A Raven with a Halo: The Translation of Aristotle's Politics

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Imprint Academic Ltd

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3901
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THE TRANSLATION OF ARISTOTLE’S POLITICS

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I
Traditions and Translations

Aristotle’s Politics opens with a passage which has had a pervasive influence in the history of political thought.

Observation shows us that every polis is a community [koinōnía] and that all communities are instituted for the purpose of attaining some good . . . [T]he particular community which is most sovereign and includes all the rest will pursue this aim most, and will be directed at the most sovereign of all goods. This most sovereign and inclusive community is what we call a polis or political community [koinōnía politike].  

The closing phrase, translated into Latin in 1438 by the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni as ‘civitas appelator & civilis societas’, has served as a paradigm for countless subsequent thinkers. From the fifteenth century to the close of the eighteenth, ‘civil society’ ['societas civilis', ‘société civile’, ‘bürgerliche Gesellschaft’] was routinely used as a synonym for ‘state’ ['civitas', ‘cité’] and ‘political society’. This convention was unchallenged by such otherwise innovative thinkers as Machiavelli and Hobbes, was taken up unquestioningly by the modern natural right tradition, and was broken only in 1820 when Hegel introduced a rigorous conceptual distinction between state and civil society in his Philosophy of Right.  

How did Bruni—a figure not normally accorded a prominent place in the Pantheon of great political theorists—create a convention which was followed without exception for something close to five hundred years? What led him to the by no means obvious choice of ‘civilis societas’ as a translation for Aristotle’s ‘koinōnía politike’? And what does his understanding of how to go about translating the Politics tell us about the way in which a book becomes a ‘classic’ in the tradition of political thought?

1 Aristotle, Politics, 1252a (in quotations from the Politics I have generally followed the Barker translation, making minor modifications when necessary).

To address these questions we need to look beyond Bruni’s translation and try to sort out the relationship between texts, translations, and traditions in the history of political thought—a topic which, surprisingly enough, has rarely drawn the attention of historians of political thought. We shall begin by looking at Aristotle’s text itself and examining what it achieves with the substitution of ‘koinōnia politikē’ for the more conventional ‘polis’. We shall then contrast the way Bruni translated the Politics with the strategy adopted by the book’s first Latin translator, William of Moerbeke. Having sketched the major differences in the way each translator went about his task, we shall play each off against Aristotle’s text and see how each translator’s choice of terms betrays a different response to Aristotle’s argument. Finally, we shall close with a few reflections on the differences between Bruni’s attitude towards the Politics and that of subsequent translators.

II
Aristotle’s Substitution

The passage from the Politics whose translation will concern us here can itself be regarded as a ‘translation’ of sorts. Roman Jakobson has suggested that translation be understood as a process which takes place on three levels: (1) intra-lingual rewordings—the substitution of an equivalent term for another within the same language, (2) translation proper—the attempt to find equivalents in one language for a text written in another, and (3) ‘transmutations’—the recasting of a work into a new medium (for example, the making of a film based on a novel). Viewed from this perspective, what Aristotle has done in the opening passage of the Politics is a ‘translation’ of the first sort: ‘polis’, a term in general use, has been replaced by a more technical term, ‘koinōnia politikē’, a term which takes on a fairly specific set of connotations within Aristotle’s argument.

Aristotle’s rewording allowed him (and, equally importantly, allows the reader) to talk about the polis in at least three new ways. First, it invites an attempt to see what the polis shares with such other communities as families and villages—the two other types of koinōnia discussed in Book I of the Politics. Aristotle argues that all three consist of groups of individuals who


4 Because of the condition of Book I of the Politics it is unclear whether Aristotle himself was able to carry this analysis through to completion. He seems to commit himself to an analysis of three forms of koinōnia: the polis, the kōme (village), and the oikos (household). Beginning with the least self-sufficient of these, the oikos, he analyses the various sub-communities which are found within it (the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, masters and slaves, and between the head of the household and the ‘art of acquisition’) (1253b). He has
differ from each other in various ways, but nevertheless pursue a common
goal. Their pursuit of this goal is marked by a concern with justice, fairness,
and reciprocity [to dikaión] and they are united in this pursuit by bonds of
good will and fellowship [philia]. These two traits—to dikaión and philia
are, as Aristotle stressed in the Ethics, the hallmarks of every koinônia.5

Secondly, Aristotle’s rewording also forces the question of what distin-
hguishes the polis from other communities as a uniquely political
community. The remainder of Book I (and, in a sense, the rest of the Politics)
is an answer to this question. Unlike the family, the polis is a community
whose members are all equal; unlike either the family or the village, the polis
is the ‘final and perfect community’ [koinônia teleios]. It is the most inclusive
of all communities, subsuming all the rest. It is also the most self-sufficient of
all communities, fulfilling ends which they only imperfectly attain and
striving for goals which they are not even suited to attempt.6

Finally, Aristotle’s rewording allows one to ask if communities other than
the polis could also be classified as examples of koinônia politikē. To the
extent that Aristotle considered the issue at all, his answer was no. The polis
was the sole community he was willing to designate as political. He knew that
there were other, larger actors in the political struggles of the ancient world.
Greek cities regularly formed military and political alliances [symmachia],
outside the Greek world there were cities like Babylon which occupied
territories that dwarfed the polis, and Aristotle lived to see Athens reduced to
a Macedonian protectorate. But an alliance is not a koinônia; its members do
not differ from one another.7 Likewise, for Aristotle, Babylon was a polis of
only the most dubious sort—a city so bloated that when it fell, it took ‘three
whole days before some of its inhabitants knew of the fact’.8 The dominance
of Macedonia over the Greek city-states was simply ignored.

Thus, even though Aristotle’s substitution of koinônia politikē for polis
allowed later readers of the Politics to ask whether the political entities in
which they lived could be understood in the terms of Aristotle’s analysis,

little to say about the kôme, however, leading Barker to conjecture that the manuscript of Book
I is incomplete; see his note on p. 38.

5 For Aristotle’s most detailed discussion of the concept, see his Ethics, VIII: 9. Helpful
discussions may be found in Riedel, Metaphysik und Metapolitik, p. 31; M.I. Finley, ‘Aristotle

6 Politics, 1252b.

7 See Politics, 1261a, 1274b, 1328a. Newman’s notes on these and related passages are
extremely helpful, see Vol. II, pp. 231–2, Vol. III, pp. 131–2, and his description of the polis as
‘an union in a compound form of uncompounded elements which continue to subsist as elements
or parts within the compounded whole’ in Vol. I, p. 43.

