



# DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD

## Civic Knighthood in the Early Renaissance: Leonardo Bruni's *De militia* (ca. 1420)

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
[Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

Citation	Hankins, James. 2011. Civic knighthood in the Early Renaissance: Leonardo Bruni's <i>De militia</i> (ca. 1420). Working paper. Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University.
Accessed	December 6, 2015 11:43:12 AM EST
Citable Link	<a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:5473602">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:5473602</a>
Terms of Use	This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a>

*(Article begins on next page)*

## CIVIC KNIGHTHOOD IN THE EARLY RENAISSANCE

### LEONARDO BRUNI'S *DE MILITIA* (CA. 1420)

In the comic tales of Franco Sacchetti, the trecento *novellista*, there is a story (no. 150) that shows with great vividness how Florentines of the early Renaissance viewed the knighthood of their time. A knight of the Bardi family has been chosen as a judge (podestà) in the city of Padua. He is a tiny man, unmilitary in his habits, and an indifferent horseman. To give himself a more impressive appearance, he decides to wear a magnificent crest on his helmet, consisting of a bear rampant with drawn claws and the motto: "Non ischerzare con l'orso, se non vuoi esser morso" (Don't play games with the bear if you don't want to be eaten). On his way to Padua, he passes through Ferrara, where in the main piazza by the prince's castle he is accosted by a gigantic German knight. The German, who is a bit tipsy, is incensed to see the diminutive Florentine bearing what he claims are his, the German's, own arms and so he challenges the Florentine to a duel. The Florentine, however, can see no point in coming to blows and arranges a deal through his seconds. "Let's settle this with florins and put honor aside, he says. If you want me to go on my way as I came, I'll be off right now; if you mean that I shouldn't bear his crest, I swear by God's holy angels that it's mine and that I had it made in Florence by the painter Luchino and it cost me five florins; if he wants it, give me five florins and take the crest away."<sup>1</sup> The German, triumphant as though he'd conquered

---

<sup>1</sup> Sacchetti, 474: "Or bene, rechianla a fiorini, e l'onore stia da l'uno de'lati: se vuole che io vada a mio viaggio, come io c'entrai, io me n'andrò incontinentemente; se vuole dire che io non

a city, paid up willingly. The Bardi knight went off with his five florins to Padua, where he was able to purchase a new crest for only two florins, making a clear profit of three.<sup>2</sup>

This little piece of buffoonery gives us a good idea of what knighthood had come to mean in the minds of many Italians by the late fourteenth century. For the Florentine judge, his knighthood was an honor which gave him the opportunity to dress up in a dazzling costume. It was a piece of merchandise he had purchased; nothing more. He had no sense of shame at his lack of *bellica virtus*. Nor was he an isolated character, at least in the literary imagination. The theme of the decline of knighthood was, as a matter of fact, a common one in the literature of the period. In the *Corbaccio* of Giovanni Boccaccio the knights of the time are depicted as “poltroons spangled with pearls and draped in ermine, decked with gold spurs and sword with gilded hilt, yet with as little appreciation of true knighthood as the devil has of the cross.” The jurists were as acerbic as the novellists on the subject. Cino da Pistoia criticized “pseudo-knights who were immersed in their profits and scarcely knew how to gird on a sword.”<sup>3</sup> They enjoyed the prestige and privileges of knighthood without having any of the military responsibilities of the order.

The historical reality, so far as we can reconstruct it, seems to correspond to the literary image. In Florence we hear of four-year-old children or old men on their deathbeds being made knights. During the tumult of the Ciompi in 1378 sixty-seven men were created

---

porti il cimiero suo, io giuro su le sante Dio guagnele che'egli è mio e che io lo feci fare a Firenze a Luchino dipintore e costòmi cinque fiorini; se egli il vuole, mandimi fiorini cinque e tolgasi il cimiero.”

<sup>2</sup> Sacchetti, 472-475.

