

## I. THE IMPACT OF THE RENAISSANCE ON HISTORIOGRAPHY

### 1. The Renaissance: Its Meaning

From the time of Petrarch (AD 1305–74) in the fourteenth century, the European mind began to experience changes of great magnitude. Scholasticism, the general name given to medieval education, slowly gave way to a new kind of learning signified by a spirit of inquiry, a spirit which affected every aspect of human thought and activity. An important aspect of the 'New Learning', as it was called, was the eager search for and an enthusiastic study of the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The culture of the ancients with its ideals of beauty, freedom and joy of life was imbibed, and the test of reason was applied to everything religious or profane. This fundamental change in the thought and taste of the Western man is designated by the term Humanism. The Humanists or those who took to the New Learning rejected the supernatural and put human interest and the mind of man paramount. They were concerned more with man than with god, with refinement of life here on earth than in the problems of life hereafter. The humanist movement reached its climax in the fifteenth century which ushered in the Renaissance, a great creative movement which emancipated Western thought from the shackles of medieval Christianity.

### 2. The Impact of the Renaissance on Historiography

The Renaissance represented a totally new spirit, a new confidence in man's limitless capacities. It was asserted that man was endowed

with free will so that he could be his own maker and moulder. Such confidence in the boundless capacity of man surely did not belong to the medieval period, but to the modern. The Renaissance spirit made a great impact on historiography. It could be seen in return to the humanistic view of history, the emergence of the lay historian, a new interest in the remains of the past, an advance in historical criticism, and in the growth of a new school of humanistic historians such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini.

#### Return to the Humanistic View of History

The new interest in man and the world in the place of medieval otherworldliness led to a revival and reorientation of historical studies in the West. The Renaissance orientation represented a return to the humanistic view of life based on that of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Historical thought once more came to be focused on man.

#### Emergence of the Lay Historian

Closely related to the revival of interest in man and the world was a swing away from the medieval Christian tradition and a gradual secularization of life and thought which was reflected in the writing of history. Theological interpretations of history and the supernatural element in historiography disappeared as men ceased to believe in the operation of a providential plan in their affairs. History became purely mundane. Monastic annals and chronicles, universal histories and world chronicles, lives of saints and bishops all went out of fashion with the emergence of the lay historian. This occurred first in Italy. Here the survival of some lay schools rigger down from Roman times – in spite of the ascendancy of the medieval Church in education – and the revived study of Roman law were factors which stimulated lay historical writing. Lay history was further promoted by the prevalence of political regimes in Lombardy, Piedmont and Tuscany, which unlike Naples and the papal states, were comparatively free as well from papal as from feudal influences. The cities of Lombardy, Piedmont and Tuscany were mostly independent republics and their societies were predominantly bourgeois. Public offices were elective and the very intensity of local issues and party strife made for an intense, realistic history writing.

#### Interest in the Remains of the Past: Establishment of the Science of Archaeology

A particular effect of humanism on Renaissance historiography was a newly awakened interest in archeological remains, succinctly described by Herbert Butterfield as an interest "in the sheer pastness of things past..."<sup>2</sup> The Italians were indifferent to the monuments of antiquity and even the humanist Pope Nicholas V (AD 1447–1455) had permitted a contractor to despoil the Coliseum of 2600 cartloads of cut stones!<sup>3</sup> But there was now a definite change of attitude. Already in the fourteenth century historical writers had discovered the value of inscriptions, coins and medals as historical sources. In the fifteenth century was awakened a genuine sentiment for the surviving remnants of the past. There emerged a fervor for 'antiquities' which began to show itself in an eager search for ancient manuscripts, the founding of societies and museums, and in imposing publications. Tacitus's *Agricola* and *Germania* were recovered in 1455 and parts of his *Annals* were brought to light in 1506. In 1473 appeared a Latin translation of a great part of Polybius's work. Poggio Bracciolini, a historian of Florence, was a passionate manuscript hunter. Niccolò Nicoli, a Florentine merchant, was a pioneer in the collection and preservation of rare books. Lorenzo de Medici had a museum in one of his palaces. Pope Sixtus IV founded the Capitoline museum. Archeology as a science of scholarship was established by Flavio Biondo (1388–1463). "The new science of archaeology," writes J.W. Thompson, "not only furnished a valuable commentary to the classical revival, it contributed also to critical method and historical interpretation."<sup>4</sup>