8 Politics, 1276a.
Aristotle’s own account remained tied to the immediate reality of the polis. Tied to it, it vanished with it. There is a passing reference to the *Politics* in the second century AD, another comment on it in the fifth century, and then nothing until the thirteenth century when the text, miraculously recovered, made its debut in Latin. But by then it was not at all clear what it meant to call something a ‘koinōnia politike’.

III
Translating the Rewording

When William of Moerbeke, a Flemish Dominican who served in the court of Pope Clement IV (1265–1268), undertook the first Latin translation of the *Politics* sometime between 1260 and 1265, he faced a text in a foreign language which posed unfamiliar questions about an alien set of institutions. It was a message from another world, transmitted without the usual mediation of Arabic translations and commentaries. His translation, which has been both praised for its literalness and damned for its obscurity, was the product of a struggle to find Latin equivalents for Greek terms whose meanings Moerbeke could only guess.

The translation is filled with terms which are simply transliterated, not translated. *Polis*, clearly enough, was *civitas*. But Moerbeke appeared to have no idea what Aristotle had in mind when he marshalled the many terms, all deriving from *polis*, which designated such matters as the constitution of the *polis* (*politeia*), the body of citizens who enjoy civic rights (*politeuma*), or those activities which are distinctively political (*politeuein*). On occasion, Moerbeke followed suit and generated parallel terms from the Latin *civitas*.

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* I have used F. Susemihl’s edition of the translation (Leipzig, 1872). For information on Moerbeke’s life, see Martin Grabmann’s works: *Forschung über die lateinischen Aristotelesübersetzungen des XIII Jahrhunderts* (Münster, 1916), and Guglielmo di Moerbeke, O.P. *il traduttore delle opere di Aristotele* (Rome, 1946). See also James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D’Aquino* (New York, 1970), pp. 149–51 which argues, against Grabmann, that Moerbeke’s translations were carried out independently from his association with Thomas Aquinas.
Thus Aristotle’s ‘politikon zoon’ became a ‘civile animal’.11 But more often he was literally at a loss for words and was forced to make up new ones. And so Aristotle’s ‘koinònia politikè’ became a ‘communicatio politica’.

In contrast, Leonardo Bruni Aretino, a humanist and rhetorician who twice served as the head of the Florentine chancellory, completed his 1438 translation of the Politics with few hesitations.12 For Bruni, the world of the polis was not foreign. In his eyes Athens was rather like Florence. He had used Aristide’s Panathenaius, a paon to the Athenian polis, as the basis for his own Laudatio Florentinae Urbis and he drew liberally from Pericles’ funeral oration for his Oratio Funerbris for Nanni degli Strozzi.13 Nor were Aristotle’s questions alien ones. They were rather like Bruni’s own: What makes politics possible? On what does the civic life of a free city rest? Bruni was not at a loss for words; Florentine public life provided them. Athens, like Florence, was a ‘civilis societas’. For the next four centuries translators followed Bruni’s lead.14

There is a world of difference between the terms Moerbeke and Bruni used to translate Aristotle’s ‘koinònia politikè’. Moerbeke’s ‘communicatio politica’ is a curious hybrid. He was apparently unsure of what to do with ‘koinònia’ and settled on ‘communicatio’ only after revising an earlier draft of a translation of Books I and II which employed the more conventional ‘communitas’.15 His ultimate choice, however, becomes understandable if we realize that there was one paradigm which he could not ignore: St. Jerome’s translation of the New Testament. Koinònia appears throughout

11 Moerbeke may have been following the precedent of Burgundio’s translation of Nemesias, see Ullmann, Medieval Foundations, pp. 90–1. See also Moerbeke’s use of ‘civilis communitatis’ at 1253a.37–8.


14 I have made use of an edition of Bruni’s translation published in Paris in 1515 which is now in the rare book collection of the New York Public Library. The passage in question is rendered in subsequent translations as ‘città & civile società’ (Brucioli’s translation of 1547), ‘cité et compagnie civile’ (le Roy’s translation of 1562), ‘citie or ciuill societe’ (an anonymous English translation of le Roy from 1598), ‘bürgersche Gesellschaft’ and ‘Staatsgesellschaft’ (Schlosser’s translation of 1798), and ‘bürgerliche Vereinigung’, ‘bürgerliche Gesellschaft’ and ‘Staatsvereinigung’ (Garve’s translation of 1799).

15 See Politica: translationes prior imperfecta, ed. P. Michaud-Quentin, Aristoteles Latinus, XXXIX:1 (Paris, 1961). The draft may possibly have been done by a translator other than Moerbeke and then used by Moerbeke as the starting point for his own effort.
the Greek New Testament, and plays an especially important role in the writings of St Paul. Sensitive to the resonances the term had for Greeks—it was associated with cultic and sacrificial feasts—Paul used the term in the joint sense of a *fellowship* between believers and their *participation*, through the Eucharist, in the body and blood of Christ. With few exceptions (at one point Jerome alternated between *communicatio* and *participatio* to exploit the term’s dual meaning and, in a few of the term’s more mundane uses, Jerome—who was a master of Roman legal terminology in addition to his other accomplishments—used *societatem* *koinônia* appeared in the Latin New Testament as *communicatio*.

Jerome could provide no aid, however, in translating *politeia* or any of the other derivatives of the term *polis*. *Polis* occurred frequently in the New Testament and was regularly translated as *civitas*. But its derivatives were extremely rare and, since the term was usually used to designate a geographical area rather than a uniquely political space (it should be remembered that under Roman rule the *polis* had been reduced to an administrative unit with little or no independent political responsibilities), the terms derived from it have little or nothing to do with the activity of politics. A *polites* was a neighbour, not a citizen, and a *politeia* was a pious order of life, not a constitution of a *polis*. Only in one place was *polis* used to denote something other than concrete geographical locales: in *Revelations*. But what was said about political life there was hardly likely to incite an outburst of civic pride.

Bruni drew on different paradigms: Cicero and Roman Law. Although Cicero employed *communitas* in some contexts where the Greek *koinônia* would have been appropriate, and while in at least one instance he used *congregatio* as a translation for *koinônia*, his most frequent recourse when denoting communities of men who have united themselves under systems of

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17 For uses of the term in the sense of ‘fellowship’ see *I Cor.* 1:9; *Phil.* 1:5. As ‘participation’ see *I Cor.* 10:16; *II Cor.* 8:23, *Ac.* 2:42; *Phlm.* 17.

