

# MACHIAVELLIAN FAITH AND FOUNDINGS: ON THE ARMED PROPHETS OF *THE PRINCE*

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## INTRODUCTION

The founding of a regime—one wholly new—represents the birth of new modes and orders under one who has risen from private citizen to prince. Niccolò Machiavelli discusses such foundings in *The Prince*, examining the actions and character of those who found new regimes, those to whom he refers as “prophets”<sup>1</sup>: Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus. Machiavelli examines “the greatest examples”<sup>2</sup> of founders so that his reader may profit from the lessons one can learn from their actions and so those less capable will be able to follow the path already beaten by those greater than them. Throughout, this chapter Machiavelli argues that these founders succeeded due to their virtue and fortune, and posits that “he who has relied less on fortune has maintained himself more”<sup>3</sup> arguing that the founders he listed were successful using predominantly virtue, given their great success.

Through examining the actions of Machiavelli’s armed prophets, one can establish why being both armed and a prophet are necessary conditions for success as the founder of a new principality. Additionally, it is valuable to investigate if being an armed prophet is also a sufficient condition for suc-

cess as the founder of a new principality. Considering the actions of the Machiavelli’s armed prophets raises another concern, one raised by Machiavelli himself. Of the list Machiavelli presents his reader as examples to be followed, that of Moses stands out, as he seems to be the only true prophet in a list of pagan warlords. In his writings Machiavelli himself comments on this fact, observing that “one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God....”<sup>4</sup> However, Machiavelli then goes on to suggest “let us consider Cyrus and the others who have acquired or founded kingdoms: you will find them all admirable; and if their particular actions and orders are considered, they will appear no different from those of Moses, who had so great a teacher.”<sup>5</sup> This remark provides a crucial insight into the Machiavellian project, and deserves serious attention.

With this comment in mind, the consideration of the lives and actions taken by Machiavelli’s armed prophets in the founding of their regimes becomes—at least in part—religious in nature. Machiavelli broaches this possibility with the claim comparing the actions of the classical founders to Moses and further encourages this line of thinking by calling these founders of kingdoms “prophets.” In order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics that define one of Machiavelli’s armed prophets the actions each took in order to found his respective principality and secure his rule were

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolò *The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 24

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 22-23

analyzed through a close investigation of the historical sources that would have been available to Machiavelli at the time of his writing *The Prince*. Through this analysis parallels could be seen between the lives of the four armed prophets Machiavelli lists, parallels which under close examination reveal patterns of behaviors which begin to fill out a better picture of what Machiavelli potentially saw in these four men which contributed to their being listed as armed prophets, the greatest of new princes.

Among the actions taken by Machiavelli's armed prophets which links them together, one in particular stands out: the parallel use of both arms and belief. While this may seem like an obvious connection given the appellation "armed prophet," the way each goes about using both arms and belief is striking. Rather than being used as two separate tools in order to encourage the people to fall in line, they are used together, and often appear more as two aspects of the same tool, instead of distinct. Arms and prophecy each support the other, and the use of one does not rule out nor diminish the ability of the armed prophet to use both.

Modern readers may question the value of Machiavelli's observations, given a religious understanding of the term "prophecy." Few modern regimes seem to be founded on religion, an observation which would appear to undermine Machiavelli's claim about the value of prophecy in a successful founding. However, the importance of prophecy is not specifically religious, but rather the ability to inspire belief in the new regime in the people. Many more modern founders can be seen seeking to inspire belief in the governments they establish, from Ataturk and Lenin to George Washington. While the regimes established by these men differ greatly and the means used to obtain each are similarly different, each employed both arms and belief to achieve his ends.

In combining arms and prophecy in the lives of his greatest founders, Machiavelli suggests that they are not two separate ways to secure rule, but rather the two edges of the same sword needed to found a stable and enduring regime. Machiavelli unites force and faith, arguing that should a founder seek to follow in the footsteps of his greatest forbears both must be employed.

## MOSES

Moses stands out among those listed by Machiavelli as the four most excellent princes, due to his status as a Biblical prophet in the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to the Biblical narrative Moses' actions were guided and aided by God, which would seem to make any comparisons of him to those with more terrestrial aids out of place. Though the other armed prophets called upon divine aid at various points in their lives, only Moses claims to have spoken directly with God. Machiavelli himself makes mention of the, writing that "...one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executer of things that had been ordered for him by God..." but then going on to add that "nonetheless he should be admired if only for that grace which made him deserving of speaking with God."<sup>6</sup> Following this Machiavelli makes an curious instruction, telling the reader to "consider Cyrus and the others who have acquired or founded kingdoms: you will find them all admirable; and if their particular actions and orders are considered, they will appear no different from Moses, who had so great a teacher."<sup>7</sup> This comment prompts further inquiry as to what Machiavelli might be implying here, particularly in light of his earlier statement that one ought not consider Moses given his divine guidance. Machia-

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<sup>6</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 22

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23

velli here has called attention to Moses by mentioning him then drawing back, subtly prompting the reader to examine Moses further. When the reader follows this prompting, much of Moses' life becomes more Machiavellian, particularly when compared to the other armed prophets. Among these four incidences in particular stand out. These four are the story of Moses' birth, his initial return to Egypt after the burning bush, the departure from Egypt, and the killing of 3,000 Israelites after they being to worship the Golden Calf. Following Machiavelli's advice, let us consider Moses not simply as the prophet and deliverer presented in Exodus, but as a Machiavellian prince.

The only source had for examining the life of Moses is the book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah. After explaining how the Israelites had come to live in Egypt, the author of Exodus writes that "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific. They multiplied and became so very numerous that the land was filled with them."<sup>8</sup> This rapid growth of the Israelite population alarmed the new Pharaoh of Egypt, as he believed that this large population of non-Egyptians living inside of Egypt was not necessarily loyal, and so could join with the enemies of Egypt and seek to do his kingdom some harm. As such the Pharaoh sought a way to control the Israelite population. He first reduced them to a state of slavery, "making life bitter for them with hard labor, at mortar and brick and all kinds of field work—cruelly oppressed in all their labor."<sup>9</sup> Next the Pharaoh gave an order to the Hebrew midwives to kill every Israelite boy that is born, while allowing any girls that are born to live. It is within this atmosphere that the birth and adoption of Moses is recounted by the book of Exodus.

The life of Moses begins in a way that in one respect is very similar to that of the other armed prophets, but in another is different. Moses is born to two Levites, and when his mother sees that he is a boy and "seeing what a fine child he was..."<sup>10</sup> she hides him away for as long as possible. However, when it no longer became possible to hide Moses away from the world "she took a papyrus basket, daubed it with bitumen and pitch, and putting the child in it, placed among the reeds on the bank of the Nile."<sup>11</sup> This is both similar and starkly contrasting with the story of Romulus. Both were placed in baskets to be put into rivers, but for two very different purposes: Moses to save his life, Romulus to end it. Additionally, the status of the true families and adopted families of the other four armed prophets are also mirrored in comparison to Moses. Romulus, along with Theseus and Herodotus' Cyrus, was originally of noble birth, born of royal blood. However, after being cast out each of these men is discovered by a family of low origins and taken in, being raised in humble circumstances before rising to glory. Moses, on the other hand, is recorded as having an opposite experience. He is of the lowest origins, born into a family of slaves, and rather than being found by peasants like the other armed prophets Moses is instead found by the Pharaoh's daughter while floating down the Nile, as she was bathing in the river at the time, and is brought into the Pharaonic household. Further, Moses' sister was watching as Moses floated down the river and when she saw that he was found by the Pharaoh's daughter she went to her and offered to find her a midwife, bringing Moses' own mother to the Pharaoh's daughter to serve as Moses' wet-nurse.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Exod. 1:7 (All citations take from The New American Bible Revised Edition)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1:14

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 2:2

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 2:3

<sup>12</sup> Exod. 2:7-9

Throughout the Biblical narrative it is never clarified if Moses was raised as though he were the princess' own son or if he was aware of his adopted status from the beginning. However, he does seem to have knowledge of his relationship with the Hebrew slaves later in the narrative. Whether this has always been something he has known or if it was learned later is not revealed. Unlike with the other armed prophets almost nothing is said about Moses' childhood outside of his being adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. This prevents direct comparison of his growth and development to that of the others listed by Machiavelli, which is a major factor in the analysis of the other armed prophets. The absence of this aspect of the narrative is interesting, as in the space of a few lines Moses goes from an infant to a fully-grown man without any real further explanation. While this absence does not answer any questions, it does raise several. In particular, what form of education did Moses receive? Brought up in the Pharaonic household one can only assume he would have received some form of education, but what form that might have taken is not provided. Assuming an Egyptian education how much contact might Moses have had to his claimed Hebraic heritage? Far more directly, one might even question if Moses spoke Hebrew. When he returns to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of slavery his brother Aaron is assigned to speak for him, suggesting his knowledge of the language could have been weak for the supposed prophet of God. The absence of answers to these questions is a striking one which can help to inform Moses' later actions. This absence is particularly noticeable given the focus placed on early lives of the other armed prophets, shrouding the period between Moses' birth and departure in a cloak of obscurity.

As was mentioned above, the Biblical narrative of Moses' life jumps abruptly from his being adopted by the daughter of

the Pharaoh to the events surrounding his flight from Egypt. Exodus recounts that "on one occasion, after Moses had grown up, when he had gone out to his kinsmen and witnessed their labor, he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen."<sup>13</sup> What jumps out immediately from this introduction is Moses' recognition of another Israelite as his people rather than the Egyptian. While little is known about Moses' upbringing, this indicates that in the Biblical account Moses is clearly aware of his Hebrew roots regardless of any Egyptian education he might have received. Seeing there are no witnesses Moses strikes and kills the Egyptian overseer, burying the body in the sand. When Moses went out the next day he saw two of his fellow Hebrews fighting. Intervening in the altercation, he asked why they were fighting, to which one responded "who has appointed you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?"<sup>14</sup> Moses then realized that his actions had been discovered, and believed that when Pharaoh learned of what he had done would seek to kill Moses. Fleeing death, Moses headed into the land of Midians to escape Pharaoh.

Upon entering the land of the Midians, Moses sat by a well. Exodus records that the priest of Midian had seven daughters who were sent to draw water from the well. However, shepherds attempted to prevent them from reaching the wells until Moses intervenes, driving the shepherds away and allowing the women to reach the wells. When his daughters returned so early from their task their father, Reuel<sup>15</sup>, asked what had allowed them to return so soon. They reported that an "Egyptian" saved them from the shepherds and helped them draw water. Reuel told his daughters to invite this "Egyptian" to eat with them. He

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<sup>13</sup> Exod. 2:11

<sup>14</sup> Exod. 2:13

<sup>15</sup> Also known as Jethro

also invited Moses to stay with him and his family as well as giving him one of his daughters, Zipporah, as a wife. This integrated Moses into life in Midian, where he settled down and established a life of his own.

The Biblical account of Moses' life again jumps ahead. In Exodus, it is written that "a long time passed during which the king of Egypt died."<sup>16</sup> During this time it is also recounted that "the Israelites groaned under their bondage and cried out, and from their bondage their cry for help went out to God. God heard their moaning and God was mindful of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew people continued to serve as slaves for the Egyptians and cried out to God to deliver them, who decides to use Moses as His vehicle for their deliverance. Moses was still living amongst the Midians caring for the flocks of his father-in-law. As Moses was leading these flocks deep in the wilderness he came to Mt. Horeb, "the mountain of God..."<sup>18</sup> Here "the angel of the Lord appeared to him as fire flaming out of a bush. When he looked, although the bush was on fire, it was not being consumed."<sup>19</sup> A voice from the burning bush then identified itself as the "God of your father...the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."<sup>20</sup> Having thus identified himself with the God worshipped by Moses' Hebrew kin, the Lord then issues his commands to Moses.

