Platina, *De principe / On the Prince* – extracts from Preface and Book I

Platina (1421-81) was born Bartolomeo Sacchi but took his sobriquet when he joined the loose group of intellectuals known as the Roman Academy and in which its acknowledged leader, who called himself Pomponius Laetus, insisted the others, like him, took on an ancient-sounding name. The Academy ended unhappily, closed down by Paul II on accusations of sodomy and encompassing the death of the Pope. Platina spent some months in prison, but after his release and the death (by natural causes) of Paul II, he gained favour under Sixtus IV and was appointed Papal Librarian in 1475.

His writings were eclectic, with his major work being the *Lives of the Popes* (in which he exacted posthumous revenge on Paul II). His ‘mirror for princes’ tract of which extracts are provided below was written in 1471 and dedicated to the future Marquis of Mantua, Federico Gonzaga (1441-84), the brother of one of Platina’s main patrons, the cardinal Francesco. Three years later, a revised version was produced, turning the text into a republican work, titled *De optimo cive / On the Best Citizen* and dedicated to Lorenzo de’ Medici, who had been implicitly criticised in the first recension.

The Latin text of the work was edited by G. Ferraiù (Palermo, 1979), and that text is available on-line on the Biblioteca Italiana website: [http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it/indice/visualizza_testo_html/bibit000358](http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it/indice/visualizza_testo_html/bibit000358) [last accessed 30th December 2014]. Sections of the work have appeared in English in a translation by Nicholas Webb in J. Kraye ed., *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1997), ii, pp. 88-108. There is some overlap in coverage between that translation and the extracts which appear below, but what is here is an independent version. You may want to look at Webb’s text for the other sections of the work that he provides.

**Preface to Federico Gonzaga**

When, in order to avoid the heat and dust of the City¹, I was in Albano² with your famous and most eminent brother, Francesco Gonzaga, cardinal of Mantua³, the most holy places, which I saw there and which are redolent with both the memory of a worthy man⁴ and with the shadows of famous men, moved me to write something. For seeing and appreciating those places which once were the seats of great philosophers and outstanding men is no little spur to intellect and learning. We think that some remnant of learning and some shadow lasts in those places and we believe it will always be there as often as we turn our mind from the senses to the understanding of hidden and remarkable things…

…I have never overlooked a remnant of antiquity, whether it be in the City or in the countryside, not so much because I am interested in discerning what is old as because I am interested in those men who have left to posterity something of their intellect and learning. And so, I feel that this keen interest has led me more than little to a range of thoughts and,

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¹ That is, Rome.
² Lake Albano, and the town of the same name, lies in the hills south of Rome. It had been a favoured retreat of the ancient Romans, who imported fish into the lake (and whose descendants still swim there and get eaten on the hillsides above it).
⁴ Presumably a reference to Ludovico Trevisan (1401-65), with whom Platina and Cardinal Gonzaga had stayed on a previous visit to Albano, in 1463: see Chambers, *Renaissance Cardinal*, p. 77.
particularly to this intention – to which I believe those very shadows themselves have encouraged me – that is, to publish something about princeship [de principatu] in your name. For to whom better should I write about the prince than to you, a prince yourself? I have looked around and certainly could not see anyone better, since you are born from that family that, if we want to consider the level of birth and gentility [agnationis et gentilitatis gradum] and the legitimate succession and eminence of your famous father and your most eminent brother, should easily be held to be of the first rank in Italy, and through the right of affinity, which provides the maternal line of the Marquis [ducis] and your wife, this name is merited without a doubt. What moves me most and gives me my loyalty and goodwill towards you and your family are the certain seeds of a great and excellent soul which I have recognised in you, even since you were an adolescent boy… I cannot easily express, my Federico, how much I desire that you, whom I have always singularly loved, should excel in all types of virtue, as is worthy of a prince. What certainly will come ungrudgingly from you, if you follow the generosity of your soul, is that these writings of mine on the best prince – asked for by you and addressed to you – you will (as you have promised to me) read attentively and frequently. This you should definitely do, moved both by the authority of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, whom I have imitated in this work, taking them as the best leaders [tanquam optimos duces], and through love of your fatherland, which begs you that before you take charge at the helm of the city, you may have learnt so that you can steer such a great ship into tranquil waters…

