A Comparative paper of Policraticus and The Prince

The definition of a great leader has evolved over the span of centuries, but that's to be expected as cultural and social norms shift. But looking back and comparing the writings of good leadership from varying eras can help modern historians learn of those cultural and social shifts. And the writings from the early medieval Policraticus to the early renaissance writing of The Prince can help show the evolving ideas of god versus absolutism, and morality by god, versus moral arbitrariness to benefit the state.

The ruling style of a king is an important factor that is heavily motivated by the societal and cultural norms of their time. John of Salisbury was heavily influenced by the king Justinian, a deeply pious man who like his predecessor Constantine, focused deeply on the religious matters of his people. Many western kingdoms that followed after the western Roman empire followed this trend, and of these authors who was heavily influenced, was John of Salisbury. In Policraticus His main motivation to what was a good king was ne who followed, but also felt that only God could give the power to be a ruler “God is the life of the soul, the soul life of the body; the one dissolves when the other flees, lost when it is undermined by God.”[1] Policraticus was written in 1159 during a time of rising empires in western Europe, primarily for the heptarchy of British kingdoms that arose from settling Germanic kingdoms.[2] During this time kings were focused on being a Christian king, by being a student of god and a “ring-bearer”. The writing of policraticus was built of roman writings, which can be seen in the Latin name of John of Salisbury’s book, Policraticus but also the way he cites the Justinian code and Eusebius as evidence for his beliefs “Christian princes can be instructed by our Constantine, Theodosius, Justinian and Leo and other most. Christian princes.[3] The influences of Machiavelli however are not as absolute. While Policraticus is a progeniture of the Christian writings of people like Eusiebius, The Prince can be seen as a pre writing or influenced by the beliefs of absolutism. Absolutism as defined by Encyclopedia Britannica “doctrine and practice of unlimited centralized authority and absolute [sovereignty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sovereignty), as vested especially in a [monarch](https://www.britannica.com/topic/monarchy) or [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictatorship). ... be it judicial, legislative, religious, economic, or electoral. King [Louis XIV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-XIV-king-of-France) (1643–1715) of France furnished the most familiar assertion of absolutism when he said, “L’état, c’est moi”. [1] The prince was written in 1513, decades before the age of absolutism but could very much be seen as a predecessor to the philosophy. Machiavelli wrote little on the will of god or what role a prince should play in leading the spirituality of the state, which is in deep contrast to the overall theme of Policraticus. Instead Machiavelli focused on the importance of the state. “Therefore, our princes should not accuse fortune for the loss of their principalities after so many years' possession, but rather their own laziness”. [2] While John of Salisbury writes about how god gives glory to a worthy king, Machiavelli writes not about how glory and gold are bad, but laziness. Posturing the idea that the power and success of the state is not by god, but by the determination of the one in charge of the state. That the greatest determiner in the states fate, is the king. This is a common theme in all of The Prince. Where each chapter is a different way for a prince to rule, whether it be constitutionally, as a monarch, or ruling by conquest or by inheritance. Kindness and cruelty is not determined by any moral obligation to god, but to what insures the prince can regain power. This speaks to the ultimate goal of the prince to Machiavelli “ Let, therefore, your great family take up this task with that courage and hope with which all just causes are undertaken, so that under its flag our native country may be made great again, and under your command that saying of Petrarch will be shown to be true”. [3] Its easy to see how a prince i the future, who could see himself stating that “he was the state” if what is right and wrong, and the success of state is determined by him, and not by god.

By what means will society use to measure morality has been a contentious topic for many philosophers. But to John of Salisbury, the answer is an obvious one. God is the ultimate decider for morality, what god says must go, and the duty of a king is to follow god. John of Salisbury defines tyranny as the objection to God's rule and no man is above God, the ultimate arbitrator, in fact his writing can be quoted on tyrannicide “Furthermore, it is not only permitted, but it is also equitable and just to slay tyrants”.[1] John of Salisbury does mince words when he wrote Policraticus. To him, a good leader leaders’ sense of morals is to god above all else, and no one not even a leader, is above the absolute will of god, the determinant of morality. Machiavelli has a much more nuanced approach to morality when it comes to being a leader. As mentioned above Machiavelli believed the goals of a leader are different. Where in Policraticus, the ultimate goal of a leader should be to lead his people to god's rule of law, Machiavelli’s ultimate goal as a leader, was to remain in power and eventually, unify the Italian peninsula. And since the prince’s goal is not of intrinsic value, such as following God's command, but is more extrinsic, i.e. unifying Italy, the moral motivations in The Prince can be seen as almost arbitrary. “ Many have imagined republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen. How one actually lives is far distant from how one ought to live... A man who wishes to act entirely in a virtuous way is soon destroyed among so much that is evil in the world.”. [2] Machiavelli believes that following moral principles is a foolish and impractical part of life, and those naive enough to chase such follies will fail as a leader, and that a true leader must make practical decisions based on the consequences of the matter. Morality, in a sense, is arbitrary and the thing that matters the most is the extrinsic consequences of the leader’s rule. A stark contrast to the pious moral beliefs of John of Salisbury.

Coming only a few centuries from the fall of the western roman empire and still alive during the height of byzantine rule, it's easy to see why the leadership during the time of policraticus would be defined by a king who’s ruling style would mimic those of a Christian king like Eusuebiuises writings, and follows the moral teachings of god. But as the modern state would start in the later centuries, the role of a leader would begin to coalesce into a new form. One like featured in the prince, a leader who practices absolutism instead of a more pious look, and one who views morality as what's best for the state, not the spiritual beliefs of their subjects. The Prince represents a shift from the writing styles of early Christion kings, to the beginnings of absolutist monarchist in the renaissance.