

## I

## The origins of humanism

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Any account of the past is necessarily coloured by the preconceptions, the aspirations and, above all, the knowledge or ignorance of the scholar who produces it. The terms and concepts that historians use to order and explain the objects of their inquiry are neither fixed nor value-free, but are evolving and often highly subjective elements in that process of revealing the past that gradually leads us to a better understanding of it. Labels such as Dark Ages or Renaissance, which are affixed to whole periods of European history, while they are convenient for the purposes of historiographical exposition, may tell only part of the truth about those segments of the past that they purport to characterize. The more we learn about the period following the decline of Rome, the less dark and uncultured it appears; the more we inquire into what was reborn in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the more we become aware of vital continuities with the past.

The history of humanism exemplifies both those continuities and a sense of renewal. The term itself owes its origin to the Latin *humanitas*, used by Cicero and others in classical times to betoken the kind of cultural values that one would derive from what used to be called a liberal education: the *studia humanitatis* constituted the study of what we might now think of as 'arts' subjects – language, literature, history and moral philosophy in particular. Even if Cicero was not widely read in the Middle Ages, he and his terminology were well known to certain fourteenth-century scholars (notably Petrarch, who regarded him as his favourite author); by the following century, the *studia humanitatis* were firmly enshrined in the university curriculum. The term *umanista* was used, in fifteenth-century Italian academic jargon, to describe a teacher or student of classical literature and the arts associated with it, including that of rhetoric. The English equivalent 'humanist' makes its appearance in the late sixteenth century with a very similar meaning. Only in the nineteenth century, however, and probably for the first time in Germany in 1809, is the attribute transformed into a substantive: humanism, standing for devotion to the

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literatures of ancient Greece and Rome, and the humane values that may be derived from them. The concept to which this volume is dedicated is thus a relatively new one, even if, as this first chapter will attempt to show, the activity to which it relates has a long and honourable pedigree, and was being practised for centuries before anyone thought of giving it a name.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of the present discussion, a working definition of humanism is clearly necessary, notwithstanding the misgivings expressed above about the value of historiographical labels. But it is precisely because it was originally an activity and not a concept that we can with confidence advance a description that will justify devoting an entire volume to it. Humanism is that concern with the legacy of antiquity – and in particular, but not exclusively, with its literary legacy – which characterizes the work of scholars from at least the ninth century onwards. It involves above all the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain. It ranges from an archaeological interest in the remains of the past to a highly focused philological attention to the details of all manner of written records – from inscriptions to epic poems – but comes to pervade, as we shall see, almost all areas of post-medieval culture, including theology, philosophy, political thought, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics and the creative arts. Grounded in what we would now think of as learned research, it rapidly found expression in teaching. And in this way it was to become the embodiment of, and vehicle for, that very classical tradition that is the most fundamental aspect of the continuity of European cultural and intellectual history. This chapter will endeavour to trace the main features of that continuity from its apparent beginnings in the ninth century to the end of the fourteenth century – a period in which scholarly interest was focused largely, but by no means exclusively, on Roman culture and Latin literature.

That these beginnings were only apparent, and that they themselves rested upon the uncharted scholarly efforts of an earlier age, themselves no doubt relying on still earlier attempts to keep the spirit of Rome and its texts alive, may be demonstrated by a minute but symptomatic instance of the survival of a classical text, *De chorographia* of the first-century geographer Pomponius Mela. We know that Petrarch acquired a copy of this rare work at Avignon in the mid-1330s, and although we do not possess his manuscript, a number of those derived from it preserved his annotations to the text and transmitted the results of his erudite labours to later scholars. The copy from which Petrarch was working was almost certainly a twelfth-century one, and at all events clearly descended from a ninth-century manuscript

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made at Auxerre and annotated by the Carolingian teacher Heiric. He in turn owed his knowledge of *De chorographia* to a sixth-century miscellany of texts assembled by Rusticius Helpidius Domnulus at Ravenna, which had since late antiquity been an important cultural centre. In this case – and it is not unique – we can therefore trace a direct line of textual descent from Rome to the Renaissance, a line constructed by scholarly activity of a kind characteristic of humanism.

