Leonardo Bruni on the constitution of Florence from the *Funeral Oration on Nanni Strozzi* (1427/8)

There is, as I understand it – most wise men – an ancient law of Solon’s¹ which has also been received and approved by use in the wisest city-state, which decrees that any citizens who die fighting for the fatherland should be provided, after their private service, with a public funeral, as magnificent as possible in both its arrangements of things and its words. The things are organised for the solemnity of the funeral, the words for the exposition of the praises of those who are being interred. A most far-sighted and excellent law, indeed, and one worthy of the authority of wise Solon… For what more useful and honourable law could be imagined than one which both draws honour to those men who have defended the fatherland and lightens the loss of the parents by taking care of those left to mourn? … There cannot be any greater justice and gratitude than for the fatherland to adopt those who have been left bereaved because of the fatherland, so that their parent’s most glorious death should be to their children no detriment, but should be seen to bring splendour and improvement.

The memory of this most celebrated and most praiseworthy law has now been revived by the death – most glorious, it seems to me – of the most famous man, Nanni Strozzi², knight of Florence, who died in battle in this war which our city-state and the Venetians are now waging against the Duke of Milan. He leaves children very young in age, deprived of the care of their parent and bereaved, for he put the love of his fatherland before the love of his children…

He himself was born in the most splendid and greatest city-state with wide dominion and the greatest authority. … The city-state owes its origins to the combination of the two noblest and most outstanding of the tribes of all of Italy: the Tuscans, long-standing lords of Italy, and the Romans, who, through the virtue and arms, gained for themselves command of all the lands. For our city-state is a colony of the Romans, mixed with the long-standing Tuscan inhabitants. For the Tuscans were always the first tribe of Italy and the leading in authority and wealth … by this one tribe the worship of the immortal gods, as well as learning and letters were brought into Italy. From this one tribe all the other peoples adopted all the ornaments of peace and war. About the Romans, indeed – their power, their excellence, their virtue, their glory, their magnanimity, their wisdom, and the greatness of their empire – it is better to be utterly silent than to say only a few words.

What city-state, therefore, can be more eminent, nobler and richer in the glory of their ancient parents? … Worthy too of commendation are our forefathers, who took this city-state in their hands and so established and guided it that they seem to have degenerated hardly at all from the virtue of those from whom they arose. They, through the holiest laws, set at balance the stability of the state [*stabilitam rem publicam ... moderati sunt*] with such wisdom that they stood as an example to all the other tribes of how to live well … Worthy too of praise are

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¹ Solon (c. 636 – c. 558 BC) was a lawgiver of ancient Athens.
² Giovanni (shortened to Nanni) Strozzi was of Florentine birth but, like others of his family, which was one of the leading ones in Florence, he went into exile in 1378. Most of his career was spent in the service of the rulers of the city of Ferrara. In the war that Bruni mentions, he was the general of the allied forces, defeating the forces of Filippo Maria Visconti, duke of Milan, at Brescia in December 1426 but, being wounded at the Battle of Ottolengo on 29 May 1427, he died a few days later.
those who now in our present age constitute the citizens, who, accepting the power of the city-state from their fathers, have augmented it, adding through their virtue and arms Pisa and certain other large cities to its empire. But now is not the time to record the wars, the battles and the roll-call of deeds…

We use that form of constitution which, of all forms, is most directed to liberty and equality of citizens and which, because in all things it is fairest [aequissima], it is called ‘popular’. For we do not fear anyone as if they were a single lord, we do not enslave ourselves to the power of a few. There is equal liberty for all, submitting only to the laws, freed of fear of men. Truly, everyone has an equal hope of gaining honour, as long as they prove themselves industrious, mentally able and having a certain way of living [vivendi ratio] which is good [probata] and serious. For our city-state requires in its citizens virtue and goodness [probitatem]. Whoever here has this is considered of good enough stock to govern the state. Truly the city-state hates so passionately the arrogance and scorn that the more powerful can show that it has enshrined more and sharper laws against that tribe of men than on any other subject…

This is true liberty, this is civic equality, to have no fear of force or injustice, to have equality before the law for all citizens. But this cannot happen in the rule of either one or a few. For those who prefer royal rule seem to imagine a king with such virtue that no one ever could actually have. For what king has there ever been who has done everything in the kingdom they rule in the interest of their men and who have desired nothing for their own interests beyond the bare name of glory? From this it can be seen that the praise of monarchy is, as it were, a made-up private fantasy [ficta et umbratilis], rather something clear and real. As the historian says⁴, kings are more suspicious of the good than of the bad, since other’s virtue is always frightening to them. Nor is the lordship of a few much different from this. That leaves the popular as the only legitimate form of governing a state, in which there is true liberty, in which the fairness of the law is equal for all citizens, in which the studies of the virtues can thrive without suspicion. And, indeed, this ability to achieve honours which a free people have is an amazing spur to the talents of the citizens. Given the hope of honour, men rouse themselves and set to work; denied that hope, they decline into inertia. So, it is little wonder that in our city-state where that hope and ability exists, both intellects and hard work are most conspicuous…

The Latin text is available in Leonardo Bruni, Opere Letterarie e Politiche, ed. P. Viti (Torino, 1996), pp. 703 – 749 at pp. 708–18. Translation is by David Rundle.

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³ Florence had only finally captured Pisa two decades before this oration, in 1406. The war with Pisa was taken as a particular cause to praise the city at the start of Bruni’s History of Florence: see the edition by J. Hankins (Cambridge MA, 2001), p. 2.

⁴ ‘The historian’ is Sallust (86 – c. 35 BC), author of two histories of the last years of the Roman Republic.