

## The Study of History during the Renaissance

The enthusiasm people had for the Greeks and Romans during the Renaissance was largely a product of people looking at history differently.

The way people think about their past reveals a lot about the assumptions they make about history and themselves. For example, medieval scholars divided history into two periods: an ancient world before the time of Christ (which was a time of darkness) and then the period after his resurrection which was regarded as a time of light. We have not thought in these terms—times of darkness and light—for a long time; however, up until about 1998 the majority of scholars organized time in reference to the birth of Christ, e.g. BC years ago western scholars organized time into a period before the birth of Jesus—the acronym BC stands for “before Christ” and AD stands for “in the year of our Lord”. In an effort to establish a non-religious calendar, historians now prefer to use the acronyms BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era). Interestingly, despite the fact Western society has not believed in the medieval view of history for centuries the BC/AD structure still continues to exert some influence on the way we think about history.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, medieval historians always connected whatever was happening in their present to some sort of parallel event in scripture, e.g. typology. God’s role in the affairs of humankind was paramount to the medieval historian because they believed they were living near the end of the last age, e.g. the Second Coming.

Humanist historians formed a different model of history. Unlike their medieval counter-parts, Renaissance historians did not divide history into two but three periods:

- The first age belonged to the ancient Greeks and Romans (it was regarded as a period light characterized by a flowering of culture and progress)
- The second age, or middle-age, was a time of darkness or a “dark age” (humanists like Petrarch branded it as an age of cultural decadence and barbarism)

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<sup>1</sup> The modern world continues to make use of all sorts of primitive or medieval notions. For example, the ancient Greeks believed the white cloudy substance in the night sky was the milk of the goddess Hera. We still call our galaxy the “Milky Way” but no one believes Hera exists any longer. Also, we still use terms like “sun set” and sun rise” which reflects an ancient belief in a flat earth. In reality the sun neither sets nor rises; rather, the earth spins revealing the sun during the day and concealing it during the night.

- Humanists represented their own age as a new historical epoch of a special kind: a renaissance<sup>2</sup>—an age of light after darkness, an awakening after sleep, rebirth after death

According to the humanists after Rome disappeared all that was good and beautiful was lost. However, everything improved once Petrarch (1304-1374 CE) re-introduced the world to the light of Virgil and Cicero. Petrarch valued the Greeks and Romans because of their emphasis on reason and logic in the pursuit of knowledge. Another humanist named Erasmus (1466-1536 CE) re-envisioned the history of religion in humanist terms. He argued that in the early days, the Catholic Church was a beacon of light surrounded by a sea of pagan darkness; however, the flood of barbarians that destroyed the Western Roman Empire also succeeded in steering the Church from its true path, i.e. the Church became more concerned about preserving its worldly power that it forgot its original purpose (to preserve the simple message of Christ). Erasmus blamed the Church's problems on ignorant monks and mind-numbing scholastics (like Thomas Aquinas) for doing the lion's share of the damage to the Church and the faith community of his day. He argued the clergy had become ineloquent and fixated with superstitious theology that was uninspiring and even in error. Nevertheless, Erasmus felt the rediscovery of the Greeks and Romans meant the Church could return to the simplicity and purity of its past.

The medieval historians believed they were living at the end of an age. Humanists, by contrast, felt they were living at the beginning of a new and brilliant period in human history. This filled them with hope and optimism for the future. To be sure, much about society, Church and life still needed reform and restoration; nevertheless, there seemed almost no limit to possibility and expectation, and men looked forward to an almost immediate future when all branches of knowledge would recover their pristine beauty; a golden age when Roman eloquence would be restored and a beneficial knowledge of Greek firmly re-established; this would revive a purer Christianity. Early sixteenth-century thinkers and writers faced the future with confidence and hope.

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<sup>2</sup> The term "Renaissance" was first prominently used by the French historian Jules Michelet in 1858, and it was set in bronze two years later by Jacob Burckhardt when he published his great book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.