God informs Moses that "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyp-

tians..."<sup>21</sup> Seeking to deliver the Hebrew people from the Egyptians God commanded to Moses "Now go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelite, out of Egypt."<sup>22</sup> In the Biblical account Moses resists this command, arguing that his is not suited to the role, and asserting that the Israelites will not believe Moses is an emissary from the Lord. God then responds that he will empower Moses to perform signs and wonders to ensure that Moses is recognized as his messenger. He also appoints Aaron, Moses' brother, to be Moses' assistant. It is at this point that a command unlike any other is given by the Lord to Moses regarding Aaron's status as Moses' assistant. It is recorded that God said "You will speak to him and put the words in his mouth. I will assist both you and him in speaking and teach you both what you are to do. He will speak to the people for you: *he will be your spokesman, and you will be as God to him.* [emphasis mine]"<sup>23</sup> This is a remarkable statement, that Moses will be like God to Aaron. It is a grant of absolute and unquestionable authority from God to a man the likes of which is not repeated throughout the Bible.<sup>24</sup> For Machiavelli, such a grant of authority would be immediately seen in decidedly secular terms. With Aaron later being established as the first High Priest of the Lord it represents a unity of secular and religious authority under Moses' complete control with his status as prophet, secular leader of the Israelite people, and lord over Aaron. Additionally, the solitude of God's command to Moses is

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2:23

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2:23-24

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 3:1

<sup>19</sup> Exod. 3:2

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3:6

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3:7-8

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3:10

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4:15-16

<sup>24</sup> Or rather, is not repeated in the Hebrew Testament. However, a parallel could be seen in Jesus' Transfiguration, in which God instructed the apostles to obey His chosen Son, Jesus. (Lk. 9:35) Further complicating matters, according to the Gospel account Moses was actually present at the Transfiguration, along with Elijah.

worth considering. God's instruction to Moses to lead the Israelites out of bondage is given in secrecy, with only Moses being present. This is a theme repeated again in Exodus, when Moses climbs Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, again in solitude. While the Biblical account implies this solitude is due to Moses' piety making him the only one worthy to speak directly with God, a more sinister possibility remains. Moses' solitude could be precisely that, solitude used to grant his rule divine legitimacy.

After his return from Mt. Horeb Moses set out for Egypt, informed by the Lord that those who sought to kill him for his earlier killing of an Egyptian overseer had died. While he was in route the Lord appeared to Aaron and instructed him to go into the wilderness to meet Moses, where he met him gladly and agreed to join in Moses' mission to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses and Aaron then "gathered all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron told them everything the Lord had said to Moses, and he performed signs before the people. The people believed, and when they heard that the Lord had observed the Israelites and had seen their affliction, they knelt and bowed down."<sup>25</sup> Moses is thus established as the head of the Israelite community, employing both divine sanction and promises of liberation from Egyptian bondage to gain the support of the people and the elders. Politically both of these claims are powerful, particularly given the station the Israelites occupied. As they were slaves being oppressed and killed by their masters calling out to their God to save them, should one emerge claiming to be sent by that God in order to liberate them it is reasonable that he would quickly gain political clout, veracity and verifiability of his claim notwithstanding.

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<sup>25</sup> Exod. 4:29-30

Moses and Aaron then go before Pharaoh, demanding that he let the Israelite people go into the wilderness to hold a feast to the Lord. Pharaoh was resistant, not recognizing the god of the Israelites. He says to Moses "Why, Moses and Aaron, do you make the people neglect their work? Off to your labors...Look how they are already more numerous than the people of the land, and yet you would give them rest from their labors!"<sup>26</sup> Pharaoh then increased the workload assigned to the Israelite slaves, forcing them to gather the straw needed for making bricks on their own, when before it was given to them by the Egyptians. Because of this some of the Israelite leaders turned on Moses and Aaron, upset that their actions had led to an increase in their labors, saying to Moses "the Lord look upon you and judge! You have made us offensive to Pharaoh and his servants, putting a sword into their hands to kill us."<sup>27</sup>

At this point it would appear that Moses and Aaron are only one misstep away from being rejected by the Israelites as their liberator and losing any authority they might have. However, Moses cries out to God on the people's behalf, asking, "Lord, why have you treated this people badly? And why did you send me? From the time I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has treated the people badly, and you have done nothing to rescue your people."<sup>28</sup> This could be seen as serving two distinct purposes. The first is that here Moses again is doubting his abilities to fulfill the command given to him at Mt. Horeb to free the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage. The second reading can be gleaned is that Moses is in a sense passing the blame for his initial setbacks onto God, preventing himself from personally taking responsibility for the mission of liberation failing to be implemented

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<sup>26</sup> Exod. 5:4-5

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 5:21

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5:22-23

immediately. It is then recounted that God spoke to Moses, promising that “you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. For by a strong hand, he will let them go; by a strong hand, he will drive them from this land.”<sup>29</sup> This promise, in conjunction with Moses’ passing of responsibility for the Israelite’s increased labors onto God, creates a narrative that reinforces Moses’ authority over the Israelite. Despite the hardships they are now enduring these are not the result of a failing on Moses’ part, but rather are part of a larger plan to crush Pharaoh utterly.

This promise to Moses from God that He will act with power to liberate the Israelites is then followed by God confirming to Moses His identity as the God of the Patriarchs, and assuring Moses that He will fulfill the covenant made to Abraham, despite the bleak situation the heirs to that covenant find themselves in now.<sup>30</sup> This reaffirming of the promise to Abraham is then followed by an account of the genealogy of Moses, linking him dynastically back to the tribe of Levi, which would go on to be established as the priestly tribe of the Israelites.<sup>31</sup> Both of these records serve to shore up Moses as the leader of the Hebrews, but placing him in the spiritual role held by Abraham as the chief patriarch of the Israelite tribes, as well as linking him by blood to the same. This grants legitimacy to Moses’ claims to rule, which seems particularly necessary in the face of earlier criticism from the Hebrew overseers. Additionally, in terms of the narrative of Exodus this genealogy caps of the story of Moses’ childhood and commission as God’s agent for the liberation of the Hebrews and begins the story of the ten plagues unleashed against the Egyptian people as punishment for Pharaoh’s hardheartedness.

The plagues present an interpretive challenge when considering a Machiavellian reading of the Exodus story. They are the most direct example of divine intervention in the account, and are also the most public, making them more difficult to explain than other events. However, turning to Machiavelli’s instructions in *The Prince*, a possible explanation emerges. Writing about the armed prophets, Machiavelli comments on the necessity of their having an opportunity to come to rule, writing that “without that opportunity their virtue of spirit would have been eliminated....”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, later in the work he writes that the prince must be able to adapt fortune to his ends in order to succeed. Machiavelli writes that “I believe ...he is happy who adapts his mode of proceedings to the qualities of the times; and similarly, he is unhappy whose procedure is in disaccord with the times.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, Machiavelli recommends boldness when facing trials of fortune, writing “that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down.”<sup>34</sup> Taking these instructions from Machiavelli in conjunction with the problem presented by the plagues in the Exodus narrative, a possible answer to this question emerges: Moses took advantage of ongoing natural disasters in order to secure his rule. This has been proposed in recent years by some archaeologists as a possible source of the Biblical plagues and fits well within a Machiavellian reading of the Exodus narrative as it places the focus on Moses’ virtue in seizing the opportunity presented by the plagues, rather than on direct divine intervention.

The final plague, the death of the firstborn Egyptians, presents a particularly rich area for Machiavellian analysis of the

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<sup>29</sup> Exod. 6:1

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 6:2-8

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6:14-27

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<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 99

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 101

Exodus account, as it is also the most difficult of the plagues to explain through natural occurrences. One possible explanation that can be offered is that the Israelite slaves took advantage of their integration into Egyptian society to kill the Egyptian firstborn. Given the significance the text places on the death of the son of Pharaoh, another possibility is that only he and perhaps a few other high social status Egyptians were killed, with later authors embellishing the story and generalizing the killing. This would emphasize the value of arms in securing the freedom of the Israelites and the rule of Moses. Additionally, it eliminates the need to posit a vast conspiracy, keeping it limited to only a few individuals. The celebration of the first Passover also fits within this interpretation. The Israelites are commanded to stay in their homes, marking them with blood of lambs. In the orthodox reading, this seclusion is to keep the Israelites safe from the angel of death passing over Egypt. However, it also could serve as a way to keep the majority of the Israelite population out of the way as a conspiracy swung into action.

Following the killing of the Egyptian firstborn Pharaoh finally relents and allows the Israelites to go free. As they left, “the Israelites did as Moses had commanded: they asked the Egyptians for articles of gold and silver and for clothing.”<sup>35</sup> As they depart Egypt the Israelites functionally loot the Egyptian people, and while the Exodus narrative comments that “the Lord had made Egyptians well-disposed toward the people that they let them have whatever they asked for...”<sup>36</sup> a Machiavellian reading of the situation with an eye towards the recent killing of the Egyptian firstborn (be it by divine or human arms) makes the Egyptian willingness seem far more coerced. This again emphasizes the value of arms in the securing

of Moses’ rule, as at this point they have provided both the political and material circumstances to solidify his control over the Israelites.

As the Israelites left Egypt, they did not follow the easy route along the shore of the Mediterranean, as that would have taken them through the land of the Philistines and they would have had to immediately fight to survive. Exodus reports that the reason for avoiding this conflict was that “God said: If the people see that they have to fight, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.”<sup>37</sup> Instead, the Israelites left Egypt “towards the Red Sea by way of the wilderness road, and the Israelites went out of the land of Egypt arrayed for battle.”<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note that though the Israelites were arrayed in warlike fashion as they left Egypt they still sought to avoid direct conflict. This could be prudence on the part of Moses, knowing that though the Israelites feel invincible after overcoming the Egyptians they are not prepared to face an enemy in open combat, and so seeking to avoid the conditions that would end his rule before it even truly began.

During their flight from Egypt the Israelites faced a final challenge. Pharaoh reneged on his acceptance of their departure, leading his army in pursuit of his fleeing labor force. The chase ended with the Israelites pinned with their backs against the Red Sea. In the Exodus narrative God then intervenes decisively, parting the sea and allowing the Israelites to pass safely along the seabed before crushing the pursuing Egyptian army under the waves. However, under the Machiavellian reading this narrative is called into question. A possible alternative could be proposed, hinging on the incorrect translation of *yam suph*, traditionally translated as Red Sea but actually

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<sup>35</sup> Exod. 12:35

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:36

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<sup>37</sup> Exod. 13:17

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:18



meaning “Sea of Reeds.”<sup>39</sup> While the exact location of this body of water has not been identified, it most likely lies among the series of small bodies of water lying north of the Gulf of Suez near the Great Bitter Lake. These bodies of water are occasionally prone to high winds which cause effects similar to those of tidal forces, causing areas of the lakes to become dry and passable to foot traffic for periods of time. However, due to the muddiness of the terrain it would not have been passable to the chariot-based army fielded by the Egyptians. This possibility eliminates the need for divine interference while still both providing an avenue of escape for the Israelites and maintaining a continuity with the Biblical narrative.

After escaping the pursuing Egyptian forces the Israelites, led by Moses, begin their wandering in the desert. The most significant event to occur during their time in the desert is the time spent at Mt. Sinai, where Moses receives the law from God. Moses ascended Mt. Sinai, and at the peak spoke directly with God, who gave to Moses the Ten Commandments and the other elements of the mosaic law. These incredibly detailed laws set forward both the moral and ceremonial laws that the Israelites were to follow, dictating every part of their lives. The Biblical narrative makes it very clear that these laws were given to Moses directly by God in order to instruct the Israelites how best to live in order to please Him. However, under a Machiavellian analysis a divine source loses credibility. Given the firm emphasis the source material places on Moses being the only one of the Israelites to ascend Mt. Sinai, it becomes possible that Moses added a divine source to laws he created in order to increase their credibility and increase the likelihood of their being followed. The laws then serve a purpose more terrestrial than divine, serving to bind the

twelve tribes of the Israelites together into one people, much as the laws given by the other armed prophets served to bind their respective peoples together. This is further underscored when Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai for the first time to find that the Israelites had constructed an idol of a golden calf to which they were offering praise and worship.

Moses destroys the idol, but still he “saw that the people were running wild...to the secret delight of their foes.”<sup>40</sup> In response to this Moses “stood at the gate of the camp and shouted, ‘Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!’ All the Levites then rallied to him, and he told them, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put your sword on your hip! Go back and forth through the camp, from gate to gate, and kill your brothers, your friends, your neighbors!’ The Levites did as Moses had commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people fell.”<sup>41</sup> Moses enforces his authority at the point of a sword, using armed force to put down an insurrection against his will. He also elevates the Levites for being willing to kill for him, making them the priestly tribe. Having a code of laws to bind a people together is necessary, but only functions if those laws carry with them firm penalties for transgressors. Through this use of arms Moses demonstrates a steadfast willingness to deploy arms in defense of the law, holding the people together and firmly putting him in the camp of armed prophets. It is also important to note that while Moses says to the Levites “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel...”<sup>42</sup> The Biblical narrative does not actually record God commanding the actions that followed, implicitly raising the possibility that this command was in fact one of Moses’ own, to which he attributed

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<sup>39</sup> Footnote to Exod. 15:4

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<sup>40</sup> Exod. 32:25

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 32:26-28

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

divine authorship in order to better compel soldiers to kill their friends and family.

