

# ALLA CORRENTE

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## FRANCESCO GUICCIARDINI

*For this month's Alla Corrente, I decided to choose one of the friends of Machiavelli who also served as a diplomat for Italian city-states. Since I gave a presentation on Machiavelli's *The Prince* at the February 27 luncheon, this piece on Guicciardini adds another perspective to the politics of the Italian Renaissance during the first half of the 16th century. Also, since this is the March Bulletin, I chose Guicciardini because he was born in March of 1483.*



*Francesco Guicciardini  
(Painting by Vincenzo Camuccini)*

FRANCESCO GUICCIARDINI (March 6, 1483–May 22, 1540) was an Italian historian and statesman; a friend and critic of Niccolò Machiavelli. He is considered one of the major historical and political writers of the Italian Renaissance. In his masterpiece, *The History of Italy*, Guicciardini paved the way for a new style in historiography by using government sources to support his arguments. In addition, he also did realistic analyses of the people and events of his time, trying to stay away from conjecture that was based on the fanciful. He sought to base his analysis on facts that he was able to discover.

He was born on March 6, 1483 in Florence, the third of eleven children of Piero di Iacopo Guicciardini and Simona di Bongianni Gianfigliuzzi. The Guicciardini were well-established members of the Florentine oligarchy as well as supporters of the Medici. Having been influential in Florentine politics for many generations, Guicciardini's ancestors had held the highest posts of honor in the Florentine government.

Piero Guicciardini had studied with the philosopher Marsilio Ficino, who stood as Francesco's godfather. (Ficino was one of the most influential humanist philosophers of the early Italian Renaissance, an astrologer, a reviver of Neoplatonism who was in touch with every major academic thinker and writer of his day. He was the first translator of Plato's complete extant works into Latin). Like his father, Francesco received a fine humanist education, studying the classics, learning both Latin and a small amount of Greek. His father sent him to study law at the Universities of Ferrara and of Padua, where he stayed until the year 1505.

The death of an uncle, who had been Bishop of Cortona, induced the young Guicciardini to seek an ecclesiastical career. His father, however, discouraged him, "because he thought the affairs of the Church were decadent. He preferred to lose great present profits and the chance of making one of his sons a great man rather than have it on his conscience that he had made one of his sons a priest out of greed for wealth or great position." [From Cecil Grayson, ed. *Francesco Guicciardini, Selected Writings*, (London: 1965), p. 132]. Thus, the ambitious Francesco once again turned his attention to law. At the age of twenty-three, he was appointed by the Signoria of Florence to teach legal studies at the Florentine Studio.

In 1508 Francesco married Maria Salviati, the daughter of Alamanno Salviati. The marriage cemented an oligarchical alliance with a very powerful Florentine family. In the same year, he wrote the *Memorie di Famiglia*, a family memoir of the Guicciardini family; the *Storie Fiorentine* (*The History of Florence*), and began his *Ricordanze*, a rudimentary personal chronicle of his life.

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## DIPLOMATIC CAREER AT THE SPANISH COURT

Having distinguished himself in the practice of law, in 1512 Guicciardini was entrusted by the Florentine Signoria with an embassy to the court of the King of Aragon, Ferdinand the Catholic. He had doubts about accepting the position because it came with so little profit, it would disrupt his law practice, and finally it would take him away from Florence. However, Francesco's father convinced him of the Spanish court's prestige and also the honor of having been chosen at so young an age. "No one could remember at Florence that such a young man had ever been chosen for such an embassy," he wrote in his diary. [Guicciardini, Francesco, *Maxims and Reflections (Ricordi)* (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1972)]. Thus began Guicciardini's career as a diplomat and statesman.

His Spanish correspondence with the Signoria reveals Guicciardini's power of observation and analysis. At the Spanish court, he learned lessons of political realism. In his letters sent back to Florence, he expressed appreciation for being able to observe Spanish military methods and estimate their strength during the time of war. However, he also distrusted the calculated gestures of Ferdinand, referring to him as a model of the art of political deceit. During his time in Spain, the Medici regained power in Florence. Under the new regime, his embassy in Spain dragged on, frustrating Guicciardini as he yearned to return to Florence and participate in the political life of the city. He finally insisted on being recalled and even sent a letter to the youthful Lorenzo de' Medici (to whom Machiavelli addressed his treatise *The Prince*) in an attempt to secure a position in the new ruling group. Guicciardini eventually returned home to Florence, where he took up his law practice again; in 1514 he served as a member of the Otto di Balìa, who controlled internal security, and in 1515 served on the Signoria, which was the highest Florentine magistracy.



