

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy

**Review Number:**

1485

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 26 September, 2013

**Author:**

Ronald G. Witt

**ISBN:**

9780521764742

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£75.00

**Pages:**

616pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.cambridge.org/co/academic/subjects/history/european-history-after-1450/two-latin-cultures-and-foundation-renaissance-humanism-medieval-italy>

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Timothy Kircher

Ronald Witt's new book serves as a prequel to his highly-praised volume, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni*.<sup>(1)</sup> If the *Footsteps* volume located the genesis of humanism in the epistolary and literary compositions of late 13th-century Padua (whereby as a consequence the traditional 'father of humanism,' Petrarch, finds his place in humanism's third generation), *Two Latin Cultures* addresses a broader and more fundamental question: why did Renaissance humanism begin in Italy in the mid 13th century? His work embraces the long view, to be sure, undertaking its inquiry with the 8th-century Carolingian conquest of the Lombard kingdom. It also embarks on a deep reading of the evidence for cultural change, expositing and analyzing source material from archives, manuscript libraries, and scholarly monographs.

Witt's study of 'medieval Italy' focuses on the northern and central Italian peninsula, the area of the original Carolingian conquest or *regnum*; this area developed a distinct urban society, tied to yet separate from transalpine princes and emperors. The 'two Latin cultures' of the title refer to what Witt calls, first of

all, the "traditional book culture" (p. 3) of grammar study with the aid of ancient authors and, in the second instance, the legal-documentary culture fostered by notaries. If the first culture, that of the traditional book, initially flourished in cathedral schools and monasteries, an arena of clerical *otium*, the second, that of the legal document, came forth under the urgent deadlines of practical affairs, in the urban sweat-shops of litigation, run primarily by the laity. The first Latin culture prioritized grammar and then dialectic; the second Latin culture emphasized rhetoric, indeed a simplified rhetoric, one sensitive to the demands of the moment. Clergy and laity assumed then, to a large degree, diverse spheres of influence, united by Latinity while devoted to different tasks. What occurred over the course of four centuries, in Witt's analysis, was a melding of interests and influence, a cross-pollination between grammatical and legal study that created the conditions for Renaissance humanism: in other words, for reviving the reading and writing of classical Latin in response to the ethos of 13th-century northern Italian communes.

The book commences with discussing how the Lombard kingdom, conquered by Charlemagne in 773, already possessed both Latin cultures, a traditional book culture and a documentary culture. Charlemagne's patronage and educational reforms drew book-loving intellectuals northward of the Alps, while an increasingly lay notariate in Italy maintained the *regnum's* legal structure. Thus the traditional book culture in northern Italy, such as it remained, entered an extended "conservative" period (p. 70), one devoted to preserving texts rather than creating new ones. During the Ottonian Renaissance, the *regnum* enjoyed relative autonomy from imperial oversight. Urban centers developed in the 10th and 11th centuries, initially under the political jurisdiction of bishops. If the Ottonians cultivated grammatical studies based on the reading of ancient historians and moralists, the foremost Italian teachers of the 10th century, such as Gunzo of Milan, typically applied their talents to the craft of rhetoric. The documentary culture thrived as trade routes opened and cities grew; and since bishops often sought to employ royal notaries to protect their interests, this culture became increasingly vested in the hands of the laity.

The relative prosperity of the 11th-century *regnum* advanced both Latin cultures. The clerical grammar schools, often located in the cathedral chapters, created teachers of renown. Lanfranco of Pavia, on his way to becoming Archbishop of Canterbury, helped foster a "renaissance of dialectic" (p. 139), first in the *regnum* and then in Francia. Conversely the clerical reform movement, spearheaded by Pietro Damiani, discouraged the reading of pagan authors, especially in logic and grammar, while developing its own arsenal of rhetorical weapons. This rhetorical focus of the reformers supported a heightened interest in legal studies; a "legal-rhetorical mentality" (p. 181), in Witt's words, would come to dominate the *regnum's* intellectual life.