<sup>3</sup> Bayley, 206.

knights by the revolutionary workers in a single day.<sup>4</sup> When the Ciompi revolt was put down and the oligarchy restored there was yet another orgy of knight-making: twenty-four new knights were created on 20 January 1382 at a single ceremony.<sup>5</sup> Such mass creations were clearly political actions, not rewards for military virtue, as was shown many years ago by Gaetano Salvemini. The aim was to undermine or to strengthen the power of the Parte Guelfa, a conservative political society in Florence, which was also a societas militum to which knights automatically belonged by reason of their rank.<sup>6</sup>

A similar disregard for the military functions of knighthood is shown in the practice of awarding knighthood to men who were being sent on diplomatic missions; here the motive seems to have been to permit Florentine diplomats to cut a better figure abroad when representing their city. As late as 1419 we hear of a mass creation of twenty knights, the sole purpose of which was to enrich the spectacle of welcome for the solemn entry of Pope Martin V into Florence. It seems that the desire to have twenty Florentines dress up in crowns of olive leaves, green tunics sewn with pearls, gold sword, spurs and swordbelt, so as to welcome the Holy Father with greater splendor, was sufficient inducement for the Florentine government to debase the coinage of knighthood.<sup>7</sup>

But by 1419 things were changing; a reaction had set in. A movement was afoot in Florence to reform knighthood, and the Parte Guelfa was at the head of it. The Parte was an immensely wealthy and prestigious institution that occupied a curious semi-public, semi-private position in Florentine life. Unfriendly critics have compared its role to that of

---

<sup>4</sup> Acciaiuoli, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Salvemini, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 189 (no. 77).

the Communist party in the old Soviet Union, but this is to overstate its influence if not its aspirations. It is certainly true that its leadership overlapped to a surprising extent with the oligarchic leadership of Florence, especially in the period 1382-1434, when that oligarchy was at the height of its power. Officially, the Parte's role was to guard against constitutional innovations. Less officially, it aimed to safeguard the position of old Florentine families and to minimize the influence of gente nuova, new men, in society and politics. It was also the institution charged with overseeing all activities relating to communal knighthood, i.e., the dignità cavalleresche conferred by the Comune of Florence on selected citizens. On feast days it organized the part of civic processions that featured knights. Every year on 28 July, the feast of St Victor, it organized a horse race at S. Felice in Piazza; on 9 October, on the feast of St Dionysius, it sponsored a joust in the Piazza Santa Croce. The latter two occasions celebrated Guelf victories over the Ghibelline city of Pisa. In addition, for citizens newly knighted by the commune, the Parte held lavish ceremonies in its own palace and attached buildings in Via delle Terme near Or San Michele.<sup>8</sup>

By 1413, there are signs that the Parte was taking active steps to reform knighthood and to renew its own tarnished image. In typical fashion, the Parte saw its task as one of excluding the “Ghibellines and peasants”, i.e. gente nuova, who had infiltrated its ranks. The dignity of knighthood was to be ennobled by taking it out of the hands of the unworthy. The movement of reform culminated in March of 1420, in the revision of the statutes of the Parte Guelfa. The new statutes were designed to ensure control over Parte affairs by the old Guelf families and to keep out *gente nuova*; they were also intended to prevent the indiscriminate

---

<sup>8</sup> Brucker 1962; Brucker 1977; Zervas ; Brown, especially 104-108 on the attempted revival of the Parte in the period 1413-1434.

creation of communal knights that had disfigured the institution in the past.<sup>9</sup> The statutes were revised by a commission of six Parte members, among whom was a man who had recently inherited a leading role in the Florentine oligarchy, Rinaldo di Maso degli Albizzi. The commission was aided in its work of drafting the new statutes by a former apostolic secretary to four popes, Leonardo Bruni of Arezzo, who had recently begun a new career in Florence as its official historian. The original codex containing the revised statutes survives; it was written, significantly, in the new littera antiqua of the humanists with an early humanistic vine-stem initial; the hand is identifiable as that of the humanist scribe Antonio di Mario, who copied a number of Bruni's works for Florentine patrons, including the dedication copy of Bruni's translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian Economics, made for Cosimo de' Medici in the very same year, 1420.<sup>10</sup>

The connection of Bruni and Albizzi is an interesting one, since in December of 1421, less than two years after the revision of the Parte Guelfa's statutes, Bruni dedicated to Albizzi a little treatise entitled De militia – a title which is best translated as On Knighthood. The coincidence of dates and persons as well as the topic of the treatise already suggest that Bruni's work should be seen as part of the Parte Guelfa's programme to reform communal knighthood, as this article will argue. What makes the work of more than antiquarian interest, however, is the surprising way Bruni realized this project of reforming knighthood. Bruni's aim in the De militia was nothing less than to co-opt the most glamorous of medieval ideals, the ideal of chivalry, and to re-interpret it in terms of Graeco-Roman ideals of military service. In other words, he aimed to make the reform of knighthood into an aspect of

---

<sup>9</sup>Florence, Archivio di Stato, Capitani della Parte Guelfa rosso, vol. 3, f. 2r.