Moses never reaches the promised land, dying in sight of it on the peak of Mt. Nebo. The Biblical account cites as a reason for this that when the Israelites found themselves in need of water during their wandering in the desert, God instructed Moses to raise his hands over a rock so that water would spring forth. However, instead he struck the rock with staff, saying “Just listen you rebels! Are we to produce water for you out of this rock?”<sup>43</sup> By disobeying God’s instructions and claiming the credit for himself Moses sinned against God, and as his punishment he was not allowed to set foot in the promised land. A potential Machiavellian reading of this death is that by ascribing a divine cause to Moses’ death it makes his failure to lead his people into the promised land look like less of a failure, as it was failure due to divine mandate caused by personal sin rather than some lack as a political leader. Another, darker reading is also possible, particularly when comparing Moses’ death to the deaths of the other armed prophets. Each of the four armed prophets has at least one negative story of his death, with the exception being Moses. It ought then be considered that Moses also has a darker death story, concealed behind the biblical account. Given, that Moses dies on seemingly alone on top of Mt. Nebo, the seclusion that gave him a claim to power also makes ambiguous the nature of his death, opening the possibility of a less than natural end. As part of the preparation for his death Moses appoints Joshua as his successor, transferring to him the authority to enforce the law.<sup>44</sup> This establishes a clear line of succession, ensuring the continuity of the laws and preventing a potential succession crises which could destroy the young Israelite polity.

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<sup>43</sup> Num. 20:10

<sup>44</sup> Deut. 34:9

At first glance Moses appears to be an outlier in Machiavelli’s listing of armed prophet, being the only one who actually was a prophet in his source material. However, upon further analysis under a Machiavellian lens, much of the “prophetic” elements in the Moses story can be picked apart and explained. Given this, Moses becomes a deeply Machiavellian character readily employing deception and force in order to achieve and secure his rule. This fits within Machiavelli’s instructions to examine the lives of the other armed prophets in the light of Moses’ life, and further comparison raises other implications discussed in the final chapter.

## CYRUS

Writing about Cyrus the Great, the second in Machiavelli’s list of armed prophets, presents a unique challenge due to the nature of the source material. The two primary sources, Herodotus’ *Histories* and Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* present deeply disparate accounts of Cyrus’ rise to power and achievements as founder of the Persian Empire. Adding to this confusion is that while the Cyrus presented by Herodotus seems to fall more in line with the other lives presented by Machiavelli, Machiavelli also explicitly instructs the reader of *The Prince* to read *The Education of Cyrus*, writing of it that “whoever reads the life of Cyrus written by Xenophon will then recognize in the life of Scipio how much glory that imitation brought him, how much in chastity, affability, humanity and liberality Scipio had conformed to what had been written of Cyrus by Xenophon.”<sup>45</sup> This seems like obvious praise both of Scipio and Xenophon’s work, but becomes more murky when one reads Machiavelli’s remarks on why Scipio failed in the end, after his armies

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<sup>45</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince* 60

revolted “from nothing but his excessive mercy, which had allowed his soldiers more license than is fitting for military discipline,”<sup>46</sup> a trait Machiavelli seems to be suggesting Scipio learned from his reading of Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*. These ambiguities create difficulties when interpreting Machiavelli’s opinion of Cyrus and his place among the armed prophets.

Despite the seeming ambiguity as to which source one ought to use when considering the life of Cyrus in light of Machiavelli’s comments on Cyrus, Machiavelli provides a clue as to which version of Cyrus’s life he intends he reader to consult. The most significant of these is the comment made by Machiavelli that when Cyrus found the Persians they were “malcontent with the empire of the Medes....”<sup>47</sup> In Xenophon’s account of the life of Cyrus, this malcontentment is wholly absent. The Persians and the Medes are described as separate kingdoms with apparently friendly relations. Though Cyrus’ mother warns him that should he stay in the court of Astyages he will learn “not the kingly [way] but the tyrannical...”<sup>48</sup> there is an obvious lack of the murderous intent or political oppression. In contrast, Herodotus’ account of Cyrus repeatedly emphasizes the Medes overlordship of the Persians, placing Cyrus’ life within the context of a revolt of a subjugated people against their masters. This discrepancy indicates that Machiavelli intends for his reader to examine the life of Cyrus as presented by Herodotus when reading chapter six of *The Prince*, and as such that is what has been done here.

Herodotus’ account of the life of Cyrus presents a story of his birth remarkably similar to that of Romulus. Astyages,

the king of the Medes, had two dreams about his daughter Mandane that were interpreted by the Magi to mean that “his daughter’s child would replace Astyages as king.”<sup>49</sup> Fearing being replaced on the throne, Astyages resolved to have his daughter’s child killed after birth. This willingness to have a child killed parallels Amulius’ determining to kill the twin sons of the daughter of Numitor—Romulus and Remus—to secure his own place on the throne of Alba. Additionally, that his rise to the throne was prophesied is striking given Cyrus’ status as an armed prophet. Even before his birth Cyrus was imbued with divine favor, granting him further legitimacy beyond his being the son of the king. Astyages orders Harpagos, a trusted advisor related to the king, to take the child upon his birth and kill him, and to dispose of the body. Harpagos swears he will fulfill the command of the king, and takes the child. However, upon returning to his home he weeps, and tells his wife of the horror the king has ordered him to commit. The wife of Harpagos asks what he intends to do, and he replies, “I will not comply with Astyages’ plan. No, not even if he were to lose his mind and become more insane than he is now would I follow his orders and commit such a murder.”<sup>50</sup> Though he was loathe to follow Astyages’ command, Harpagos realizes that the child still must die, or else he will face the wrath of Astyages. He determines that while the child must be killed, the murderer must come from the household of Astyages rather than his own. Harpagos then sent word to Mitradates, one of Astyages’ herdsmen who Harpagos believed would be well suited to his purpose.

Mitradates presented himself to Harpagos, who instructed him to take the infant and expose it in the wilderness to die,

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>48</sup> Xenophon *The Education of Cyrus* trans. Wayne Ambler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 1.3.18

<sup>49</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 1.108.2

<sup>50</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.109.2

informing him that should he fail in this he will be killed, and that Harpagos would come to ensure the child had been killed. Mitrdates accepts this command, and takes the child home with him. Herodotus reports that at this time Mitrdates' wife, who was pregnant at the time, gave birth to a stillborn son. Mitrdates returns to his home with the child and explains what he has been commanded to do to his wife, revealing the identity of the child to be Cyrus, the grandson of Astyages. Upon seeing the beauty of the child, an infant Cyrus, Mitrdates' wife pleaded with him to keep the child and raise him as their own, and to show Harpagos their own stillborn son instead of Cyrus. Mitrdates gives in to his wife's pleading, and follows through with the plan. Harpagos is fooled by this switch, and he believes that Cyrus is dead.

Mitrdates and his wife raise the young Cyrus as their own, keeping his true identity a closely guarded secret. However, when Cyrus was ten, a series of events played out that would reveal who he truly was. The youths of the village were playing a game, and elected Cyrus to be their king. He assigned the other children to various roles, and ordered them to complete tasks. However, "one of the boys who joined in this game was the son of Artembares, a man held in high esteem among the Medes. This boy refused to perform the task assigned by Cyrus, so Cyrus ordered the other boys to seize him, and when they obeyed, Cyrus punished the boy severely with a whip."<sup>51</sup> The boy was outraged by this, as his sense of honor was deeply offended, and so he went to his father and complained. The boy's father, in turn, went to Astyages to protest the vicious treatment of his son at the hands of one of Astyages' own servants. Astyages, upon hearing this story and seeing the bruises on the boy's shoulders, summoned Mitrdates and Cyrus to his pre-

sence. There he asked Cyrus why he, the son of a lowly herdsman, dared to lay hands on the son of an esteemed noble? Cyrus responded that "[he] did this to him for a just cause. For when the boys of the village, including this boy, were playing a game, they made [Cyrus] their king because [he] seemed to them the most suitable for this role. All the other boys carried out [his] commands, but this one boy disobeyed and ignored them, for which he received punishment."<sup>52</sup> Cyrus' defense of his actions is that he was chosen as the leader, and so acted to enforce that position. Even at a young age the use of arms to maintain power was apparent to Cyrus, as to not punish the young rebel would undermine his authority as "king."

As Cyrus gave this explanation for his actions, Astyages began to have a growing sense of recognition, both in the way the boy spoke and in his appearance, "noticing that his facial features resembled his own, that he spoke more like a free man than a slave, and that the time since the baby's exposure seemed to correspond to the boy's present age."<sup>53</sup> After regaining his composure, Astyages sent Artembares away, promising that just action would be taken. Cyrus was then led to an inner chamber at Astyages' orders, so he was left alone with Mitrdates. Astyages then began to question Mitrdates about Cyrus. At first Mitrdates kept to his story, insisting that Cyrus was the rightful son of him and his wife. However, when Astyages commanded that he be led away and tortured, Mitrdates broke, and revealed everything. Astyages then summoned Harpagos, and inquired as to who he had put the child to death as he had been ordered. Seeing that Mitrdates was present with Astyages, Harpagos decided that he ought to be fully honest, and explained how he had given the child over to Mitrdates to

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<sup>51</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.114.3

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.115.2-3

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.116.1

be killed, and sent trusted servants to see the body of the child and ensure he was dead. Upon hearing this, Astyages revealed that Cyrus was in fact alive, but assured Harpagos that he considered this for the best, and requested that Harpagos send his own son to be with Cyrus, and that evening to come to the palace for a feast to thank the gods for returning Cyrus to the household of Astyages. Harpagos thanks the king for his mercy, and believes that the king has truly forgiven him.<sup>54</sup>

Having dealt with Harpagos and ascertained the true identity of Cyrus, Astyages was now faced with a dilemma. In his own household now resided the child who it was prophesied would overthrow him as king. Astyages consulted with his magi, who argued that Astyages had nothing to fear from Cyrus, as his appointment as “king” of the youth of the village and his carrying out of the responsibilities of king fulfilled the prophecy and eliminated the danger. The magi then point out that they personally are invested in the continuation of Astyages’ reign as king, for if Cyrus were to become king they will no longer be ruled by their fellow Median, but “it will come into the hands of others, and the Persians will make us their slaves and despise us, since we are foreigners to them.”<sup>55</sup> The magi also recommended sending Cyrus to live with his true parents, the daughter of the king and her Persian husband, so as to remove him from the Royal Court where he may pose some danger to Astyages.

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<sup>54</sup> This belief would turn out to be ill-founded, as Astyages would avenge himself on Harpagos, slaughtering his son when he arrived at the palace and having him cooked. When Harpagos himself came to the place for the promised feast he was served the flesh of his own son. When this was revealed to him rather than displaying outrage he remained reserved, and went home to quietly plot revenge, a fact that becomes important later in Herodotus’ account of Cyrus.

<sup>55</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.120.5

The King agreed with the magi’s recommendation, and send Cyrus to live with his true parents. They were quite understandably overjoyed to see him, believing Cyrus to have died at birth. Cyrus then informed them of all that occurred, revealing Astyages’ actions and how he had been kept alive. When he told his parents how the herdsman Mitradates’ wife, Kyno, had pleaded to save his life, “praising her so continually throughout all he said that her importance to the story of his life was obvious”<sup>56</sup> they saw an opportunity to prepare the groundwork for Cyrus’ ascent to power. They “spread the rumor that when Cyrus had been exposed in the wild, a bitch had suckled and raised him [Kyno meaning “bitch” or “female dog” in Greek], so that their son’s survival would seem more divinely miraculous to the Persians. Certainly, from this beginning, that rumor has spread far and wide.”<sup>57</sup> This almost explicitly parallels the early life of Romulus, who after being exposed in the wild to die was rumored to have been suckled by a wolf, strengthening a claim to divine parentage or support as the wolf is the symbol of Mars, who was said to be the father of Romulus and Remus. Further, the story of Cyrus’ birth and early upbringing parallels that of all four armed prophets, who were raised apart from those who they would in time come to rule over.

