

Georgios Trapezuntios and Niccolo Machiavelli on the mixed constitution and Sparta

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Georgios Trapezuntios (1395-c.1472), otherwise known as George of Trebizond, was an eminent scholar of the 15th century, who contributed vastly to the dissemination of ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric in Renaissance Italy. According to a letter of consolation he sent in the 1420s to Georgius Vatacius Cretensis on the occasion of the latter's wife's death, Trapezuntios was fascinated by the Spartan culture.¹ In the letter, he frequently refers to Pseudo-Plutarch's *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, especially to the passages where Pseudo-Plutarch praises the Spartan attitude towards death.² A few decades later, in 1451, Trapezuntios translated the Platonic *Laws*, the careful study of which led him to express the view that the Platonic philosophy was what inspired Venice's founding fathers to establish their mixed constitution.³ As proposed by modern scholarship,⁴ Trapezuntios specifically refers on passages where Plato praises the Spartan constitution.⁵ Further, in his *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*, Trapezuntios discusses Venice's mixed

¹ John Monfasani, *Collectanea Trapezuntiana, Texts, Documents, and Bibliographies of George of Trebizond* (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies in conjunction with the Renaissance Society of America: Binghamton New York, 1984), 212-223.

² Georgios Steiris, «Georgius Trapezuntius Cretensis on Death». *Journal of Classical Studies Matica Srpska* 11 (2009): 189-202.; Georgios Steiris, "Exemplary deaths in the Peloponnese: Plutarch's study of death and its revision by Georgius Trapezuntius Cretensis", in *Honouring the Dead in the Peloponnese, Proceedings of the Conference held at Sparta 23-26 April 2009*, edited by H. Cavanagh, B. Cavanagh, J. Roy (CSPS: University of Nottingham 2011), 763-771.

³ John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic* (Brill: Leiden, 1976), 102-103.

⁴ Franco Gaeta, "Alcune considerazioni sul mito di Venezia". *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 23 (1961): 57-75; Franco Gaeta, "Giorgio da Trebisonda, le "Leggi" di Platone e la costituzione di Venezia", *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico per il Medioevo LXXXII* (1970): 479-501; Felix Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought", in *Florentine Studies, Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, edited by N. Rubinstein (Faber & Faber: London, 1968), 463-500; Monfasani, *George*, 103; Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 198-203.

⁵ Plato, *Laws*, 692d-694a.

constitution and its relation to the Spartan polity.⁶ As a result, he was responsible, along with Aristotle⁷ and Polybius,⁸ for the reappraisal of the Spartan constitution in 15th-century Italy. Later, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) argued in support of the mixed constitution and praised Sparta more than any other Greek state, although he believed in Rome's political superiority. Machiavelli extolled Lycurgus for giving Sparta durable laws.⁹ In this paper, I set to examine how Trapezuntios and Machiavelli approached the ancient sources that informed them about the Spartan constitution, and how they contributed to the birth of the political myth of Sparta in the Renaissance. Finally, I suggest that Trapezuntios' views on the Venetian constitution presuppose Polybius' and Plutarch's rather than Plato's texts.

Trapezuntios was an industrious translator. Although he fervently opposed Plato and the Platonists, he did translate Platonic texts. Originally, the translation of Plato's *Laws* was addressed to Pope Nicolas V.¹⁰ However, in 1452, Trapezuntios argued with the Pope and his entourage about the quality of his work on Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Expelled from the Papal court and persecuted by the Roman authorities, he left Rome and followed a different path in his life.¹¹ When he studied carefully the Platonic *Laws*, he realized that the Venetian founding fathers based their republic on the Platonic text and they must have studied it to formulate their polity. Next, he decided to announce his findings to Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454), well-renowned humanist and politician, aiming to exalt the Venetian republic and reap personal gains, which, one could say, held higher importance to Trapezuntios over altruism. Barbaro eagerly adopted Georgius' views and encouraged him to continue his work, since his argument needed further elaboration.¹²

In the preface of the translation of the *Laws*, Trapezuntios praised the

⁶ Trapezuntios, *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*, Venice 1523, R8r-S1v.

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1293b 33-34.

⁸ Polybius, *Histories*, 6.3, 6.45-6.50.

⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 1.6 in Machiavelli: *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert (Duke University Press: Durham, 1989), 209-10; Alfredo Bonadeo, 'Appunti sul concetto di conquista e ambizione nel Machiavelli e sull'antimachiavellismo', *Annali dell'Istituto orientale* 12 (1970): 245-60; Alfredo Bonadeo, 'Machiavelli on War and Conquest', *Il pensiero politico* 7 (1974): 334-61; Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988), 192-3; Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), 74-5; John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2003), 189-90; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol.II (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002), 384-5.

¹⁰ Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 198.

¹¹ Georgios Steiris, "Science at the Service of Philosophical Dispute: George of Trebizond on Nature", *Philosophy: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 12 (2012), 103-119.

¹² Gaeta, *Alcune*, 57-75; Gaeta, *Giorgio*, 479-501; Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 198-199; M. A. Querini (ed.), *Franzisci Barbari et aliorum ad ipsum epistolae* (Brescia 1743), 290-295.

Spartan constitution and associated it with the Venetian one. He developed the preface in four stages: the first in 1451, the second in 1452, the third in 1453, and the final in 1460. It is worth mentioning that he chose to ignore most of Barbaro's remarks and comments, which had been eagerly adopted and incorporated in the second and third version of the preface, after the latter's death in 1454. As a result, I support that the final version of the text is the most authentic, regarding Trapezuntios' take on the subject.

Trapezuntios specifically cited the Platonic *Laws* as the exemplar on which the Venetians based their political institutions.¹³ The tripartite form of the Venetian constitution, *Maggior Consiglio*, Senate and Doge, correspond to the democratic, the aristocratic and the monarchical elements respectively.

According to Trapezuntios, Plato thinks that the liberty of a city will be neither stable nor permanent unless it bears a resemblance to three seemingly praiseworthy types of city: the city governed by a single ruler, the city governed by an elite or aristocracy and the city governed by the people. But Plato said this in a way which only the Venetians understood and the truth of which only they were able to confirm in actual practice. For the Venetians obey a single ruler. They also have an elected elite, distinguished by its prudence, justice and high reputation, which stands ready to advise the republic on all matters of war and peace. Nor have they neglected to incorporate an element which resembles popular government; in fact they give real power to the people, for all those who are not part [of the government] of the republic meet in the Council, which is responsible for creating the magistrates.¹⁴

In the beginning of his preface, Trapezuntios stated that the *Laws* is by far the best among the Platonic dialogues, exceeding in eloquence all previous Platonic texts.¹⁵ Moreover, he held that Plato provided the initial inspiration for the Venetian constitution. For instance, Plato proposed certain laws to ensure the permanence and liberty of the city-state. Although the Venetians drew from Plato, they eventually surpassed the Platonic model in every aspect. In a fit of rhetorical extravaganza, he described Venice as even greater than the ideal Platonic republic. Besides the mixture of the democratic, aristocratic and monarchical elements, the

¹³ Plato, *Laws*, 692d-694a.

¹⁴ George of Trebizond, "Preface to his translation of Plato's *Laws*", in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, edited by J. Kraye, translated by John Monfasani (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1997), v.2: 128-134.

¹⁵ Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 199.

Venetians adopted most of the Platonic proposals concerning the structure and functioning of the state, such as the censors of the law, who have the authority to surveil the citizens to prevent public harm. However, they did not merely reproduce slavishly the Platonic political philosophy; rather they enriched it with their political tradition and improved it. Trapezuntios claimed that the Venetian constitution does not leave room for any improvement, as it achieves the utmost perfection.¹⁶

Later in his text, Trapezuntios attempted to prove why the Venetians surpassed the Athenians and the Spartans. His critique against the Athenian republic was harsh, similar to that in his subsequent *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*. Namely, he remarked that the Athenian state flourished for only a short period. Its heyday was pure incidental. He described the Athenian δῆμος as a bunch of angry people, like Thucydides, Plato and other ancient writers did. Despite the common view about the soundness of the Athenian institutions, the cause of the Athenian glory was the virtue of a few politicians.¹⁷ Trapezuntios explained this in the *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*, where he named these virtuous generals (Miltiades, Cimon, Themistocles and Pericles). However, the Athenian mob reproached the saviors of Athens and Greece. According to him, the ingratitude towards the virtuous generals was the evidence of the deficiency of the Athenian republic.¹⁸

