

Introduction

The last thing readers want from the authors of history books is arcane historiographical debates among contending schools of interpretation. Yet in the case of Renaissance humanism, any serious reader needs some knowledge of where we have been since 1860, when the Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt put forward what long remained the dominant concepts of the key terms, 'Renaissance' and 'humanism', in his masterpiece of cultural history, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Although few specialists today would give unqualified endorsement to his description of the age, it was profoundly appealing to his contemporaries, and it still has much to offer.

Burckhardt's book quickly captured the imagination of educated readers because it was a subtle and learned synthesis of opinions about the Renaissance that had been accumulating for centuries and had grown powerful during the Age of the Enlightenment (Ferguson 1948). Burckhardt seemed to confirm a story that had already become prevalent but had never before been given such a powerful and coherent presentation. This story, or historical myth, was the product of the secular intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were searching for the origins of their own beliefs and values. According to this story, after the collapse of ancient civilization in the fifth century AD, a thousand years of darkness and barbarism ensued, with the Christian church acting simultaneously to preserve some few shreds of ancient civilization and to suppress any intellectual or religious revivals that might weaken the stranglehold that the higher clergy and the warrior aristocracy held over the minds as well as the bodies of ordinary people. Eventually, however, a revival of commerce and urban life (the reasons for which were rarely explained) laid the foundations for a rediscovery of ancient literature and simultaneously for a secular, even anti-religious, set of values. These values, which constituted a new and distinctly modern philosophy of life, glorified the individual and the attractions of earthly life; and they were strongly reinforced by the rediscovered pagan literature of Antiquity. The new secular, individualistic values were inherently incompatible with

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Christian belief. This worldly philosophy of life came to be called 'humanism', and it reflected a comprehensive rebirth (i.e., a renaissance) of high civilization that drew its main ideas and inspiration from ancient times. Those who had been brought up in this humanistic philosophy overthrew the social and economic restraints of feudal, pre-capitalist Europe, broke the power of the clergy, and discarded ethical restraints on politics. They laid the foundations for the modern absolute, secular state and even for the remarkable growth of natural science at the end of the Renaissance. In short, they ended the Middle Ages and ushered in the modern world. This is a rather straightforward story. It is especially attractive to secular-minded intellectuals who still often call themselves 'humanists'. It dominated prevailing views of Renaissance humanism from the publication of Burckhardt's book until well into the twentieth century. It has only one major flaw: both in its general thrust and in virtually every detail, it is untrue.

The preceding account of Renaissance humanism contains just enough half-truths to make it plausible. Rather oddly, the author who created it, Jakob Burckhardt, was no uncritical admirer of the materialistic, power-hungry bourgeois culture of his time. His masterpiece is far more subtle than the preceding simplified account would indicate. Virtually every work on the Renaissance for two generations accepted its conclusions without serious question. But the twentieth century witnessed a growing reaction against 'Burckhardtian' orthodoxy, partly because fresh research challenged specific points but also because the bloody and violent history of the twentieth century made it hard to accept the liberal, optimistic faith in progress that Burckhardt's book seemed to imply.

The attack on Burckhardt's Renaissance

Of particular importance in the twentieth-century reaction against Burckhardt was the growth of scholarship on medieval history, which made the conventional view of a dark and barbarous Middle Ages increasingly hard for well-informed historians to swallow. The stark contrast between a culturally 'dark' Middle Ages and an enlightened, 'modern' Renaissance melted away as medievalists discovered squarely in the Middle Ages all the essential traits supposedly typical of the later period, and also discovered within the Renaissance many traditional elements that seemed to prove that the Middle Ages lived on into the Renaissance. Medievalists found renaissances (that is, periods of classical revival) in 'their' period also – in Carolingian France, Anglo-Saxon England, Ottonian Germany – though not, perhaps significantly, in any century of Italy's Middle Ages. One of these medieval revivals, the 'twelfth-century

Renaissance', has established itself firmly in the historical vocabulary. The great American medievalist Charles Homer Haskins made that concept canonical with his *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927). Haskins argued that the term 'renaissance', in the sense of emergence of high culture, including significant enthusiasm for classical Latin literature, was an obvious characteristic of the twelfth century and that this cultural renewal is the direct ancestor of all subsequent European civilization. Others went further and claimed that *the* Renaissance, the real one, the one that marked the fundamental transition of Europe from a backward to an advanced civilization, occurred not in Italy in the later fourteenth century but in France in the twelfth century. For a time in the late 1940s and the 1950s, the very idea of a Renaissance came under attack.

