

The Recovery of manuscripts

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ABSTRACT

Manuscripts were the cornerstone of humanism. They had been the main vector for transmission of the ancient texts and culture in the Middle Ages. Most of them had nonetheless been lost or forgotten in remote libraries. In order to recover the ancient Greek and Latin texts they favoured, humanists went on a European quest to find these manuscripts. From Italy, at first, humanists travelled all across Europe, visiting convents and libraries, in search of the lost works of Tacitus, Cicero, etc. building and securing the antique legacy of European culture.



Portrait of Poggio holding a manuscript on the first page of the Ruins of Rome (Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, Urb. Lat. 224, fol. 3). This treatise dedicated to another prominent manuscript hunter, the pope Nicholas V, is a meditation on the loss of Roman culture.

Manuscripts were humanism's lifeblood, its inspiration and its purpose. The production of new books in a new, or revived, style of Latin and with a new, or revived, presentation on the page was central to their activities. But before they could even be conceived, there needed to be classical texts to be imitated. Behind the humanists' practices lay an agenda of manuscript recovery all across Europe. They were conscious of themselves as cut off from the classical past and set themselves the challenge of discovering works which had not been seen—they said—by scholars for centuries. In writing of their achievements in doing this, they exaggerated both their own heroic endeavours and the dire state that preceded them.

Similarly, ancient texts, pagan and Christian, suffused the learned culture of medieval Christendom. Most of the authors celebrated in the Renaissance were known names in the preceding centuries. So, the Roman author most celebrated by humanists, Marcus Tullius Cicero, was known for some of his philosophical works and some of his speeches. Similarly, of ancient Greek authors, Aristotle had been to the West 'the Philosopher' since the thirteenth century, read in word-for-word translations. Those translations were derided and replaced by humanists led by Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), but this cannot deny the essential point: the humanists built on an existing classical heritage; they did not work with a *tabula rasa*.

The scholars of humanism's fifteenth-century heyday were not only more indebted to existing medieval learning than they would often like to admit; they also had before them recent precedents for the rediscovery of classical texts. In Florence, the circle around Bruni had an ambivalent attitude to their city's 'three crowns', Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, but they respected the last two for their role as pioneers in the hunt for ancient works. It is most likely Boccaccio who found in the monastic library at Monte Cassino a mid-eleventh century copy of some of the writings of the Roman historian, Tacitus. To Petrarch went the credit of making the *Epistolae ad Atticum* of Cicero available by transcribing a manuscript owned by the Cathedral of Verona. These men's pursuits were continued in the next generation by Coluccio Salutati, godfather to the circle of early Quattrocento humanists. In whichever ways Bruni and others were honest in their announcement of their own novelty, for their interests in archival archaeology they had their immediate forefathers to thank.

It was a protégé (like Bruni) of Coluccio Salutati who became most associated with this campaign of rediscovery: Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459). He spent some years at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), travelling from there to monasteries in Switzerland, Germany and France to inspect their collections. On one such trip, accompanied by two fellow Italians (the activities of archival archaeology could be companionable), he visited the abbey of St Gallen and found a complete copy of a work until then only known in part, the *Institutio oratoria* of Quintilian. Poggio excitedly wrote back to his homeland, anthropomorphising the manuscript:

"Amid a tremendous quantity of books, we found Quintilian safe and sound, though filthy with mould and dust. For these books were in a foul and gloomy dungeon at the bottom of one of the towers, where not even men convicted of a capital offence would have been confined" (Letter to Guarino da Verona, 1416).

Humanists saw themselves as liberators of disrespected manuscripts and considered theft a potential virtuous by-product of their activities.

Quintilian's *Institutio* was by no means the only text that Poggio rescued. He also, for instance, brought to Italy a set of Cicero's speeches which had not previously been known there. He came across them at the abbey of Cluny in 1414 but his attention may have been drawn to the manuscript by the French scholar Nicolas de Clamanges (d. 1437). This serves to remind us of another point: the humanists' self-congratulation celebrated the arrival of texts within their own coteries; that they were previously unable to access a work did not mean that others elsewhere had sat in the same darkness of ignorance.

Within their own milieu, the mid-1410s and early 1420s were a high-water mark of humanist archival archaeology, not solely thanks to Poggio's imports from north of the Alps. South-east of Milan, in the cathedral library of Lodi, the bishop, Gerardo Landriani (d. 1445) discovered in 1421 a manuscript which was particularly important for the humanists' intellectual agenda: it included three rhetorical works by Cicero which (like Quintilian) had previously only been known in mutilated form. Significant for them also was the increased availability of Greek texts, both by the pagan philosophers and the Church Fathers. For those, they had to cross the Adriatic to the lands of the Byzantine Empire. The year 1423 was especially auspicious, since the Sicilian humanist, Giovanni Aurispa (1376-1459), arrived from Constantinople with hundreds of manuscripts, 238 of them being classical pagan works.

The practice of archival archaeology did not end in the 1420s. During another General Council, that held in Basel (1431-1449), it was Aurispa who travelled to Germany and found the *Panegyrici latini* in the cathedral library at Mainz. At the mid-century, the election of a humanist, Tommaso Parentucelli, to the papal throne as Nicholas V (1447-55), encouraged further raids on foreign libraries: Enoch of Ascoli was sent as far north as Denmark and brought to Rome from Hersfeld (Hesse) Tacitus's *Germania*. Of the same author, further sections of his *Annals* only became available in c. 1508, when another manuscript was found in Corvey (Westphalia) and soon reached the hands of Leo X (1513-1521) in Rome.

Yet, this was an enterprise that could have no end: the humanists were never able to strike off everything from the list of their desiderata. Top of that list was Cicero's most substantial philosophical work, his *De Re publica*, of which only one part was available. There were rumours of sightings and attempts to reconstruct the text from other works, but nothing close to the full text was known only in 1819 and even then, and now, the text is incomplete – as is that of Livy, of Tacitus and of so many other classical authors.

The circulation of rediscovered texts all across Europe was not the end of the humanists' services. With the increasing number of works and of exemplars, there was a consciousness of how inaccurate the texts they had could be. From that realisation arose the concern for emendation and explication that we know as the discipline of philology, which some have seen as the humanists' most distinctive contribution. Yet, what the activities of archival archaeology primarily provided for the humanists was the opportunity to depict themselves as heroes, as hunter-gatherers, bringing home to civilization the wherewithal for intellectual nourishment. This rhetoric was so attractive, some wanted to claim a part, even when, in truth, they had none. So, for instance, the future pope Pius II (1458-64), when plain Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, claimed to have discovered in London an ancient translation of Thucydides – his correspondents were expected to detect Pius's fraud, but later generations failed to do so. Rather more intended to deceive were the efforts of Annio of Viterbo (d. 1502) at the end of the century, publishing fragments of texts he claimed to have recovered which were later shown to be forgeries. His method may have proven suspect but his ambition was, for some, convincing because it was true to the humanist dream of archival archaeology.

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