As Cyrus continued to grow he “was the most stalwart of his peers—as well as the most popular.”<sup>58</sup> During this time Harpagos “worked to establish ties with him by sending him gifts, although his real desire was for revenge on Astyages.”<sup>59</sup> Harpagos saw in Cyrus a potential ally in his aim to revenge himself upon Astyages, as Cyrus also bore animosity towards the King.

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<sup>56</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.122.3

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 1.123.1

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Aiding in this endeavor, “Astyages had begun to treat the Medes harshly, and Harpagos mingled with the most prominent Medes one by one and persuaded them to work to end the reign of Astyages and make Cyrus their leader instead.”<sup>60</sup> When Harpagos believed the time was ripe for rebellion, he secretly sent a message to Cyrus, hiding it within the belly of a hare and sending along with this hare a slave with oral instructions for Cyrus to split open the belly of the hare with his own hand when alone.<sup>61</sup> This message exhorted Cyrus to lead the Persians among whom he dwelt to revolt, assuring that “if you will persuade the Persians to revolt and march against the Medes, it will not matter whether I or another of the eminent Medes is appointed by Astyages to serve as general against you. You shall have everything you want, for these Medes will be the first to revolt against him and come over to your side, and they will strive to bring him down. And so, since all is in readiness for you here, make your move now and with all dispatch.”<sup>62</sup>

Upon reading this message, Cyrus decided that it was time to act. However, first he had to persuade the Persians to rise in revolt against the Medes. He did this by gathering the Persian people together, and presenting to them two examples of life over two days. On the first day Cyrus ordered the Persians to take scythes and clear a certain track of land densely covered in thorn bushes and prepare it for cultivation. When this task was completed Cyrus ordered the people to go home, bathe, and rest, and to return the next day. In the intervening time Cyrus gathered together his father’s herds, slaughtered them, and had a feast prepared. When the Persian people returned the next day, Cyrus laid out this feast before them. After the Persians had eaten their fill, Cyrus

contrasted these two days, and asked the Persians which they preferred. When they responded the second day, with its leisure and pleasures rather than the first, Cyrus argued that should they take up arms with him against the Medes all their days will be like the second, while if they refuse all their days will be like the first. The Persian people heralded Cyrus as their leader, and prepared to march against Astyages and the Medes, as “they had for a long time felt that to be ruled by the Medes was intolerable”<sup>63</sup>.

Upon hearing that the Persians had risen in revolt against him Astyages summoned Harpagos to the palace and placed him in command of the Median army. However, Harpagos activated his plan and lead the Median army along with many prominent Medes to join with the Persian rebels and proclaim Cyrus as King. Because of these defections the Median army collapses, and Cyrus defeats his grandfather Astyages and becomes the first Persian Great King. Of note is the amount of aid Cyrus employed in his seizure of the throne. Rather than winning his crown solely on his own merits Cyrus supports an internal conspiracy within Media to place him on the throne. This could place Cyrus is a similar situation as that in which Machiavelli initially places Moses, as Cyrus comes to rule at least in part through the actions of others than through only his own arms. However, this can be objected to on two fronts. First, Cyrus is an integral part of the conspiracy, as he encourages the Persians to revolt against the Medes, a necessary component of the plan. Secondly, Cyrus seizes the opportunity presented to him by fortune, which Machiavelli praises as one of the chief virtues of an armed prophet. Following his subjugation of the Medes, Cyrus will then launch a campaign of conquest, unifying much of Central Asia, the Levant, and Anatolia under his rule.

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<sup>60</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.123.2

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1.123.4

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1.124.2-3

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<sup>63</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.127.1

Cyrus' conquests go well, with nation after nation falling under his sway. With the majority of the Middle East under his rule, he turned his eyes towards central Asia, and "after Cyrus had conquered the Babylonians, he next set his heart on the conquest of the Massagetai."<sup>64</sup> This tribe was ruled by Queen Tomyris, who rebuffed Cyrus' original plan to bring her people into his empire through marriage. With his original plan rejected, Cyrus decides to invade Massagetai to bring them under his sway. As he advanced into their territory his advisor Croesus, the former king of the Lydians,<sup>65</sup> proposed a strategy of advancing some ways into the Massagetai territory, and preparing a great feast with rich food and strong drink. The Persians would then withdraw some ways back, and allow the Massagetai to see the plenty, distracting them and allowing the Persians to gain the advantage. Cyrus decided to follow this strategy, and advanced into Massagetai, prepared a great feast, and then withdrew out of sight. This ploy succeeded, when many of the Massagetai soldiers became drunk on the wine and falling asleep. The Persian forces then descended on the Massagetai, killing and capturing many. Among those captured is Spargapises, the son of Queen Tomyris. Upon hearing of this Tomyris sent a message to Cyrus, offering safe passage out of the Massagetai lands in exchange for the release of Spargapises, but threatening that Cyrus and his armies will be destroyed if he refuses. Cyrus refuses to heed this warning. When Spargapises awoke and the effects of the wine had worn off he saw that he was captured and begged Cyrus to release his bonds. When Cyrus agreed, aiming to win favor with Spargapises, he immediately

killed himself rather than be a prisoner to Cyrus.

Upon hearing that Cyrus had refused her advice, Tomyris gathered together her armies and attacked the Persian forces. In what Herodotus describes as "the most violent of all battles ever fought by barbarians..."<sup>66</sup> the majority of the Persian army was destroyed. More significantly, Cyrus was also killed in this battle. After the battle's conclusion, Tomyris "then filled a wineskin with human blood and searched for the corpse of Cyrus among the Persians' dead. When she found him, she thrust his head into the wineskin, and as she thus abused the corpse she declared to it: 'I am alive and have conquered you in battle, but you have ruined me by taking my son through guile. Well, then, just as I threatened I will slake your thirst for blood.'"<sup>67</sup> So ended the conquests of Cyrus the Great, struck down in the pursuit of greater dominion.

## THESEUS

Both Machiavelli and Plutarch describe the Athenian people as "dispersed" before Theseus arrived and brought them together into the city of Athens and formed them into one people.<sup>68,69</sup> This action makes him the formal founder of Athens, for though the Athenians had technically existed before Theseus' arrival they "lived dispersed, and were not easy to assemble upon any affair for the common interest."<sup>70</sup> It is from his drawing of the Athenian's together into one people, uniting them through war and religion, that Machiavelli lists Theseus as one

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<sup>64</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.201.1

<sup>65</sup> Croesus had ruled Lydia before being conquered by Cyrus. This story, recounted in Herodotus 1.87, describes how Croesus was nearly burned alive by Cyrus following his defeat

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 1.214.1

<sup>67</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.214.4

<sup>68</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

<sup>69</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives: Volume I* trans. John

Dryden (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) 14

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

of his armed prophets. Through a close examination of his life and actions one can determine the actions taken by Theseus to bring the Athenian people together that earned him a place among Machiavelli's armed prophets.

Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* provides an excellent account of Theseus' life that would have been available to Machiavelli at the time of his writing *The Prince*. In his paired *Lives* Plutarch places Theseus alongside Romulus as "both of them united with strength of body an equal vigour [sic.] of mind; and of the two most famous cities of the world, the one built Rome, and the other made Athens be inhabited."<sup>71</sup> This explicitly instructs Plutarch's reader to compare these two founders, an instruction which Machiavelli also encourages. Of the four armed prophets listed by Machiavelli only Theseus and Romulus found new cities. Theseus was born the son of Aegeus, who was descended from one of the first inhabitants of Attica, and Aethra the daughter of Pittheus, who was in his own right descended from Pelops, the greatest of all kings in the Peloponnesus. Theseus' patrimony alone is significant, as he is descended from royal blood. This presents a contrast to Machiavelli's portrayal of Theseus as an entirely new prince, and is a story element repeated throughout the lives of all four armed princes. Theseus was born after Pittheus prevailed upon Aegeus, the man who would become Theseus' father, to sleep with Aethra, his daughter, possibly contrary to a proclamation by the Oracle at Delphi. Plutarch comments that "it is uncertain whether [Pittheus succeeded in his prevailing] by persuasion or deceit..."<sup>72</sup> Theseus' conception through possible deceit and overall questionable circumstances raises a natural parallel with Romulus, whose birth story shares similar traits.

After sleeping with Pittheus' daughter, and suspecting her to be with child by him, Aegeus placed a sword and sandals under a large rock, and instructed Aethra that should she give birth to a boy, "when he came to a man's estate, should he be able to lift up the stone and take away the things what he had left there, she should send him way to him with those things with all secrecy..."<sup>73</sup> The choice of gifts Aegeus chooses to leave for his future son are significant, the sword in particular. Before he is even born Theseus is prepared for a life of armed struggle, being kitted by his father with the arms of war. Additionally, Aegeus requests that Aethra send Theseus to him upon his reaching manhood, however instructs her to give "injunctions to him as much as possible to conceal his journey from everyone, for he [Aegeus] greatly feared the Pallentidae, who were continually mutinying against him, and despised him for his want of children, they themselves being fifty brothers, all sons of Pallas."<sup>74</sup> Theseus is already involved in political maneuvering before his birth, and he has rivals who will come to challenge his rule over Athens.

As Theseus grew into manhood, he was raised in exile, brought up by his grandfather Pittheus and taught by a fellow Athenian named Connidas. An episode is recounted by Plutarch in which Theseus partook in "a custom for the Grecian youth, upon their first coming to man's estate, to go to Delphi and offer first-fruits of their hair to the god..."<sup>75</sup> Upon going to Delphi to offer these "first-fruits" Theseus "clipped only the fore part of his head, as Homer says the Abantes did...The Abantes first used it, not in imitation of the Arabians, as some imagine, nor of the Mysians, but because they were a warlike people and used to close fighting....Therefore that they might not

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>72</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 2

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 3



give their enemies a hold by their hair, they cut it in this manner.”<sup>76</sup> Like much in Theseus’ early life, this action is indicative of his later character, and points to his armed nature.

Plutarch next relates to his reader that “Aethra for a time concealed the true parentage of Theseus, and a report was given out by Pittheus that he was begotten by Neptune....”<sup>77</sup> In a major parallel to Romulus, Plutarch is reputed to be the son of a god as a means to conceal a questionable parentage. Along with preventing damage to Aethra’s reputation, this report—put out by her own father—builds Theseus’ reputation and adds additional weight to any claim he has to rule, as divine parentage gives added glory to a man.

As Theseus grew into manhood Plutarch records that he had “not only great strength of body, but equal bravery, and quickness alike and force of understanding....”<sup>78</sup> Because he demonstrated that he was now a man, his mother brought him to the stone under which his father Aegeus had hidden the sandals and sword and informed Theseus as to his true parentage. Theseus was easily able to lift the stone and retrieve the items, and deigned to set forth for Athens. However, he chose not to go by sea, but rather to take the more dangerous land route, despite it being plagued by many villainous robbers and bandits. Theseus chose to take this route—despite its being against the advice of his mother and grandfather—because it was the route taken by Hercules and Theseus “had long since been fired by the glory of Hercules, held him in high estimation, and was never more satisfied than in listening to any that gave an account of him....”<sup>79</sup> In addition, Theseus “thought it, therefore, a dishonorable thing,

and not to be endured, that Hercules should go out everywhere...and he himself should fly from the like adventures that actually came in his way....”<sup>80</sup> Theseus hopes to achieve glory, and believes this can be done by imitating the deeds of the great Hercules. This again calls into question Theseus’ being an entirely new prince. Not only is he born of the royal family of Athens, but he also seeks not to blaze his own path but to follow the example of others. As Theseus sets forth in this pursuit of glory he did so “with the design to do injury to nobody, but to repel and revenge himself of all those that should offer any.”<sup>81</sup> The Plutarchian account of Theseus’ actions to begin making a name for himself gives a moral framework to his actions, recounting that he desired to act in accord with a rough justice, only destroying those who present a danger to him. However, the legitimacy of this account will be called into question given the violence Theseus employs on his journey to Athens

In his search for glory Theseus originally set out to follow rules of justice, only fighting those who fought him, but leaving alone those who left him alone. Plutarch introduces an interesting twist into this story very shortly after reporting Theseus’ desire to act with justice, when he recounts that Theseus sought out and killed the Crommyonian sow, called Phaea, “going out of his way on purpose to engage her....”<sup>82</sup> Theseus’ apparent disregard for his own expressed principles is explained by his desire “that he might not seem to perform all his great exploits out of mere necessity; but also of opinion that it was part of a brave man to chastise villainous and wicked men when attacked by them, but to seek out and overcome the more noble wild beasts.”<sup>83</sup> This identification of Phaea as a wild beast

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 4

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 5

is implicitly disputed by Plutarch, who reports that according to some she was in fact a woman, though a villainous one.<sup>84</sup> Taking this as the case, what then is one to make of Theseus' apparent rejection of the aim for justice that is presented to the reader by Plutarch with only a paragraph between the two events?<sup>85</sup> It would seem that there exist two possible explanations. The first is that Theseus is being unintentionally hypocritical, not meaning to violate his previously expressed principles. On the other hand, it is possible that Theseus is being intentionally Machiavellian. Being held to be just can be extremely useful; however actually being just can be harmful over the long term.<sup>86</sup> By proclaiming that he aims to act with justice, while also acting unjustly when it will add to his glory, Theseus is able to gain the benefits of both justice and injustice.