<sup>10</sup> On Bruni's role, see De Angelis. On Antonio di Mario's copies of Bruni's works, see de la Mare, 1: 483.

the revival of antiquity – that great Renaissance movement which in those years was just beginning to sweep through Florence and other Italian cities.

It needs to be said that this interpretation of the De militia is by no means the orthodox one at present. The most detailed study of the text, that by C. C. Bayley published in 1961, sees the work as “a link in a long chain of controversy, extending from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, excited by the progressive displacement in Italy of citizen militia by mercenary troops.” Bayley, in other words, saw the text primarily as a critique of the condottiere system. Bayley’s interpretation came under criticism already in the 1960s in reviews by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Sergio Bertelli and Hermann Goldbrunner. Kristeller pointed out that the word militia should be translated as “knighthood”, not “militia” in the sense of volunteer citizen soldiery; as a result, he claimed, the whole concept behind the book was flawed.<sup>11</sup> Bertelli, too, said the book was “nato su di un equivoco” and made the suggestion that Bruni's treatise should be connected with the reform of the Parte Guelfa in 1420 rather than with the reform of the condottiere system.<sup>12</sup> Goldbrunner repeated these criticisms and raised a number of more technical questions regarding Bayley's critical edition of Bruni's text.<sup>13</sup>

Not all of these criticisms are entirely fair. Bayley certainly knew that militia could mean “knighthood” and he was aware of the connection between the De militia and the 1420 statutes. Indeed, he realized that the De militia was somehow related to contemporary criticisms of “carpet knights”: the treatise, he admitted in passing, “lodged a discreet but

---

<sup>11</sup> Kristeller.

<sup>12</sup> Bertelli.

<sup>13</sup> Goldbrunner. Similar criticisms of Bayley are found in Hale and Rubinstein.

unmistakable protest against the current decline of civic knighthood.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Bayley's attempt to read the text primarily as a critique of the condottiere system inevitably skewed his interpretation and led to several false emphases in addition to the errors of fact and method pointed out by his critics.

Bayley's rather perverse view of Bruni's text – which after all never mentions condottieri or mercenaries – may be traced to the influence of Hans Baron's famous book, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance, first published in 1955.<sup>15</sup> This work, extremely popular in America and Italy during the 1960s, tended to read Bruni's writings as promoting republicanism and popular government. Impressed by Baron's conception of civic humanism, Bayley was predisposed to read Bruni's De militia as a work that advocated replacing the mercenary system with citizen soldiers. But since Baron's interpretation of Bruni in recent years has been brought into question on other grounds, it is worth while reopening the question of what the De militia actually means.<sup>16</sup> The task is all the more necessary as the interpretation of Baron and Bayley has been endorsed by two leading Bruni scholars of the present day, Paolo Viti and Lucia Gualdo Rosa.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the alternative interpretation of the De militia as an attempt to reform communal knighthood in accordance with ancient models, has never been worked out in detail beyond the passing suggestion in Bertelli's review. As this article aims to show, a careful reading of this text can help us

---

<sup>14</sup> Bayley, 208.

<sup>15</sup> Baron.

<sup>16</sup> See now Renaissance Civic Humanism, with references to the earlier literature.

<sup>17</sup> Gualdo Rosa; Viti. On the other hand Bayley's interpretation is rejected by Böninger, 204-209, whose reading is closer to the one advanced here. For the historical phenomenon in general see Gasparri.



understand more clearly what the Renaissance of classical antiquity meant in a concrete social and political context: the Florence of the 1420s.

