

The Birth of Humanist Historiography

Gary IANZITI

ABSTRACT

This entry focuses on a particularly significant moment in the history of historical writing in Europe. It posits that Renaissance humanism—an intellectual movement whose development can plausibly be located in early fifteenth-century Italy—gave birth to radically new ways of conceptualizing and representing the past. To some extent the changes were the result of a deeper engagement with the ancient Greek and Roman historians that the humanists took as their models. But the renewed interest in the classics was itself often embraced as a means of rising to the challenges posed by the need to interpret a rapidly changing political landscape. By way of illustration, this entry zeroes in on the work that can be seen as the foundation stone of humanist historiography: Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*. Bruni's *History* is presented as the first stage in a general renewal of historical writing, one that moves outwards from Renaissance Florence to pervade Italy and eventually Europe as a whole.



The Renaissance witnessed dramatic changes in the ways of thinking and writing about the past. New directions first began to emerge in fifteenth-century Italy as part of the broader cultural program of humanism. The humanists regarded history as one of the central disciplines within the *studia humanitatis*. As such, history took its place alongside the other core humanistic disciplines. This move represented a considerable promotion of history's status: from the peripheral position it had been assigned within medieval culture, history now came to occupy centre stage. The reading and writing of history acquired thereby a new prestige. It also assumed a different orientation with respect to prevalent medieval practice: no longer subordinate to Christian theology, as had been the case since Late Antiquity, Renaissance historical writing sought to reconnect with the Greco-Roman tradition of political and military historiography. This orientation implied a careful study of ancient historians, as well as the adoption of their methods and styles. Livy, Sallust, and Julius Caesar were among the humanists' favoured models, but Thucydides, Polybius, and Xenophon were not far behind. The return of these Greek historians to the canon of Western historiography proved to be a distinguishing mark of the Renaissance.

Emphatically however, the humanist revival of classical historiography was no mere literary fashion. Renaissance historians were responding to the needs of a society in rapid evolution. Fifteenth-century Italy in particular was the scene where the impact of converging developments in the wider European world was most deeply felt. The key structural underpinnings of the social and political fabric had entered a period of crisis. The Church was still in the throes of the Western Schism (1378-1417) that had split Europe, severely damaging the prestige of the Papacy and weakening its temporal and spiritual power. It is no coincidence that the first half of the fifteenth century witnessed the high tide of the Conciliar movement, an attempt on the part of local ecclesiastic authorities to assert the supremacy of regularly convened Councils over the Pope in matters of Church governance. Meanwhile the Holy Roman Empire, supposedly the source of legal jurisdiction and the fount of sovereignty throughout most of Northern Italy, had become little more than a shadowy presence, one to which ceremonial homage was due on occasion, but which no longer played any substantial role. The conditions were thus ideal to spark off a series of large-scale innovations: the vacancy of traditional authority created the opportunity for regional centres of power like Milan, Florence, and Venice to extend their control over ever larger swaths of territory. While this development brought these regional powers into conflict, it also had other consequences, most notably radical institutional reform and the rise of large bureaucracies to cope with the burdens of administering complex territorial states.

A search was hence on to find new ways of understanding the past and its relationship to the present. The city chronicles that had flourished in medieval Italy were no longer adequate to the task: framed within the perspective of universal history, they continued the long-standing tendency to delegate the explanation of events to Divine Providence. While such ruminations might still exercise a broad appeal throughout society at large, they could not satisfy the cravings of the more sophisticated elites that made up the cadres and leading political actors of the Italian states. Such men required a different vision, one that would encompass a more concrete and factual account of the past, complete with an explanatory apparatus that both clarified and justified present power configurations. Nourished by their reading of classical historians, the Italian humanists were primed to offer exactly what these elites wanted: carefully crafted narratives that explained sequences of events as the results of human agency working through time.

One of the first and most influential of the humanist historians was Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444). Born in Arezzo, but Florentine by election and adoption, Bruni established a benchmark with his *History of the Florentine People*. Working on commission, in close collaboration with the leading members of the ruling oligarchy, he set out to recast the history of Florence, charting its rise from an insignificant outpost of the Roman Empire to the thriving administrative capital of a modern territorial state. In Bruni's hands history took up new duties of explanation: human motivation became the prime driver behind the unfolding of events, while events themselves were ordered into an intelligible process subject to rational explanation through the examination of evidence. Along the way, Bruni found time to dismiss many a popular legend enshrined in the local chronicle tradition, most notably the tall tales associated with the supposed foundation of the city by Julius Caesar, and its re-foundation by Charlemagne. While often construed as exercises in pure critical scholarship, such features were part of a larger project designed to foster the recognition of the Florentine state as a sovereign power, independent of the Roman Empire and its long line of Caesars. Bruni in fact projected his entire *History* onto a larger canvas that featured a radically new perspective on the *longue durée* of the European past. In the place of abstract Biblical chronologies beginning with the Creation and leading along a linear trajectory bound for a divinely ordained end of time, Bruni placed his narrative within a framework whose contours were conditioned by purely historical forces. His scheme began with

the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, skipped over a millennium of supposed decay and barbarism that later came to be known as the Middle Ages, and concluded with an extended account of the rebirth of Florence and its transformation into a major regional power.

Bruni's fundamental lesson—that the toolkit of classical historiography could be harnessed to serve the purposes of power politics—did not go unnoticed. The *History of the Florentine People* set the stage for a revolution in the ways of writing about the past. Subsequent generations of Italian humanists looked to his example in developing their own histories. Differences in outlook notwithstanding, his influence can be easily detected in the works of Andrea Biglia (1395-1435), Biondo Flavio (1392-1463), Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), and Pier Candido Decembrio (1399-1477), to mention only a few. In the early sixteenth century both Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) continued to invoke Bruni's *History* as a model of stylistic polish and reasoned argument. By this time indeed the humanist method of uniting historiography and statecraft was becoming established practice throughout Europe. This is not to deny the vitality and persistence of the various national and regional historiographies. In France for example an important tradition of royal historiography predated by well over a century the introduction of humanism, and the situation was similar for the several Iberian kingdoms. But by the sixteenth century the humanist manner initiated by Bruni and consolidated by his Italian followers had begun to spread to every corner of Europe. Italian culture had become so prestigious that some of the most prominent authors of a new breed of humanist-inflected national histories were recruited directly from Italy: e.g. Paolo Emilio (c. 1455-1529) in France, Polydore Vergil (1470-1555) in England, Antonio Bonfini (1427-1505) in Hungary. While later developments inevitably led historiography in new directions, the imprint of Italian humanism remained strong throughout the early modern period. Its power was still being acknowledged in the late eighteenth century by no less a figure than Edward Gibbon (1737-1794).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FUBINI, Riccardo, *Storiografia dell'umanesimo in Italia da Leonardo Bruni ad Annio da Viterbo*, (Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003).

GRELL, Chantal (dir.), *Les historiographes en Europe de la fin du Moyen Âge à la Révolution*, (Paris, Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006).

IANZITI, Gary, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past*, (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2012).

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/european-humanism/cultural-heritage/birth-humanist-historiography>