Upon reaching Athens, Theseus finds "the public affairs full of all confusion, and divided into parties and factions."<sup>87</sup> Of most immediate importance to Theseus, his father's wife Medea sought to prevent Theseus from claiming his place as the firstborn son of Aegeus so that her own children could claim the throne. In pursuit of this end Medea convinced Aegeus that Theseus, who at this point had not identified himself, posed a threat to his position in Athens and therefore he ought to be killed. Aegeus agreed to this, and decided that Theseus would be poisoned at a banquet. When Theseus came to the banquet, he sought to reveal his true identity to his father, but in a manner subtler than an announcement. Instead, when he arrived at the banquet at which he was supposed to be poisoned he drew the sword that was left for him by his father under the stone, and made as though to use it to cut the meat being served. Seeing

that sword, Aegeus recognized him and embraced Theseus as his son.<sup>88</sup>

With Aegeus' recognition of Theseus as his son—and thereby his legal heir—a struggle for power began between Theseus and those who sought to keep him from his inheritance as prince. Pallas' sons had expected to receive Aegeus' kingdom upon his death but with the arrival of Theseus their plans were thwarted and so "highly resenting that Aegeus first, an adopted son of Pandion, and not at all related to the family of Erechtheus, should be holding the kingdom, and that after him, Theseus, a visitor and stranger, should be destined to succeed it, broke out into open war."<sup>89</sup> While a literal reading of this story does hold up, another possibility remains open for consideration. Given upcoming events, in particular the suspicious death of Theseus' father, it is possible that the sons of Pallas were correct to suspect Theseus of being a stranger.

With his enemies moving openly against him Theseus had to act quickly to consolidate his hold on the succession. When a crier from one of the towns held by the sons of Pallas revealed to Theseus their plans he was able to easily outmaneuver them and defeat them on the field of battle, causing them and their supporters to scatter.<sup>90</sup> This episode illustrates two major points. Firstly, this reinforces the idea that Athens was divided before Theseus forged it into one *polis* by demonstrating how deep those divisions ran, with political factionalism spilling out into outright war. Secondly, it shows the necessity of Theseus' being armed as requisite for his success. Had Theseus not been able to defeat the sons of Pallas through force of arms he would have been overthrown, and would have been

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 62-62

<sup>87</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 6

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<sup>88</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 7

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

relegated to a footnote in the annals of Athenian history.

The next major episode Plutarch addresses is that of Theseus' famous slaying of the Minotaur. Every nine years the Athenians sent to the Cretans a tribute of seven young men and seven young women. What exactly was done with these offerings is unclear, as Plutarch explains. Some authors, those of a more poetic disposition, recount the traditional story in which the fourteen Athenian youths were cast into the infamous Labyrinth, either to perish there or be devoured by the Minotaur. Others argue that, rather than being fed to a monstrous creature, the Athenians were kept as slaves by the Cretans. Whatever the case may be, soon after Theseus' arrival in Athens the time came for the third tribute. Aegeus sought to have Theseus exempt from the raffle used to choose who among the Athenian youth would be sent, however "Theseus, who, thinking it but just not to disregard, but rather partake of, the sufferings of his fellow-citizens, offered himself for one without any lot."<sup>91</sup> By agreeing to join with those who were to be sacrificed rather than accepting the exemption offered by his father Theseus gained the love and respect of the Athenian people who "were struck with admiration for the nobleness and with love for the goodness of the act."<sup>92</sup> Aegeus attempted to discourage Theseus from joining the youths sent to Crete, but Theseus assured his father that he would return safely, "encouraging his father, and speaking greatly of himself, as confident that he should kill the Minotaur...."<sup>93</sup> Theseus believed that he would surely slay the Minotaur and thereby deliver the Athenians from having to continue offering tribute. Much like Moses, Theseus delivered his people

from slavery to a foreign power, cementing himself as their deliverer.

Theseus was successful in overcoming the Minotaur and bringing an end to the Athenian offerings to the Cretans.<sup>94</sup> When Theseus had set out from Athens he had brought with him a white sail to use should he succeed in his quest, in opposition to the black sail that had been used on the two previous tribute ships. However, as Theseus sailed closer to Athens, he neglected to raise the white sail. Seeing the black sail marking tragedy Aegeus threw himself from a rock and drowned in the sea.<sup>95</sup> With his father's death Theseus inherited his lands and title and became the king of Athens. His failure to raise the white sail can be interpreted in one of two possible ways. The first possibility is that it was a genuine lapse in Theseus' memory, a fatal error. A second, and more nefarious, explanation for Theseus' actions is that he intentionally "forgot" to swap the sails in the hope that it would lead to Aegeus' death, allowing him to take the throne of Athens far earlier. While this reading of Theseus' return from Athens paints him in a much darker light, it would appear to be consistent with his place as a Machiavellian founder.

Following Aegeus' death and Theseus' ascension to the throne "forming in his mind a great and wonderful design, he [Theseus] gathered together all the inhabitants of Attica into one town, and made them one people of one city, whereas before they lived dispersed, and were not easy to assemble

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<sup>91</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 9

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>94</sup> Plutarch recounts several different accounts of how exactly Theseus enacted this feat, with each variant allowing for a different consideration of the Minotaur legend. The primary common denominator is the presence of Ariadne, the daughter of Minos and the princess of Crete, aiding Theseus in measure followed by her either being abandoned or accidentally left behind as Theseus returned to Athens.

<sup>95</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 13

upon any affair for the common interest.”<sup>96</sup> This then is the formal founding of Athens, with the peoples being brought into one polity. One feature of Theseus’ forging of Athens is his decision to lay down regal power as an aspect of his founding. Plutarch recounts that as Theseus went about Attica gathering the people together “those of a more private and mean condition readily embraced such good advice, to those of a greater power he promised a commonwealth without monarchy, a democracy, or people’s government, in which he should only be continued as their commander in war and the protector of their laws, all things else being equally distributed among them:—and by this means brought a part of them over to his proposal.”<sup>97</sup> Additionally, Plutarch records that “Theseus was the first, who, as Aristotle says, out of an inclination to popular government, parted with the regal powers.”<sup>98</sup> This is unique among Machiavelli’s founders: no others surrender direct rule over the principalities they found. Moses could be comparable, as he established laws, rather than the personal rule of Cyrus or Romulus. However, Moses also served as the supreme interpreter of those laws, as he claimed they were given personally to him by God. When considering Theseus’ place among the Machiavellian armed prophets this is a fact which cannot be discounted.

One potential clue to determining how Theseus’ abrogation of power might be interpreted in light of his being named by Machiavelli as an armed prophet is that of those listed Theseus is mentioned the least of the four throughout *The Prince*, with his being listed in chapter six as his only appearance. In contrast, the other armed prophets appear at other points throughout, with Romulus and Moses each warranting

two mentions, while Cyrus is named four times. This could suggest that while Machiavelli considers Theseus an armed prophet he does not deem Theseus as significant as the others named, which in turn could reflect Machiavelli’s opinion of the form of government Theseus chose to establish. Further, this disparity in times mentioned could also suggest that Machiavelli considers Cyrus to be the greatest of the armed prophets, with Moses and Romulus being middling figures, and Theseus as the least worth imitating.

Even as Theseus departs from the example of the other armed prophets in his choice to abdicate the throne and establish a democracy, he parallels Romulus in choosing to throw open the doors of Athens to anyone who wished to settle within the city. Plutarch records that Theseus “invited all strangers to come and enjoy equal privileges with the natives, and it is said that the common form, *Come hither, all ye people*, [sic.] was the words that Theseus proclaimed when he did thus set up a commonwealth, in a manner, for all nations.”<sup>99</sup> However, even as Theseus throws open the doors of Athens to any who wish to join the city he divided the Athenians into social classes that reflected each citizen’s income, and entrusted to each certain responsibilities necessary for the survival of the city.<sup>100</sup> Romulus took similar action upon founding Rome, allowing any and all who wished to settle in the city to do so in an effort to expand the population. And Romulus also created social classes, namely the Patricians and the Plebeians. Further, though Moses did not allow anyone to join the people of Israel, one could see a parallel of the creation of social classes in the designation of the tribe of Levi as the tribe from which the priests of the Lord were to be drawn, an honor not dis-

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>97</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 14

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 15

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<sup>99</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 15

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 15-16

similar to the duty Theseus ascribes to the Athenian nobility.

The final major act in the story of Theseus as presented by Plutarch is his demise. Theseus was away from Athens adventuring, and during his absence a man by the name of Menestheus, “the first man that is recorded to have affected popularity and ingratiated himself with the multitude...”<sup>101</sup> took it upon himself to stir up resentment and anger towards Theseus. He “stirred up and exasperated the most eminent men of the city, who had long borne a secret grudge to Theseus, conceiving that he had robbed them of their several little kingdoms and lordships, and having pent them all up in one city, was using them as his subjects and slaves.”<sup>102</sup> Additionally, Menestheus “put also the meaner people into commotion, telling them, that, deluded with a mere dream of liberty, though indeed they were deprived of both that and of their proper homes and religious usages, instead of many good and gracious kings of their own, they had given themselves up to be lorded over by a new-comer and a stranger.”<sup>103</sup> In this way he began to destroy the unity that Theseus had attempted to create, reopening divisions in the Athenian people. This permanently damaged Athens—as well as the reputation of Theseus—as is demonstrated plainly when Theseus returned to Athens. He sought to return to the first place in the city, a position he held despite formally abolishing a monarchical form of government, but “he soon found himself involved in factions and troubles; those who long had hated him had now added to their hatred contempt; and the minds of the people were so generally corrupted, that, instead of obeying commands with silence, they expected to be flattered

into their duty.”<sup>104</sup> The people had been corrupted by Menestheus’ actions and now reject Theseus, desiring a demagogue who will flatter them rather than one who will actually lead them well. This failure to rule suggests a failure on the part of Theseus as a founder, as he was unable to instill in the people a belief in the superiority of his rule, a belief Machiavelli argues is necessary for a new prince to succeed.<sup>105</sup>

Theseus initially considered using force to bring the people back in line, but ultimately rejects this plan, believing that the effects of the demagogues and factionalism are too great. Instead he determines to go into exile, abandoning Athens to its fate and cursing the city. He then sailed to Scyros, where some lands had been left to him by his father.<sup>106</sup> The current king of Scyros was a man named Lycomedes, whom Theseus met, with two different reports existing for the content of their meeting. Some argue that Theseus simply met with Lycomedes to gain the possession of his property, with others suggesting that he was seeking armed assistance against the Athenians. Whatever the case may be, “Lycomedes, either jealous of the glory of so great a man, or to gratify Menestheus, having led him [Theseus] up to the highest cliff of the island, on pretense of showing him from thence the lands that he desired, threw him headlong down from the rock, and killed him.”<sup>107</sup> So ended the life of Theseus, exiled from the city he founded and murdered in cold blood. However, the story of Theseus does not exactly end there, on the cliffs of Scyros. Instead Plutarch observes that in later generations “besides several other circumstances that moved the Athenians to honor Theseus as a demigod, in the battle which they thought at Marathon against the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>102</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 21

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 24

<sup>106</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 23

<sup>107</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 23

Medes, many of the soldiers believed they saw an apparition of Theseus in arms, rushing at the head of them against the barbarians.”<sup>108</sup> Much like Romulus Theseus was honored in like a deity by the city that he founded, though the circumstances are markedly different.