On the contrary, the Spartan city-state lasted longer. Sparta's longevity proved its efficient institutions. However, Sparta, despite the glory and success of its army, never accomplished a naval dominion, as Venice did. In addition, the Roman Empire was not in fact as successful as it was deemed. Although it was vast, the constant regime changes and the engagement in so many military campaigns in Europe, Asia and Africa caused instability and insecurity. The Roman Empire did not remain united due to its institutions, but rather because it was founded upon one city and resorted to wars against the barbarians to deal with opposing tensions within its borders.¹⁹

As a result, according to Trapezuntios, none of the ancient Greek states nor the Roman Empire could hold a candle to Venice, which prospered in all aspects. The Venetian state was far from bellicose; the citizens

¹⁶ Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 200-201.

¹⁷ Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 201.

¹⁸ Georgius Trapezuntius, *Comparationes Philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* (Venetiis: 1523), f.05r-P2r.; Georgios Steiris, "Byzantine Philosophers of the 15th Century on Identity and Otherness", in *The Problem of Modern Greek Identity: from the Ecumene to the Nation-State*, edited by G. Steiris, S. Mitralaxis, G. Arabatzis (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne 2016), 183-186.

¹⁹ Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 201-202.

enjoyed peace and tranquility in their everyday lives; Venetians dominated both sea and land in the Eastern Mediterranean and were able to earn valuable resources.²⁰ We must bear in mind that Trapezuntios was born a Venetian citizen, since Crete was Venice's domain, and he felt proud of his origin.²¹ In a pseudo-Dionysian outburst, he even stated that "the only thing left for us is to stand silently in utter amazement" in front of Venice's magnificence.²²

Trapezuntios discussed the same topic in his *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*.²³ Although in the rest of the book he fervently attacked Plato, he felt obliged to acknowledge that the Athenian philosopher preferred the mixed constitution. According to Trapezuntios, in a mixed constitution, advantages multiply and disadvantages decrease. The interaction of elements of three basic polities mutually eradicates their deficiencies. He applied the Aristotelian cumulative method to states, as Aristotle himself did in his *Politics*: the addition of good elements always creates something better.²⁴ The Venetians either followed on Plato's path or realized the same truth by their genius. Either way, their state is the realization of the Platonic ideal, as expressed in the *Laws*. Trapezuntios held that the Venetian republic surpassed in glory and success not only the Platonic, but also the Ciceronian ideal republic.

In the same work, Trapezuntios praised the Spartans for the soundness of their constitution and the morals their legislation ordained.²⁵ Conversely, he did hold the classical Athenian constitution and legislation in the same esteem. Although he recognized Draco's and Solon's contributions to the magnificence of archaic Greece, he thought of Lycurgus as comparable only to King Minos, a son of Zeus.²⁶ Furthermore, his admiration for the Spartans was also expressed in his theory on death, partially inspired by the Spartan attitude towards death, as reported by Pseudo-Plutarch.²⁷ Trapezuntios drew most of his arguments from *Consolatio ad Apollonium* – something he avoided mentioning. He used Pseudo-Plutarch's view of the Spartans as an alternative to the traditional attitude towards death during the Middle Ages.

²⁰ Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 202.

²¹ James Hankins, "George of Trebizond, Renaissance Libertarian?", in *Essays in Renaissance Thought and Letters: In Honor of John Monfasani*, edited by Alison Frazier & Patrick Nold (Brill: Leiden, 2015), 89.

²² Monfasani, *Collectanea*, 202.

²³ Trapezuntius, *Comparationes*, f.R8v-S1r.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1281b.

²⁵ Trapezuntius, *Comparationes*, f.Q2r-Q8v.

²⁶ Trapezuntius, *Comparationes*, f.Q2r-Q8v.

²⁷ Steiris, *Exemplary*, 764.