Book I

Chapter I: That there may be one prince

Lycurgus, the great Spartan, had such authority in the founding of laws and the arranging of rule [ordinandoque principatu ac regno] that, through the man’s divine mind, what he instituted – which nearly all peoples and nations used in ruling cities – was thought (as Plato says) to have come from Jupiter. Once, when he was being encouraged by someone to reorder Sparta as a government of the people [popularem potentiam], Lycurgus responded: ‘first you propose this for your own home’. He was showing that it would be badly done in a state [re publica], in which several people—not without great disaster—wish to lead, since greed and ambition, from which countless evils are born, would immediately arise from the multitude, whether it be about what should be considered at home or done abroad. For what people could there be—considering that temerity and cupidity [temeritas et cupiditas] are nearly like the companions and allies of the people—who could either rule others through judgement (which they lack themselves) or force them to act? Even the prince who acts as the

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5 Lodovico Gonzaga, the father of Federico and Francesco, and Marquis from 1444 until his death in 1478, was married to Barbara, daughter of the Margrave of Brandenburg, while Federico himself wed in 1463 Anne, daughter of the Duke of Bavaria.
6 The best known of ancient philosophers: the Athenian Socrates (d. 399 BC) himself left no works, but his teaching is recorded primarily in the dialogues by his pupil, Plato (d. c. 348 BC), and by Plato’s own student, Aristotle (384-322 BC). Of the four, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) is the only Roman, a lawyer, orator, senator and consul but also considered in the Renaissance to be Rome’s leading philosopher as well.
7 Lycurgus was the legendary lawgiver of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta.
8 Jupiter (sometimes called Jove, and Zeus in Greek) was the king of the gods.
safeguard of the good even against the people (as Aristotle says) can hardly keep the people in place through the fear of the law. The great Homer, all of whose poetry bubbles with precepts and insights of this sort, gives us this saying of the most wise Ulysses: the rule of the many is a bad thing. Let there be one prince and one king, whom the Lord God Almighty has ordained should be – as far as a man can be – like Himself. For the one King, Father of gods and of men, moves and rules the heavens [quod et coelum alio nomine licet appellare] and the earth, through the ages and with such enduring wisdom that not even for an instant do the heavenly bodies wander from their place. The tale of Phaeton was thought up not without reason to show that it is essential to have one prince by whose nod everything is ruled and by whose lightning strike those can be driven out of the state [e re publica] and into the river Eridanus who, like incompetent charioteers, steering badly, throw so many thousand men into the fire through their own stupidity.

Every establishment of princely rule is founded on a singular integrity [in una integritate], born of dignity itself or of virtue (either personal or inherited) or of benefits bestowed on the people through judgement or arms… The founders of cities should be counted in this number, among whom the founder of the City, Romulus, is justly listed. The Romans later did away with the name of king on account of Tarquin’s lack of self-control, but, lest virtue should be robbed of its reward, those who added to [Rome’s] command [ob auctum imperium] were named commanders [imperatores]. Among their number, when later through the corruption of the times the state was passed to the rule of one, are justly included Julius Caesar, Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, Trajan, the two Antonines and Severus Alexander. In contrast, we call those tyrants who, moved by the flighty favour of the people [populari aura moti], condemn virtue and nobility and do not refrain from imposing any type of scandal or hurt on whoever is best in their society… [such were] Tarquin in Rome and Herod in Israel [in Iudaeae]. Those men are very far from being the good parent which the Socratic philosopher

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In classical mythology, Phaeton was the son of the Sun God (Helios) who, being allowed to ride his father’s chariot for one day was too incompetent to avoid it going off course and had to be killed by Zeus. He fell from the heavens into the Eridanus, which is now the River Po, near whose banks Platina himself was born. The term phaeton was used in the nineteenth and early twentieth century for a type of horse-drawn carriage.