Heiric's activity at Auxerre is exemplary of what is known as the Carolingian Renaissance, a surge of scholarship that took place in the eighth and ninth centuries in which many features of later humanistic practice can be observed. Auxerre was but one of the great monastic centres where during Charlemagne's reign the production of books flourished and important libraries were formed; others include Tours, Fleury and Ferrières in France, Fulda, Hersfeld, Corvey, Reichenau and St Gall in Germanic areas, Bobbio and Pomposa in northern Italy. Heiric was an influential scholar and teacher, to whom we owe the transmission of a number of classical texts besides that of Pomponius Mela, and notably fragments of Petronius. He was a pupil of Lupus of Ferrières, who was the greatest scholar of the ninth century and in effect the first classical philologist. Not only did he build up a substantial library, but he made every effort to acquire further manuscripts of texts that he already possessed, so that by comparing them he could correct and augment his own copies. More than a dozen surviving manuscripts, including works by Cicero, Valerius Maximus and Aulus Gellius, are annotated in Heiric's hand and bear witness to his philological skills. Five or six centuries on, manuscripts such as these were to provide the Italian humanists with the primary material for their recovery of the classics.

A quite different aspect of the Carolingian period, but one which also to some extent foreshadows the revival of learning that was to come later in Italy, was the need generated by a centralized regime for educated administrators outside the narrow sphere of the monasteries. Charlemagne's solution was to summon the head of the greatest school in Europe at York to advise him on educational matters in 782. Alcuin brought with him from England an effective pedagogical method, based on the reading of classical texts, and a significant consequence of his advice was the imperial edict establishing schools not only in monasteries but also for the secular clergy attached to the cathedrals. These schools, whose aim was perhaps no greater than to guarantee the spread of basic literacy, none the less helped to create a literate class outside the monasteries and, in generating an increasing need for books, widened the circle of readers for the texts that they contained.<sup>2</sup>

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Even if with the decline of Charlemagne's empire the flourishing literary culture that had accompanied it at its height did not survive, the pattern which it had established for the spread of education to cities was to be of the greatest significance. Major monasteries continued to be centres of scholarship and book-production, and to promote interest in classical literature. The outstanding example is the Benedictine mother-house of Monte Cassino, to whose activity, especially in the eleventh century under Abbot Desiderius, we owe some magnificent manuscripts and the survival of a number of key texts. But the future was with the courts, the cathedral schools and the cities. During the twelfth century, classical literature underwent a new revival, this time labelled as the twelfth-century Renaissance; at the courts and in the cathedral schools (some of them destined to become universities) of southern Italy and Sicily, of Spain, of Bologna and Montpellier, of northern France and Norman England, scholars turned their knowledge of the classics not only to literary ends but also to more practical and above all secular ones. In addition to men of letters and philosophers, society needed lawyers, doctors and civil servants, and for them the study of the writings of antiquity assumed the role of professional training. The range of texts available had not only expanded considerably in the field of literature, grammar and rhetoric, but now included Latin translations of Greek scientific and philosophical texts: medical treatises, Euclid, Ptolemy and some works of Aristotle.

It is a measure of the degree to which twelfth-century French culture was permeated by classical material that even vernacular literature came to bear its traces. In the last decades of the century three romances – the *Roman de Thèbes*, *Eneas* and the *Roman de Troie* – and many shorter texts were directly based upon material reaching back to antiquity. The growth in production during the same period of *florilegia*, anthologies of excerpts from classical authors, confirms the impression that their writings, or parts of them at least, were reaching an increasingly wide, though not always scholarly, audience.<sup>3</sup>

One of the outstanding scholars of the age, John of Salisbury, may stand as an illustration of the embryonic state of humanism. He had been educated at Chartres and Paris in the early twelfth century and certainly possessed an impressive, if somewhat patchy, knowledge of Latin literature (some of it no doubt derived from *florilegia* rather than the original texts); he praised eloquence and defended liberal studies in his *Metalogicon*; he was skilled at deploying his knowledge of examples drawn from ancient history to illustrate the moral judgements that he brought to bear on contemporary problems. Yet he shows no signs of an awareness of the ancient problem of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, nor of

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a deeper understanding of the works from which his examples were derived: they served as ornamentation to his argument rather than as a fundamental part of the thinking behind it. He was an excellent Latin stylist, but as a result of being a grammarian rather than a philologist. In short, he was typical of the best kind of medieval classicist: broadly familiar with, but still only an armchair traveller in, the terrain that the humanists were later to explore in depth and make their own.<sup>4</sup>

The factors that prevented the kind of classical reading that was done by a John of Salisbury from developing into fully-fledged *studia humanitatis* were endemic in a society, such as that of northern France, in which the Church and its needs dominated. Canon law (the body of ecclesiastical rules imposed by authority in matters of faith, morals and discipline) and the new logic of Aristotle were the mainstay of the education of clerics, and within the confines of scholastic theology, pagan literature could hardly come into its own. Indeed, scholasticism was later to be regarded by some as the very antithesis of humanism, though such a view greatly oversimplifies the issues. In contrast to the largely agrarian and feudal society of countries north of the Alps, however, a quite different and predominantly urban civilization had developed in Italy. In the city-states of the north in particular, the needs of civic administration and commerce were to prove stronger than those of the Church; educated laymen, lawyers and civil servants in particular emerged as the new literate class.

