Reviewing Machiavelli: German Journals and the Politics of the Enlightenment

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Abstract: The essay explores how German learned journals between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mediated the reception of Machiavelli and Italian Renaissance thought. Through the analysis of reviews in the *Acta Eruditorum*, *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* and other periodicals, the paper shows how the figure of Machiavelli evolved from theological scandal to object of philosophical debate. The review becomes a lens through which the moral and political conscience of the German Enlightenment took shape—balancing virtue, power, and historical judgment. Particular attention is given to Christian Thomasius, who used reviewing as a form of moral reasoning, and to the vast critical debate surrounding Frederick II's *Anti-Machiavel*. Ultimately, the paper argues that the philosophical review was not a secondary genre but a space where modern political thought and the ethics of criticism were forged.

Keywords: Machiavelli, German Enlightenment, Journals, Anti-Machiavel, Thomasius.

1. The Framework of the Renaissance

The presence of Renaissance authors in German periodicals—Machiavelli aside—is noteworthy though not quantitatively overwhelming. We stand on the threshold of the *invention* of the Renaissance—a construct born, to put it succinctly, from the encounter between the French Enlightenment and, later, the philosophical and cultural traditions of the German world, until Burckhardt finally codified the historiographical myth of the Renaissance. Yet for certain Renaissance authors a crucial turning point in their posthumous fortunes was determined by the reinterpretation that classical German philosophy gave to their thought. It is therefore of particular interest to observe how these figures were registered and discussed in contemporary learned journals, how their works circulated in the European editorial landscape, and how their "subterranean persistence" can be traced within this cultural and geographical framework. In 1682, the *Acta Eruditorum* reported the publication of Pico della Mirandola's *Epistolarum liber,* edited by Christoph Cellarius (*Acta Eruditorum* 1682, 184). References to Pico appear sporadically in other texts, but his presence is, on the whole, limited. The same applies to Marsilio Ficino, of whom three reviews appear in connection with the 1744 Leipzig edition of the *Phaedo* edited by Winkler (*Nova*

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Acta Eruditorum 1745, 717–20). This relative scarcity must be contextualized: Pico's reputation in the early eighteenth century corresponded to the limited fortune of the platonic philosopher of the fifteenth century, which would grow in German territories in the centuries to come. The fortune of Giordano Bruno was instead in an ascending phase, as attested by the treatment devoted to him by Jacob Brucker in his *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (Brucker 1744, IV, pars 2, 786; V, pars 2, 12–62). From this point on, the publication of several Latin extracts and important biographical clarifications by Heumann in *Acta Philosophorum* stands out (Heumann 1724, 432). And yet it is interesting to note that, in the review of Gautier's *Bibliotheca philosophorum et eruditorum* published in the *Acta Eruditorum* in 1724, it is lamented that nothing has been transmitted about certain important authors whose texts are difficult to find—one of the examples given is that of Bruno (Heumann 1724b, 46).

More abundant are references to Giulio Cesare Vanini.[1] The 1709 *Acta Eruditorum* reviewed *De vita et scriptis famosi athei Julii Caesaris Vanini*, situating the renowned "Italian atheist" within a genealogy of unbelief rooted in Italy—a lineage including Aretino, Poggio, Pomponazzi, Campanella, Cardano, Machiavelli, Cesalpino, Cremonini and others. Vanini is placed among the disciples of Pomponazzi, portrayed as the intellectual father of all atheists; elsewhere he is described as even worse than "Peretto" (*ipso non satis bono, longe deterior*). Lutheran theologians reconstructed his biography following the *Lexicon* of 1709, weighing accusations of atheism (Raynaud, Lacroze, Schramm, Morhof) against exculpatory readings as those of Olearius, Arpe, Diecmann (*Acta Eruditorum* 1709, 260–64).

Thus, Italian thinkers were portrayed, on the one hand, as irreligious, and on the other, as victims of Rome's intolerance—two well-established themes of Protestant polemic that shaped the German intellectual perception of the Renaissance. Machiavelli's case follows this general pattern shared by other Renaissance authors, though with a moment of rupture that significantly alters the picture, as we'll see.