The De militia treats four main topics: (1) the origin and true nature of knighthood; (2) the question whether modern Italian knighthood conforms in its general pattern with ancient ideas about military service; (3) the question of how a knight should dress, and (4) the issue of what the duties of the knight should be during peacetime. The radical nature of Bruni's approach becomes clear immediately in his treatment of the first topic. Bruni ignores the usual view of his contemporaries that knighthood was a transalpine invention of recent centuries. Instead, he raises the question to a higher level of abstraction altogether by inquiring what the essence is of communal knighthood – that is, of military service to the state considered as a necessary social and political function. The question for him is as much a philosophical as an historical one. He begins from the Aristotelian proposition that man is a political animal. Since the miles is a man, it follows that an enquiry into the nature of the miles is fundamentally an enquiry into the nature of the state. “Civitas enim totius vite cunctorumque humanorum munerum princeps est et perfectrix.” (The city-state is the beginning and fulfillment of our whole life and all human activities), he writes.<sup>18</sup> Following Macrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio and Polybius' Histories (a text of which Bruni had published a paraphrase only the year before), he avers that there are two ways of investigating the nature of the state: the philosophical and the historical.<sup>19</sup> The philosophical

---

<sup>18</sup> For the text of the De militia with an Italian translation, see Bruni 1996b, 649-701 (quoted passage on 656); for an English translation, see Bruni 1987, 127-145 (quoted passage on 128).

<sup>19</sup> Macrobius, Comm. in Somnium Scipionis, cap. 1. The comparison of philosophical and historical republics is most fully worked out in Book 6 of Polybius' Histories, the surviving

way exists only in the mind, as an analytical model, while the historical way is based on the analysis of actual states. Both shed light on the origin of military service.

Bruni's philosophical guide to the essence of the miles is Book 2 of Aristotle's Politics. This was a natural choice: Bruni had just finished translating the Nicomachean Ethics (1418) and the pseudo-Aristotelian Economics (1420) and would soon embark on a translation of the Politics that would eventually be published in 1436.<sup>20</sup> He considered himself an Aristotelian, or as he put it, “a follower of Aristotle in matter, of Cicero in manner.”<sup>21</sup> Despite his allegiance to the moral philosophy of Aristotle, however, Bruni uses Aristotle more as an historical source than as a philosophical authority. Aristotle himself had said little about the function of the miles in the state, but he reported the views of Phileas of Carthage, Hippodamus and Plato that the protective function of the miles was “necessary and natural” to the state; that milites or custodes should therefore be permanently constituted as one of the three orders or classes in the state with appropriate responsibilities and privileges. Bruni takes this to be the “philosophical” view of the miles’ role in the state. Bruni seems also to have consulted Plato's Republic itself, or the Latin translation by Uberto Decembrio, since he quotes a passage in Republic 2 (not found in Aristotle) where Socrates describes the ideal character of the guardian caste as one combining ferocity against enemies with

---

fragments of which did not become known until the end of the fifteenth century, but the theme is implicit throughout the first five books, paraphrased by Bruni in his De primo bello punico (1419/22), for example at 1, caps. 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> See Hankins forthcoming. Bruni had begun work on the Politics version already in the mid-1420s, as we learn from the quotations from his work-in-progress contained in the De recta interpretatione (1424/26), for which see Bruni 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Ep. IX.4, in Bruni 1741, vol. 2.

gentleness towards fellow-citizens.<sup>22</sup>

As part of his “philosophical” consideration of the function of the miles in the state, Bruni investigates the etymology of the word miles. The results are not impressive. Bruni approves the derivation of miles from malum arcendum: the miles is one who wards off evil from the state – an embarrassingly close parallel to the infamous lucus a non lucendo. Here one may be reminded of Voltaire's witticism that etymology is a science where the vowels count for nothing and the consonants for very little. But the digression shows that, in Bruni's mind, as in those of other humanists, there was a natural parallelism between grammatical and historical methods. Just as the meaning of a word was established by its derivation and current usage, so establishing the meaning of an institution had to take into account its original function as well as contemporary practice. This is precisely Bruni's approach in discovering the meaning of knighthood.