Whereas in France the study of classical texts – which was to continue well into the fourteenth century – tended to remain rooted in grammar as a tool for understanding and sometimes imitating Roman writers, in Italy it developed along different lines and particularly in the direction of rhetoric as a skill for contemporary life. The study of what in classical times had been the art of public speaking had by the twelfth century in Italy become the *ars dictaminis*, the art of letter-writing; those who practised it, the *dictatores*, applied their knowledge to the needs of their patrons and the legal profession. They were not initially classical scholars in any profound sense, but rhetoricians who drew upon ancient models to achieve eloquence in the writing of letters and speeches; yet they held positions of influence as teachers, secretaries or chancellors to rulers and communes, and were consequently involved in, and influential upon, affairs of state. We can see in *dictamen* one of the roots of humanism, reaching deep into the past: the letter, thanks above all to Petrarch, was to become one of the most favoured and versatile literary genres of the Renaissance, encompassing private and political discourse, scholarly and philosophical enquiry, and all manner of literary enterprises.

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Another main root of humanism which may be observed in thirteenth-century Italy, closely entwined with, and sometimes inseparable from, the activities of the *dictatores*, was the study of Roman law in its philological and practical aspects. Indeed, as early as the ninth century there are traces of notaries at the royal palace at Pavia applying the *Corpus iuris civilis* (the sixth-century codification of Roman law compiled at the behest of the Emperor Justinian) to contemporary situations, anticipating by some 400 years the figure of the legally trained civil servant as the typical learned layman who was to play such an important part in civic life. In the rapidly developing independent communes of the north, the role of lawyers in economic and political affairs was crucial. From at least the twelfth century onwards, and notably at the University of Bologna, there had been a revival in legal education. The glossing and interpretation of the great texts of Roman law, the *Code* and the *Digest*, with a view to applying them to current legal problems, combined with an awareness of historical origins no doubt reinforced by the presence of many physical remains of antiquity, helped to give a sense that the civilization of the past was still alive, and this in turn led to curiosity about that civilization.<sup>5</sup>

The lawyers who studied legal texts and adapted the precepts of Roman law to the needs of a fundamentally different society thus also became interested in other aspects of their classical heritage, and in particular in history and moral philosophy; they even resorted to the recreational writing of Latin verse. Lovato Lovati is the earliest figure who exemplifies these tendencies. Lovato gathered around him in Padua a group of like-minded men whose scholarly activities justify one in regarding that city as one of the earliest centres of proto-humanism. A notary and subsequently a judge, he was familiar with a remarkable range of classical texts, many of them extremely rare at the time, including Seneca's tragedies and lyric poets such as Catullus, Tibullus and Propertius. He almost certainly encountered some of them at the Benedictine Abbey of Pomposa and in the Chapter Library of Verona, both of them renowned as repositories of the writings of antiquity. He was also a skilled interpreter of epigraphs and showed a passionate antiquarian concern for Padua's past when in 1283–4 he identified an early Christian sarcophagus that had been dug up during building works as containing the remains of the mythical Trojan founder of the city, Antenor. It is significant of the cultural climate that it was agreed to incorporate this supposedly glorious relic of the city's ancient past into a monument of supposedly classical style bearing a Latin inscription composed by Lovato himself.

Yet however revealing this episode may be, it does not do justice to his scholarship. Lovato's real achievements, or such as survive today, were his



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Latin verse epistles, bearing the traces of his reading of the classical poets, and a remarkable short commentary on Seneca's tragedies, the fruit of his own careful reading of the texts and in effect the first brief treatise on classical metrics. In these works we perceive in embryonic form three of the features that were to mark the later development of humanism: an appetite for classical texts; a philological concern to correct them and ascertain their meaning; and a desire to imitate them. These features mark, to a greater or lesser degree, a number of other minor figures in Lovato's Paduan circle, above all his nephew Rolando da Piazzola and Geremia da Montagnone, compiler of one of the most successful of medieval *florilegia*, the *Compendium moralium notabilium* ('Anthology of Noteworthy Examples of Virtuous Behaviour'), or *Epitoma sapientie* ('Epitome of Wisdom') in the 1505 edition, containing a vast range of carefully identified excerpts from classical and medieval authors.<sup>6</sup>