18 Jerome’s departures from the convention were at *I Cor.* 1:9 (*societatem*); *II Cor.* 8:23 (*socius*); *Phlm.* 17 (*socius*); and *Luke* 5:10 (*socii*). The legalistic cast of much of the language of the Vulgate has been discussed by Ullmann, *History*, p. 21.


law was to the term *societas*. The Latin and Greek terms were even more directly linked in Justinian's *Institutes*: 'A partnership [Societatem] is formed either of the whole goods of the contracting parties, to which the Greeks give the special name *koinōpraxia*, or for some particular business as the sale or purchase of slaves, oil, wine, or wheat.' A category of private law, a *societas* consisted of a fixed number of members, united under a contract which was dissolved (or at least had to be renegotiated) upon the death of any one of them. New members, likewise, must draw up a contract with the existing members before they enter into association with them. Each member was expected to contribute something to the common end and an element of *fraternitas* was claimed to be present. All the members are equally liable for the negligence of any one member and, in the event of any disagreements, arbiters are drawn from within the *societas*, not from outside.

The two translations appear to inhabit different worlds: that of the monk and that of the civic humanist. That, at any rate, was how Bruni saw it. He loathed Moerbeke's translation not simply because it betrayed an ignorance of the rudiments of Latin elocution. It was also uninformed by the experience of the free civic life of Renaissance republics. Bruni felt that in the absence of this experience there was simply no way that Moerbeke could have understood what Aristotle was saying.

But this is too neat. It stacks the deck too completely against Moerbeke who, after all, was no stranger to cities. He lived in a world of rebellious communes and had travelled to Greece in search of texts and of guidance in

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translating them. We cannot account for the differences in the two translations solely by virtue of the different vocabularies and experiences on which their authors drew. There is a confounding factor at work here as well: the way each man approached the text and the way each understood the tasks of the translator.

**Texts**

What sort of book did each translator think he was translating? For Bruni, the answer is clear enough. The *Politics* was a classic, a part of the 'golden stream of eloquence' which flowed from Plato through Aristotle and Cicero but was interrupted during those dark ages which knew neither eloquence nor free cities. The stream could be re-entered only in Bruni's day, since only then were citizens and cities again to be found. The great achievement of Florentine culture, Bruni argued, was that it allowed the men of the fifteenth century to see the philosophers, orators, and learned men of antiquity face to face, rescued from the veil of 'barbarous' Scholastic translations. And when the men of the fifteenth century looked at the men of antiquity, it was as if they were looking at a mirror.

For Moerbeke, on the other hand, the *Politics* was simply an old text, not an ancient one. The distinction is crucial. More of the classical heritage survived during the Middle Ages than Bruni was willing to admit. Before the Renaissance there were classical renascences. Ciceronian rhetoric passed in and out of fashion. Classical themes passed in and out of literature and art. But these renascences were marked by a curious characteristic which Erwin Panofsky has termed the 'principle of disjunction'. Classical and Christian motifs were regularly intermingled in a bizarre montage. For example, an illustration in a manuscript from around 1100 shows Jupiter seated on a throne, with a raven (the sacred bird of augury) at his side. The theme is classical enough, but the raven, as Panofsky goes on to note, 'is surrounded by a neat little halo because the illustrator involuntarily assimilated the image of a ruler enthroned and accompanied by a sacred bird to that of Pope

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24 For general discussions of Bruni's stance towards classical texts see, in addition to the previously cited work of Baron and Seigel, Helene Harth, 'Leonardo Brunis Selbstverstandnis als Übersetzer', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 50 (1968), pp. 41–63.


Gregory visited by the dove of the Holy Spirit. Other examples abound: Hercules appears as Fortitude, Phaedra as the Virgin Mary, Apollo rides in a medieval peasant’s cart, and Trojans dress in medieval armour and are called ‘barons’ and ‘damsels’. In these cases antiquity is neither foreign nor ‘classical’. It is simply old—a earlier part of a tradition which continues without interruption.

Moerbeke thus confronted a text which, though puzzling, was nevertheless presumed to lie on a continuum with other, more familiar texts. Bruni, in contrast, confronted a text which was a member of a distinct and separate group of works: ‘classics’. To return to Panofsky’s argument, Bruni’s age viewed classical culture from something approximating the fixed distance of Renaissance painting. The past could be surveyed and comprehended from a distance which ‘prohibited direct contact’ but which nevertheless allowed for ‘a total and rationalized view’. ‘The classical past was looked upon, for the first time, as a totality cut off from the present; and therefore, as an ideal to be longed for instead of a reality to be both utilized and feared.’ Because of the temporal distance which separated Athens and Florence, Bruni could turn from his *societas civilis* to consider Aristotle’s *koinōnia politikē* and marvel at their similarity.

**Translations**

Closely related to this difference in the way each saw the text was a difference in the way each saw the task of the translator. For Bruni, it was the responsibility of a translator to consider the total effect of the text he was translating and to produce similar effects in his own language. Aristotle was an eloquent writer—or so Cicero (who knew only Aristotle’s so-called ‘exoteric’ works) had testified—and a translator of the *Politics* must find a way of reproducing this eloquence. The way to do this was to turn to the best available Latin stylists and learn from them how one went about producing a Latin text which was as eloquent as Aristotle’s Greek.

When Bruni spoke of eloquence he had something more in mind than mere ornamentation. Eloquence was the crucial means through which truths were articulated, especially in the sphere of practical philosophy, where the ultimate index of truth was the ability of the text to move men to good

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32 Bruni, *Schriften*, pp. 46–8, 74, 77.
actions. Accordiy, a translation was more than a transposition of terms from one language to another. Coluccio Salutati, Bruni’s mentor and immediate predecessor in the chancellory, had advised translators to ‘consider things, not words’. A translator had to look beyond the words of an author and grasp what it was that the author was trying to reveal.

Moerbeke’s translation had been governed by different assumptions. The medieval philosophy of language was concerned, in contrast to Salutati, not with things [res], but with words, or more precisely, with modes of signification [modi significandi]. While Bruni’s assumptions have re-minded certain present-day commentators of hermeneutic approaches to language, the medieval approach has been likened by others to current concerns with universal grammar. The ambitious project of medieval grammarians was to clarify the logic inherent within language, a logic which was independent of the particular form a given language took. Proceeding on these assumptions, Alonzo Garcia of Cartagena, a Spanish bishop who knew no Greek, had no reservations about asserting the superiority of Moerbeke’s translation over Bruni’s. ‘Since . . . Aristotle himself did not attain to reason on account of authority, but to authority on account of reason, whatever accords with reason should be thought what Aristotle said.’ Eloquence (the criterion invoked by humanists who knew no Greek but nevertheless felt confident in correcting Scholastic translations was irrelevant to Alonzo. Manifestatio, a clear and distinct style which permitted the drawing of strict demarcations between categories, was his stylistic ideal. The task of a translator was to provide an interpretatio, a literal reproduction of the terms of the original text. The labour of expositio, the logical analysis which would make sense out of the text the translator produced, was left to other hands.

“ Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy, p. 125.
“ Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy, p. 125.
From 'Polis' to 'Civitas'

The equivalents Moerbeke and Bruni proposed for Aristotle's 'koinōnia politike' thus differ both because they had divergent conceptions of what it is that they were translating and because they had differing notions of what was at stake in the act of translation. With these differences in mind it is possible to return to the point broached and withdrawn a few moments ago: the contrasting ways in which Moerbeke and Bruni understood what it meant for something to be a civitas.

By Moerbeke’s time, 'civitas' had become a good deal more ambiguous in its meaning than 'polis' had been in Aristotle’s day. Two clusters of meanings may be distinguished. Civitas may be employed either in legal discourse as a term denoting a specific region over which political rule is exercised, or it can be used, within philosophical discussions, to refer to an arena of action which is public rather than private.⁴⁰ Nothing prevents philosophers from using the term in the same way as jurists and politicians. But nothing ensures that the two usages will coincide.

The history of the legal usage of the term is the more complex of the two. In Roman Law, civitas denoted a subdivision of a province consisting of an urban centre and its surrounding territory. It came into being when a magistrate appointed a 'defensor civitatis' to serve as its legal guardian. This usage survived the collapse of the empire in the west and by the thirteenth century, a civitas could be a surviving Roman civitas, a newer city judged to be as significant or as heavily fortified as one of the older Roman cities, or an old forum or trading centre — typically outside the borders of the old western empire — which had grown in importance to the point where the mantle was bestowed on it as well.⁴¹ But by and large, the most typical characteristic which marked a civitas between the sixth and thirteenth centuries was that it was a bishopric.⁴² The reason for this is not far to seek. At a time when the administrative organs of the empire were in total disarray, the Church was the sole claimant to the title of defensor civitatis. What civic life there was,

⁴⁰ See Michaud-Quantin, pp. 111–17 for a general discussion of usages of the term civitas prior to Moerbeke's translation.


before the revival of trade owed its existence to the power and influence of the Church.\textsuperscript{43}

Sometime before the eleventh century new types of towns—designated (not always consistently) by such terms as portus, wik, and burg—began to emerge as a consequence of the revival of long distance trade.\textsuperscript{44} Their legal systems differed markedly from the surrounding area and in some of them there were considerable tensions between the old ecclesiastical authorities and the new commercial order.\textsuperscript{45} The transformation in northern Italy was even more dramatic. With the weakening of the hegemony of the German emperor in the tenth century, power passed to local authorities—at first to bishops, but by the third quarter of the eleventh century to associations of urban laymen.\textsuperscript{46} Both these new commercial cities and the Italian communes frequently functioned as autonomous political units. But, owing to their unconventional origins, neither could unproblematically be termed a civitas.

The history of the philosophical usage of civitas is a bit more straightforward. This use played on a peculiar aspect of the legal usage. Strictly speaking, civitas referred to the collectivity of citizens, not to the physical urban settlement.\textsuperscript{47} As Cicero wrote, 'What is a civitas if not a society united by laws?'\textsuperscript{48} And laws could reach far indeed. By the last days of the Roman Empire, those who sought to legitimate imperial rule had appropriated most of the crucial metaphors from Hellenistic and Eastern religions in order to portray the Empire as the long-promised universal city, a city with walls


\textsuperscript{44} Gerhard Köbler, 'Civitas und vicus, burg, stat, dorf, und wik', in \textit{Vor- und Frühfromen der europäischen Stadt im Mittelalter}, ed. Jankuhn et al., Köbler’s careful account casts doubt on some of the more clear-cut distinctions made in Pirenne, \textit{Medieval Cities}, pp. 142–4 and repeated by Latouche, \textit{Birth of Western Europe}, pp. 246–51.


\textsuperscript{46} See Lauro Martines, \textit{Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy}, (New York, 1979), pp. 7–21 for a lucid brief discussion.

\textsuperscript{47} Michaud-Quantin, pp. 354–5.

\textsuperscript{48} Cicero, \textit{The Republic}, 1:1:49 (cf. 1:xxv:39 which is paraphrased by Augustine in \textit{The City of God}, II:21 and XIX:21) and VI:xiii:13 (a part of the Somnium Scipionis and hence a passage which would have been available throughout the Middle Ages). For a general discussion see Victor Ehrenberg, 'Some Roman Concepts of State and Empire' in his \textit{Man, State, and Deity: Essays in Ancient History} (London, 1974), pp. 107–26.
made up of far-flung cities.\textsuperscript{49} And even as the walls on the frontiers were being breached and real walls were being thrown up once again around now-threatened cities (sometimes with such haste that public buildings were left outside them), the Archbishop of Hippo delivered a sermon that argued that while the physical city [\textit{urbs}] might be destroyed by invaders, the \textit{civitas} itself (the body of citizens) was indestructible.\textsuperscript{50}

Thus, by the time Moerbeke began his translation the term \textit{civitas} was incredibly elastic. It could designate a bishopric or a commercial centre. It could refer to a body of citizens living under a uniform set of laws or to a spiritual community embracing both the living and the dead. It could be thought of as a \textit{communicatio politica} or as a \textit{societas civilis}. The choices of both Moerbeke and Bruni were warranted by the ambiguities of \textit{civitas}—the Latin term which seemed so unavoidable as an equivalent for Aristotle's \textit{polis}. But with these choices both Bruni and Moerbeke were attempting to transpose Aristotle's account into times which in crucial ways lacked the terms necessary to comprehend his argument. Having seen how their choices rested on different understandings of the nature of texts, translations, and cities, we must now take a closer look at each to see how they both broke down.

\section*{IV}

The \textit{Civitas} as \textit{Communicatio Politica}

The great virtue of Moerbeke's strategy of translation is that it makes obvious those moments when a translator is in trouble. The uneasy shifting between '\textit{communitas}' and '\textit{communicatio}' and the resort to the Hellenism '\textit{politica}' should serve as ample warning that something is happening in Aristotle's text which Moerbeke is incapable of capturing. We have seen how Moerbeke's curious rendering of '\textit{koinōnia politikē}' as '\textit{communicatio politica}' drew in part on conventions that had been established by St. Jerome. But we have yet to reflect on the difficulties which drove him to such devices.

\textit{Community Degree Zero}

We can make some progress in understanding these difficulties if, instead of focusing on the models that can be found for the terms Moerbeke chose,

\textsuperscript{49} For a helpful survey see Lidia Storoni Mazzolani, \textit{The Idea of the City in Roman Thought: From Walled City to Spiritual Commonwealth}, trans. S. O'Donnell (Bloomington, Indiana, 1970).