Yet the concept and term 'Renaissance' have survived, though still contested. The main reason is that whatever terms historians might apply, the historical realities that Burckhardt described cannot be dismissed with quibbles about the proper terms to use. A flood of new studies vastly enriched historians' understanding of the period. By the 1950s, these studies had produced new ways of thinking about Renaissance culture, new ways of defining such fundamental terms as 'humanism' and 'Renaissance'. Books by Myron P. Gilmore (1952) and Denys Hay (1961; 2nd edn 1977) are important early steps in synthesizing this new research.

Many of those who joined in the attack on Burckhardt spent their energy denying the appropriateness of his terms rather than in discussing the major traits of the period. No serious scholar now believes that before the Italian Renaissance, Europe lay sunken in darkness, barbarism, and superstition for a thousand years. It is true that Petrarch and other humanists claimed to have restored civilization after a millennium of cultural darkness. This claim may contain profound truths concerning the Renaissance period. But concerning the Middle Ages, it is patently false, so false that no one whose opinion counts now holds it.

Thus the beginning of wisdom for anyone who wants to understand the culture of Renaissance humanism is to realize that the high civilization of the Renaissance developed out of the high civilization of the Middle Ages and always retained marks of that origin. The medievalists are at least partly right: the Renaissance is not the beginning of the cultural dynamism of Western society, but rather a highly significant reorientation of an advanced civilization already two or three centuries old. As Haskins demonstrated beyond dispute, many of the major authors of ancient Rome were not only known but well known in the schools of the High Middle Ages. From the thirteenth century, the curriculum of all universities was based on the works of Aristotle, one of Antiquity's greatest philosophers. Humanism was not, as many people have assumed, a worldly rival

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philosophy that displaced a pious scholastic philosophy during the Renaissance. For one thing, humanism was not a philosophy at all (an issue that will be treated later). In the professional study of philosophy and natural science, scholasticism (and Aristotle) retained a mastery unshaken and almost unchallenged right through the Renaissance centuries, all the way down to the collapse of Aristotelian science in the time of Galileo and Descartes. The humanistic culture did not produce a new philosophy to replace this scholasticism, which continued not only to exist but also to develop along lines that were intellectually sound and philosophically fruitful.

Yet Burckhardt was right in detecting the emergence of a new culture and also in identifying at least one of its major sources. Part One of his book links the new humanistic culture of Italy to a unique set of social, political, and economic conditions. At first glance, this new culture might seem to be the simple reflex of the emergence of capitalism, commerce, and cities in northern Italy from the late eleventh century. But there are difficulties with the cruder forms of this purely materialistic explanation, the most obvious one being chronology. Urban growth and commercial expansion can be traced as early as the eleventh century. Why did the new culture not attract a large following until almost the end of the fourteenth century? Since many historians of the period are now convinced that the 1340s witnessed the onset of the new capitalist economy's first great depression, it even seems that the new culture did not develop until the capitalist economy was in a prolonged decline. In any case, there is no simple connection between the birth of capitalism and the new humanist culture.

Italy's unique social character

Yet it is true that Italy during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had become the most highly developed, the wealthiest, the most urbanized region of Europe. North of the Alps, the scholastic philosophy, Gothic art, and vernacular literature of these centuries seem to be clearly associated with the clergy and the feudal aristocracy that dominated the Middle Ages. Italy was not totally free of this older aristocratic and clerical culture. But Gothic art and architecture never gained full dominance in Italy, and the scholasticism that developed in Paris first penetrated Italian universities during the lifetime of the earliest humanists and never became a prominent element in Italian civilization (at least not until the conservative Catholic religious reforms of the late sixteenth century).