The most significant of Lovato's pupils, and the key figure in this scholarly revival, was the lawyer, politician and patriot Albertino Mussato, who came to be known, as diplomat and man of letters, far beyond the bounds of his native city. He too was widely read, and his reading bore fruit in his Latin verse, much of it in a polemical vein; he wrote a defence of poetry and a history, *De gestis Henrici VII Cesaris* ('The Deeds of Emperor Henry VII'), modelled on Livy. Above all, he was noted for his verse tragedy *Ecerinis*. It was not just that this was the first play to have been composed in classical metre since antiquity, in imitation of Seneca; it was also a work with a powerful political message, telling of the fall of the tyrant of Padua Ezzelino da Romano and warning against the dangers of domination by the ruler of Verona, Cangrande della Scala. In recognition of this work of poetry and patriotism, Mussato was crowned with laurels in 1315 by his grateful compatriots. For the Florentine humanist and chancellor Coluccio Salutati, writing eighty years later, this coronation was no doubt one of the reasons why he placed Mussato among the forebears of Petrarch in his survey of the restorers of learning.<sup>7</sup>

Recent research has rescued from oblivion a number of other minor figures in and around Padua in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. They were generally lawyers by training, and their enthusiasm for classical culture was shown by their interest in links with antiquity (such as an epigram by Benvenuto dei Campesani of Vicenza celebrating the return to Verona of her long-lost son Catullus) and by their emulation of classical letter-writing or historiography. Verona itself, no doubt in part because of its remarkable Chapter Library, can be seen as another cradle of humanistic activity. Giovanni Mansionario, for example, drew upon manuscripts that he found there to compile, between 1306 and 1320, a *Historia imperialis*,

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which shows a distinct ability to compare and evaluate historical sources critically. He also devoted a study to showing that the Pliny who was well known in the Middle Ages as the author of the *Natural History* was not the same as the Pliny who wrote a collection of letters, but that there had been two men of that name in antiquity. Also at Verona, Cangrande's chancellor Benzo d'Alessandria composed a vast historical encyclopedia, the *Cronica* (1313–20), based on a very wide range of classical texts, many of which he had himself unearthed during his travels. The search for texts, like the critical acumen shown by Mansionario, are clear signs of the progress that scholarship was making.

Such progress appears, in Padua, Vicenza and Verona at least, to amount almost to the development of a common literary and aesthetic ideal: the rediscovery of classical texts and through them the assertion of links, sometimes mythical, with Roman civilization; and the restoration of classical genres and styles of writing. Elsewhere in Italy, the evidence for some kind of classical revival is much more tenuous, seeming often to depend on isolated individuals. One such was Giovanni del Virgilio, appointed to teach Latin poetry at the University of Bologna in 1321, who appears to have limited himself to Virgil and Ovid, but whose Latin poems addressed to Mussato and Dante included one of the earliest eclogues in Virgilian mode. There were in addition in Florence a number of scholars active in the revival and imitation of classical literature, including Francesco da Barberino and Geri d'Arezzo, who is placed on a par with Mussato by Coluccio Salutati;<sup>8</sup> but there was at this period no sign of a concerted interest in the culture of antiquity.

There are two other centres of learning in the fourteenth century, however, which deserve particular mention in the context of the present discussion. The first is the Angevin court of Naples, one of the earliest places in Italy to witness a revival of Greek, to which we shall return in the final part of this chapter. The other, closely in contact with the Angevin court, most especially during the reign of King Robert I (1309–1343), is the papal curia at Avignon. For the first three-quarters of the fourteenth century, the so-called 'Babylonian captivity' of the popes there – the result of pressure exerted by the powerful kings of France – meant that it became the diplomatic and cultural centre of the western world. The papal library gradually acquired an important collection of classical texts; the curia, as a focal point of patronage, attracted scholars and men of letters from all over Europe, providing employment for cultivated lawyers and *dictatores*. Perhaps the single most illustrious intellectual figure to emerge from the Avignonese milieu was Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), often considered to be



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the father of humanism and certainly the outstanding scholar and creative writer of his generation.<sup>9</sup> It is in his activities and in his writings that we perceive the fulfilment of all the various scholarly tendencies that we have so far observed; yet it is also clear that without the preparation of the terrain that we have witnessed his achievements would not have been possible.