\textsuperscript{50} Augustine, \textit{De urbis excidio}, 6.6; for the sudden constriction of urban space with the invasions, see Latouche, \textit{Birth of Western Europe}, pp. 7–8 and Vercauteren, ‘Die spätantike \textit{Civitas}’, p. 127.
we consider some of the terms which Moerbeke did not choose. What is striking here is the wealth of alternative candidates. The list minimally includes universitas, societas, corpus, and collegium. While some of Moerbeke’s contemporaries argued that all of these terms meant more or less the same thing, others sensed (or forced) distinctions which made some of the terms less suitable than others as equivalents for Aristotle’s koinonia. Collegium can be eliminated rather quickly. By the thirteenth century it had come to be used, along with corpus, in a fairly specific way within canon law as a subclassification under universitas. A collegium was a corporate body [universitas] in which all goods are held in common, e.g. a religious brotherhood. Corpus, in contrast, was reserved for those corporations in which common ownership was not the case. Thus, were there no other alternatives available, it would appear that koinonia could best be translated by either corpus or universitas.

But other choices were possible: societas and communitas. These terms were used during the thirteenth century in ways which frequently set them apart from both universitas and corpus. While universitas typically referred to the whole as distinguished from the parts which constituted it (as is made clearest in the technical use of the term in rhetoric, logic, and jurisprudence) communitas and societas tended to speak of collectivities primarily from the perspective of their members. It is the associates and not the association which is highlighted. Moerbeke’s communicatio was intimately related to this group of terms, sharing a common root with communitas and casting a similarly individualist light on the collectivity. By likening the membership of individuals in a community to their participation in the Eucharist, the sanctity of the individual communicant is emphasized.


Johannes Andreae, a canonist, argued that all of the terms listed here meant the same thing; see the discussions in Gierke, Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht, III, pp. 247–8 and Michael Wilks, The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 23–4.

Michaud-Quantin, p. 63.

For universitas, see Michaud-Quantin, pp. 11–57. The most important legal text for this interpretation of the term is the Digest, III:4:3–5, 8–10. For societas, see Michaud-Quantin, pp. 64–9. The relevant legal texts are Digest, XVI:2 and Code, 4:37. Cicero (e.g. De Off., 1.5) was also an important influence on this understanding of the term. For communitas, see Michaud-Quantin pp. 147–53. Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between universitas and societas in On Human Conduct (Oxford, 1975), pp. 199–205 is a good deal clearer than most medieval sources, and hence—despite whatever merits it may have as an analytic tool—is not a reliable historical guide.

Communicatio, however, also had important affinities with the term corpus. A term rich in metaphorical associations, corpus, like communicatio, was intimately connected with the Eucharist. In the twelfth century, the use of ‘corpus Christi mysticum’ as a synonym for the Church gained official sanction. But prior to that time, the phrase had been used to designate the sacrament itself.\textsuperscript{56} When used to denote collectivities, corpus had the advantage of providing ready-to-hand metaphors which rank-ordered the parts of the community in a strict hierarchy. The image of the ‘headless body’ was a particularly popular way for bishops to explain to prelates why they needed the guidance of superiors, while Popes could make use of the image of the sacerdotal order as the ‘head and soul’ of the body politic as a way of reminding Emperors of their dependence on the Papacy.\textsuperscript{57}

A steady infusion of Roman elements into canon law gave legal support to these metaphors. Innocent IV (1243–54) was a master of such arguments and exploited one particular way of defining corpus—as universitas—and one particular understanding of universitas—it was an entity with no legally relevant will of its own and thus had to be treated as if it were a minor: it needed a superior who could act as its tutor.\textsuperscript{58} The effect of this interpretation was to accentuate those elements of German customary law which focused on relations of dependence to the virtual exclusion of those elements which stressed the common interests shared by lord and follower. Thus Munt, the protection which a superior gave to a subject, became virtually identical with the Roman category of manus, the power which a father exercised over his family.\textsuperscript{59}

Understood in this way, corpus and universitas clearly would not do as translations of Aristotle’s koinònia. The terms move on different planes. Aristotle saw the political community as a community of equals and pushed all relations of subjugation to the margins of his account, where they served

\textsuperscript{56} Wilks, Problem of Sovereignty, p. 123.


\textsuperscript{58} Gierke, Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht, III, pp. 285–6, 251. In Gierke’s interpretation, Innocent represents the culmination of the canonist tradition; Tierney’s more balanced discussion (p. 136) stresses that Innocent’s interpretation of universitas was in many ways exceptional.

\textsuperscript{59} For a concise discussion of the issues sketched here see Walter Ullmann, ‘Juristic Obstacles to the Emergence of the Concept of the State in the Middle Ages’, Annali di Storia dei diritto, 13 (1969), pp. 43–64; for the treatment of Munt and manus, see p. 50. For a more detailed discussion of the notion of Munt see Walter Schlesinger, ‘Lord and Follower in Germanic Institutional History’, trans. F.L. Cheyette, in Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe, ed. F.L. Cheyette (New York, 1968), pp. 64–9. Schlesinger also notes the ties between the terms denoting lordship (e.g. dominus) and those dealing with the household (e.g. domus), see pp. 65–7.
either as contrasts to the authentically political community or as preconditions for the existence of the polis. Munt, manus, corpus, and universitas, in contrast, defined relationships almost solely in terms of networks of dependence and mutual obligation. At the margins of this account, covered by the newly popular and increasingly disreputable terms commune and societas, stood communities of equals.⁶⁰

- Moerbeke's communicatio thus stood at 'degree zero', midway between the individualistic communitas / societas group and the totalistic universitas / corpus group. It shared aspects of each but belonged to neither. Meaning all things to all people, it passed on the difficulties of determining what a 'communicatio politica' was to the commentators which would come after the translation was completed. But if Moerbeke's choice for 'koinōnia' was so equivocal as to be virtually meaningless, his choice for a term to render the rest of Aristotle's term was even more bizarre. For with 'politica' he was not attempting a translation at all. He was simply marking a term he could not understand.

Absences

We should be careful not to make too much of the fact that Moerbeke had no term available to serve as an equivalent for Aristotle's 'politikê'. It should be taken neither as evidence that medieval theorists lacked ways of talking about politics nor that they had no way of designating those institutions which were concerned with the protection of the public good. Categories like 'ratio publicae' and 'ratio status' were in use long before Machiavelli allegedly reintroduced a concern with politics to a world which had somehow managed to forget about it.⁶¹ But while it is clear that medieval theorists could talk about political authorities, it is not at all clear that they could speak of distinctly political spaces. And that is what one needed to do in order to understand Aristotle's argument.