The dynamic part of Italy, the north, was dominated not by clerics and feudal nobles but by wealthy urban merchants; and during the twelfth

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and thirteenth centuries, the cities of northern Italy in alliance with the popes broke the military and political power of the German kings, who called themselves Roman emperors and attempted to control northern Italy. Instead of developing a strong, centralizing monarchy based on feudalism as France and England did, Italy became a jumble of urban republics that exercised *de facto* independence, a point developed at some length by Burckhardt. Although the people of these urban communes were sincerely Catholic and were periodically swept by waves of religious revivalism, the position of the clergy in Italian city life was marginal. The cities were ruled by wealthy merchants and modest tradesmen and artisans, though from the thirteenth century, more and more of them came under the control of military despots who offered protection from internal class conflict and outside invasion.

In such a society, based on individual property and private contract, the most important educated groups were those who dealt with commercial and industrial activities. These were the lawyers and the notaries, those who drew up and interpreted the rules and written agreements that made trade on a large scale possible. As Italian capitalist society developed, there was an acute need for men skilled in drafting, recording, and authenticating contracts and letters. These were the notaries, specialists who did not need the long and costly education provided by law schools but who did receive a training in Latin grammar and a style of rhetoric called *ars dictaminis*. Such training in letter-writing and drafting legal documents was often given by apprenticeship, but at major centres of legal study such as Padua and Bologna, there were professional teachers who not only taught the conventional legal forms of various kinds of business documents and the correct type of handwriting for documents of public record but also provided some instruction in Roman law. At first, the duties of notaries required little more education than the ability to read and write. But as the scale and complexity of Italian business transactions grew and as a growing proportion of Italy's urban male population became literate, professional notaries had to differentiate themselves from the general literate population by acquiring more sophisticated skills, such as a good mastery of Latin, the language of the law courts, and the ability to embellish documents and letters with quotations from classical and Christian authors. In addition, the need for lawyers and notaries to study, ponder, and apply Roman law predisposed them to develop an interest not only in the law but also in the language, literature, institutions, and customs of Antiquity. Although humanists of the Renaissance generally pointed to Petrarch and Boccaccio as the pioneers of the cultural renewal that they claimed to be leading, they sometimes alluded to precursors who lived in the closing decades of the thirteenth century. Not

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by mere coincidence, these precursors (sometimes now labelled pre-humanists) were all either lawyers or notaries.

Paduan 'pre-humanism'

Padua, a university town especially noted for the study of law and medicine, held the earliest known cluster of enthusiasts for the language and literature of ancient Rome. The central figure was a judge, Lovato dei Lovati (c. 1240–1309). His few surviving poems show that he had a thorough knowledge of ancient Latin poetry. Lovato energetically defended ancient poetry against those who preferred modern vernacular verse. He was active in the discovery and reburial of the supposed remains of the Trojan Antenor, the mythical founder of Padua. He was also an admirer of the Roman dramatist Seneca. His study of Seneca's texts gave him a clear understanding of the metrical structure of ancient Latin poetry, producing the earliest Renaissance treatise on metrics. While his poetic work shows a strongly classicized Latin diction, his prose works are written in the prevailing medieval Latin of the legal profession.

Although Lovato was a talented writer and a striking personality who showed many characteristics of humanism, he remained relatively little known outside Padua. His younger contemporary Albertino Mussato (1261–1325), who was a notary by profession, became widely known throughout Italy; and perhaps for that reason, many more of his writings survive. Though he sometimes still interprets classical myths and poets in the allegorical medieval way, his underlying approach to poetry and history is innovative. His prose style was influenced by the Roman historian Sallust; and his own historical works were influenced by Sallust, Caesar, and especially Livy, ancient Rome's most famous historian. His poems were also modelled on ancient poets. His admiration for Seneca's tragedies reflects the influence of Lovato, whom he regarded as his master. Mussato used Seneca's tragedies as a model for the first secular drama written since Antiquity, the *Ecerinis*. Significantly for future developments in Italian humanism, the play was political propaganda encouraging Paduan citizens to resist the attempts of the tyrant of Verona to incorporate Padua into his principality.