Theseus, the founder of Athens and a Machiavellian armed prophet, presents an interesting challenge unique among Machiavelli’s founders. Though in many respects aspects of Theseus’ life provide distinct parallels between his actions and those of the other three armed prophets the methods of and actions he takes during the founding of Athens herself stand in distinct contrast to the other three. He is the only of the armed prophets to voluntarily cede power, and it would seem to be this ceding of power that eventually leads to his undoing.

## ROMULUS

“A name so great in glory, and famous in the mouths of all men...”<sup>109</sup> So does Plutarch describe the name of Rome in the beginning of his *Life of that city’s legendary founder, Romulus*. While there are several legends about who actually founded Rome, that of Romulus is the most widely accepted, and it is he to whom Machiavelli gives credit for bringing that city into life. Romulus’ actions are discussed both by Plutarch and Livy in their respective works, as well as being mentioned in Cicero’s work *The Republic*. Throughout his life what one might call a proto-Machiavellian streak can be seen, as he followed principles which would later be espoused in *The Prince*. It is possibly for this reason that Machiavelli lists Romulus as one of the greatest of founders in chapter six of *The Prince*. As such an examination of his life and actions will shed

greater light on what qualities Machiavelli saw in those he labeled “armed prophets” and how, if at all, he rated their achievements.

Several events throughout Romulus’ life parallel those of the other armed prophets, beginning with the circumstances of his birth. His grandfather, Numitor, was the former king of Alba who had been overthrown by his brother Amulius. Fearing that Numitor’s daughter<sup>110</sup> would bear sons who could challenge his rule of Alba Amulius had her made a Vestal virgin, ensuring she would not become pregnant. However, despite these precautions Numitor’s daughter was found to be with child, and eventually “brought forth two boys, of more than human size and beauty...”<sup>111</sup> These twins were, of course, Romulus and Remus. Livy provides more detail as to the possible parentage of the boys, recounting that “The Vestal Virgin [the daughter of Numitor] was raped and give birth to twin boys. *Mars, she declared, was their father* [emphasis added]—perhaps she believed it, perhaps she was merely hoping by the pretense to palliate her guilt.”<sup>112</sup> This then is a clear parallel to Theseus, who was also claimed to be the son of a god—in Theseus’ case, Poseidon—in order to alleviate the shame of questionable fatherhood. The claim of divine fatherhood also gives additional weight to any actions taken by those who are their children, giving them greater authority. The choice of Mars, the Roman god of war, as the divine parent is also significant, providing a massive indicator to a future of armed conflict. Alongside the claims of divine parentage, Romulus’ birth parallels that of the other three armed prophets in that it was under unfavor-

<sup>110</sup> Plutarch lists three possible names for the daughter of Numitor, either Ilia, Rhea, or Silvia, while Livy identifies her specifically as Rhea Silvia.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>112</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin Books, 2002) 34

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>109</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 25

able circumstances. Theseus was born through potential deception, and upon his birth already had potential enemies who sought to prevent his coming to power in Athens. Moses was born under an Egyptian law that would have had him executed as a male Israelite child. And Cyrus, at least in the account given by Herodotus, is raised in secret by a shepherd after it is prophesized that he will overthrow his father, the king of the Persians.

Seeing these two sons as a potential threat to his reign Amulius decided to have them killed, ordering a servant to drown the twins in the Tiber River. This servant “put the children in a small trough, and went towards the river with a design to cast them in....”<sup>113</sup> At that time, however, heavy rains had caused the Tiber to overflow its banks so the servant placed the trough near the banks of the river, believing that the rising waters will eventually reach the children and drown them. Despite, the waters did not drown the boys but instead “bore up the trough, and, gently wafting it, landed them on a smooth piece of ground, which they now call Cermanus, formerly Germanus, perhaps from *Germani*, which signifies brothers.”<sup>114</sup> There is a small conflict between Plutarch and Livy’s account of this same story, with Plutarch having the river Tiber carry the brothers to the spot called Ruminialis, while in Livy’s telling the servants place them at that place originally, with the river playing no major role in the story.

At this spot called Ruminialis, so called because the teat of animals was called the *ruma*, that famous story of a she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus is said to have occurred.<sup>115</sup> Plutarch writes that “while the infants lay here, history tells us, a she-wolf nursed them, and a woodpecker constantly

fed and watched them; these creatures are esteemed holy to the god Mars; the woodpecker the Latins still especially worship and honor.”<sup>116</sup> Plutarch points out that this story gives some credence to their mother’s claims that they were the sons of Mars, but then quickly moves to cast doubt on the tale of divine parentage, commenting first that “some say it was a mistake [believing she was raped by Mars] put on her by Amulius, who himself had come to her dressed up in armor”<sup>117</sup> and then observing that Latins also called prostitutes *lupoe*, and that instead of a she-wolf nursing the legendary founder of Rome it could have been a prostitute, as there was one who lived in the area, the wife of Faustulus, the man who is said to have found the children.<sup>118</sup> Livy does not recount these alternate possibilities, and so avoids casting doubt on Romulus’ divine parentage. However, Plutarch openly raises the possibility, practically begging for this option to be considered. One possible reason for this is character of the author of each work and the period in which they were writing. Livy was a native Roman, and wrote his works during the fall of the Republic and the establishment of the Empire under Augustus. As such, he had personal and political reasons to avoid critiques of Romulus. As a Roman, Livy would reasonably avoid critiquing the legendary founder of Rome. Additionally, criticizing the first king of Rome could be politically dangerous during the rise of the Empire. Plutarch, on the other hand, was a Greek writing after the Empire was well established. As such, he had no loyalty to Romulus, and was more politically free to criticize the founding of the Roman republic. Taking this in conjunction with the birth stories of the other armed prophets, all of whom share a similar origin—with the notable exception of Moses

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<sup>113</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 27

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 27

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

—Machiavelli could be imply that the birth stories of the armed prophets are fabrications promoted in order to secure their own right to rule. Whatever the case may be, Faustulus raised the twins either without informing anyone or, as Plutarch suggests, with the secret aid of their grandfather Numitor. Plutarch considers this more likely because the boys were “well instructed in letters, and other accomplishments befitting their birth.”<sup>119</sup>

As Romulus and Remus were growing up Plutarch also recounts that “in their very infancy, the size and beauty of their bodies intimated their natural superiority; and when they grew up, they both proved brave and manly, attempting all enterprises that seemed hazardous, and showing in them a courage altogether undaunted.”<sup>120</sup> Both Romulus and Remus are prepared to face dangers even from an early age, a prefiguring of the armed nature that Romulus will display throughout his life. However, despite both being courageous Plutarch does not describe the brothers as necessarily being equal. He comments that “Romulus seemed rather to act by counsel, and to show the sagacity of a statesmen, and in all his dealings with their neighbors, whether relating to feeding or flocks or to hunting, gave the idea of being born rather to rule than obey.”<sup>121</sup> Here Plutarch begins to differentiate Romulus from Remus, particularly as only one will go on to be the founder of Rome. By implicitly arguing that Remus did not act with sound judgment by putting Romulus’ prudent actions in an implicit contrast with Remus’ actions, particularly when it came to political rule, Plutarch’s narrative helps to bolster Romulus’ reputation and his claim to rule, and ascribes to him to the virtues needed to be an armed prophet.

Plutarch recounts that Romulus and Remus did not lead wasteful lives during their youth, but instead spent their time in activities befitting their birth, most importantly “repelling robbers, taking...thieves, and delivering the wronged and oppressed from injury.”<sup>122</sup> Plutarch comments that because of these actions the twins developed quite a reputation for themselves.<sup>123</sup> During a quarrel between cowherds of Numitor and Amulius the men of Amulius attacked those of Numitor, who were in the process of stealing their cattle, and drove them off. In revenge, some of Numitor’s men attacked and seized Remus while he was traveling without Romulus.

Here Plutarch briefly pauses his narrative to explain Romulus’ absence, narrating that “Romulus was attending a sacrifice, being fond of sacred rites and divination.”<sup>124</sup> Until this point Plutarch has given the reader little indication as to the attitude Romulus took towards religious practices, so this detail with worth pausing to examine. Plutarch depicts Romulus as one who favored religion, while Remus is absent from the festival, implying that perhaps he was not as pious as his brother. In Livy’s account of this story, on the other hand, Remus is included in the festival with the brothers being attacked during the course of the rituals. Remus is only captured in this account after he fails to defend himself, while Romulus is able to escape through force of arms.<sup>125</sup> In these narratives Romulus’ superiority over Remus is shown in the two core areas emphasized by Machiavelli: arms and religion.

After making this comment about the way Romulus viewed religion Plutarch returns to the main thread of his narrative. Having been captured by men loyal to Numitor, Remus was brought before his

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<sup>119</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 28

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 28

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>125</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* 35



grandfather—though their relation remained unknown to both parties—and was accused of harassing Numitor’s herdsmen. Numitor, however, feared that punishing the son of one of Amulius’ herdsmen would cause further conflict between them so he turned Remus over to Amulius and asked for justice. Amulius and his men were also annoyed by Remus, as they believed he was causing far too many problems for them. Therefore, Remus was returned to Numitor, who was given the freedom to do with Remus what he wished. Rather than punish him, Numitor was impressed by Remus, both in the way he appeared and carried himself and also in the exploits he had achieved. As he further inquired into the circumstances of Romulus and Remus’ birth and early life it slowly dawned on Numitor that these could be the twin sons of his daughter.

As this was occurring Faustulus called upon Romulus to aid in rescuing Remus from captivity. Further, Faustulus at last revealed to Romulus the true conditions of his and Remus’ birth, which he had concealed from the boys. Faustulus then rushed to Numitor bearing the trough in which he found Romulus and Remus as confirmation of their relation. Numitor seized on this as an opportunity to overthrow Amulius and reclaim rule of Alba. Plutarch reports that as Romulus approached Alba “many of the citizens, out of fear and hatred for Amulius, were running out to join him; besides, he brought great forces with him....With Remus rousing the citizens from within to revolt, and Romulus making attacks from without, the tyrant, not knowing either what to do, or what expedient to think of for his security, in this perplexity was taken and put to death.”<sup>126</sup> These events provide a prime example of Romulus’ armed nature. While Remus induced the people within Alba to

revolt it was Romulus who spearheaded the actual attack on the city at the head of an offensive force. With Amulius dead Romulus and Remus raised their grandfather Numitor to his rightful place as king of Alba.

Having done this, Romulus and Remus left Alba and set out again, as they “would neither dwell in Alba without governing there, nor take the government into their own hands during the life of their grandfather.”<sup>127</sup> Romulus and Remus believe they were deserving of rule and refuse to live under another’s command, but also do not wish to topple their grandfather, and as such “having therefore delivered the dominion up into their hands, and paid their mother befitting honor, they resolved to live by themselves, and build a city in the same place where they were in their infancy brought up.”<sup>128</sup> Here then the decision to found the city that will become Rome is made. Plutarch observes that while this is the “most honorable reason”<sup>129</sup> for Romulus and Remus’ departure from Alba there is another possibility, that because in the course of their youth Romulus and Remus had collected a body of “fugitives and slaves”<sup>130</sup> who served as an armed bodyguard. The inhabitants of Alba did not allow such unsavory characters to settle in their midst, and so Romulus and Remus chose to found a new city rather than dispense with their loyal followers.

Romulus and Remus then set out to the place where they were raised, near the banks of the Tiber, where they determine to settle a new city. Some quarrel arises between the two over the exact spot where the city should be founded, with each favoring a particular location, and it was determined that this dispute would be resolved by con-

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<sup>126</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 30

<sup>127</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 30-31

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

sulting the omens from flights of birds. According to one account Remus first saw six vultures, with Romulus then seeing twelve. However, Plutarch remarks that according to another account Remus truly did see six vultures, but Romulus lied about having seen twelve.<sup>131</sup> This potential deception allowed Romulus to claim not only the place upon which the city would be built, but also its name, and so Rome—the eternal city—was born.

Next in the narrative presented by both Plutarch and Livy's accounts is the famous episode in which Romulus kills Remus, founding Rome in a fratricide. Livy gives two different accounts of this episode, with Plutarch echoing the second. According to the first version presented by Livy after Remus saw six vultures and Romulus claimed to have seen twelve the followers of each saluted their respective leader as king. This led to angry words, "followed all too soon by blows, and in the course of the affray Remus was killed."<sup>132</sup> The second account—the one that Livy and Plutarch both present—is that as Romulus was constructing the walls that would encircle Rome Remus began to leap back and forth over the walls, mocking Romulus. Romulus then, in a fit of rage, struck and killed Remus.<sup>133</sup> Plutarch adds that in the fighting that followed between the supporters of Romulus and Remus, Faustulus was also killed.<sup>134</sup> With his brother and possibly the man who raised him dead Romulus continued to establish Rome, and Livy remarks that "this, then, was how Romulus obtained sole power."<sup>135</sup> It is presented as an act of passion, with Romulus being driven by rage. However, it is also possible that Romulus saw in Remus a potential threat to his rule over Rome, and decided that he needed to be eliminated in

order to consolidate his power in the new city.