The City here is Rome – Romulus was its legendary founder: reared by a she-wolf with his brother Remus, they later agreed both to found a city, only for Romulus to kill his brother over a border dispute and so to become sole founder of the city. Machiavelli was later to praise Romulus’s virtue in killing his own brother: Discourses, Lix.

Romulus was the first of seven kings of the city, but, when Tarquin’s son raped Lucretia, the wife of one of the leading citizens, her husband, Brutus, led a rebellion which ejected Tarquin and thus the monarchy, substituting for it a constitution in which, each year, two consuls were elected to rule the city for one year. Imperator can also be translated as ‘general’ or (as in Webb’s version) as ‘emperor’ – in Latin, imperium means both ‘power’ or ‘sovereignty’ generally and ‘empire’, as an area of rule, specifically, while imperator means basically a man having power, but also gained the meaning of a military leader – a commander or general – and, later, came to mean emperor.

Here Platina completes his potted history of Rome: the republican rule lasted over centuries but descended into civil war (‘the corruption of the times’) from which Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, emerged the victor and was declared imperator, beginning a new era of one-man rule. Platina lists here the ‘good’ Emperors before implicitly acknowledging in the next sentence that there were also bad Emperors (he could have mentioned but does not Nero and Caligula).

Webb in his translation has ‘against anyone from the upper classes’, taking optimi (the best) to mean – as it can do – the aristocrats. Note that that latter term, derived from the Greek, also means ‘the best’ (aristoi in Greek).
Xenophon demonstrates in no way differs from the prince, since [these tyrants] are interested in what is to the advantage of themselves, not the public [non publica, sed private commode]. Nor, it is most important to realise, should you consider there to be only one or a few more tyrants, such as once existed in many cities, particularly Athens, for now they can also be found in Bologna and Florence. This is the concern of these people: since they are defended by no virtue whatsoever, they withdraw arms from their citizens, they oppress any of the best or expel them from the city and make that place empty of inhabitants, for that very emptiness and solitude makes them feel safer.

It is in no way part of our purpose to praise government by either the upper class [optimatum] or the people, the one easily descending into tyranny or the rule of the few, the other turning to a principality. Our search is for the best prince who, like a living law, rightly rules over everyone. Rightly it is done everywhere – as Pindar says – if, in some way, parents rule their offspring, elders their juniors, masters their slaves and so better should rule the worse, those with good sense rule those ignorant of things and the generous rule the ignoble. Our search, therefore, is for the wisest and the best prince, given not to leisure but to busyness, not to sleep but to being vigilant, who looks out for, concerns himself with and safeguards whatever tends towards the common utility of men [ad commune hominum utilitatem]. The eyes of princes are not private but public and are like those lights which show those erring from the way. It is necessary for him who excels in dignity and authority to excel all others in good sense, judgement, diligence and hard work. Nor would it be amiss for the same man, if at all possible, to excel in whatever form of learning and virtue, by which, strengthened by several props, he could carry before him a certain aura of divinity [admirationem quondam divinitatis] and thus more easily keep the people in their rightful place.

Chapter II: On the religion of the prince

Religion is the strongest foundation for organising authority and establishing princely rule, for, as everyone knows, those who have more than a modicum of faith – believing the Lord to be immortal and capable of everything, and realising that they achieve whatever men hold excellent and outstanding not through their own diligence but as a divine gift – protect themselves, if they respect, worship and revere the author of such a gift. So you should take case that the one Lord is dutifully and honestly worshipped in your city and lands … And this will be a safeguard for you yourself and a not insignificant strength for you in protecting your rule, for, as Aristotle says, men are less likely to shun him whom they detect to be given to religion, and are less likely to dare to be against him who they see is a friend to God...

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15 Xenophon (d. 354 BC) was, like Plato, a pupil of Socrates.
16 When mentioning ancient Athens, Platina is referring to the Thirty Tyrants, an oligarchy installed in 404 BC and opposed by, among others, Socrates. You will want to consider whom Platina might have mind when he refers to present tyrants.
17 In Roman Law, the Emperor is described as a ‘living law’.
18 Ancient Greek poet of the early fifth century, much of whose work is lost and who is here quoted from Plato.