In a following section, entitled "The birth of a new order" (p. 179), the book analyzes the Investiture struggle and its revolutionary effect on the society of the *regnum*. Pope Gregory VII marshalled the power of urban popular protest to support his reform program, with the result that town-dwelling laity grew more independent from traditional episcopal control by the early 12th century. To quote Witt's words here: "Intellectually, with the introduction of communal institutions a new space opened up for secular lay thought, at least one propitious for creative thinking about law, ethics, and politics" (p. 183). To have this new space opened up by one of the most strident ecclesiastical zealots in European history is just one of the paradoxes the book ponders. The war of propaganda that the Investiture struggle unleashed led to a new style of argumentation, exemplified by the writings of Placido of Nonantola, which, in its use of organized rubrics for canonical pronouncements and patristic sources, encouraged the study of canon law as a distinct academic discipline. At the same time, private grammar schools emerged to prepare notaries for the study of rhetoric and civil law.

The next section of the book accounts for the dominance of the legal-rhetorical mentality. As the communes enlarged their political sway in the *regnum*, their civic leaders employed ambitious laymen trained in the texts of Roman and civil law, who created what Witt calls a second book culture, the culture of the legal book. The traditional book culture, adapting to the dynamic urban circumstances, provided new textbooks in simplified grammar and rhetoric for this legal training. The critical political catalyst for these developments was the Peace of Constance between the Emperor Frederick I and communes in 1183, which granted the communes an almost complete autonomy. The city of Bologna both illustrated and energized this legal-rhetorical mindset; its private schools were in the forefront of the three new disciplines: canon law, Roman

(civil) law, and the *ars dictaminis*, a streamlined form of rhetoric for the writing of public letters. Bolognese doctors were able to achieve the greatest philological success of the Middle Ages, the compilation of Justinian's *Corpus iuris civilis*, as well as to articulate theories about the relationships among Roman, Lombard, feudal, and customary law. The skill at reconciling apparently disparate legal statutes found fruition in the field of canon law, notably in the *Decretum* of Graziano (or Gratian). Canon law was henceforth separated from theology, justifying, with legal logic, the papacy's claim to spiritual preeminence over temporal kings and princes.

The private educational market, responsive to the needs and demands of a growing commercial and urban elite, expanded in breadth and depth in the 12th century. It assumed an increasing share of primary and secondary education in the rudiments of Latin letters; and its portion of advanced education in legal studies would lead to the first *studia* and the nascent universities of the *regnum* at Bologna and Padua. Lay teachers and scholars over the course of time became drivers of the traditional book culture in the *regnum*, in contrast to their clerical counterparts in Francia and Germany. While Matilda of Tuscany was an early patroness of this book culture among the clergy of her court, cities such as Pisa and Bergamo sponsored their own panegyrics and histories, often written by laymen, that mixed classical and Christian elements. Lay scholars also translated medical and scientific works from Greek and Arabic sources. Yet ancient writers for the most part did not enliven the intellectual life of the 12th-century *regnum*, and their relative paucity distinguished its culture from the humanist awakening in Francia during this period. French studies of grammar and dialectic, conducted with an increasingly theoretical approach, influenced Francia's adaptation of Italian jurisprudence after 1150.

The book's concluding section examines the way French learning and letters in turn affected the cultural life of the *regnum* in the 13th century. By this time, the communes had gained even greater independence, but they were also afflicted by antagonisms between classes, by familial vendettas, and by tensions over episcopal and princely claims on their sovereignty. Provençal culture, exiled from Francia, found a new home among the *regnum*'s aristocracy, where it often fueled these antagonisms. City governments confronted these internal factions through legal means, sponsoring a larger class of ambitious notaries and lawyers. This white-collar brigade required a training in Latin grammar and eventually sought to enhance its prestige by showing erudition beyond the basic *ars dictaminis*. At the center of the educational whirlwind stood Bologna, which would showcase the *regnum*'s first university. At least nine other urban centers founded *studia*, collectives of advanced students and teachers, at this time. Laity of the *regnum* therefore presided over both book cultures, the traditional and the legal, by 1250.