With Rome now having been built, Romulus set about establishing its military and social structure. He created the first of the famous Roman legions that would go on to conquer the known world, enlisting those of age to bear arms into the new city's military. Of those citizens who were not brought into the army he divided them into the patricians, made up of the 100 most eminent citizens, and the plebeians, who were constituted of all the rest.<sup>136</sup> This mirrors Theseus, who established social orders based off already existing societal standing, giving to each order its own particular responsibilities. Moses also employed divisions between the tribes of Israel, calling upon Romulus again mirrors Theseus by throwing open the gates of Rome to anyone seeking refuge or shelter as a way to increase the population, with Livy commenting that this was a common practice with the founders of any new cities.<sup>137</sup>

While this worked to bring more men into the city, there were still not enough women in Rome to provide wives for all the men. This is a two-fold problem. First, in the short-term, without wives and families tying them to Rome there is a distinct possibility that many of the new immigrants might simply leave in search of better prospects elsewhere. Additionally, it presents a long-term demographic problem for Rome, as without families raising sons their might not be enough men in the future to maintain a military force. Romulus sent envoys to the surrounding cities requesting that they might send to Rome some of their daughters to marry. However, the surrounding cities refused, believing the Romans not fit to marry their daughters, so Romulus devises a plan to take the women Rome needs to survive and prosper by force.

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<sup>131</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 31

<sup>132</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* 37

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

<sup>134</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 32

<sup>135</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* 37

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<sup>136</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 33-34

<sup>137</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* 38

Romulus first announced that he had found an altar hidden underground to either Consus, the god of counsel, or equestrian Neptune<sup>138</sup> and proclaimed a festival and games to celebrate this discovery. Plutarch casts doubt on Romulus' actual finding of an altar, suggesting the use of deception in order to create an opportunity to seize the Sabine women. Many peoples flocked to Rome to witness the games, and armed Roman men positioned themselves throughout the crowd waiting for Romulus to give them the signal to seize the women. When Romulus rose, and gathered his robes and threw them over his body<sup>139</sup>—the appointed signal—the Romans leapt into action, seizing the daughters of the Sabines and carrying them away. This act sparked war between the Romans and the Sabines, with several inconclusive battles being fought. The fighting came to an end after the Sabine women, having grown fond of their husbands despite gaining them by force put themselves between the Roman and Sabine lines, exhorting their husbands not to kill their fathers and brothers and their fathers and brothers not to kill their husbands.<sup>140</sup> The warring parties, moved by this appeal, agreed to put aside their arms and unite into one city, doubling the population of Rome.

Plutarch briefly considers another opinion given as to why Romulus undertook to seize the Sabine women, that “Romulus himself being naturally a martial man, and predisposed, perhaps by certain oracles, to believe the fates had ordained the future growth and greatness of Rome should depend upon the benefit of war, upon these accounts first offered violence to the Sabines...more to give an occasion of war than out of any want of women.”<sup>141</sup> Plutarch dismisses this as not being a particularly

likely example, but in that case why even raise such a possibility at all? When considering this in conjunction with Machiavelli's observation that “a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but that of war and its orders and disciplines; for that is the only art which is of concern to one who commands”<sup>142</sup> along with the comment that “war may not be avoided but is deferred to the advantage of others”<sup>143</sup> it seems that Romulus seeking to initiate a war between Rome and the Sabines is not entirely out of the question as a way to aggrandize the power of Rome. Additionally, given that as a result of the conflict between the Romans and Sabines Rome's power grew far more than had the women simply been taken, Romulus' having a desire to begin a war between the two cities seems like a definite possibility.

Romulus' rule over Rome continued fairly uneventfully, however Plutarch records that he began to slowly more accrue more power at the expense of the Senate. Plutarch comments that Romulus “as most, nay all men, very few excepted, do, who are raised by great, and miraculous good-haps of fortune to power and greatness, so, I say, did he; relying upon his own his own great actions, and growing of a haughtier mind, he forsook his popular behavior for kingly arrogance, odious to the people; to whom in particular the state which he assumed was hateful.”<sup>144</sup> Plutarch reports that it was not the fact that Romulus had gained more power that caused the people to turn against him, but rather that because of this increase of power he began to act haughtily, distancing himself from the people. Livy disputes this account slightly, arguing that it was not with the people generally that Romulus began to fall into disfavor, but only

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<sup>138</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 34-35

<sup>139</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 35

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

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<sup>142</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 58

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>144</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 45

with the aristocracy.<sup>145</sup> This discrepancy between sources is important given the following events.

After the death of Romulus' grandfather, Numitor the rule of Alba passed over to Romulus. In order to appease the people of Alba, Romulus "put the government into their own hands, and appointed an annual magistrate over them."<sup>146</sup> While this solved the problem of the rule of Alba, it created a new problem for Romulus, as "this taught the great men of Rome to seek after a free and anti-monarchical state, wherein all might in turn be subjects and rulers."<sup>147</sup> It was under this growing tension that Romulus disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Two different accounts are offered of Romulus' fate, one given to the people by the Senate and the other whispered in secret. The Senate claimed that Romulus had been proclaimed a god by the other gods and was taken into heaven and one of the patricians came forward and swore sacred oaths that while traveling Romulus had appeared to him on the road in a glorified form. Romulus had told this patrician, named Julius Proculus, that he had been taken into heaven and made a god and that his name was now Quirinus. He also instructed Proculus to have the Roman people build a temple to him at the spot where he appeared. Plutarch reports that "this seemed credible to the Romans, upon the honest and oath of the relater, and indeed, too, there was mingled with it a certain divine passion, some preternatural influence similar to possession by a divinity; nobody contradicted it, but, laying aside all jealousies and distractions, they prayed to Quirinus and saluted him like a god."<sup>148</sup> Though the people may have accepted this story, Plutarch presents another possible account. He records that some

among the people believed that the Senators, angered over Romulus' growing haughtiness, fell upon him and murdered him, cutting his body into pieces and carrying it away with them under their robes.<sup>149</sup>

So ends the life of Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome. Either apotheosized and entering into the Roman pantheon, or assassinated by the senate, his body cut into pieces. Throughout his life Romulus was able to gain power, often using ends that could be interpreted in several different ways, typically including a very Machiavellian reading of his actions. Both Plutarch and Livy, the two major sources on the life and actions of Romulus, present multiple accounts of his life, opening the door to interpretation. Because of this, Romulus is presented in a somewhat ambiguous light that allows one to see him either as the noble founder of Rome or a Machiavellian figure more concerned with efficacy than justice or piety.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the sixth chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli considers the founding of new regimes, discussing those who he calls "armed prophets," those "greatest examples" of founders: Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus.<sup>150</sup> Through the example of these great men Machiavelli hopes to provide examples that those lesser can follow, "for since men almost always walk on paths beaten by others and proceed in their actions by imitation, unable either to stay on the paths of others altogether or to attain the virtue of those whom you imitate, a prudent man should always enter upon the paths beaten by great men, and imitate those who have been most excellent, so that if his own virtue does not reach that far, it is at least in

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<sup>145</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* 48

<sup>146</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 46

<sup>147</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

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<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>150</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 22

the odor of it.”<sup>151</sup> Given the high emphasis Machiavelli places on these greatest of founders, analyzing what made them successful could provide insight into the virtues Machiavelli believes are necessary to successfully create new modes and orders.

This is particularly true given the appellation Machiavelli gives to the best of founders: armed prophets. Both words used in this term, “armed” and “prophet”, come loaded with meaning and teasing out what exactly Machiavelli desires to convey is necessary in order to gain a full understanding of what exactly he believes makes these armed prophets truly the greatest. The methodology employed here is a parallel examination of the lives of Machiavelli’s four armed founders in order to observe potential similarities between each of their lives, particularly focusing on the circumstances surrounding their individual rises to power using historical sources which would have been available to Machiavelli at the time he was writing *The Prince*. Through examining these resources and finding parallels between the lives of the four armed prophets, a more cohesive picture of what defines “armed prophecy” begins to emerge.

The first primary parallel that can be seen between all four of the armed prophets is the stories ascribed to their births. Each of the birth narratives followed a similar pattern. The future ruler was born of noble parents, but for reasons typically rooted in the politics of succession were cast out of the city of his birth. For two of these armed prophets—Romulus and Cyrus—their being cast out was specifically connected with an attempt on his life. After a time spent growing up outside the city, each of the armed prophets would make his way back to the city of his birth in order to claim his rightful political inheritance in one form or another. The telling exception to this narra-

tive is Moses. Rather than being born of a princely family and cast out to end his life, he was born the son of Hebrew slaves, and put into the Nile in order to save his life. The similarity between each of this birth narratives is telling, as it points to shared narrative characteristics between the four armed prophets. These shared characteristics raise an interesting question about the true origins of the armed prophets. One possibility that emerges subtly from the source material is that the stories presented are not the true origins of these founders, but instead are a form of propaganda, with the armed prophets connecting themselves to previous rulers in order to gain recognition and legitimize their use of arms to secure their rule.

Of all the armed prophets, Romulus has his own origin called into question by the source material the most explicitly, and also most closely parallels that of Moses. In Plutarch’s “Life of Romulus” he writes that when a herdsmen found Romulus on the banks of the Tiber after failing to drown, Romulus and Remus were being nursed by a female wolf.<sup>152</sup> However, immediately after this Plutarch undermines the legitimacy of this very narrative, pointing out that in the Latin the word for female wolf, *lupoe*, is also the word used to indicate a female prostitute, and recording that the wife of the herdsmen who found the twins was allegedly a prostitute.<sup>153</sup> This raises the possibility that Romulus and Remus were raised by a prostitute, and at its most radical could suggest that Romulus and Remus were not the sons of the daughter of Numitor, but were in truth the sons of this prostitute. If this is the case, then Romulus was not a hereditary prince as he claimed, and was truly a new prince as Machiavelli claims.

Following Romulus, Cyrus’ birth as presented by Herodotus is that which next

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 27

<sup>153</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch’s Lives* 27

most closely parallels Moses. Following a series of dreams that were interpreted by Magi to mean that Cyrus would come to replace him as the Great King, Astyages resolves to kill Cyrus in order to eliminate a threat to reign. This presents a clear parallel with Romulus, whose death was also sought in order to secure his relatives place on the throne. Cyrus was then sent out to be killed, but his life was saved when a herdsman in the service of Astyages chooses not to kill him, and instead swaps Cyrus with the body of his own stillborn son.

Theseus also is said to be rightly of royal birth but is not able to claim this inheritance right away. In contrast with the other armed prophets, this was not due to any explicit plots on his life at birth, but rather as a result of the illegitimate nature of his birth. However, his birth was marked with its own set of circumstances, as his conception came to be out of deceit or persuasion, giving a Machiavellian character to his very coming into being.

On the surface these parallels in accounts of birth between the armed prophets seems like only an interesting bit of trivia. However these similarities point to a potential Machiavellian teaching which strikes at the validity of these accounts and raises important questions that illuminate a major element of the Machiavellian project. To get to this point, however, how the armed prophets achieved their foundings must also be examined, as it is through these means, and more importantly through Machiavelli's commentary on their actions that let to their foundings that this teaching becomes better explicated.

Machiavelli describes the conditions each armed prophet found those people he would come to rule, conditions which point to his implicit teaching about the origin of each of these men. He writes that "it was necessary then for Moses to find the people of Israel in Egypt, enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians....It was fitting that

Romulus not be received in Alba, that he should have been exposed at birth, if he was to become king of Rome and founder of that fatherland. Cyrus needed to find the Persians malcontent with the empire of the Medes.... Theseus could not have demonstrated his virtue if he had not found the Athenians dispersed."<sup>154</sup> There are several points about this passage worthy of notice. The first is that Romulus is the only armed prophet of whom the condition of those he would rule is not mentioned, but rather the conditions of his birth that would lead to his founding of Rome. This is significant because of the armed prophets, Romulus is the only one of which the source material describing his exploits admits he was not the leader of a united people. Rather, both Livy and Plutarch describe how he created the Roman people out of those seeking asylum from other cities. This fact points to the implications of the rest of this passage.

