marble that was available for better or worse, and any reordering would have to take it into account.

Machiavelli is not interested in giving new orders to mountain men, who may or may not even exist. His goal is giving new orders to Italy and the world. The world Machiavelli had in view was fundamentally Christian, and he could not realistically expect, nor did he necessarily want, this religion to be eliminated. The language of the church was Latin, and by maintaining that tradition, the Roman church had dragged all of the history and literature of Rome along with it. Those church fathers who tried to stamp out heresy compounded this problem by giving voice through their attacks to the very doctrines they sought to destroy: “Whoever reads of the modes taken by Saint Gregory and by the other heads of the Christian religion will see with

³⁶ I owe this insight to Maurizio Viroli.

³⁷ Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 80, 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

how much obstinacy they persecuted all the ancient memories, burning the works of the poets and the historians, ruining images, and spoiling every other thing that might convey the sign of antiquity.”³⁹ The only sure way to remove the memory of ancient things, Machiavelli says, is through floods, because “those who are saved are all mountain men and coarse.”⁴⁰ Again, we see that Machiavelli had no such coarse mountain men to work with. Just as Christians like Gregory could not eliminate the memory of the ancient world, so Machiavelli cannot remove the memory of Christianity. Since the memory of both Christianity and the ancients has persisted, they must be incorporated in the new religion.

The only option is creating a beautiful statue from a piece of marble badly blocked out by someone else. Machiavelli never says this is impossible, but the full implication of his statement is that a refounding of Christianity can only happen when a genius of the stature of Michelangelo appears who is capable of accomplishing what had never been accomplished before. Michelangelo’s *David*, we recall, was famous for surpassing all modern and all ancient sculpture, while incorporating elements from both Christianity and paganism. Seymour goes so far as to say that “the David is also an Adam,” and so carries with it the memory of Creation, or the original founding.⁴¹ Machiavelli aimed at a similarly revolutionary reordering of Christianity.

The newness of Michelangelo’s *David* is a telling parallel to the originality of Machiavelli’s project. Machiavelli, in urging his contemporaries to imitate not only the statues of the ancients but their actions as well, is harnessing the idea of the Renaissance—that is, the idea that something had been lost in the modern world and had to be recovered. This fits with the occasional allusions to the cyclical nature of history we find in Machiavelli. The clearest example of this is the section of the *Discourses* beginning in book 1, chapter 2, in which Machiavelli repeats a theory of the cycle of regimes that is unmistakably taken from Polybius without mentioning him. Polybius attributes this cycle to nature, while for Machiavelli it arises because of chance.⁴² Machiavelli also appears to follow a suggestion from Lucretius in discussing the possibility that the world periodically suffers natural catastrophes that erase the memory of things. Every five or six thousand years, Machiavelli says, the

³⁹ *Discourses* 2.5 (p. 139).

⁴⁰ *Discourses* 2.5 (p. 140).

⁴¹ Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David*, 51.

⁴² Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders: A Study of the “Discourses on Livy”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 35. See *Discourses* 1.2 (p. 11).

cycle begins anew, and within that cycle religions tend to be overturned two or three times.⁴³ It is especially after the great floods that eliminate all but a few men that the coarse mountain men he earlier said would be susceptible to a new religion appear. This periodic destruction is a natural process, much like nature causing purges in natural bodies for the sake of their health.

If we compare this discussion about the power of chance or nature to cause regular revolutions with what Machiavelli says about the need for dykes and dams to stop the destructive forces of nature and subject them to reason, it becomes clear that Machiavelli does not hope for a simple return to ancient virtue. He is using Livy as a foil from which to present an entirely new project: his own new modes and orders. The Renaissance began as a movement to revive the arts and letters of ancient Rome and Greece, but soon, in the fine arts at least, which are arguably the most famous aspect of the Renaissance, surpassed it. Machiavelli similarly wants a new religion to emerge which will surpass both that of the ancients and Christianity. He wants to transcend the cycles he speaks of and put a stop to them. It is, after all, one of the potentially paradoxical features of Machiavelli's works that he does not seem to see any contradiction between a return to the ancient virtue of the Romans and a renewal of true Christian piety.

THE ART OF WAR: SCULPTING MERCENARIES

What at first appears as a warning about the difficulty of making a new religion among sophisticated men turns out to be an indication that doing so is entirely possible for an artist of the highest stature. In fact, given the paucity of mountain men who are ripe for a new religion, or states that can be entirely reformed, this type of reworking is in fact the only realistic option. The surface impression is that it will not be possible to found a new religion, while the real implication of what he says is a challenge to be taken up by the right kind of artist. We can see that Machiavelli is using the same strategy when he makes a nearly identical statement about sculpture in the *Art of War*. Just before the end of that work, the main speaker, Fabrizio, who claims to admire the ancients but who cannot imitate them, says the following:

Consider how many wars there have been in Italy from the passing of King Charles to today. And while wars usually make men bellicose and reputed, these, as much as they have been more grand and fierce, have so much more made the members and their heads lose reputation. This must arise because the accustomed orders were not and are

⁴³ *Discourses* 2.5 (p. 139).

not good; and as to new orders, there is not anyone who has known how to seize them. Never believe that reputation may be rendered by Italian arms except by the way I have shown and by means of those who have big states in Italy. For this form can be impressed on simple, coarse men of one's own, not on malicious, badly cared for foreigners. One will never find any good sculptor who believes he can make a beautiful statue from a piece of marble badly blocked out; but from one in the rough he may very well think so.⁴⁴