The clearest way of illustrating the point is to ask how Aristotle and how a medieval theorist would go about arguing that something is not political. The conflation of public and private Roman Law categories (for example the use of dominium or manus to refer to the exercise of power outside the

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⁶⁰ Guibert de Nogent described the term commune as 'new and detestible'. See Bloch, Feudal Society, pp. 354-5. The term societas had also been the seat of considerable controversy, having been used by lay teachers at the University of Paris in the struggle which began in 1252—eight years before the earliest date for Moerbeke's translation — against restrictions imposed upon their teaching of Aristotle by ecclesiastical authorities. See Michaud-Quantin, p. 69.

⁶¹ For a vigorous discussion of the importance of such categories for the emergence of the notion of the state, see Post, Studies in Medieval Legal Thought, pp. 241-309. For a contrasting view on the question of whether such notions are enough to allow one to speak of such a thing as 'the medieval state'. see Otto Brunner, 'Feudalism', in Lordship and Community, ed. Cheyette, pp. 48-56.
household) did not go unchallenged. Bulgarus argued in the mid-twelfth century that a tutor was not a dominus—who has the right to dispose of property as he sees fit—but rather serves as a procurator—whose actions are limited to the protection of his ward.\textsuperscript{62} The distinction is essentially the one which Aquinas, with the aid of Aristotle, made between a tyrant and a king in De Regimine Principum.\textsuperscript{63} Bulgarus, however, made the argument without recourse to Aristotle. But what he could not do was to argue that the rule of the father differed from that of the statesman because the communities in which this rule was exercised were fundamentally different: the household being a community of unequals concerned with procuring the goods necessary for the continuance of life, the polis being a community of equals which exists for the sake of the good life. In the medieval universe there were no exclusively political places and no exclusively non-political places. One spoke of powers and offices, not of places and communities.

Nothing shows this more clearly than the curious way in which terms which we would classify as either civil or ecclesiastical were constantly interwoven. Where we would want to impose a distinction between church and state, the medieval theorist speaks of 'regnum' and 'sacerdotium'—divergent claims of power asserted by secular and religious authorities over the same community.\textsuperscript{64} Michael Wilks has captured the complexities of this way of thinking quite succinctly.

The Ecclesia is both a single corporation and the greatest of a hierarchy of corporations stretching from the whole world down to the lowest political unity, the village or the manor, by way of the kingdom, the province, and the city. Each of these communities is at the same time as much a civil as an ecclesiastical corporation: the universal church is the universal empire, the kingdom is equally an episcopal province, the city is a bishopric, and the village a parish.\textsuperscript{65}

The ambivalent character of the term 'civitas' can now be seen to be only one instance of a way of looking at politics which, at every turn, frustrates a clear demarcation between the political and the ecclesiastical.

Much the same, however, could be said of the ancient polis. Although it was a point almost completely ignored by the Politics, the ancient polis maintained its identity through a subtle mingling of domestic and civil


\textsuperscript{63} De Regimine Principum, 1:1.

\textsuperscript{64} This point has been stressed repeatedly by Ullmann. See, for example, History, pp. 17–18, 41, 101–1, 103, 137.

\textsuperscript{65} Wilks, Problem of Sovereignty, p. 28.
What is crucial for us here is the difference between Christianity and the religion of the polis, a difference which does not directly intrude into Moerbeke's translation (since the Politics does not discuss religion) but which nevertheless haunts the entire translation (since the language which Moerbeke is using can, at any moment, take on religious connotations). The Greek public cults were particularistic, tailored to the communities they united, and were established in virtually the same act as the founding of the community. Christianity, in contrast, proclaimed its indifference to the distinctions of clan and city and called upon men as individuals. The closest Greek terms to 'religion in general'—eusebia and hosiotes—refer to practices and attitudes, not to inner convictions or faith, hence the ease with which the ancient citizen could accept the diversity of cults which he met every day. Christianity, however, was above all else a religion of inner conviction and faith and thus could not tolerate such a splintering of loyalties. If antiquity bound religion and politics together, Christianity wove them into a chiasmus: they cross but do not connect.

We can thus appreciate the obscurity which plagued Moerbeke's substitution: Aristotle's category of koinōnia politikē was being inserted into a tradition which was poorly equipped to make a clear distinction between what was political and what was not. Nor did any of Moerbeke's first readers seem to feel the need to make such a distinction. It was only later readers, disturbed by the way Aquinas slid from the position (which, indeed, had been held even by Augustine) that there were certain natural forms of community to the argument that the political community was natural to man, who wondered whether justice was being done to Aristotle's argument. Likewise, later readers might question whether Aquinas' indifferent use of animal politicum and animale sociale as translations for Aristotle's zoon politikon did not miss the essential point that Aristotle was making: man is a political being, a polis dweller, and not merely a gregarious or a social animal. And finally, later readers might be perplexed by the ease with

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48 For a fine account of the confusion, see R.A. Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 219–27.

49 See, for example, Summa Theologica, I.11. Q 72.A 4 which interprets Aristotle's notion of man as a politikon zoon as equivalent to the argument that man 'est naturaliter animal politicum et sociale'. The conflation of the terms 'political' and 'social' has been forcefully criticized by Hannah Arendt in The Human Condition (Garden City, New York, 1959), p. 24.
which Aquinas mixed together *civile*, *sociale*, and *politicum* throughout his writings, and might devote their energies to the task of making sense of his use of these terms. But only later readers seem to have worried about such things. The initial readers of the Moerbeke's translation of the *Politics* did not seem to be overly concerned with how the book distinguished the properly political sphere from other—to them more important—spheres of human life. The raven had disappeared under its halo.

V

The *Civitas* as *Civillis Societas*

For the historian of political thought, Moerbeke's strategy of translation has the considerable virtue of making it unmistakably clear where the language of the classical *polis* resists translation into that of the medieval *civitas*. When he found terms which could not be rendered into Latin he simply transliterated them from the Greek. Leonardo Bruni's translation provides the historian with no such clearly marked stress points. Indeed, his explicit intent was to avoid any suggestion that there were difficulties in recasting Aristotle's text into the language of fifteenth-century Florence.

One of Bruni's criticisms of Moerbeke is particularly revealing. He chided Moerbeke for his use of such 'barbarous' terms as *'oligarchiam'*; *'democratiam'*; and *'aristocratiam'* as translations of three of Aristotle's forms of government. The terms obviously must be translated as *'paucorum potentiam'*; *'popularem statum'*; and *'optimorum gubernationem'*.