One of the most puzzling characteristics of the Italian cultural situation is that Florence, the city associated with the later flowering of humanistic culture, played a modest and largely derivative role in this pre-humanist movement. A few individuals had personal connections to classicizing Paduan lawyers and notaries, but in general Florence at the end of the thirteenth century was not a highly learned place. It was not a university town, and, with the exception of the convents of the mendicant orders, there

seem to have been few libraries of classical texts. Yet the city was growing and prospering immensely in the late thirteenth century, and it contained a large population of lawyers and notaries, the group most active in the early classical culture of Padua. Conventional scholarship associates the first great Florentine literary and intellectual figure, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), with medieval rather than Renaissance culture. The most important Florentine precursor of Dante was a notary, Brunetto Latini, who was broadly learned, but in a manner that links him to the encyclopaedic tradition of the Middle Ages. Indeed, Latini spent several years of exile in France and wrote his major book in French. The prospering merchant class of Florence was developing an intellectual life dominated by its own needs and interests, not those dominant among university professors and clergymen. Yet it was not cut off from medieval scholasticism. Dante claims to have attended ‘the schools of the religious and the disputations of the philosophers’ during the 1290s, probably meaning that he attended lectures on theology at the Dominican and Franciscan friaries. The libraries of these two flourishing convents were the only places where Dante could have gained access to the broad range of books, both ancient and medieval, reflected in his poetic and prose works.

Yet while the unusual erudition of Latini and Dante seems to reflect predominantly medieval culture, the fact that both were laymen and both were chiefly concerned with practical moral and political questions rather than abstract, speculative ones (such as logic, metaphysics, and theology) demonstrates that the new social reality of late medieval Italy was producing new cultural initiatives. What these Florentine intellectuals lacked was a clear conception of a far-reaching cultural renewal to be brought about by assimilation and reinterpretation of classical literature and by conscious repudiation of the values of medieval civilization. These new directions were the discovery of yet another Florentine, Francesco Petrarca (or Petrarch). It may be significant that Petrarch was a Florentine who never resided in Florence, the son of a political exile who became a functionary at the papal court in Avignon. Thus Petrarch grew up not in Italy but in southern France. And surely it fits the emergent pattern of the early classical revival that though he never practised law, he received a university education in Roman law. With him, a new cultural ideal, the ideal of humanism, emerged in Italy. That emergence is the subject of the following chapter.

1 The birth of humanist culture

Both the classical enthusiasms of Paduan lawyers and notaries and the literary works of Florentines like Brunetto Latini and Dante show that about 1300 the prosperous educated laymen in the Italian cities were groping their way towards a new culture distinct from both the chivalric culture of the medieval nobility and the scholastic culture of the clergy. This was a natural response to the conditions of their life. Since the nineteenth century, historians have labelled this new culture ‘humanism’, though that abstract term was coined by a German scholar in 1808 and appears nowhere in the writings of the Renaissance itself. The term that did exist then was ‘humanistic studies’ (*studia humanitatis*), used to designate a cluster of academic subjects much favoured by humanists. By the first half of the fifteenth century, the term ‘humanist’ (in Latin, *humanista*) had come into use, originally as student slang used to designate masters who taught those particular academic subjects: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. ‘Humanism’, the bundle of subjects taught by ‘humanists’ in the Latin grammar schools and university faculties of liberal arts, made no claim to embrace the totality of human learning, nor even all of the traditional seven ‘liberal arts’ (embracing the *trivium*, or grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, and the *quadrivium*, or arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) that in theory were studied by all who received the bachelor and master of arts degrees from a university. The *studia humanitatis* did not include the subjects taught in the three higher faculties of medieval universities: law, medicine, and theology.

To our own era, which has cast aside most of its classical heritage, it may seem odd that an educational and literary movement that embraced only grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy could have become quite literally epoch-making. Since the eighteenth century, efforts have been made to equate humanism with something broader and more obviously significant, the rise of a new philosophy that was generally defined as a glorification of human nature and an exaltation of this-worldly goals in place of the otherworldly values that supposedly dominated life in the Middle Ages. But this way of thinking about humanism ran up against

irrefutable evidence that leading humanists (beginning with Petrarch himself) were still deeply moved by otherworldly religious values.