2. The Afterlife of Machiavelli

At this point, it is worth briefly retracing the thread of Machiavelli's presence in Germany. The Italian Renaissance played a distinctive role in shaping German thought, and within it Machiavelli occupied a singular position—not merely as a symbol of intrigue, but as a key voice in debates on *ragion di Stato* and as a potential interlocutor for a politically fragmented Germany seeking unity (Procacci 1995). For this reason, studies on his reception in German-speaking Europe are by no means lacking; yet even recently it has been pointed out that the history of Machiavelli in Germany is still far from fully written (Macor 2015; Robertson 2017; Biasiori-Presezzi 2025).

[1] *Acta Eruditorum* 1709, 260–64; *Acta Eruditorum* 1711, 419–24; *Acta Eruditorum* 1713, 173–74; *Acta Philosophorum* 1715, 10; *Acta Philosophorum* 1716, 568, 585, 600–1; *Acta Philosophorum* 1718, 230, 388.

A crucial vehicle for the diffusion of Machiavelli's thought and myth beyond Italy was Italian emigration—particularly that motivated by religious exile. The first Latin edition of Machiavelli, printed in Basel by the Lucchese émigré Perna at the end of the sixteenth century, provoked controversy yet made his writings accessible to scholars across Europe (Kaegi 1940; Terracciano 2016).

Another major channel for the spread of the Machiavellian myth in the German world was the Catholic *anti-Machiavellian* campaign, especially through the activity and publications of the Jesuits. One of the most emblematic episodes occurred at the Jesuit college of Ingolstadt, where Machiavelli's portrait was publicly burned in effigy, described in scathing terms as that of a "cunning and deceitful man, author of diabolical ideas, assistant to the devil." (Schoppe 1619) The episode is recorded in a manuscript by Caspar Schoppe—the same author who reported the burning of Giordano Bruno. Schoppe, a Protestant convert to Catholicism, sought through his notes to mitigate Machiavelli's most scandalous aspects, an endeavor that culminated in his *Paedia Politices*, published in Rome in 1623. The work aimed at a moral and philosophical "normalization" of Machiavelli's figure, possibly nourished by Schoppe's encounter with Campanella.

It is for this reason that Schoppe's work was reprinted in 1663 by the Protestant Hermann Conring, who a few years earlier had completed a new Latin translation of *Il Principe* accompanied by a commentary (Machiavelli 1660). Conring's scholarly intention was to strip the text of the layers of polemical pamphleteering that had accumulated over time, treating Machiavelli instead as a genuine political theorist whose ideas should be evaluated independently of moral judgment.

Not everyone, however, was ready to abandon the "black legend." Reacting against Schoppe's *Paedia Politices*, the Jesuit Heinrich Wangnereck published the *Vindiciae politicae adversus pseudo-politicos* (1636), reiterating the Counter-Reformation condemnation of the Florentine Secretary and describing yet another burning in effigy of Machiavelli at Ingolstadt—this time as part of a satirical theatrical performance organized by university students. A similar tone and vocabulary appear in *Promontorium Male Spei* by the Jesuit Paul Zehentner (1643).[2]

The true turning point, however, came with Hermann Conring's 1660 translation of *Il Principe*. For Conring, Machiavelli remained above all a theorist whose objective was to describe the universal laws governing all forms of government; his interpretation, therefore, did not differ substantially from that of Schoppe. Yet this new translation marked a shift: from the earlier pamphlet-driven controversies to a more philological and scholarly engagement. From the final decades of the seventeenth century onwards, discussions about *The Prince* increasingly entered the learned republic of letters.

Although their concerns remained primarily erudite, the proliferation of references to Machiavelli laid the groundwork for a broader reconsideration of his work—a process through which the Florentine thinker began to emerge not

[2] In connection with the framework outlined above, see Terracciano 2024.

merely as a moral problem, but as a foundational yet deeply problematic author in the genealogy of modern political thought, one whose warnings demanded careful attention. In other terms the history of Machiavelli's reception in Germany between 1678 and 1810 evolved significantly, moving from explicit demonization to nuanced philosophical and dramatic exploration of political pragmatism.