If it is puzzling to the modern reader why such strange terms should have seemed such obvious choices to Bruni, the answer is not far to seek. Bruni's favoured terms were part of day to day political discussions in Florence and turned up time and again in debates over the future of the republic. Could it remain a popularly based regime [popularem statum] or had it already decayed into an oligarchy [paucorum potentiam]? While this debate raged in public, others argued in private that the ultimate solutions to the problems facing Florence lay in the replacement of the present form of rule with an aristocracy [optimorum gubernationem]. That we cannot understand Bruni's terms without recourse to the Hellenisms coined by Moerbeke is but the least of the ironies that plague Bruni's attempt to equate fifth century Athens with fifteenth century Florence.

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70 Markus discusses these variations and subsequent attempts (none of them very convincing in his eyes) at finding a logic to them, see Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 222, footnote 3.

71 Bruni, *Schriften*, pp. 95–6 (*De interpretatione*).

72 For the controversies, see Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 248–51. Bruni also wrote a text in Greek which made use of Aristotle's categories to analyse the class structure of Florence, see Baron, *Crisis*, pp. 427–8 for a discussion.
Since Bruni's view of the task of the translator differs markedly from Moerbeke's, our approach must change as well. We can no longer look, as we did in considering Moerbeke, for strains within the words which were marshalled in the process of attempting a literal rendering of the Greek text. Rather, we must investigate the difficulties that plagued Bruni's stated project: the creation of a text which, in spite of its use of a different set of terms and its need to depart frequently from a literal rendering of the text, nevertheless mirrors the intentions of the original text.

**Parallels**

The first thing to note is that Bruni's sense that Florence was the *polis* reborn cannot be written off as a case of overly enthusiastic civic pride. As sober a sociologist as Max Weber and as sceptical a historian of the Renaissance as Lauro Martines have come to similar conclusions. 'The political Aristotle', Martines has argued, 'would have had nothing to say to the thirteenth century if late medieval urban experience had not squared with so much of his political thought'. 73 Likewise, Weber's contrast of ancient and medieval urban forms paused to stress one remarkable set of parallels: those between the ancient *polis* and the 'southern' or 'Italian city' type. In both cases the primary military forces were connected with urban settlements, in both cases the city was a fusion of town and country (with the urban settlement exercising hegemony over the countryside), and each—to be sure to a different degree—subjected its religious officials to political control. 74

There is thus good reason for assuming that Bruni's Florence was a good deal more like Aristotle's Athens than almost anything before it, save the early Roman Republic. That this supposition was shared by other readers of the *Politics* is evident from the book's reception in Italy before Bruni's translation. In spite of the vagaries of the text Moerbeke had produced, to a commentator like Remigio Girolami, it was clear what a *polis* was. It was a settlement very much like an Italian città and hence the *Politics* could be recommended as a book of particular importance for Italian city dwellers. 75 Likewise, Marsilius of Padua reversed Aquinas' preference for political

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73 Martines, *Power and Imagination*, p. 126. Marvin Becker's two-volume study *Florence in Transition* (Baltimore, 1967–8) carries the argument even further and constantly refers to the commune as the 'polis' and analyses the transformation of its 'paideia'. P.J. Jones has criticized the study for its anachronistic use of such terms in his review in the *English Historical Review*, LXXV (1970), pp. 563–7.


forms larger than the individual *civitas* and went to considerable lengths to insist that the *civitas* was indeed a ‘perfect community’. Finally in Brunetto Latini’s *Li Livres dou Trésor* the same interpretation triumphs in the face of the most considerable odds. Brunetto knew only Aristotle’s *Ethics*, and that only from a twelfth-century Latin version based on an Arabic translation. In reproducing Aristotle’s discussion of forms of government, he substituted ‘*communes*’ for the translator’s *communitatum* as the translation for Aristotle’s *politieia* and he reversed the order of preferences so as to claim that Aristotle had stated that ‘polity’ and not ‘monarchy’ was the best form. It was a rather brutal handling of the text, but Brunetto, like other citizens of Italian city-republics, was convinced that he knew what Aristotle must have meant.

**Differences**

The analogy, of course, could not hold. Indeed, Bruni’s concern with the *Politics* was, at least in part, connected with its failure to hold. What Hans Baron has termed ‘civic humanism’—that preeminently political concern with the classics found in the work of Bruni and others—has increasingly come to be seen as a response to a set of problems the Florentine republic encountered in mustering support during a period in the early fifteenth century when it was under assault from the outside and in danger of civil strife from within. The clearest evidence for the advent of ‘civic

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77 The Latin translation of the *Ethics* from which Brunetto worked read: ‘Principatus civiles tres sunt, principatus regum et principatus bonorum et principatus communitatum. Et omnium optimus est regnum principatus.’ He translated the passage as follows: ‘L’une est des rois, la seconde est des bons, la tierce est des communes, laquelle est la très millour entre ces autres.’ (*Li Livres dou Tresor*, ii, 44). For a comparison of the two translations, see Rubinstein, ‘Marsilius of Padua’, pp. 50–1, who also notes that Moerbeke’s omission of the monarchical form of constitution from the list in *Politics*, 1287b provided Ptolemy of Lucca, who wrote the continuation of Aquinas’ *De Regime Principium*, with a text which had a considerably more republican cast than the Greek original since it left the reader with only ‘polity’ and ‘despotism’ as possible forms. Ptolemy responded by classifying aristocracies as a form of polity and then went on to argue that such a form was ‘suitable for cities’ such as those in Italy; royal rule was equated with despotism (see. pp. 52–3). For a more general discussion of Brunetto’s book, see Martines, *Power and Imagination*, pp. 116–22.

78 The concept was employed for the first time in his introduction to Bruni, *Schriften*; the most complete explication is in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*. For a brief discussion of Baron’s work and a list of the relevant critical discussions, see Denys Hay, ‘The Place of Hans Baron in Renaissance Historiography’ in *Renaissance: Studies in Honor of Hans Baron*, ed. A. Molho and J.A. Tedeschi (Dekalb, Indiana, 1971), pp. xi–xxx and Brucker, *Civic World*, p. 9, footnote 17.
humanism' can be seen in the marked shift in the character of speeches delivered during those special meetings—termed practiche—in which groups of citizens were gathered together to discuss issues facing the republic. Prior to 1411, speakers were content to state their views plainly and simply, and they seem to have seen their role as that of representing their own family, guild, or neighbourhood. After 1411, speakers made use of various rhetorical techniques, began to appeal to historical examples and to draw lengthy lessons from past events, and appear to be trying to persuade their fellow citizens to take certain very general courses of action. They were no longer interested parties appearing before the representatives of the commune; they were acting instead as if they were individuals with the knowledge and the skills to move the entire people. Every man, in short, is striving to emulate Cicero's ideal orator.