Pope Leo X

## IN THE SERVICE OF THE PAPACY: 1513–1527

In 1513 Giovanni de' Medici, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, became Pope Leo X and brought Florence under papal control. This provided opportunities for Florentines to enter Papal service, and in 1515 Guicciardini began working for the papacy. Leo X made him governor of Reggio in 1516 and Modena in 1517. This was the beginning of a long career in papal administration, first under Leo X, and then under Leo's cousin and his successor, Clement VII. "He governed Modena and Reggio with conspicuous success," according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "and so he was appointed to govern Parma. In that city, in the confusion that followed the pope's [Leo X's] death, he distinguished himself by his defense of Parma against the French (1521)."

In 1523 he was appointed vice-regent of the Romagna by Pope Clement VII (1478-1534). These high offices rendered Guicciardini the virtual master of the Papal States beyond the Apennines. As he later described himself during this period: "If you had seen Messer Francesco in the Romagna...with his house full of tapestries, silver, servants thronged from the entire province where—since everything was completely referred to him—no one, from the Pope down, recognized anyone as his superior..." [Sydney Alexander, "Introduction" to Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, (Princeton, 1969), p.xvii.]

Throughout these years political turmoil in Italy was intensifying. As hostilities between the French King Francis I and the Emperor Charles V escalated, Pope Clement VII remained undecided over which side to back and thus he sought Guicciardini's advice. Guicciardini counseled an alliance with France, urging Clement to conclude the League of Cognac in 1526, which led to war with Emperor Charles V. In 1526 as the forces of Charles V threatened to attack, Clement made Guicciardini lieutenant-general of the papal army. Guicciardini was powerless to influence the commander of papal forces, Francesco Maria della Rovere, the Duke of Urbino, to take action. However, in April 1527 Guicciardini did succeed in averting an attack on Florence by the rebellious imperial army, which turned toward Rome instead. Less than two weeks later came the news of the Sack of Rome and the imprisonment of Clement in the Castel Sant'Angelo.

Although Guicciardini served three popes over a period of twenty years, or perhaps because of this, he was highly critical of the papacy, writing:

“I don't know anyone who dislikes the ambition, the avarice, and the sensuality of priests more than I do...Nevertheless, the position I have enjoyed with several popes has forced me to love their greatness for my own self-interest. If it weren't for this consideration, I would have loved Martin Luther as much as I love myself—not to be released from the laws taught by the Christian religion as it is normally interpreted and understood, but to see this band of ruffians reduced within their correct bounds. [Guicciardini, “Maxim 28”, in Alison Brown (trans.), *Guicciardini: Dialogue on the Government of Florence* (Cambridge, 1994), p.171.]



“Emperor Charles V with a Baton,”  
by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz [copy of a portrait  
by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, 1490-1576)].

GUICCIARDINI AND THE FLORENTINE REPUBLIC: 1527–1530

Like many Florentine aristocrats of his day, Guicciardini believed in a mixed republican government based on the model of the Venetian constitution; and despite working so often and closely with the Medici, he viewed their rule as tyrannical. He was, however, able to reconcile his republican ideals with his support of the Medici, writing: “The equality of men under a popular government is by no means contradicted if one citizen enjoys greater reputation than another, provided it proceed from the love and reverence of all, and can be withheld by the people at their pleasure. Indeed, without such supports, republics can hardly last.” [Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections (Ricordi)*, Mario Domandi, trans., Introd. by Nicolai Rubinstein, (New York, Harper & Row, 1965) p.144].

Shortly after the Sack of Rome, Guicciardini returned to Florence, but by 1527 the Medici had been expelled from the city and a republic re-established by the extreme anti-Medici Arrabiati faction. Because of his close ties to the Medici, Guicciardini was held suspect in his native city. In March, 1530 as a result of his service to the Medici, Guicciardini was declared a rebel and had his property confiscated.