In the Renaissance itself, humanism was never defined as a philosophy or taught as an academic subject. All serious study of philosophy throughout the Renaissance was founded on one or another of the rival forms of medieval Aristotelianism – scholasticism. Although humanist scholarship eventually diffused knowledge about other ancient philosophical traditions besides the Peripatetic or Aristotelian, only Aristotelian philosophy was taught in the schools. This scholastic philosophy remained dominant until the rise of the new physical science in the seventeenth century demolished the credibility of Aristotelian natural philosophy. Outside the academy, Platonism or Stoicism or some other ancient system may have been a philosophical rival to scholasticism for certain individuals. But humanism never was, because it was not any kind of philosophy at all. Among twentieth-century scholars, Paul Oskar Kristeller led the opposition to all attempts to define humanism as a philosophical rival to scholasticism. Aside from his awareness of the actual origins and contemporary meaning of the term *studia humanitatis*, one of his principal motives seems to have been historiographical. The kind of windy, undocumented blather about ‘humanist philosophy’ that dominated discussions of the Renaissance in the nineteenth century cannot stand up against any serious study either of medieval civilization or of the writings of the leading humanists themselves. It is true that from the time of Petrarch, humanists frequently attacked scholasticism; but this was largely an outgrowth of educational and curricular disputes, not of philosophy strictly speaking. Humanists objected to the narrow, trade-school approach that dominated scholastic education. They also denounced the scholastics’ reluctance to incorporate some fairly limited curricular changes that the humanists demanded. Sometimes they attacked scholasticism (as Petrarch did) because it seemed too materialistic and rationalistic, too subversive of religious faith. They did not present their age with a comprehensive new philosophy, because they had none to offer. There is no identifiable set of philosophical doctrines that all humanists held and that could possibly be used to define them as a distinct philosophical school. Most of their writings had nothing to do with philosophy. Kristeller concludes, ‘the Italian humanists on the whole were neither good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all’.

On its own terms, this position is unassailable. But it leaves modern students with the problem of explaining why humanism seemed so important, both to contemporaries and to later historians. Perhaps to the graduate of nineteenth-century classical schools, the humanists’ effort to attain a purer, more classical Latin style and a broader knowledge of

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ancient Latin and Greek literature may have seemed epoch-making; but to the present generation, which has virtually renounced study of Greek and Latin, why should such achievements seem important? It is a fair question, made all the fairer because a significant part of the ancient Latin literature that survives today was known, read, studied, and even loved throughout the Middle Ages.

The question of how thoroughly lost the 'lost' classical books really were is worth pondering. In the case of Greek texts, which in general were far less known than Latin books in the Middle Ages, the works of Aristotle were of interest to the medieval Arabs; and in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, when the intellectual life of Christian Europe reached a level where Aristotle seemed relevant to its concerns, nearly all of his works were made available in Latin translation within the lifetime of one generation.

Also worth pondering is the historical fact, widely known but seldom reflected upon, that from the conquest of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 down to 1261, that city and many other centres of medieval Greek culture were ruled by puppet princes installed by Venice and other Italian cities. A steady stream of Italian merchants and administrators went east and lived for many years in the Byzantine capital. Western churchmen flocked to the east to persuade or compel the Greeks to accept religious union with Rome. Yet none of this thirteenth-century contact seems to have aroused much interest in ancient Greek language and literature. In the case of both Latin and Greek, perhaps what is the important and overlooked point is not the availability of ancient books (which were always potentially present) but the change in outlook that made acquisition of those books and mastery of a difficult language worth the trouble.

A change of mentality

Western Europeans *could* have recovered Greek language and literature in the thirteenth century as easily as in the fifteenth, but they did not seize the opportunity. The scarce Latin manuscripts that humanists of the early fifteenth century took pride in 'rediscovering' were all available during the high-medieval period, but they were not 'discovered' – that is, few readers knew of their existence. In the case of both classical Latin and Greek, something had changed between the early thirteenth century and the early fifteenth century. This change was a change of mentality, of values, that made the tedious mastery of the classical languages and diffusion of classical texts seem worth the effort.

Historians of culture have often assumed that the Renaissance recovery of ancient languages and literatures was somehow easy because Italy as