When practically-minded civic leaders turned to the study of antiquity in the 13th century, they were prepared to understand classical writers because of their advancements in Latin literacy; furthermore, they welcomed the Roman political ethos of *civilitas* to counteract the internecine strife besetting their communes. If Bologna remained the standard-bearer of the legal-rhetorical mentality, Padua, the home of a newer *studium*, showed a broader interest in literary studies. These studies, and its notariate, created in Italy a new book culture, the culture of Italian humanism, forged in the city's struggles with the tyrant Ezzelino da Romano. The Paduan Lovato de' Lovati, a lay notary and judge, initiated the new book culture by employing a classicizing poetry and rhetoric that addressed the concerns of the secular commune.

A work of this scope and breadth leads one to inquire into the author's historical method. Witt employs, it seems to me, a careful logic rounded by skepticism. His book showcases an experienced, thoughtful historian at his craft, constantly alert to the limitations of his sources even as he derives the principles and themes that guide his argument forward. The dominant triad of these principles is patronage, politics, and literacy, in particular the way their interrelation changes over time, producing what he terms the condition of 'Italian exceptionalism' (pp. 1, 207).

To illustrate this interrelation for his readers, Witt makes use of categorical distinctions and antitheses: lay versus clerical, book culture versus document culture, to cite the two prime examples. Yet these categories are never programmatic. He qualifies them time and again by uncovering surprising kinships (e.g., Damiani's rhetorical focus), and by conscientious references, in both text and notes, to the way that one's conclusions

rest on fragmentary and partial information: often on a scattering of manuscripts, subject to the accidents of natural or human neglect. To cite one passage, in which Witt discusses the popularity of two grammar books in the 11th century:

By the twelfth century, although comparison of the number of manuscripts of Priscian with those of Papias would suggest the opposite, Priscian may already have been replaced in innovative educational institutions by Papias's summary. Priscian's is a large manuscript, laborious to copy and difficult to replace. It would have been carefully warehoused. Papias's summary version is considerably smaller, easier to copy, and less likely to be guarded in monastic libraries. Paradoxically, therefore, if in this case we accept the rule of the survival of the unfittest, the smaller number of surviving Papias manuscripts could reflect the fact that the work was more heavily used than was Priscian, both in Italy and in Francia. I see no way of moving from this assumption, however, to a solid assessment of the extent to which the two grammars served teachers' needs on either sides of the Alps (p. 260).

Here, as elsewhere in the work, the conclusions are conditional, awaiting further discovery and analysis. They allow openings for corroboration, elaboration, and revision, for example by those studying the exchanges among medieval Jewish scholars throughout the peninsula, whose activity has been illuminated by the recent find of a 12th-century Torah in Bologna. Nonetheless, the range and detail of the information Witt provides in his book are eloquently synthesized into a compelling argument.

I would make two finishing observations on Witt's historiographical craft. His writing has an eye for literary excellence; he wants his readers to notice examples of rich, artistic compositions from the course of these four centuries: e.g., the "Song of the Watchmen of Modena" (p. 54); the verses "O Roma nobilis" (p. 83); Damiani's "De die mortis" (p. 157); the poetry of Mosè del Brolo (p. 300); and Enrico of Settimello's *Elegia* (p. 440). Secondly, this work offers a perspective on the Middle Ages by a scholar of Italian humanism. As if looking out at the past from the window of the humanist Coluccio Salutati, the late 14th-century Florentine chancellor, Witt has a vision for culture shaped by the processes of competition, patronage, and political strife. But this vision transcends the very assessment of the Middle Ages expressed time and again by Italian humanists themselves. Rather than looking back at a Dark Age, we see multiple renaissances. If these humanists lamented a lack of classical learning prior to their time, they might have spoken with accuracy of only the 12th-century *regnum*, but not before it or beyond it.

## Notes

1. Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Hortulus

<http://hortulus-journal.com/journal/volume-8-number-1-2012/carroll/> [2]

---

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1485>

### Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/65742>

[2] <http://hortulus-journal.com/journal/volume-8-number-1-2012/carroll/>