His father, a Florentine notary, was exiled from his native city a few months after Dante in 1302 – both men were conservatives who fell victim to a shift of power in favour of the radicals – and sought employment at the papal curia. Not surprisingly, he wanted his son to have a legal education, sending him to Bologna for six years when he was sixteen. But by Petrarch's own account his father's intentions were foiled, for from an early age he developed a passion for the classical authors, reading everything that he could lay his hands on, and in particular the works of Cicero and Virgil. From the former he was to learn that mastery of rhetoric and style which was to raise him above the level of the *dictatores*, and from the latter a love of poetry that was to shape his whole literary life. In his early legal and rhetorical training we see the reflection of the Paduan notaries of Lovato's day; like them too, Petrarch was to remain in the secular world and to serve political patrons as politician and diplomat.

He spent the first half of his life in or around Avignon, principally in Vaucluse a few miles away. He thus had access not only to patronage and to the cultural and intellectual milieu of the curia, but also to books: those in the papal library and those brought to Avignon by others. However much he came to resent the business of the curia and the iniquities of the papal city as time went by, it was in a sense an ideal centre in which to conduct his first philological enterprises and from which to travel in search of others.

It was doubtless at Avignon that he supervised the preparation of a Virgil manuscript for his father around 1325, and certainly there that, a dozen years later, he had a frontispiece added to it by the Sienese artist Simone Martini. It was also at Avignon, aided by manuscripts found there or brought there, that he was able to piece together and restore the text of Livy's *History of Rome*, combining an incomplete thirteenth-century copy of the third decade with a copy of the first, much of which he transcribed in his own hand, and finally a copy of the fourth decade brought to Avignon from Chartres by Landolfo Colonna. By about 1330 he had succeeded in assembling the most complete text of Livy then known and was able to recognize what the shape of the original must have been. But in addition he was able considerably to improve the text, collating that of each of the decades with other manuscripts. His notes and corrections to the third decade are particularly valuable, since they record the variants of a manuscript which was probably also provided by Landolfo Colonna, but is now

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lost, and which descended from a quite different branch of the tradition. Although there is no real evidence of critical reflection on Petrarch's part as to the relative merits of the various sources that he was comparing, there can be no doubt as to either his philological zeal and acumen or his enthusiasm for classical literature.<sup>10</sup>

This enthusiasm is reflected in his search for new texts, first manifested in a journey to the north in 1333, when he found a manuscript of Cicero's forgotten *Pro Archia* in Liège, and one of Propertius in Paris, stemming from the thirteenth-century scholar Richard of Fournival. Both these texts he studied assiduously and transmitted to posterity with his annotations and emendations, as he did also with *De chorographia* of Pomponius Mela (mentioned above); one clear benefit of Petrarch's humanism is his particular contribution to the tradition of classical texts which he had himself inherited from earlier generations of scholars. Much subsequent scholarship would have been impossible without his intervention, and it is indeed probable that we owe the very survival of certain texts to his discoveries and his labours.

He was of course not alone in his enthusiasm, and the history of the restoration of Livy probably owes as large a debt to Landolfo Colonna as it does to Petrarch; yet the active search for manuscripts of classical texts clearly points to the development of what was to become a major humanist activity of subsequent generations of scholars, starting with Petrarch's friend and disciple Giovanni Boccaccio. Its most immediate consequence was that Petrarch's personal library grew rapidly. We know from a list that he made of his favourite books in the late 1330s that by then it already contained a high proportion of classical texts (including fourteen by Cicero); by the time of his death it had become the largest collection of Roman literature in private hands and included a number of works which Petrarch had himself discovered.<sup>11</sup>

Although this precious library was dispersed, many books from it have survived – perhaps most significantly the Virgil mentioned above, now in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, and Petrarch's copy of Livy, in the Harleian collection of the British Library.<sup>12</sup> It is in the margins of such manuscripts as these that we see Petrarch's dialogue with ancient authors at close quarters: his annotations to Virgil's poems and to Servius' commentary upon them reveal a close eye for points of prosody and history, and a dense network of cross-references to the writings of other classical authors. As a result of his remarkably wide knowledge of them, he was frequently able to correct Servius' interpretations and even (in a later letter) to prove that Virgil's account of the love of Dido and Aeneas was historically incorrect, since she lived some 300 years after Aeneas' death.<sup>13</sup> Petrarch's