Bruni next turns to the historical part of his study of military origins. Here he relies chiefly on Livy and Cicero. In the best-constituted historical societies military service is treated very differently from the way it is treated in philosophers' republics. For Bruni (as for Macrobius), Rome is of course the best of all states that have actually existed. It is morally inferior to the philosopher's republic in that it makes concessions to human weakness, but it has the advantage of being possible.<sup>23</sup> According to Bruni, military service

---

<sup>22</sup> See Republic 2, 375c 1. The same passage was noted by Guarino in his annotations to Uberto Decembrio's version of the Republic; the exemplum was also picked up by Guarino's student, Francesco Barbaro, in his De re uxoria, which may be the intermediate source here. Hankins 1987, 175.

<sup>23</sup> The general “prudential” (as opposed to “idealistic”) approach to the design of constitutions comes from Aristotle's Politics; see esp. 4.1, 1288b.

in the state founded by Romulus was a temporary condition, rigidly divided from civilian life by a religious oath. Soldiers did not form a caste apart, but were citizens performing military duties on a temporary basis. The military oath, as Bruni learned from the De officiis (1.11.36), prevented the civilian from acting as a soldier and vice versa. In what was presumably a further concession to human weakness, Romulus also allowed for class distinctions among his milites. The Roman military consisted of both pedites and equites. The latter rank was accorded to citizens of outstanding wealth, ancestry or accomplishments. In time they formed the equestrian order, and were considered noble. From thence they might rise further to consular or senatorial rank. This did not mean that the pedites, however, were downgraded to servile status as in the society of Gaul; Romulus did not permit the plebs to be stripped of its rights and dignity. But he did give special honor and dignity to equestrian soldiers. And he allowed for a certain mobility between ranks, a principle that Bruni, as a novus homo, heartily approves.

As can be seen, what Bruni is doing here is reinterpreting the meaning of communal knighthood, using the classical concept of the *polis*: a natural association of men under common laws, organized for the purpose of realizing the good life. The military function of the state, whether temporary or permanent, is a necessary one, and derives its value from its organic role in preserving other members of the state. We are now worlds away from the medieval concept of chivalry. Here are no divided loyalties to lord, lady and church; here is no supranational code of conduct, no crusaders fighting the paynim in foreign lands, no roving adventurers seeking to prove their prowess or find the Holy Grail, no jousts or tournaments or feats of arms. We would also seem to be at some distance even from the communal knights of late medieval Florence – those middle-aged merchants in fancy dress. So it comes as a surprise to hear Bruni assert, in the next section of his work, that it is possible to identify modern Italian knighthood with military service in ancient times.

By this Bruni does not mean that the ancient soldier or eques and the modern gentleman-cavaliere resemble each other in their way of life. Rather the resemblance between ancient and modern knighthood is a formal one, seen mainly at the level of constitutional theory. According to Bruni, modern communal knighthood draws elements from both ancient philosophical theory and actual ancient practice. From Rome it adopts the practice of allowing mobility between the orders and the practice of requiring a military oath before a soldier could engage in warfare. From the philosophers it borrows the idea of a permanent caste of men dedicated to the military life. Bruni's analysis also reveals, implicitly, how inferior the French equestrian order is to both ancient and modern Italian forms of military service. French knighthood is a closed caste which, together with the priesthood, monopolizes all honor in the kingdom; by doing so it reduces the common people to servile status. "At non sic Romulus," writes Bruni, "sed plebem sua iura libertatemque habere voluit" (Not so Romulus; he wanted the common people to have their rights and freedom).<sup>24</sup> As elsewhere in his writings, Bruni aims to bolster Italian pride in native institutions by assimilating them to ancient Roman ones, while contrasting them favorably with the ways of transalpine barbarians.<sup>25</sup>

In keeping with this aim, Bruni's analysis thus far has not breathed a word of criticism of Italian communal knighthood. Bruni accepts, indeed celebrates, the idea of a permanent order of men, singled out for their ancestry, wealth and accomplishments, who follow a more

---

<sup>24</sup> Bruni 1996b, 672; Bruni 1987, 134.