Trapezuntios' predilection for Sparta was not an exception among the Greek scholars of the 15th century. Pletho (c.1355-1454) was also an admirer of the Spartan state and laws. He thought of Sparta as the pinnacle of Greek history and scorned Athens.²⁸ Pletho supported that the Spartans and the Sabines were both Dorians, sharing a common ancestry. The Sabines moved to Italy from the Peloponnese and were in fact Lacedaemonians,²⁹ which was the key factor in Rome's magnificence and splendor. Pletho paraphrased ancient Greek sources, according to which the Spartans colonized the lands of the Sabines, and thus introduced their morals to Italy and influenced the locals, i.e. the Romans.³⁰ Moreover, Pletho agreed with Trapezuntios that the Platonic *Laws* describe a quite possible, rather than a merely ideal state.³¹ Ianus Lascaris (1445-1535) agreed with Pletho on the Spartan origins of the Sabines.³² Moreover, Bessarion (1408-1472), in an epistle to the despot of Mystra and future emperor Constantine Paleologus, supported that ancient Sparta surpasses Athens in legislation and glory. He encouraged the despot to guide his Spartans to Asia, like a new Agesilaus, to restore the ancient greatness of the empire.³³ Apart from the above scholars, Michelle Tarcaniota Marullo (1453-1500), a Greek émigré in 15th century Italy, was among the chief admirers of the Spartan morals and polity.³⁴

From his part, Niccolo Machiavelli was also an admirer of the ancient glorious states and empires. In his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, he vividly presented his vision of global history:

"When I meditate on how these things move, I judge that the world has always gone on in the same way, and that there has been as much good as bad, but that this bad and this good have varied from land to land, as anyone understands who knows about those ancient kingdoms which

²⁸ Pletho, Γεώργιος Γεμιστός, *Πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Ἐμμανουῆλον περὶ τῶν ἐν Πελοποννήσῳ πραγμάτων*, edited by Σπ. Λάμπρος, ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΕΙΑ III (1926): 246-265; Γεώργιος Γεμιστός, *Συμβουλευτικὸς πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην Θεόδωρον περὶ τῆς Πελοποννήσου*, edited by Σπ. Λάμπρος, ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΕΙΑ 4 (1930): 113-135; Christos Baloglou, *Γεωργίου Γεμιστοῦ Πλήθωνος: Περί Πελοποννησιακῶν Πραγμάτων* (Ελευθερία Σκέψη: Αθήνα 2002), 319-326. ; Christopher M. Woodhouse, *George Gemistus Pletho – The Last of the Hellenes* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1986), 92.

²⁹ Pletho, *Πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα Ἐμμανουῆλον*, 248-249. ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae*, 2.49.4-5; Pletho, *Συμβουλευτικὸς πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην Θεόδωρον*, 115-116.

³⁰ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae*, 2.49.4-5; Plutarch, *Romulus*, 16.1; Plutarch, *Numa*, 1.3.

³¹ R. Webb, "The Nomoi of Gemistos Pletho in the Light of Plato's *Laws*". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989): 218.

³² Han Lamers, *Greece Reinvented: Transformations of Byzantine Hellenism in Renaissance Italy* (Brill: Leiden, 2015), 173-175.

³³ Ludwig Mohler, *Aus Bessarions Gelehrtenkreis. Abhandlungen, Reden, Briefe* (Scientia: Paderborn, 1942), 443-444; Ihor Ševčenko, "The Decline of Byzantium Seen Through the Eyes of Its Intellectuals", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 15 (1961), 169.

³⁴ Lamers, *Greece*, 210-220.

differed from one another because of the difference in their customs, but the world remained the same. There was only this difference, that whereas the world first placed excellence in Assyria, she later put it in Media, then in Persia, and finally it came to Italy and Rome".³⁵

Although Greece is noticeably omitted from Machiavelli's genealogy of civilization, he praised Sparta more than any other city-state. While, according to Machiavelli, small states were in no position to play a significant role in human history, Sparta accomplished the opposite. Machiavelli did not share Trapezuntios' enthusiasm for Venice. In his estimation, Venice, though admirable for many of the same reasons as Sparta, never reached the same level of glory and political success.³⁶ Machiavelli disregarded Sparta's poor cultural heritage and extolled Lycurgus, who gave Sparta a durable set of laws, observed for more than eight centuries. The perfectly designed and effective legislation was the bedrock of Sparta's power. Spartans had a mixed constitution, in which kings, aristocrats, and people all had a role.³⁷

In the 16th century, Sparta came to enjoy high popularity among Renaissance humanists besides Machiavelli: Donato Giannotti (1492-1573, a

³⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, II. Pref., in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, edited and translated by Allan Gilbert (Duke University Press: Durham, 1989), 322.