The way in which these individuals speak is not the only significant point. What matters as well is who spoke. The answer, on the basis of Gene Brucker's careful reconstruction, is two-fold. First, very few people spoke: fifty-seven individuals did most of the talking. Second, those who spoke were for the most part bankers, merchants, and industrialists—the wool industry predominating—with the usual assortment of lawyers, notaries, and investors in the Florentine public debt tagging along. A novel sort of ruling élite, they could not distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens by a more noble source of income—like the 'new citizens' [novi cives] who entered the public arena in the fourteenth century, their assets had been converted from land into commercial and financial capital. Nor was the absolute size of their fortunes a distinguishing trait; there were equally wealthy citizens who lacked access to the inner circle. Here, then, was a ruling élite which had difficulty in legitimating its rule in any of the traditional ways.

And finally, what they talked about—what ends these displays of eloquence were intended to advance—is also of considerable importance in understanding the difficulties which Bruni faced. What was chiefly of concern to those who spoke was the problem of raising adequate funds to support the mercenary armies which the Florentines employed to maintain control over their subject territories and to resist the incursions of other rival city-states. Speaker after speaker incited further displays of civic virtue by

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80 Ibid., pp. 264-5, 269-70.

81 Ibid., pp. 253, 271.

pointing to his own past sacrifices. But these sacrifices involved giving up one's money, not risking one's life—a rather odd posture for a citizen of a 'polity' to strike.

Uncivil Citizens

That Florence should be understood as a 'polity' in Aristotle's sense of the term—a rule by the middle classes which is marked by its display of military virtues—was assumed by Bruni. His *De Militia* of 1422 argued that Florence as a 'forma mixta civitatis' in which at one time the people [*populares*] and at other times the aristocracy [*optimates*] held the upper hand. From the fourteenth century onward, he argued, power had passed away from the people. They preferred to pay others to kill for their city but, to twist Machiavelli's famous phrase, were themselves unwilling to die for it. Thus the command of military forces fell to those who could pay the most. 83 Clearly a rebalancing of the relationship between the *populares* and the *optimates* demanded the restitution of the civic militia. And here the analogy between Florence and Athens came crashing to the ground.

The militia had declined in the first place because of the difficulties involved in fielding an army made up of men engaged in financial or commercial pursuits. The art of making money is not usually a good predictor of success in the art of making war, and in any case the activities in which merchants and bankers were engaged were too complicated to be left to others during the long campaigns which were now required with the spread of Florentine influence across Tuscany. Nor was a draft of the lower classes advisable. They were needed behind the loom, in the workshop, or on the rural *mezzia*. The last time an armed *popolo minuto* had been seen was during the abortive Ciompi rebellion of 1378. Understandably, few in the *popolo grasso* looked forward to the prospect of seeing such a sight again. 84

Bruni is not at his best in addressing the problem of who would man the revived civic militia. But having seen Moerbeke straining to bring Aristotle into Latin, we cannot ignore Bruni's *faux pas*. Bruni argued that knighthood was an institution of the Roman republic, not a Christian creation. A full-fledged revival of classical civic virtue would thus involve the recreation of an equivalent military aristocracy, ready to lay down its life in the interest of the common good. 85 The problem with Bruni's argument is not simply the obvious fact that the revival of an ancient institution is no mean feat. Much more troubling is the fact that there is no ancient institution to revive.

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84 Ibid., pp. 7–8, 53–5, 198, 206–7, 212, 214.
85 Ibid., pp. 208–11.
In 1568, a French translation of the *Politics* by Louis le Roy—a disciple of Valla—appeared in Paris. Le Roy prefaced his translation with an essay which traced the history of political philosophy and attempted to place Aristotle's text within that history.\(^7\) The *Politics* was a work which le Roy argued still had considerable relevance for the sixteenth century; but he was well aware that Aristotle was by no means a contemporary. For le Roy, the task of translating Aristotle's arguments involved neither an attempt at situating Aristotle's words within the timeless discourse of rational speech nor an attempt at recapturing Aristotle's intentions in the language of contemporary politics. It consisted rather of an overcoming of a chasm between past and present which could be bridged only by a translator who was acutely conscious of the differences in time and place which separated text and translation.

But for all of his historical acumen, le Roy remained, above all else, a translator. His goal was not that of imprisoning Aristotle's text in the conventions and controversies of its day but rather that of making Aristotle's achievement comprehensible to the readers of his own day. He recognized more clearly than Bruni how alien the ancient world was, but no less than Bruni was he convinced that this peculiar text had important things to say to the present. And in that he is not the worst of models for the historians of political thought of our day.

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Lorenzo Valla and Francesco Filefello, using the same type of historically-based philology that had been Bruni’s forte, made short work of his argument for the Roman origin of knighthood. To them, Bruni’s interpretation was yet another example of the most typical error of conventional civil law scholarship: the worth of a medieval institution was established by inventing Roman origins for it. The father of civic humanism was slain by his own progeny. Bruni’s mastery of Ciceronian rhetoric could make even Christian doves appear raven black. But he could not keep his students from noticing their halos.

VI
Texts, Contexts, and Traditions

Despite differences in intentions and in strategies of translations, Moerbeke and Bruni both presupposed a relationship between translations, texts, and contexts which was not fulfilled. Moerbeke presumed that all languages, ancient and modern, rested on an invariant rational structure. The meanings of individual words might temporarily elude a translator, but commentators could fill in these gaps through a process of interpretation which appealed to the unchanging context which supported all texts: the logical structure of language itself. But as we have seen, to understand the Politics one must understand something more than the logical structure of language; one must understand the peculiarities of Aristotle’s language as well. One must know what it meant for him to call something something a ‘koinōnia’, and — even more important — one must know what it meant for something to be called a ‘koinōnia politike’.

Bruni assumed that text and translation could communicate with one another to the extent that they inhabited similar historical contexts. He felt that he could translate the Politics properly because he — unlike Moerbeke — was the citizen of a free city. To know how to speak about politics in fifteenth-century Florence was to have already taken the most important step in understanding what Aristotle was saying in the Politics. But, as we have seen, Athens and Florence were rather different places and Florentine public discourse did not hold all of the clues which were needed to unravel the mysteries of the Politics. Each translation conceived its relation to Aristotle’s text differently. Each had a different way of understanding what made it relevant to the present day. But ultimately, the assumptions that both Moerbeke and Bruni made about texts and and translations have little in common with the ways in which we have come to understand the Politics today.

"Ibid., p. 216."