<sup>25</sup> Böninger, 205, identifies as the likeliest target of Bruni's work the Liber gentilis militiae of Gentile d'Adeguardo de' Mainardi (after 1396), a tractate which places Italian knighthood in the chivalric tradition of medieval French knighthood.

honorable style of life devoted primarily to military affairs. It is, in short, the kind of life led by the dedicatee of the De militia, Rinaldo degli Albizzi, whose public activity was devoted to diplomacy and military commissions.<sup>26</sup> This observation alone, it may be said, disproves the thesis that the De militia advocates the revival of the old Florentine civic militia, since militias by definition imply temporary military service by citizen-soldiers who follow different occupations in peacetime. It might be argued, to the contrary, that Bruni was unwilling to criticize communal knighthood openly because he could not afford to offend men such as Rinaldo, or his banker and close friend Palla Strozzi, or Michele di Vanni Castellani, the future father-in-law of his son – all of whom held the dignity of communal knights. To be sure, it seems likely that Rinaldo's own knighthood was given him for ceremonial reasons, as it was conferred within ten days of his being appointed ambassador to Pope Martin V.<sup>27</sup> But while it is true that Bruni was never inclined, in this or other matters, to articulate sweeping criticism of the existing order, it cannot really be denied that his conception of knighthood was that of a permanent order of men dedicated to a life of honorable pursuits. It is quite impossible to make sense of the last section of the De militia, dealing with the peacetime occupations of the knight, on the assumption that Bruni favored instituting a militia of temporary soldiers, raised from the peasant population of the Florentine territory, of the kind later advocated by Machiavelli. Such a theory would also contradict the ideal of military service enunciated in a parallel text, the Oration on the Funeral of Nanni Strozzi, which will be dealt with in due course.

In the first two sections of the De militia, then, Bruni is not so much a reformer of communal knighthood – someone who sought to change the institution fundamentally – as he

---

<sup>26</sup> Extensively documented in Guasti.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1: 294-95.

was its panegyrist and champion. Bruni's aim is to refurbish communal knighthood; to ennoble it; to change the way people saw it by looking at it from the point of view of the ancients. Seen from the perspective of ancient history and philosophy, Italian civic knighthood could be viewed as a legitimate descendent of a classical socio-political institution which embodied, or could embody, classical virtues. In repackaging knighthood this way, Bruni was acting (as usual) as a political conservative, a faithful servant of the oligarchy. To put it in anachronistic modern terms, the Parte Guelfa and knighthood had an "image problem," and Bruni's treatise aimed to help remedy that. It is, indeed, a fundamental misunderstanding of Quattrocento humanism to think of it in any way as interested in serious institutional or political reform. What Bruni and other early humanists wanted was not outward reform, reform of laws or institutions; they wanted interior reform, reform of the inward man. They wanted virtue. "Men, not walls, make a city," as the humanists delighted to quote. What made a city great was not its constitution, but the virtues of its citizens.<sup>28</sup>

It is to the task of building knightly virtue that Bruni turns in the last two sections of the De militia, and it is here one can sense his true reforming fervor. His first goal is to discredit the vulgar view of many of his contemporaries that the essence of knighthood was dressing up in magnificent clothes. This view Bruni dispatches swiftly, citing various classical authorities to indicate that the dress of equites in Roman times was very simple: they distinguished themselves from the plebs only by the gold ring they wore. Even the olive crown was a later innovation, though Bruni considers it permissible to wear it since it still has a good ancient pedigree.

In the last section of the De militia, on the peacetime functions of the knight, Bruni has to pick his way carefully. Having had the benefit of a legal education, he was no doubt

---

<sup>28</sup> See Hankins 1996.

aware of the legal maxim in the Justinianic Code that prohibited citizens from simultaneously exercising military and civic functions.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he is dealing with a living dignity, a number of whose holders were engaged in precisely the sort of activities Bruni believes are inappropriate for knights. Rejecting Justinian, Bruni argues that in the case of a permanent knightly caste, one has to allow the knight to have more than one persona: he can, while a knight, act as a judge or diplomat or senator or guardian or simply as a vir bonus. Though he is always a miles, he does not always act qua miles. But the fact that multiple activities are permitted to the person of knightly status does not mean that it is fitting for knights to exercise any and all activities.<sup>30</sup> It is most fitting for a knight to exercise functions wherein he makes use of his special virtue of fortitude. In peacetime this means protecting widows and orphans against wicked men. But it is, in Bruni's view – and here he recognizes that he is being controversial – absolutely wrong for a knight to engage in mercenary occupations, to “strive for profit.” The good knight should already have sufficient wealth so that he can dedicate himself completely to public service. It is acceptable to be raised to the rank of knight because of one's wealth, but once one becomes a miles, the striving for “sordid profit” should cease.