³⁶ Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the Discourses on Livy* (Lexington Books: Lanham, 1999), 45–7; Markus Fischer, "Prologue: Machiavelli's Rapacious Republicanism", in *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*, edited by Paul A. Rahe (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2005), lvii–lviii; Paul Q. Hirst, *Space and Power: Politics, War and Architecture* (Polity: Cambridge, 2005), 27–9; Mark Hülling, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1983), 47–51; H. C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1998), 87; H. C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Livy* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2001), 51–2; Gerald Proietti, *Xenophon's Sparta: An Introduction* (Brill: Leiden, 1987), xi; Elizabeth Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1991), 141–4; Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (Northern Illinois University Press: DeKalb, 1996), 61–6, 93–5; Vickie B. Sullivan, 'In Defense of the City: Machiavelli's Bludgeoning of the Classical and Christian Traditions', in *Instilling Ethics*, edited by Norma Thompson (Lexington Books: Lanham, 2000), 39–44; Maurizio Viroli, 'Machiavelli and the republican idea of politics', in *Machiavelli and Republicanism, Ideas in Context*, edited by Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993), 160; Kostas Vlassopoulos, "Sparta and Rome in Early Modern Thought: A Comparative Approach", in *Sparta in Modern Thought: Politics, History and Culture*, edited by Stephen Hodkinson & Ian Macgregor Morris (The Classical Press of Wales: Swansea, 2012), 43–69; Catherine H. Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2017), 128–130.

³⁷ Alissa Ardito, *Machiavelli and the Modern State* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2014), 89–95; Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2009), 408–418; Alfredo Bonadeo, 'Appunti sul concetto di conquista e ambizione nel Machiavelli e sull'antimachiavellismo', *Annali dell'Istituto orientale* 12 (1970): 245–60; Alfredo Bonadeo, 'Machiavelli on War and Conquest', *Il pensiero politico* 7 (1974): 334–61; Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988), 192–3; Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), 74–5; John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2003), 189–90; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2002), vol. II, 384–5.

compatriot and friend of Machiavelli, and Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542) shared his appreciation of the Spartan constitution. Renaissance translators of Xenophon read his *Constitution of the Spartans* in conjunction with Aristotle's *Politics* to find out whether the former was based on the latter.³⁸ Although Machiavelli praised Sparta, he ultimately concluded that it was in fact inferior to Rome. Of course, he admitted that the two states were very different: while Sparta possessed a simple and stable political structure, the Roman polity was of a more mixed and dynamic variety.³⁹ Contrarily to Sparta, the strife between plebs and nobles had led Rome to greatness.⁴⁰ While Sparta's growth was only limited, the expansion of Roman territory and authority was immense, and in this regard, its superiority was beyond question:

"If anyone sets out, therefore, to organize a state from the beginning, he needs to examine whether he wishes it to expand like Rome, in dominion and power, or whether it is to remain within narrow limits. In the first case, it is necessary to organize it like Rome...In the second case, you can organize it like Sparta and like Venice".⁴¹

Despite Trapezuntios' claim that his praise of Venice's mixed constitution derives from the Platonic *Laws*, a claim also adopted by modern scholarship, I propose that his views presuppose Polybius – or the Polybian tradition – and the medieval Scholastics rather than Plato and Aristotle. There is a noteworthy distinction here regarding mixed constitutions: depending on the amount of polities they combine elements from, in the examples discussed above, they can be bipartite or tripartite. Plato was probably the first to deal with a mixed constitution.⁴² According to Plato, the mixed constitution combines two and not three features: the monarchical and the democratic, in spite of their obvious contrast. The

³⁸ Noreen Humble, 'Xenophon, Aristotle and Plutarch on Sparta', in *The Contribution of Ancient Sparta to Political Thought and Practice*, ed. Nikos Birgalias (Athens, 2007), 267–77; Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton University Press: Princeton 1997), 227ff.