### The Importance of Analyzing & Criticizing History

If someone wanted to accurately forge (copy) a piece of writing created two hundred years ago they must know enough history to avoid anachronisms.<sup>3</sup> For example, if while reading an account of the Battle of Yorktown (1781 CE) the historian explains the Americans defeated the British by dropping atom bombs you should be skeptical, i.e. the first atom bomb was dropped in 1945 on Japan. America dropping nukes on England would be an example of an anachronism because the technology (nukes) did not exist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Humanists valued historical accuracy and developed methods to test a document's trustworthiness. For example, who would be more of an authority on Christianity—St. Paul who lived in the First Century or Pope Leo X (the pope at the time of Martin Luther)? The humanist historian would argue Paul is the greater authority: Paul was closer *in time* to Jesus than Leo X; therefore, Paul was positioned better both historically and intellectually to discuss events related to the time period the historical Jesus existed. Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457 CE) used newly developed investigative techniques to prove that the *Donation of Constantine* was a forgery. The Catholic Church argued they received a "donation" in the 4<sup>th</sup> century from Emperor Constantine giving them control of vast parts of Italy. Valla looked at the language of the *Donation* document discerning it had actually been written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, not the 4<sup>th</sup>. He pointed out that the word "fief" occurred in the document but this word was first used in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, there was no way Constantine—a person living in the pre-feudal 4<sup>th</sup> century—could have given Italy as a "fief" to the Catholic Church.

Erasmus applied similar critical techniques to the study of the bible. He translated the *New Testament* from Latin into Dutch and published it in 1516 CE. In his translation, he left out the following verse (commonly referred to as the *Comma Johanneum*) from the *First Epistle of John* that is the scriptural basis of the doctrine of the Trinity. The text of *1 John 5:7-8* reads as follows:

And there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood, and these three agree in one.

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<sup>3</sup> An anachronism is a thing belonging to or appropriate to a period other than that in which it exists, e.g. Romans did not have smart phones; therefore, if you were to read a "historical" account of Julius Caesar texting his friends on his smart phone this would be an example of an anachronism.

Erasmus, like Valla, proved the first verse was not authentic. In particular, he found the reference to “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost” was absent in all of the oldest Greek versions of John’s letter; the verse was also absent in his *oldest* Latin manuscripts. Lastly, upon investigation he discovered that it was unknown to any Christian writer *before* the fourth century (or the 300s). He argued, by appealing to the evidence, that if the verse *had* existed, it certainly would have been quoted by writers at a time when the doctrine of the Trinity was the center of a theological controversy. The controversy actually threatened to tear the early Church part, i.e. the majority of Christians did not believe in the Trinity. Instead, the majority—called Arians—argued that the Holy Spirit was a quality Jesus and God shared (and that God was the *adopted* not actual son of God). Those supporting the concept of the Trinity would certainly have appealed to *1 John 5: 7-8* as evidence against the Arians. But they could not because the verse simply did not exist (yet). The controversy over the nature of God was resolved in favor of the Trinity at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE). Erasmus concluded that the Church must have penned in (added) the verse after the council to give scriptural authority to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Textual criticism of this kind represents a more scientific approach to understanding history that emerged during the Renaissance. Renaissance historians were far from perfect: they tended to write in a flowery style sometimes sacrificing accuracy to elegance; they looked at history differently than we do; that is, they looked at it as a branch of literature. Nonetheless, advances made by humanist historians helped secularize<sup>4</sup> historical writing and thinking. People still saw God at work in history; however, they did not automatically revert to discussing God in order to make sense of events.

Renaissance historians had a more secular conception of history than their medieval counter-parts. Instead of being an illustration of God’s rule over humankind, history was, in the humanist view, a guide to life. The study of history, according to the humanists, incites one to virtue and discourages vice; it trains future statesmen in politics and war; it is the mother of experience and the grandmother of wisdom. Old men are said to be wise because their judgement rests on the accumulated experience of a lifetime; a right reading of history likewise makes people wise. The new history was thus a secular narrative of past politics or a comparative study of ancient and contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> Secularize: to separate from religious or spiritual connection or influences.

institutions, elegantly written, coherently organized, practical in purpose, with causes and motives explained in human terms. The works of humanist historians remained models for generations.

**Source:** *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460-1559* (pg. 79-83).