Bruni underlines his point in the dramatic closing of the treatise. The De militia ends with a stirring speech, modelled on Plato's Crito (a text Bruni retranslated within a year or two of writing the De militia),<sup>31</sup> in which Patria addresses the aspiring knight. The knight, she declares, should be a man who seeks honor and glory rather than riches. His superior rank should imply a higher form of life, a more ample virtue, than that of merchants and

---

<sup>29</sup> Bayley, 212.

<sup>30</sup> The point is possibly derived from Aristotle Politics 7.9, 1328b.

<sup>31</sup> See Hankins 1990, 1: 51-53, 73-74, 2: 379-387.



tradesmen. It would be intolerable that one man should hold rank over another when he is indistinguishable in his way of life from others of lesser rank. Rank has responsibilities as well as privileges.

Thus Bruni's classicizing reinterpretation of communal knighthood accords perfectly with, and in effect provides ideological justification for, the reform of the Parte Guelfa in 1413 and 1420. Like the Parte reformers, Bruni envisages a form of knighthood restricted to those wealthy enough to engage in military and political activity without having to dirty themselves with actual money-making. Tradesmen and “peasants” need not apply. It is typical of fifteenth century humanism that virtue is closely linked, indeed made conditional upon, the possession of wealth. Wealth is the essential precondition for knightly status, and military virtue is effectively restricted to those of knightly status. In connecting virtue and class in this way, Bruni followed Isocrates, Cicero and the other ancient writers whose educational theory reflected their oligarchical sympathies.

Further confirmation for this reading of Bruni's treatise can be found in another text which, surprisingly, is never been cited by students of the De militia: the Oration on the Funeral of Nanni Strozzi (1428). As is well known, the speech was written only a few years after the De militia and was modelled on Pericles' Funeral Oration in Book 1 of Thucydides.<sup>32</sup> Nanni Strozzi was a Ferrarese knight of Florentine extraction, a cousin of the great oligarch Palla Strozzi, who was killed at the battle of Ottolengo at the crisis of the Second Milanese War. The first part of Bruni's speech praises Florence and her free institutions as a topic in the praise of Nanni, and it is this part of the speech which has received the most attention from modern scholars. In the second part of the speech, however,

---

32 For a full analysis of the speech, see Hankins 2000 and the commentary of Susanne Daub in Bruni 1996a.

praising Nanni himself, there is a long passage in which Nanni is presented as the *beau ideal* of Bruni's classicizing form of knighthood.<sup>33</sup> There are many explicit parallels with and echoes of the *De militia*. We are told that Nanni, in order to devote himself to the military life, gave up careers in commerce and farming. Unlike many others, Nanni knew that what made a knight was not golden swordbelts and spurs, but an honorable mode of life and brave deeds. He eschewed sartorial display and luxury and lived his life according to a “recta ... et simplex et ingenua vivendi ratio” (an upright, simple and noble plan of life). When he was knighted, it was as though he had received a sacrament; the military life, it is implied, is a special way of life like that of the priesthood. Indeed, Bruni – like St Bernard, but with a wholly different intention – compares the profession of arms with the monastic profession: Nanni was consecrated to “haec perpetua militiae religio” (this perpetual vow of knighthood), “quasi intra claustra quaedam huius propositi continere” (as though he was enclosing himself within the cloisters, as it were, of this great purpose). But the service to which Nanni was dedicated was not that of God, but of the *patria*:

He held the welfare of his country so dear that he was judged to have been born for this one thing above all. His whole life showed this, which he conducted in such a way that everything he did seemed to have reference to his country. ... Thus he inarguably preferred the affairs of war to the arts of peace. ... His youthful battles, his study of military encounters, like his athletic exercises, were undertaken to achieve, through acts of courage, fame, glory, distinction and the enlargement of his reputation. But he believed his courage should be placed most of all at the service of

---

33 Ibid., 291-295, with Daub's commentary on 337-342.

his country, and he did so abundantly throughout his entire life.<sup>34</sup>

This passage surely demonstrates beyond question that Brunni's conception of militia has nothing to do with citizen-levies, *scelte*, or the militia companies (gonfaloni) of the popolo, either those Florence possessed in the thirteenth century or those such as Machiavelli attempted to organize in the sixteenth. Rather he was inventing a new image for communal knighthood and the Parte Guelfa – the heart of the Florentine oligarchy – one that helped to justify its position of leadership in domestic and foreign affairs.