³⁹ Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans*, 150–2.

⁴⁰ Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), 79; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1958), 111–19.

⁴¹ N. Machiavelli, Discorsi, I, 6; Machiavelli: *The Chief Works and Others*, 209–10. ; Vickie B. Sullivan, 'Muted and Manifest English Machiavellism: The Reconciliation of Machiavellian Republicanism with Liberalism in Sidney's Discourses Concerning Government and Trenchard's and Gordon's Cato's Letters', in *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul A. Rahe (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2005), 70–1; Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1983), 220–2.

⁴² George Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2006), 238–241; Glenn Raymond Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City: A Historical Interpretation of the Laws* (Princeton University Press: Princeton 1960), 521–543.

Persian and the Athenian states are the best examples of a pure monarchy and a democracy respectively. He concluded that the prevalence of one of these elements could not allow a state to flourish, as history has proven. On the contrary, Sparta and Crete adopted the mixed constitution and achieved a perfect balance of the rule of the one and the many, which resulted to glorious achievements.⁴³

"Athenian: Listen. There are two mother-forms of constitution, so to call them, from which one may truly say all the rest are derived. Of these the one is properly termed monarchy, the other democracy, the extreme case of the former being the Persian polity, and of the latter the Athenian; the rest are practically all, as I said, modifications of these two. Now it is essential for a polity to partake of both these two forms, if it is to have freedom and friendliness combined with wisdom. And that is what our argument intends to enjoin, when it declares that a State which does not partake of these can never be rightly constituted.

Clinias: It could not.

Athenian: Since the one embraced monarchy and the other freedom, unmixed and in excess, neither of them has either in due measure: your Laconian and Cretan States are better in this respect, as were the Athenian and Persian in old times".⁴⁴

Moreover, Plato did not refrain from praising Lycurgus for having founded a mixed constitution by dividing the powers between the kings, the senate and the ephors.⁴⁵

Aristotle's mixed constitution suggestion also consists of two and not three features.⁴⁶ Namely, he claimed that while pure democracy is an ineffective constitution, the combination of oligarchic with democratic features, which would contribute to the stabilization of the state, is more beneficial. Aristotle called this constitution πολιτεία and admitted that previous scholars did not pay the appropriate attention to it. Politeia is the best among the achievable constitutions, let alone among ideal political systems, since is based on the middle citizens, which fits Aristotle's

⁴³ Plato, *Laws*, 693d-e.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Laws*, 693d-e. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 10 & 11 translated by R.G. Bury. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967 & 1968.

⁴⁵ Plato, *Laws*, 691e-692c.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1295a-1301a.

practical philosophy and its fundamental concept of the mean.⁴⁷

"Having then stated the reason for this mode of classification, we have now to set forth our view about constitutional government. For its meaning is clearer now that the characteristics of oligarchy and democracy have been defined; since constitutional government is, to put it simply, a mixture of oligarchy and democracy".⁴⁸

While Aristotle did not provide thoroughly examined historical examples of politeia, he mentioned Sparta as an existing one.⁴⁹

It was Polybius who first presented the mixed constitution as a combination of three political features. Although he reproduced the Aristotelian typology of the six regimes, he also included in the mixed constitution the monarchical element.⁵⁰ Polybius favored the Spartan and Roman constitution, which efficiently combined monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. In the case of the Roman republic, the consuls, the Senate and the Roman people corresponded to the aforementioned three key political systems. Therefore, the mixed constitution combines all three so as the government does not become abusive. Each feature keeps the other in check and the regime is stable, avoiding the degeneration of simple constitutions.