3. Machiavelli in the Journals

Across the German learned journals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one can identify roughly seventy references to Machiavelli—encompassing not only a) editions of his works, but also b) texts related to Machiavellian themes and c) reflections inserted within reviews of other authors. This wide spectrum of mentions attests to the persistent, though evolving, fascination exercised by Machiavelli within the *Respublica litteraria*.

The *Acta Eruditorum* of 1692 offers a telling example, briefly but sympathetically noting a new French edition of the *Discorsi* (*Discours politique de Machiavel, – Nicolai Machiavelli ad primam Decadem Historiarum Titi Livii Discorsi Politici* Amsterdam, H. Desbordes 1691), likely penned by Otto Mencke,—mathematician, polymath, and, together with Leibniz, founder of the *Acta*. The notice praises Machiavelli's "profound knowledge of political science" in analyzing the rise of the Roman Republic and regards his *Discorsi* as worthy of continued study despite ecclesiastical hostility. It reads:

> This is a new edition of a book that is not new, having passed through the hands of scholars for more than a century and a half, now accompanied by a French translation. It is a work written in 1530 by Niccolò Machiavelli, a famous man who, in the catalogues of prohibited books commonly used in the Roman Church, is honoured with the title of atheist and pseudo-politician. Yet no one can easily deny that he revealed a profound knowledge of political science in his commentaries on the Decades of Livy, in which he narrates the origins and expansion of the Roman Republic. Thus, his book, once greeted with applause, has been deemed worthy by learned men to be translated not only into Latin under the title *Disputationum de Republica*, but also into French and English. The author, after suffering the hatred of the Roman clergy, seems to have deserved well of his fellow citizens, having decided to republish this book adapted to the style of the age so as to make it more pleasing to readers (*Acta Eruditorum* 1692, 178–179).

No mention is made here of *Il Principe*, yet the passage provides an important early testimony of appreciation for the *republican* Machiavelli—the thinker of civic virtue and political prudence, rather than the theorist of princely manipulation. The *Acta Eruditorum*'s acknowledgment of his "profound knowledge of political science" signals a shift in tone: it is a cautious rehabilitation within a learned context that begins to distinguish between Machiavelli's historical analysis and his moral reputation. This review stands as one of the first marker of the German Enlightenment's willingness to engage with Machiavelli not as

a moral scandal but as a political classic—a thinker whose republican writings could now be read with scholarly sympathy, detached from the polemical excesses that had long defined his image.

In 1714, the *Gelehrte Journale und Zeitungen der Aufklärung* reported a German edition of several Machiavellian works—*The Prince*, the *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, and a *Life of Borgia*—published under a fictitious imprint as *Lebens und Regierungsmaximen eines Fürsten* by Peter Marteau. Translator Carol Arnd, professor at the University of Rostock, prefaced it accusing Machiavelli of blasphemy and of being "a man without conscience," and placing him first among the "false politicians", a reminder that moral suspicion lingered even within Protestant academia, where Machiavelli was habitually reduced to a symbol of cynical statecraft and impiety. Yet even this hostile reception attests to the continued vitality of his name within the German learned public: the very need to denounce him proves his ongoing intellectual presence (*Gelehrte Journale und Zeitungen der Aufklärung* 1714, 94–96).

A turning point in the more balanced reassessment of Machiavelli came with the publication of *De Nicolao Machiavello libri tres* (1731) by Johann Friedrich Christ, promptly reviewed in the *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*. A student of Christian Thomasius, academic, and later rector of the University of Leipzig, Christ embodied one of the first genuine attempts within European scholarship to read and interpret the Florentine Secretary's works historically and without prejudice. The *Neue Zeitungen* review, published in May of the same year, praises precisely this methodological rigor and the author's commitment to restoring intellectual accuracy to the study of Machiavelli:

> Since this study pertains to the history of scholarship and to a deeper understanding of the theory of the State, and since it is, to some extent, necessary in order to avoid various errors, it is essential to have reliable information about the life, writings, and opinions of the famous Machiavelli. However, such information has so far proved deficient and difficult to obtain from other sources. This has led the author to believe that his new investigation will be both useful and welcome to most scholars. To this end, he has provided in an extensive preface the reasons that motivated him to undertake it, and has defended his inquiry with humility against various objections (*Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* 1731, 324–25).