Machiavelli's description of Theseus and Moses "finding" their people dispersed and enslaved respectively ought to be put in contrast with his description of Cyrus finding the Persians "malcontented." Theseus and Moses find those they would come to rule in a certain material condition. It seems strange to say they would not have been aware of had they been members of these communities. However, it would seem Cyrus could have more easily been amongst the Persians from the beginning while not being aware of their emotional state regarding their domination by the Medes until he turned his eyes towards political rule. As such, one could conclude that Machiavelli is subtly signaling his belief that Theseus and Moses were not familiar with the Athenians and the Israelites until they came to rule them, while Cyrus was familiar with the Persians. This fits within the narrative of Theseus, who was raised apart from Athens until he was an adult and made the journey

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<sup>154</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

to the city. However, when this same light is turned on Moses something strange is revealed. According to the account presented in Exodus, Moses spent the early portion of his life with his natural parents before being sent down the Nile, and more significantly identified strongly enough with the Israelites to throw away his life as a member of Pharaoh's court in order to bring temporary relief to a slave being whipped. This contrasts strongly with the narrative implicitly presented by Machiavelli that Moses *found* them enslaved, as though he was not aware of their enslavement before he came to rule them. Thus, Machiavelli appears to be calling into question the factuality of the account of Moses as presented by Exodus.

From this a startling conclusion can be drawn: Machiavelli implicitly argues that the origin story of Moses as presented by Exodus is false, from which a possibility yet more startling emerges. In the Machiavellian telling of events, Moses was not the son of Israelite slaves, but very possibly a member of the Egyptian royal household who took advantage of the condition of the Hebrews and natural events to gain a chance to rule. This aligns closely with the Machiavellian teaching that the virtue by which the armed prophets were best able to succeed that of seeing an opportunity and seizing it.<sup>155</sup> Combining this with Machiavelli's instruction to compare the other armed prophets to Moses, as this will lead the reader to see that they "will appear no different from Moses..."<sup>156</sup>, Machiavelli seems to be suggesting that the origin stories of all the armed prophets are fictions. Taking this into consideration, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus all crafted fictitious backstories in which they were in truth of royal blood despite growing up among peasants and regained their rightful place, in contrast with Moses' origin, coming from the humblest of back-

grounds before being adopted into royalty. The reasoning behind taking such an action seems straightforward for the founder of a new regime. In order for his new orders and modes to succeed their founder must be seen as legitimate by those over whom he rules, "for even though one may have the strongest of armies, he always needs the support of the inhabitants of a province in order to enter it."<sup>157</sup> The best way to initially gain this legitimacy and provide the armed prophet with the opportunity to rule in such a way as to solidify his control is to create a fiction in which he is not a complete break from previous rule, but is connected in some way, be it by being the rightful heir to the throne, born of royal blood, or a fellow Israelite slave. This is necessary in order to inspire the belief Machiavelli argues is necessary for the armed prophet to succeed.

Machiavelli's subtle suggestion that the life of Moses as presented in the Biblical account is not that true story is revealing about the role of divinity in the Machiavellian project as well as the significance he ascribes to the secular founders in relation to Moses. When initially writing about Moses, Machiavelli writes in paralipsis, initially claiming that "one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God..."<sup>158</sup> This comment would seem to undermine the value of considering Moses as an armed prophet, as it was not by his own virtue that he was successful but by divine direction. However, Machiavelli then makes two comments that contrast with his previous remark. He first writes that Moses "should be admired if only for that grace which made him deserving of speaking with God."<sup>159</sup> This contrasts incredibly with the previous comment, as to say one has the grace to be worthy to speak with God is incredibly

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<sup>155</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

<sup>156</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>159</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

laudatory. It also emphasizes Moses' own virtue, in contrast with the previous comment which undermined that same characteristic. Machiavelli then makes another remark, writing that if one examines the lives of the three secular founders, "and if their particular actions and orders are considered, they will appear no different from those of Moses, who had so great a teacher."<sup>160</sup> This observation by Machiavelli could be taken in two different ways, either as an attempt to lower the role of the divine in Moses' actions or to raise the other three founders to the level of Moses. These two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and the most likely interpretation is a combination of the two.

Machiavelli's move to place Moses and the three classical founders on the same plane is revealing about the role he sees divine guidance playing in foundings, as well as in political life generally. By leveling the field between Moses and the secular founders—whose personal virtue as princes he had earlier praised—Machiavelli is implicitly arguing that Moses too relied on his personal virtue rather than divine supervision. This also fits within the implications that can be drawn from the subtle argument presented by Machiavelli that the origin stories of the armed prophets are fictions, which almost entirely undermines any claims to divine authority on the part of Moses, as he was not led by God but his own ambition to rule to free the Israelite slaves and found a nation. As such, according to Machiavelli God played no role in Moses' founding, much as He played no role in the foundings of the Persian Empire, Rome, or Athens.

Given the Machiavellian undermining of the role the divine plays in the founding of new orders, his giving the most excellent founders the title of prophet must be examined in a new light. The prophecy

practiced by the armed prophet is not of the religious kind, but rather of the political. Through their prophecy, the armed prophet inspires belief in his rule, belief which Machiavelli emphasizes as necessary for the success of a founding. This is particularly pertinent given the prominent role belief plays in the sixth chapter of *The Prince*. As Nathan Tarcov points out, of the twenty-eight uses of terms related to the concept of belief throughout *The Prince*, eight of these occur in chapter six, with no more than three occurring in any other one chapter.<sup>161</sup> This certainly indicates the importance belief as a concept plays in the project of creating new orders and modes undertaken by the founder of new regimes discussed in the aforementioned chapter. Machiavelli discusses the chief difficulty faced by the founders of new orders, writing that "nothing 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."<sup>162</sup> The primary reason for this extreme difficulty is that "the introducer has all those who benefit from the old orders as enemies, and has lukewarm defenders in all those who might benefit from the new orders."<sup>163</sup>

This discussion of the difficulties faced by a new ruler presents an implicit reference to the third chapter of *The Prince*, in which Machiavelli commented that new principalities suffer from an inherent difficulty in that citizens will willingly change their ruler if they believe this change will bring them some benefit.<sup>164</sup> In the context of the third chapter this relevant given the discussion of mixed principalities, with Machiavelli pointing out that citizens who traded their previous ruler for another once are likely to attempt this again should the

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 23-24

<sup>161</sup> Tarcov, Nathan "Belief and Opinion in Machiavelli's "Prince"" pg. 577

<sup>162</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 8



believed benefits not come to pass, which could threaten the prince's hold on power. This is also relevant, though perhaps less explicitly, in the discussion of the founding of new principalities, as the founder has not yet demonstrated that his new orders and modes will improve the lives of those living under them. Here then is the cause of Machiavelli's pointing out that those who might in theory support the new regime are often lukewarm in doing so, a fact arising "...from the incredulity of men, who do not truly believe in new things unless they come to have a firm experience of them."<sup>165</sup> As such, the successful founder must be able to inspire in their followers a belief that their new modes and orders will be an improvement over the previous regime and ruler. Ideally he will be able to provide immediate experience with these benefits, as this is the best means by which to convince the people that his rule will in fact be to their advantage.

This condition for successful founding points to the prophecy element of the title "armed prophet", though Machiavelli also emphasizes the role of arms in buttressing belief. It is through their "prophecy" that the armed prophets establish a system of beliefs to undergird their new modes and orders, avoiding the threat posed by lukewarm support from those who might believe they will benefit from these new regimes. When considering the actions taken by each of Machiavelli's armed prophets, it is clear that each sought to establish a basis from which to claim that their rule would be to the advantage of the ruled as opposed to that of the previous ruler. This action is especially present in the cases of Cyrus and Moses, though it can also be found in the accounts of Romulus and Theseus.

As presented by Herodotus, Cyrus is straightforward in his use of belief to inspire

his followers and encourage them to join his revolt against Astyages. When Harpagos sends word to him that the time is ripe to revolt, Cyrus gathers the Persians together and presents to them two models of life. The first is a life of hardship and labor, while the second is that of pleasant leisure.<sup>166</sup> He promises the Persians that their lives shall be like the second should they follow him in revolt against Astyages and Medes, while it shall be like the first should they remain subjugated by the Medes. Cyrus inspires the Persians to follow him by promising them a brighter future. In this he functions as a prophet, despite the belief he inspires not being religious. This underscores an important point: the "prophecy employed by the armed prophets need not be strictly religious. Rather, Machiavelli uses the term prophecy broadly, referring to any belief that inspires the people to follow a new prince in his founding.

Moses' use of prophecy to inspire belief in his people in order to convince them to come under his rule is even more explicit. He presents himself as a prophet sent by God, telling the Israelites that should they accept him he will lead them out of their slavery and into the promised land. This can be seen in a deeply Machiavellian light, particularly given Machiavelli's earlier moves to distance Moses from any form of divine guidance. As such, Moses could be seen as the most successful at using prophecy to bring about belief, as his claim to have been sent directly by God was accepted as truth.

Romulus and Theseus' use of prophecy to instill belief in their followers is somewhat less explicit than in the accounts of Cyrus and Moses, but it is still present. Upon founding Rome Romulus opens the city to all those seeking asylum, using this to swell the population of Rome and provide

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<sup>165</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 23-24

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<sup>166</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 1.127.1

more manpower for the legions.<sup>167</sup> This provided hope for those individuals who were without a city, leading them to trust in Romulus' rule as more to their advantage than their previous condition. Theseus brought the Athenian people together into one city, easing the burden of government and uniting them into a true people. He also paralleled Romulus in inviting peoples of all nations into Athens and offering them equal rights with the native inhabitants.<sup>168</sup> However, of the armed prophets Theseus appears to be the one who was least able to compel belief in his ability to rule, which provides a clue as to why his downfall was brought about by the city he founded.

The founder's need to compel belief also brings about the need for the ability to use arms, as Machiavelli writes that "the nature of people is variable; and it is easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to keep them in that persuasion. And thus things must be ordered in such a mode that when they no longer believe, one can make them believe by force."<sup>169</sup> For the prophet to succeed he must have recourse to arms should his followers cease to believe in his prophecy, as well as have the ability to use force to achieve the ends he has built his edifice of belief upon. Each of the armed prophets uses force to this end, killing both internal and external enemies. Additionally, the implicit threat of force was employed by each of the armed prophets to varying degrees of success in order to maintain compliance to the laws they established.

The nature of prophecy used by Machiavelli's armed prophets is also important. As was briefly discussed regarding Cyrus, the prophecy concerns the new prince and what he will accomplish, and is used by the armed prophet to inspire belief in himself and his cause. Moses, Exodus records,

was sent by God to liberate the Israelites from slavery. Cyrus is reputedly prophesied to overthrow Astyages and become king, and further promises a bright future to the Persian people to encourage them to follow him in rebellion against the Medians. Theseus' father is claimed to be Neptune and he intentionally modeled himself in the pattern of Hercules to grant authority to his rule and grow his fame. Romulus was reputed to be a son of Mars, and employed oracles to buttress his claim to the founding of Rome. Though in some cases they do, these prophecies need not follow the traditional model of prophecy as direct communication from God or the gods, as Machiavelli's armed prophets often seem to have created their own prophecies, building legends for themselves to inspire the people, both in fabled origins and common causes to rally around.

In founding a new regime the founder establishes new orders and modes and moves decisively from private citizen to prince. Machiavelli discusses this type of principality in chapter six of *The Prince*, and provides as examples the four most excellent founders: Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus.<sup>170</sup> There four men are given the title of armed prophets, an appellation which contains within itself the key to their success as founders. Machiavelli's description of foundings contains both an implicit and an explicit teaching, both important to his overall project. Through a close examination of the lives of the armed prophets these teachings come to light, and the necessity of both arms and prophecy in foundings are demonstrated. Additionally, Machiavelli subtly strikes at the role of the divine in political, and thereby human life, placing the emphasis on one's own virtue. Machiavelli saw in these four princes the models of success, and provides their example to all those with the ability to emulate their deeds.

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<sup>167</sup> Livy *The Early History of Rome* 38

<sup>168</sup> Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* 15

<sup>169</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 24

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<sup>170</sup> Machiavelli *The Prince* 22

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