"Now, it is undoubtedly the case that most of those who profess to give us authoritative instruction on this subject distinguish three kinds of constitutions, which they designate kingship, aristocracy, democracy. But in my opinion the question might fairly be put to them, whether they name these as being the only ones, or as the best. In either case I think they are wrong. For it is plain that we must regard as the best constitution that which partakes of all these three elements. And this is no mere assertion, but has been proved by the example of Lycurgus, who was the first to construct a constitution—that of Sparta—on this principle".⁵¹

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1293b; Ryan Balot, "The mixed 'regime' in Aristotle's *Politics*", in *Aristotle's Politics: A Critical Guide*, edited by Thornton Lockwood, Thanassis Samaras (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2015), 103-121; Mogens Herman Hansen, *Reflections in Aristotle's Politics* (Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen 2013), 1-18; Andrew Lintott, "Aristotle and the Mixed Constitution", in *Alternative to Athens, Varieties of Political Organization and Community in Ancient Greece*, edited by Roger Brock, Stephen Hodkinson (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000), 152-166.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1293b. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 21, translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1944.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1288b.

⁵⁰ Polybius, 6.3-10; Andrew Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), 214-225; Henrik Mouritsen, *Politics in the Roman Republic* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2017), 7-13.

⁵¹ Polybius, *Histories*. VI.3. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. translator. London, New York. Macmillan. 1889. Reprint Bloomington 1962.

Furthermore, Plutarch compared the Spartan and Roman constitution. According to him, they were both heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy.⁵² Plutarch supported that Plato admired the Spartan polity and skipped intentionally Plato's criticism on the Spartan institutions.⁵³ Since it has been proved that Trapezuntios studied Plutarch's works, it is possible that his idea to connect the Platonic political philosophy and the Venetian constitution originated from Plutarch.

Similar views were expressed by Cicero,⁵⁴ who, following Polybius, praised the classical Roman polity, which wisely distributed the powers to the magistrates (potestas), the Senate (auctoritas) and the people (libertas).

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), under the influence of Aristotle's *Politics*, projected the tripartite mixed constitution to the Israelis: Moses represented the monarch, the seventy-two elders aristocracy and the people, who elected the elders, democracy.⁵⁵

"Hence, the best manner of constituting the ruling offices occurs in a city or region in which (a) there is a single person who is placed in authority on the basis of virtue (secundum virtutem) and presides over everyone, and in which (b) under him there are certain others who govern in accord with virtue, and yet in which (c) this political arrangement involves everyone (ad omnes pertinet), both because the rulers can be chosen from among everyone and also because they are chosen by everyone. This is the best political arrangement, with a good mixture of (a) monarchy, insofar as there is a single preeminent ruler, and (b) aristocracy, insofar as many govern in accord with virtue, and (c) democracy, i.e., rule by the people, insofar as the rulers can be chosen from among the people and the choice of rulers falls to the people".⁵⁶

It is obvious that when Aquinas discussed mixed constitution, he in fact argued in favor of a limited monarchy and did not accept Polybius' approach about the harmonization of the fundamental political ten-

⁵² Plutarch, *Agis*, 2.6; *Lycurgus*, 31.1; *Comp. Lyc. Num.*, 4.7.

⁵³ Bernard Boulet, "Is Numa the Genuine Philosopher King?", in *The statesman in Plutarch's works. V.II, The statesman in Plutarch's Greek and Roman "Lives"*, edited by Lucas de Blois, Jeroen Bons, Ton Kessels & Dirk Schenkeveld (Brill: Leiden, 2005), 245-256; Hugh Liebert, *Plutarch's Politics: Between City and Empire* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2016), 101-110; Eugène Napoléon Tigerstedt, *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1974), 226-264.

⁵⁴ *De republica*, 2.66; Jed Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The Republic and Laws* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2013), 80-119; Robert Radford, *Cicero: A Study in the Origins of Republican Philosophy* (Rodopi: Amsterdam – New York, 2002), 34-36.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.2 q.105.1.

⁵⁶ *New English Translation of St. Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (Summa Theologica) by Alfred J. Freddoso, University of Notre Dame <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddoso/summa-translation/Part%201-2/st1-2-ques105.pdf> [accessed 13/3/2017].