Christ's *De Nicolao Machiavello libri tres* thus marks a fundamental moment in the German Enlightenment's intellectual encounter with Machiavelli. No longer the diabolical counselor or "atheist politician" of Counter-Reformation polemic, Machiavelli begins here to emerge as a historical figure whose works can be examined critically, philologically, and politically. The Leipzig scholar's insistence on accurate documentation and systematic interpretation paved the way for the later eighteenth-century rediscovery of Machiavelli as a political thinker, not merely a moral problem—a development that would culminate, only a decade later, in the great European debate surrounding Frederick II's *Anti-Machiavel*.

Among the most intriguing and intellectually rich references to Machiavelli in the German learned journals is an intervention by Christian Thomasius, which belongs to the third category of allusions—not to editions or explicit treatises, but to broader reflections embedded in other critical discussions. It appears in an article entitled *Schertz- und ernsthaffter, vernünfftiger und einfältiger Gedancken über allerhand lustige und nützliche Bücher und Fragen* (1689), concerning Robert Knox's *Reise Beschreibung von der in Ost-Indien gelegenen Insel Ceylon in Englischer Sprache heraus gegeben durch Robertum Knox, Schiff-Capitein in Engelland*. Thomasius, writing in the *Monatsgespräche* (1689), argued that polemics against Machiavelli had produced little effect: princes did not need Machiavelli to govern tyrannically, since tyranny arose from corrupted will, not from political theory. Such observations revealed skepticism toward the very genre of antimachiavellian literature that would soon gain prominence.

The text is particularly significant for three reasons: first, it is one of the earliest citations of Machiavelli within the corpus under consideration; second, it comes from one of the most prominent figures of German early Enlightenment thought; and third, it anticipates several themes that would later recur in more systematic treatments of Machiavelli, influencing subsequent authors such as Christ and Reimmann. Knox's travel narrative—*An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies*—contains a vivid description of a tyrannical regime ruling over the island. It is in this context that Thomasius introduces his extended excursus on Machiavelli. He writes:

> As often as a politician, who has superficially memorized Gracián's *Homme de Cour* and wishes to apply it in practice, seeks to make his fortune at this king's court, just as often does the king himself act according to the teachings of Machiavelli. And now that I mention Machiavelli—has not this poor devil been written against and disputed over to such an extent that, in an excessive desire to refute him, men have fallen into the opposite extreme, giving rise to a new sect, the Monarchomachs? I have long pondered these common errors. I do not intend to defend Machiavelli's doctrines, nor to excuse him as though he had satirically mocked the illegitimate rule of the Italian princes. Yet it seems to me that the disputes against him have had little or no success. […] The fault of tyrannical princes lies not in their understanding, but in their will. Even if their intellect were greater, do the anti-Machiavellians truly believe that princes will read their magnificent works? When the will is corrupt, it is not necessary for great lords to take lessons from Machiavelli or others like him on how to establish a tyrannical government. The King of Conde-Uda, for instance, has never seen a book by Machiavelli, and yet his understanding in this matter seems in no way deficient. Once pride and cruelty have taken root, his own intellect spontaneously suggests to him the Machiavellian means to apply. The learned Weise of Zittau has already depicted this vividly in a charming comedy entitled *Der Bäurischer Machiavellus* ('The Peasant Machiavelli'), defending Machiavelli with subtle humour. What use is it to teach the young to refute Machiavellian doctrines with syllogisms in *Barbara and Darapti*, when they see Machiavellian

> selfishness practiced everywhere, by great and small alike? Or when, through the example of the anti-Machiavellians themselves—who often observe more faithfully in their deeds the doctrines they condemn—they are inevitably led to imitation? True learning does not consist in the art of attacking false opinions, but in the search for truth that leads to a virtuous life (Thomasius 1689, 580–98).