This final Florentine Republic did not last long, however, and after enduring the Siege of Florence by Imperial troops for nine months, in 1530 the city capitulated. Under the command of Pope Clement VII,

Guicciardini was assigned the task of punishing the Florentine citizens for their resistance to the Medici, dealing out justice mercilessly to those who had opposed the will of the Pope. [Recall that Pope Clement was himself a Medici, the nephew of the famous patron of the humanist artists and thinkers, Lorenzo de' Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent].

FINAL YEARS IN FLORENCE UNDER THE MEDICI: 1534–1540

In 1531 Guicciardini was assigned the governorship of Bologna, the most important city in the northern Papal States by Clement VII. He resigned this post after the Medici pope's death in 1534, and returned to Florence, where he was enlisted as advisor to Alessandro de' Medici, who had lost much power as Duke and whose position had become less tenable since the death of Pope Clement. Guicciardini legally defended him in Naples in 1535 before Charles V, contesting the various exiled rebels' accusations of tyranny against Alessandro. He assisted in successfully negotiating the marriage of Alessandro to the Emperor Charles V's daughter Margaret of Parma in 1536 and for a short time he was the most trusted advisor to Alessandro, until the Duke's assassination in 1537.

After the murder of Duke Alessandro in 1537, Guicciardini allied himself with Cosimo de' Medici, who was just seventeen years old at the time and new to the Florentine political system. Guicciardini supported Cosimo as duke of Florence; however, Cosimo dismissed him shortly after his rise to power and Guicciardini retired to his villa in Arcetri, where he spent his last years working on the *Storia d'Italia*. He died in 1540 without male heirs.

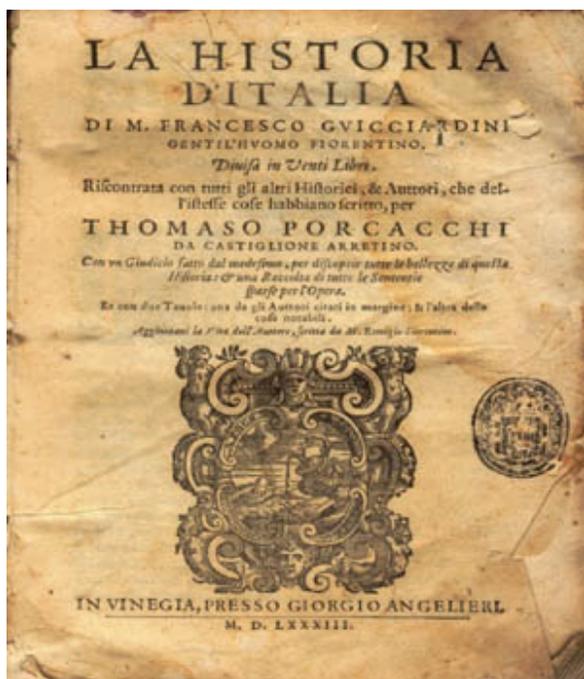
THE HISTORY OF ITALY

Among his many written works, Guicciardini is best known as the author of the *Storia d'Italia (The History of Italy)*, which provides a detailed account of politics in the Italian Peninsula between 1490 and 1534. Written during the last years of his life, this work contains the historian's observations collected over his entire lifetime and was a work intended for posterity. As Gilbert writes: "*The History of Italy* stands apart from all his writings because it was the one work which he wrote not for himself, but for the public." [Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, 1985)].

In his research Guicciardini drew upon material that he had gathered from government records as well as from his own extensive experience in politics. His many personal encounters with powerful Italian rulers serve to explain his perspective as a historian: "Francesco Guicciardini might be called a psychological historian—for him the motive power of the huge clockwork of events may be traced down the mainspring of individual behavior. Not any individual, be it noted, but those in positions of command: emperors, princes and popes who may be counted on to act always in terms of their self-interest—the famous Guicciardinian *particolare*." [Sidney Alexander, "Introduction" to Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, (Princeton, 1969), p.xv].



Alessandro de' Medici (1510–1537)  
Portrait by Jacopo Pontormo.



Title page of 1583 edition of Storia d'Italia.