We see here a parallel on one hand between the pliable mountain men of the *Discourses* and one's own rough men who can be formed into good soldiers, and on the other hand between the intractably sophisticated city-dwellers and foreign mercenaries who are beyond help. Sculptors, even good ones according to the *Art of War*, shy away from the difficult task and prefer to work with more malleable material. The example of Michelangelo, though, proves to be the crucial exception to this theory. The right artist, the full implication of this passage indicates, will be capable of transforming badly cared-for foreigners just as well as impressionable local peasants.⁴⁵

The implication of the literal interpretation here suggests that a great military commander, like a great sculptor, should be able to reform an army of foreign mercenaries into a great army. There is something perplexing about this, since Machiavelli nowhere else argues that a prince's goal should be to improve a mercenary army. Rather, he quite clearly thinks that one should not rely on mercenaries at all but should rely on one's own people. If I am correct that Machiavelli's reference to a sculptor working with a badly blocked-out piece of marble refers to Michelangelo, and therefore a great artist who can overcome what appears to be insurmountable obstacles, then Machiavelli does seem to be saying that mercenaries can be reformed into something that will transcend any of their original elements.

If, however, we take Machiavelli's statements about mercenaries to be allegorical, this passage makes more sense. Leo Strauss, among others, has suggested that Machiavelli is often speaking indirectly about Christianity

⁴⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War*, trans. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 163, with minor changes.

⁴⁵ There are, in the vicinity of this quotation, several other allusions to statuary, and failed attempts at making a perfect figure. In speaking of making good soldiers out of the bad ones of today, Fabrizio asks, "What good form, then, could there be that one could impress on this matter?" (*Art of War*, 162). He later says that if the army "is not ordered and trained just as I have said, it can complain to you that you have made an abortion, not a perfect figure. The Venetians also, and the duke of Ferrara began one and did not continue it" (165). And nearly at the end of the work, he claims that "this province seems born to resuscitate dead things, as has been seen in poetry, painting, and sculpture" (164).

and religion in his works when he appears to be speaking only of political or military matters.⁴⁶ In this scheme the key piece of information about the mercenaries and foreigners Fabrizio speaks of above is that their homeland is elsewhere; namely, heaven instead of earth. Read this way, Machiavelli is saying in the passage quoted above that the right kind of founder will be able to transform Christians who think too much of the next world, and make this world their home. This would seem to be an essential part of Machiavelli's general aim to create more patriotic and virtuous citizens and soldiers.

CONCLUSION: DAVID'S ARMS

The parallel with *David*, a major Florentine civic hero, here extends beyond the artistic merits of the sculpture to its subject matter. As scholars have noted, Machiavelli's account of the biblical David differs significantly from the original story in 1 Samuel.⁴⁷ In *The Prince*, David refused Saul's weapons and said he would rather meet Goliath "with his sling and his knife."⁴⁸ In 1 Samuel, David has no knife and uses only his sling. As mentioned above, representations of David in Florence often showed him with Goliath's sword in hand and Goliath's head underfoot, and several scholars have thought that Machiavelli had simply confused this ubiquitous image with the original story.⁴⁹ The point of this chapter of *The Prince* is that one should rely on one's own arms, whereas David here seems to be using Goliath's sword to defeat Goliath. If this is in fact the import of Machiavelli's supposed error, it suggests that Machiavelli was in fact recommending using the arms of others as if they were one's own. This implies that Machiavelli is recommending that a new religious founder use the methods and appearance of Christianity in the process of radically transforming it.

This fits with the general strategy recommended in *Discourses* 1.25 and 26. Here Machiavelli says that a new founder in an antiquated state, as the Christian states are, "is under the necessity of retaining at least a shadow of its ancient modes so that it may not appear to the peoples to have changed its

⁴⁶ See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 245.

⁴⁷ *The Prince* 13; see p. 56n, *Discorsi*, 258.

⁴⁸ *The Prince* 13.

⁴⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. James B. Atkinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2008), 240. Rinaldo Rinaldi, *Discorsi*, 258, thinks that Machiavelli may have confused "baculum," which is Latin for staff, with "coltello."

orders even if in fact the new orders are altogether alien to the past ones.”⁵⁰ This helps us to understand the other egregious error Machiavelli makes about David. In *Discourses* 1.26, immediately after discussing the need to retain the appearance of ancient orders in a new state, we are told that a prince should make everything new in a state taken by him. “That is,” Machiavelli says, “to make in cities new governments with new names, new authorities, new men; to make the rich poor, the poor rich, as did David when he became king— ‘who filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.’”⁵¹ This quotation occurs in Luke, and is said of God, not David. In the verses before this misattribution, Joseph is said to be a descendant of the house of David, and of Jesus it is said that he will inherit the throne of his father, David. In fact, in a chapter purporting to show the necessity of a complete break with the past, Machiavelli draws our attention to the connection between the Old and New Testaments, or Judaism and Christianity, by recalling to our minds that God promised David that his kingdom would endure forever, and that that promise, according to the Christian tradition, was fulfilled by Jesus.

The kingdom established by Jesus did not resemble the kingdom of David, but, despite its connection, was radically different. On the deepest level of Machiavelli’s thought, he is saying that the new founding will contain something of the appearance of the old orders, yet will be fundamentally different. When Machiavelli speaks of the traditional founders Moses, Romulus, Theseus, and Cyrus, his true aim is not to encourage a new founder of the same kind, but one who will be different in kind, one who will accomplish a fundamentally new kind of founding. As he puts it in the *Discourses*, his goal is to offer “new modes and orders” that “bring common benefit to everyone.”⁵² The new founding will not resemble any religion of the past, but will be more powerful, subtle, and pervasive. Like Michelangelo’s *David*, it will incorporate ancient and modern elements, Christian and pagan elements, but, through the genius of the artist, will transcend both.

⁵⁰ *Discourses* 1.25 (p. 60).

⁵¹ *Discourses* 1.26 (p. 61).

⁵² *Discourses*, 5.