Thomasius's passage is of remarkable depth. It criticizes the futility of intellectual polemic against Machiavelli's doctrines when, in practice, those very doctrines are continuously enacted by both rulers and their moral critics. The real issue, he argues, is not intellectual error but the corruption of the will—tyranny is born not of ignorance, but of moral vice. Hence, genuine erudition should aim at the pursuit of truth and the cultivation of virtue, rather than the sterile refutation of abstract ideas. Thomasius's reference to Christian Weise's drama *Der Bäurischer Machiavellus* (1679) enriches the discussion. Weise—a Protestant writer, political theorist, and former pupil of Hermann Conring—used the infernal mythology surrounding Machiavelli to stage a celestial court, presided over by Apollo, where the Florentine is accused of corrupting mankind. A character called "Gentilletus" (an evident echo of Innocent Gentillet) repeats the traditional anti-Italian and anti-Medicean argument according which Machiavelli's writings indirectly caused the massacre of St. Bartholomew. Machiavelli defends himself by asserting that his intention was satirical: to expose, not to encourage, the vices of tyrants. Nonetheless, he is admonished as a paradigmatic example of the misuse of intellectual gifts.

In Thomasius's reading, however, Machiavelli acquires a subtly utopian dimension: the possibility of transforming political knowledge into moral reflection. His remarks, beyond their moral thrust, anticipate the approach later adopted by Johann Friedrich Christ—the call to study Machiavelli concretely, historically, and without prejudice.

4. The *Anti-Machiavel* and the Eighteenth-Century Debate

The decisive moment in the German debate on Machiavelli and Machiavellism: the publication of Frederick II's *Anti-Machiavel*, with its successive clandestine and authorized editions around 1740–1741—a work that would crystallize the Enlightenment's moral and philosophical confrontation with the Florentine Secretary. The book, as it is very well known, was composed by the young Frederick of Prussia, and edited and brought to press by Voltaire in 1741. The book was quickly reviewed in leading German periodicals. Frederick II's *Anti-Machiavel* opens with its now-famous statement:

> In the field of morals, Machiavelli's *Prince* is what Spinoza's work represents in the field of faith: Spinoza undermined the foundations of religion, seeking above all to destroy it; Machiavelli corrupted politics with the intent of annihilating the principles of sound morality. The errors of the former were speculative, those of the latter practical. Yet whereas theology has warned us against Spinoza, only a few moralists have attacked the pages of the Florentine (Frederick II 1958, 169; English translation is mine).

Machiavelli's writings, Frederick insists, "corrupt the young and the naïve," but their greatest danger lies in the fact that—being a handbook for rulers—they corrupt those who govern: "and kings with a corrupted morality do greater harm than natural cataclysms." (Frederick II 1958, 169).

The publication of *Anti-Machiavel* unleashed a veritable flood of reviews across the German learned press, most of them enthusiastic or at least deeply respectful of the young Prussian prince's philosophical ambition. The first notice appeared in the *Frankfurtische Gelehrte Zeitungen* in June 1740, on the Amsterdam edition published by von Duren: "There are only few who think about such matters as they should, and among them the author surely deserves the first place" (*Frankfurtische Gelehrte Zeitungen*, June 1740, 102–103). Equally positive were the reviews printed in the *Hamburgische Berichte von neuen Gelehrten Sachen*, the *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, and the *Nöthiger Beytrag zu den Neuen Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*. The *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* published two separate notices in 1741—one distinctly enthusiastic, the other briefer and more neutral in tone.[3]

In March 1742, the *Acta Eruditorum* reviewed Frederick's treatise in explicitly celebratory terms:

> We begin with the mention of a small work that stands nobly against illustrious adversaries. The author himself possesses an enlightened and noble mind, formed by God as a rare example, and brought onto the stage of the world to unite humanity with virtue, both by precept and example. This great hero—another Antoninus the Philosopher—wrote down, a few years ago, thoughts dictated by his luminous spirit. Though young, he was wholly devoted to wisdom and virtue. He resolved to instill within himself precepts of prudence so composed that they may serve as a *speculum principis* and as a source of salvation and happiness for all mankind. The author entrusted the manuscript to Voltaire, who, with the permission of the Most Serene Author, brought it to light. Since Machiavelli's poison now circulates publicly, it is fitting that the antidote should as well. It is indeed extraordinary that an author so exalted, neither born nor raised in France, has composed in that language a work so noble, vigorous, and pure.