In the following excerpt, Guicciardini records his observations on the character of Pope Clement VII:

“And although he had a most capable intelligence and marvelous knowledge of world affairs, yet he lacked the corresponding resolution and execution. For he was impeded not only by his timidity of spirit, which was by no means small, and by a strong reluctance to spend, but also by a certain innate irresolution and perplexity, so that he remained almost always in suspension and ambiguous when he was faced with those deciding those things which from afar he had many times foreseen, considered, and almost revealed.” [ Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, translated and edited by Sydney Alexander, (Princeton, 1969), p. 363].

Moreover, what sets Guicciardini apart from other historians of his time is his understanding of historical context. His approach was already evident in his early work *The History of Florence* (1509). As Rubinstein writes: “The young historian was already doubtlessly aware of the meaning of historical perspective; the same facts acquiring different weight in different contexts, a sense of proportion was called for.” [Nicolai Rubinstein, *Storie Fiorentine and the Memorie di Famiglia* by Francesco Guicciardini, 6th Ed. Vol.5. (Sansoni: Firenze, 1953)].

#### GUICCIARDINI AND MACHIAVELLI ON POLITICS AND HISTORY

Guicciardini was a friend of Niccolò Machiavelli; the two maintained a lively correspondence until Machiavelli’s death in 1527. Though Guicciardini was on a somewhat higher social standing than his friend, through their letters a relaxed, comfortable relationship between the two emerges. “Aware of their difference in class, Machiavelli nevertheless was not intimidated by Guicciardini’s offices...or by his aristocratic connections. The two established their rapport because of mutual regard for each other’s intellect.” [*Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, James B. Atkinson and Davis Sices, Trans. and Ed. (Northern Illinois Press: 2004) pp. xx-xxi]. They discussed not only personal matters, but political ideas as well and influenced one another’s work.

Guicciardini was critical of some of the ideas expressed by Machiavelli in his *Discourses on Livy*, “Guicciardini’s principal objection to the theories which Machiavelli advanced in the *Discourses* was that Machiavelli put things ‘too absolutely.’ Guicciardini did not agree with Machiavelli’s basic assumption that Rome could serve as a perfect norm.” [ Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, 1985), p. 283].

Both were innovative in their approach to history: “Machiavelli and Guicciardini are important transitional figures in the development of historical writing. The historical consciousness that becomes visible in their

work is a significant rupture in our thinking about the past...Human agency was a central element in the historical thought of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, but they did not have a modern notion of individuality... They started to disentangle historiography from its rhetorical framework, and in Guicciardini's work we can observe the first traces of a critical historical method." [Bod, Maat, & Weststeijn, *The Making of the Humanities: Vol. 1 Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: 2010), p. 362]

#### PUBLICATION OF HIS WRITINGS

None of Francesco Guicciardini's works were published during his lifetime. It was not until 1561 that the first sixteen of the twenty books of his *History of Italy* were published. The first English "translation" by Sir Geffray Fenton was published in 1579. Until 1857 only the *History* and a small number of extracts from his aphorisms were known. In that year his descendents opened the Guicciardini family archives, and committed to Giuseppe Canestrini the publication of his memoirs in ten volumes. These are some of his works recovered from the archives:

- *Ricordi Politici e Civili*, consisting of about 220 maxims on political, social, and religious topics;
- *Observations on Machiavelli's Discorsi*, which bring into relief the views of Italy's two great theorists on statecraft in the 16th century, and show that Guicciardini regarded Machiavelli somewhat as an amiable visionary or political enthusiast;
- *Storie Fiorentina*, an early work, distinguished by its animation of style, brilliancy of portraiture, and liberality of judgment;
- *Dialogo del Reggimento di Firenze*, also in all probability an early work, in which the various forms of government suited to an Italian commonwealth are discussed with subtlety, contrasted, and illustrated from the vicissitudes of Florence up to the year 1494.
- To these may be added a series of short essays, entitled *Discorsi Politici*, composed during Guicciardini's Spanish legation.

*Adapted by James Boitano, Ph.D. from The Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07064a.htm>); Encyclopedia Britannica (<http://www.britannica.com> [Article on Guicciardini is authored by Nicolai Rubinstein]; and Wikipedia.*