

Birth of Philology (The)

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Abstract

The first generations of humanists wanted to bring back to life classical Latin culture and literature. They were looking for manuscripts of rare or forgotten texts, and translated the rediscovered legacy of classical Greek literature. Humanist pioneers such as Petrarch, Salutati and Poggio demonstrated a specific interest in the recuperation of Cicero, whose Latin remained a model for centuries to come. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, the philological attitude of Italian humanism spread all over Europe. In the sixteenth century the epicentre of the philological movement shifted from Italy to the Low Countries, featuring prominent philologists such as Erasmus and Lipsius. Their works were a key factor in the shaping of the new humanist culture of the European elite and in the Reformation.

Article

The classical Greek term φιλολογία (*philologia*), denoting originally a rather generic love of learning or literature, pointed to a more specific erudition in the era of Hellenism. In more recent times, national traditions tend to diverge: while in Anglo-Saxon usage it is often related to linguistics, in Romance languages philology is more often connected to classical scholarship and textual criticism in particular. In the context of the *studia humanitatis* of late fourteenth and fifteenth century Europe, that is, of Renaissance “humanism”—a term no less problematic itself —“philology” will be used in the latter sense.

In the Hellenistic age, the head librarians of Alexandria in northern Egypt dedicated themselves to collecting and correcting the existing Greek literature, producing first of all a sounder version of Homer’s epic poems. These first textual scholars also produced commentaries on those ancient texts as well as prosodic and grammatical treatises. The tradition of the Alexandrine philologists from the fourth to the second century B.C., such as Zenodotus, Callimachus, Aristophanes and Aristarchus, was built upon and continued by various Byzantine scholars and compilers. Centuries later, when the first generations of humanists wanted to bring back to life classical Latin culture and literature, they went looking for manuscripts of then “lost” texts which they then copied and corrected. They also translated the legacy of classical Greek literature, which was recovered from Byzantium, studied the correct use of both classical languages and produced their own grammatical treatises, with Lorenzo Valla’s *Elegantiae* (1444) and Giovanni Tortelli’s *De orthographia* (c. 1451) as perhaps the most

prominent examples.

Petrarch and Salutati

In Western and Central Europe, where after the fall of Rome in the fifth century the knowledge of Greek had all but disappeared, the transmission of classical Latin literature was mainly a matter of monasteries and other ecclesiastical scriptoria. With the most notable exception of the Frankish abbot Lupus Servatus (ca. 805-862), hardly anyone before Petrarch (1304-1374) took a real “philological” interest in correcting classical texts as they had been handed down the centuries. Petrarch frenetically searched for lost classical writings all over Europe and he annotated the texts on which he had managed to lay his hands with numerous marginal notes. Many of these were conjectures aimed at restoring the meaning of corrupt passages, by which Petrarch made a most important contribution to the restoration of the vast corpus of writings produced by Cicero, who quickly became a role model for generations of humanists.

Petrarch’s efforts as to the recuperation of Cicero’s oeuvre were continued by Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), the chancellor of Florence. Perhaps realising the degree to which a real understanding of Cicero depended on a grasp of the Greek culture that all educated Romans were steeped in, Salutati in 1397 gave a decisive impetus to the renewed study of Greek in the West by inviting Emmanuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415) from Constantinople to become the first teacher of Greek in Florence. He wrote the first modern Greek grammar in use in Western Europe, the *Ἑρωτήματα* (*Erotemata* or “Questions”, c. 1395), and trained an entire class of translators. Barely half a century later almost the entire legacy of ancient Greek literature had been translated into Latin. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, from the last quarter of the Quattrocento onwards the Latin versions spread over Europe often before editions in the original Greek.

Poggio, Valla and Poliziano

While many more important discoveries of classical Latin texts which had been lying dormant for centuries were made by Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) and several other humanists, none of these book hunters demonstrated the philological acumen displayed by Petrarch. The first real successor who surpassed Petrarch’s seminal contributions was Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406-1457). His *Elegantiae linguae Latinae*, an often-reprinted manual discussing the proper use of Latin syntax and vocabulary, brought the study of the Latin language to an unprecedented level. Building on his superior philological competence he laid the foundations for critical Bible studies, with his *Annotationes* on the New Testament (1453). This work, later used by none other than Martin Luther, occasioned a dispute with Poggio, who accused Valla of irreligion for subjecting the *littera divina* to the same philological criticism as profane texts. Valla also proved both the *Donation of Constantine* and the apocryphal correspondence between Seneca and St Paul to be forgeries. With his relentless critical method, the

ever-polemical Valla paved the way for the critical philology of Angelo Poliziano in Italy, Antonio de Nebrija in Spain, Desiderius Erasmus in the Netherlands, Guillaume Budé in France and later generations of European humanists, his penchant for conjectural emendation notwithstanding.

In his philological *Miscellanea*, inspired by the example of the learned second-century Roman writer Aulus Gellius and his *Noctes Atticae*, Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494) displays attention for the quality of his textual sources, which he attentively weighs against each other, aiming at a genealogical assessment of their interdependence. A Greek poet himself, Poliziano was well aware of the crucial role Greek models played for classical Latin authors. His innovative adherence to the methodical principle that second-degree copies among the witnesses at hand should be disregarded in assessing the value of different branches in the transmission of texts was at the base of one of the founding principles in classical textual philology, the *eliminatio codicum descriptorum*. Poliziano was the first who systematically tried to reconstruct the archetype of a text through thorough collation of as many (ancient) witnesses as possible; he distinguished between transmitted variants and conjectures; and he introduced the use of sigla for distinguishing the witnesses of a text.

Shift to the North

From the late fifteenth century onwards, the blossoming tradition of producing ever more elaborate commentaries (e.g. by Domizio Calderini, and Niccolò Perotti in his *Cornucopiae*, 1478) on both Latin and Greek classical texts saw the philological approach developed by the first generations of humanists gradually evolve into the profession of true academic scholarship. The explosive growth in the production of manuscript copies in the course of the fifteenth century was soon to be followed by a multiplication of available texts thanks to the opportunities offered by the recently invented printing press. Publishers and the editors they increasingly called upon had access to numerous witnesses of the texts to be printed, which further fostered the development of an ever more sophisticated philological attitude.

Since the fifteenth century, some Italian magnates had maintained private humanist circles; sixteenth century monarchs and regents created true academic institutions dedicated to philological studies in Alcalá de Henares (*Colegio Mayor de San Ildefonso*, 1499), Louvain (*Collegium Trilingue*, 1517) and Paris (*Collège des lecteurs royaux*, 1529). The epicentre of the philological movement had shifted from Italy to the North, featuring prominent figures like Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536), Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), Josephus-Justus Scaliger (1540-1609) and Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614).

Thanks to the spreading of the philological works and attitude, learned people all across Europe rediscovered long forgotten or corrupted texts, like Cicero, Seneca or the Bible. They shaped the classical culture of the European elite and partly grounded the evangelical *Sola Scriptura*.

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