This tone of almost reverential admiration dominates most of the German reception. Yet a few notices stand apart, revealing the complexity of the debate. Of particular interest is an anonymous essay published in the *Frankfurtische Gelehrte Zeitungen* on 27 June 1741, situating the review of the Anti-Machiavelli within the broader context of justice in public administration and the judiciary. The writer acknowledges his inspiration from "a work praised with many eulogies in the learned journals under the title *Anti-Machiavel*, said to be authored by a great prince and edited by the famous French poet Voltaire." Developing

[3] *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* (1741, 73–5; 184); *Hamburgische Berichte von neuen Gelehrten Sachen* (1741, Bd. 10, 107–11): *Nöthiger Beytrag zu den Neuen Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* (1741, 237–38; 253–54; 776).

his own reflections on justice, he warns against the seductions of power: "The greater the power, the more easily one may permit oneself arbitrariness against justice—or, as we say, govern and judge in a Machiavellian manner." The treatise closes in a quasi-apocalyptic tone: "Thus it remains in accordance with the word of God: let the wicked remain wicked, and the righteous remain righteous; for His judgment is that of God, to render to each according to his works."

Although veiled in theological rhetoric, the text seems to imply a certain distance from Frederick's own political conduct—a subtle skepticism that perhaps recognized the contradiction between his theoretical critique of Machiavelli and his practical pursuit of *Realpolitik*.

This ambivalence emerges even more clearly in the reception of Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre's *Réflexions sur l'Anti-Machiavel* (1740), the philosophical and critical essay written in response to Frederick II. Saint-Pierre's work is not a direct attack on Machiavelli, but rather a moral and political reflection on the ideal of the "just prince," contrasted both with Machiavellian thought and, to some extent, with the moralistic simplifications of Frederick's text. As an Enlightenment reformer and utopian thinker, Saint-Pierre advances a rational and pacifist vision of political power, grounded in principles of justice, the common good, and fair administration.

The *Hamburgische Berichte von neuen Gelehrten Sachen* of 1742 review the work approvingly, noting how Saint-Pierre turns Frederick's arguments toward a pacifist ideal: the rejection of Machiavellianism becomes, here, an appeal to reason and peace, transforming Frederick's moral protest into a program of perpetual concord (1742, 21–3).

Equally significant is the notice published that same year in the *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* on *Machiavel Républicain tegens den Anti-Machiavel verdedigt* ("The Republican Machiavelli Defended against the Anti-Machiavel"). The tone is calm and measured, yet the very act of defending Machiavelli in print against Frederick's assault marks a new phase in the European debate (1742, 491–92). The *Nöthiger Beytrag*, by contrast, dismisses the same work harshly, reaffirming the Prussian monarch's moral authority (1742, 215–17).

Through these layered and often contradictory reactions, the German learned press of the 1740s constructed a polyphonic image of Machiavelli: between condemnation and rehabilitation, moral critique and political admiration. The Enlightenment thus transformed the Florentine's legacy into a mirror of its own internal tensions—between virtue and power, moral law and political necessity.

5. Conclusion

The long trajectory traced through German learned journals—from Thomasius's early remarks to Christ's systematic inquiry and the wave of reviews prompted by Frederick II's *Anti-Machiavel*—shows how the German engagement with Machiavelli unfolded less as a coherent intellectual program than as an uneven, often contradictory exploration of pressing philosophical and political questions. Over the course of half a century, the Florentine Secretary

became not so much an emblem of Enlightenment progress as a testing ground for competing interpretive needs: moral suspicion and historical curiosity, political anxiety and scholarly rigor.

In the German context especially, Machiavelli's presence exposes fractures rather than synthesis. Journals in Leipzig, Hamburg, Göttingen, and Frankfurt did not simply "refine" or "rehabilitate" him; they used his name to probe the tensions between princely authority and civic virtue, between erudition and polemic, between normative theory and the observation of political reality. Through these shifting appropriations—admiring, hostile, or ambivalent—Machiavelli emerged as a sensitive indicator of the unresolved dilemmas that marked early modern debates on power, responsibility, and the conditions of political order.

Rather than a reinvention, his German reception appears as a fragmented itinerary: a mirror in which the intellectual uncertainties of the age repeatedly came to the surface.

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