sions in the state. Furthermore, Aquinas did not faithfully follow Aristotle, who's suggested mixed constitution was bipartite.⁵⁷ John of Paris (1255-1306), Ptolemy of Lucca (1236-1327) and Engelbert of Admont (1250-1331) followed on the same path and applied Aquinas' theory to church administration.⁵⁸ A few years before Trapezuntios, Pier Paolo Vergerio (1370-1445) claimed that Venice owed its glory and success to its mixed constitution. In *De republica veneta* (c.1400), he attributed Venice's magnificence to its constitution. According to Vergerio, the Venetian constitution is an aristocracy, in the ancient Greek meaning of the term, which he considers an advanced form, as it combines elements from both monarchy and popular political forms, making it a mixed constitution.⁵⁹ Vergerio's mixed constitution is bipartite.⁶⁰ Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), in his *On the Florentine Constitution*, followed Aristotle's bipartite model and described the Florentine constitution as a mixture of aristocratic and democratic elements.⁶¹ Trapezuntios further elaborated Vergerio's views and specifically cited the Platonic *Laws* as the exemplar on which the Venetians based their political institutions. However, according to Trapezuntios, the Venetian constitution was tripartite and not bipartite: Maggior Consiglio, Senate and Doge, correspond to the democratic, the aristocratic and the monarchical elements respectively.

As a result, it is obvious that Trapezuntios did not base his claims about the Venetian mixed constitution on the Platonic *Laws*, as he claimed and modern scholarship suggests. His views on the mixed constitution presupposed the Polybian and Plutarchean tradition instead of Plato's *Laws*. Another explanation would have been that Trapezuntios did not understand that the Platonic mixed constitution differs from the Polybian and the Venetian. It is well known that he wasn't the most careful scholar. If Trapezuntios was aware of the differences between the Platonic and Polybian views, he would have attempted to strengthen his claims by

⁵⁷ Janes Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1992), 39-59.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 60-160.

⁵⁹ Pier Paolo Vergerio, *De Republica Veneta* [c.1400], edited by David Robey and John Lawin, *Rinascimento 15* (1975): 38-39; Felix Gilbert, *History: Choice and Commitment* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass 1977), 184; John McManamon, *Pierpaolo Vergerio the Elder: the humanist as orator* (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996), 65.

⁶⁰ Plato, *Laws*, 692d-694a.

⁶¹ Russel Dees, "Bruni, Aristotle, and the Mixed Regime in On the Constitution of the Florentines", *Medievalia et Humanistica* 15 (1987): 1-23; James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance* (Ed. di Storia e Letteratura: Roma, 2003), 23-29; David Thompson, Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins (ed & trans), *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts* (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies: RSA, 1987), 171-74.

resorting to Plato's *auctoritas*, since it would have been easier for him to flatter the Venetians by connecting their constitution with the Platonic and not the Polybian tradition. James Blythe and others supported that the early Renaissance scholars did not learn of the mixed regime from the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories*, which did not become available until the early sixteenth century, but from Aristotle and his thirteenth-century interpreters.⁶² Momigliano has proved that the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories* was known to Florentines before 1505, before its Latin translation and the arrival of Janus Lascaris in Florence.⁶³ Recently, James Hankins has proved that Polybius text was available to Cyriac of Ancona (1391-1452) before the 1450s and I conclude that Trapezuntios could also have access to the very same book, where Polybius articulates his views on the constitutions.⁶⁴ Moreover, Pocock suggested that the book was available to early Renaissance scholars, even in Greek manuscripts.⁶⁵ Trapezuntios, as a Greek, could have read the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories*. On a final note, Polybius proposed the *anacyclosis* of constitutions, their natural degeneration and renewal.⁶⁶ However, although Machiavelli adopted this Polybian view, Trapezuntios did not. Instead, he claimed that Venice would be imperishable and not subjected to any natural constitutional degeneration.

⁶² Blythe, *Ideal*, 278-300; Jack H. Hexter, "Seysssel, Machiavelli, and Polybius vi: The Mystery of the Missing Translation," *Studies in the Renaissance* 3, no. (1956): 75-96; John Monfasani, "Machiavelli, Polybius, and Janus Lascaris: the Hexter Thesis Revisited", *Italian Studies* 71 (2016), 39-48.

⁶³ Arnaldo Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2012), 87-88.

⁶⁴ James Hankins, "Europe's First Democrat?", in *For the sake of learning: essays in honor of Anthony Grafton* (Brill, Leiden 2016), 692-710.

⁶⁵ Pocock, *Machiavellian*, 77.

⁶⁶ Polybius, 6.2-9.