#### Advance of Historical Criticism

Humanist historiography marked a general advance of historical criticism. The Italian humanists who had reached a high degree of critical awareness, achieved "a great clearing away of what had been fanciful and ill-founded in medieval historiography."<sup>5</sup>

1. A new form of criticism, *philological criticism*, was to liberate history writing from the grip of tradition and the binding force of authority. In AD 1440 Lorenzo Valla (1406–57) set out to prove that the *Donation of Constantine* had been a forgery. It was on the

authority of this document that the temporal power of the papacy had largely reposed. Valla was at the time in the service of Alfonso, King of Aragon and Sicily. His criticism, appearing at a time when King Alfonso was at war with the pope, was, in fact, part of a bitter publicity campaign.<sup>6</sup> In assailing the document, Valla employed not only the known evidence of history, but made brilliant use of philology, numismatics, psychology, and common sense. Was it not against ordinary experience that an emperor would have disinherited his children? And how would arguments resting on common sense Valla proceeded to expose the absurdities and contradictions in the text, the barbarity of the Latin, and the mistakes in terminology.<sup>7</sup> The philologist came to the conclusion that the historical setting in which alone the document could be placed was AD 752-756, and therefore the document was a forgery. The first great triumph of humanist critical scholarship, the famous expose was the first achievement of textual criticism.

2. Jean Bodin in 1566 showed in his *The Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* that the accepted scheme of periods, the Four Empires, was based not on accurate interpretation of facts but on an arbitrary scheme borrowed from the *Book of Daniel*.<sup>8</sup> Bodin's ideas on criticism did not, however, go farther than ratifying Aristotle's view that authorities were likely to be unreliable if they were too ancient or too recent; yet, when they clashed with one another, he preferred the more recent. Again, he thought it better, where possible, to follow a writer who was intermediate, i.e., neither a hostile nor a friendly witness.<sup>9</sup>

3. Likewise, humanist scholars exploded many 'myths of origin'. Polydore Virgil, an Italian humanist in England, destroyed the legend about the foundation of Britain by Brutus the Trojan. The first to subject the sources of English history to real criticism, Virgil dismissed the legends about King Arthur and the tales of Geoffrey of Monmouth. In the mid-sixteenth century, again, the humanist L.V. de la Popeliniere, assailed the legend that the Franks were descended from the Trojans.

Yet, with works of the Italian humanists, though substantial cannot be said to have established a general standard of historical criticism or brought new methods into general currency. Butterfield

writes: "As yet...there could be no organic story of the development of historical technique, and the battles that had been won for a moment would have to be fought over again in the future."<sup>10</sup>

### Humanist Historiography and the Territorial State

The new humanist historiography was from the beginning, connected with the development of modern political consciousness. Celebrating the glories of Florence was a particular function of the historiography that was developing in Florence under the stimulus of Bruni. Other governments of Italy following the example employed humanists as official historians. Indeed, between 1450 and the 1530s Italian humanists served like court historiographers in Germany, France, England, Spain, Poland and Hungary. The close identification of the new humanist historiography with the new kind of territorial state that was emerging, was to endure and develop into modern nationalist historiography.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Renaissance Historians

Renaissance historiography, was mostly a Florentine affair. From the fourteenth century onwards a tradition of historiography was developing in Florence which flowered under the stimulus of the humanist revival of classical learning. Rationalistic and mostly secular in character, this new historiography of the Italian Renaissance imitated the classical authors like Livy and Suetonius, and later Polybius and Tacitus.

#### Flavio Biondo (1388-1463) and Leonardo Bruni (d. AD 1444)

Flavio Biondo was an historian as well as an antiquarian. His *Decades*, also called *History from the Decline of the Roman Empire*, is chiefly a history of southern Europe from the fall of Rome (AD 410-1440). This 'long' view along with the critical handling of sources, makes the *Decades* a milestone in modern historiography and an anticipation of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>12</sup> Biondo anticipates specialists in medieval studies in the twentieth century when he reproaches Petrarch for his contempt for the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup> He stresses the continuity of European history from the fall of Rome in the fifth century to the Renaissance in the

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