It is surely no coincidence that at the same time Brunni was trying to invent a new, more classical image for communal knighthood, the Parte Guelfa, the custodian of communal knighthood, was endorsing in its artistic patronage the most radical form of artistic classicism available in early Quattrocento Florence – namely, the classicism of Donatello and Filippo Brunelleschi. As Diane Finiello Zervas states in her study of the artistic patronage of the Parte, “these men [the Parte's leaders] ... opted with surprising unanimity and within the space of only a few years, for the explicitly all'antica style offered by Donatello and Brunelleschi and to a lesser extent by Ghiberti.”<sup>35</sup> The great projects sponsored by the Parte

---

34 Ibid., 294-295: “Patrie vero salutem usque adeo caram habuit, ut huic uni se rei maxime natum arbitraretur. Ostendit vero id tota vita, que sic ab eo transacta est, ut cuncta retulisse ad patriam videatur. [...] Itaque res bellice pacis artibus sine controverisa preferuntur. [...] Prelia ergo iuvene totaque illa certaminum meditatio ceu athletarum preparamenta fuere ad famam, ad gloriam, ad amplitudinem claritatemque nominis per fortitudinis opera comparandam. Fortitudinem vero patrie maxime se debere putabat eique per omnem vitam accumulatissime prestitit.”

35 Zervas, 94.

Guelfa – Donatello's tabernacle and bronze statue of St. Louis for the Parte's niche on the exterior wall of Orsanmichele, and Brunelleschi's rebuilding of the palazzo of the Parte Guelfa – are remarkable visual correlatives to the ideological work of reconceptualizing knighthood and the Parte Guelfa being undertaken by Bruni.

A still more striking parallel is Donatello's famous statue of St. George, a work in stone created to adorn the niche of Orsanmichele assigned to the Guild of Armourers [Plate]. Here we have what is certainly an idealized image of a knight sculpted only a few years before Bruni's De militia. Obviously it is not meant to invoke the standard image of the communal knight of the period – merchants in fancy dress, covered with pearls and gold. But neither is it meant to be an evocation of a medieval chivalric ideal. The point may not be evident, since the statue and imitations of it have, since the fifteenth century, become familiar icons of medieval knighthood, found frequently in Gothic settings. So it may be difficult to see at first sight just how radically classical the image really is. Recent students of the work, however, such as Zervas and Greenhalgh, have emphasized the antique sources for a number of motifs and decorative details in the statue, such as Roman military stelai, portrait-sculptures (especially portraits of the young Augustus), Roman coins and gems; some features of the military costume may be borrowed from the decoration of the arch of Constantine. Greenhalgh (51) has indeed argued that the drill-holes around the head of the statue were not meant to hold a helmet, as had earlier been thought by Janson and others, but rather an olive wreath – a striking suggestion in view of Bruni's view in the De militia that the olive was one of the few appropriate ornaments a knight might wear.<sup>36</sup>

But in the end, the most impressive thing about Donatello's St George is his countenance and bearing. Contemporary sources praise the face and physical attitude of the

---

<sup>36</sup> Greenhalgh, 49-63, esp. 51-54.

St George for its effectiveness in communicating prontezza and vivacità; they marvel at Donatello's ability to combine beauty and martial valor. Modern critics describe “the focussing of the entire design of the statue upon a specific psychological state” as “a truly revolutionary achievement” in the art of sculpture.<sup>37</sup> But we, looking at the statue through lenses provided by Leonardo Bruni, considering that countenance, assured and noble, determined without aggression, strong yet gentle, might be tempted to see an image combining the austerity and martial spirit of the Roman military with the virtue and beauty of soul of Plato's guardians.

---

<sup>37</sup> Janson, 29.

[Notes to “Civic Knighthood”]