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Renaissance (The West)

In the West, the term Renaissance, with a capital R, is inseparably associated with the period of Italian history from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century and its cultural aftermath in the rest of Europe during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although it was only in the nineteenth century that the Renaissance began to be thought of as an historical epoch, the idea that these centuries witnessed a rebirth, in which the revival of classical antiquity played a significant part, was proclaimed from the first by those engaged in recovering what they regarded as their lost heritage. While they had no hesitation in blaming their medieval predecessors for neglecting or even destroying this inheritance, modern scholarship has identified various earlier movements, similar to those in Byzantium, in which a renewed interest in the classical tradition featured prominently. It now seems that practically every medieval century from the end of the Dark Ages can claim a renaissance of its own.

The first of these – variously referred to as the Carolingian renaissance, revival or *renovatio* – was an offshoot of Charlemagne's political and religious reform of his empire in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Although the intellectual flowering and surge of scholarship which characterized this period was a crucial factor in the survival of the greater part of classical Latin literature, these pagan texts occupied only a limited space within the wider context of Carolingian studies, which were primarily focused on Christian learning: the Latin Bible, above all, and the Church Fathers, especially Gregory the Great and Augustine. Charlemagne's program of establishing schools at all monasteries and cathedrals in his realm, with the aim of improving the educational level of monks and clerics, had the side-effect of producing scribes and scholars who engaged in the copying and editing of texts on a previously unimaginable scale. While only a small proportion of these works were classical, the end result was that the canon of Latin literature as we know it was preserved and transmitted to future generations – securely in the case of some authors (Virgil,

Horace, Lucan, Juvenal, Terence, Persius, Statius, Cicero, Sallust, Pliny the Elder, Vitruvius), less so for others (Seneca, Martial, Quintilian, Plautus, Lucretius, Pliny the Younger, Ovid, Columella, Petronius and Ammianus Marcellinus), and by the slenderest of threads for a few (Tibullus, Catullus, Propertius and certain works of Tacitus and Livy). In the palace scriptorium of Charlemagne and his successor Louis the Pious, and in those located in monasteries (such as Fulda, Hersfeld, Corvey, Lorsch, Reichenau, St. Gall, Tours and Fleury), manuscript exemplars, many of them ancient and written in majuscule scripts, were carefully copied in the elegant minuscule hand which was universally adopted in the Carolingian empire and on which the humanists of the fifteenth century modeled their own script.

Charlemagne's masterstroke was to headhunt from far-off York the brilliant scholar Alcuin (c. 735-804) as the director of educational reform within the empire. Through this position Alcuin helped to shape Carolingian attitudes toward classical antiquity: although learning was intended to serve God and his Church, there was nevertheless a place for pagan texts, which could be tolerated, even when not amenable to Christian glossing, on the grounds of utility, both moral and political. One of Alcuin's students, Hrabanus Maurus (c. 780-856), himself became an influential educator, earning the title *praeceptor Germaniae* ("The Teacher of Germany") and including among his pupils the greatest scholar of the age, Lupus of Ferrières (c. 805-862). An avid manuscript hunter, Lupus attempted not only to fill gaps in the holdings of the library at Ferrières but also to acquire exemplars of works already in his possession so that he could use them to correct and supplement his own copies. Moreover, in collating these manuscripts, he worked out sophisticated methods of textual criticism – leaving spaces for lacunae, marking corruptions and recording variants – that anticipate practices developed centuries later by classical philologists. Lupus's student Heiric of Auxerre (c. 841-876) is notable for compiling collections of excerpts from Latin authors such as Valerius Maximus, Suetonius, Pomponius Mela and Petronius. It was mainly from such anthologies or florilegia that

most Carolingian – and, indeed, later medieval – scholars gained access to classical texts.

Another Carolingian compiler and student of Hrabanus Maurus was known as "Walafrid the Squinter" (Walafrid Strabo, c. 808-849). A poet, biblical exegete and abbot of Reichenau, he included only a small amount of pagan material in his famous commonplace book (St. Gall 878), but was sufficiently interested in classical Latin poetry to emend the oldest surviving manuscript of Horace (Vat. Reg. lat. 1703). He also provides eloquent testimony, in his prologue to Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, that he was aware of living in a time that was 'radiant with the blaze of new learning, previously unknown to our barbarism,' though the precariousness of this shining moment of cultural rebirth was equally apparent to Walafrid, who went on to lament that this 'light of wisdom' was now 'dying out.'

Walafrid's pessimism was to a large extent justified, as the political disintegration of Charlemagne's empire inevitably led to a general decline in the level of education and culture in the second half of the ninth century. Nonetheless, the Carolingian tradition was not entirely extinguished and served as the basis for the Ottonian renaissance, which took place in the tenth century in the reigns of Otto I, Otto II and Otto III. The era is particularly noted for the lavish manuscripts of Christian texts that were produced in monasteries such as Corvey, Hildesheim and Reichenau, with magnificent illuminations inspired by late ancient, Byzantine, Carolingian and insular art. Characteristic of the revival of classical antiquity in this period are the six Latin dramas in rhymed prose by the Benedictine canoness, Hrostwitha of Gandersheim (c. 935-c. 975): presented as a reworking (*retractatio*) of the plays of Terence, they highlight the chastity, steadfastness and asceticism of Christian heroines. The central intellectual figure of the Ottonian renaissance was Gerbert of Aurillac (c. 940-1003), whose rise from abbot of Bobbio to archbishop of Reims and then of Ravenna, and finally to the papacy as Sylvester II was not the result of a pact with the devil, as a later legend would have it, but was due instead to

the support he received from Otto III, whom he served as tutor and counselor. A keen collector of manuscripts – a 10th-century codex of Cicero's *De oratore* (Erlangen 380) was made for him – Gerbert helped Otto to expand the imperial library, which acquired from Italy copies of Livy's fourth decade, Pseudo-Quintilian's *Declamationes maiores* and a collection containing Florus, Festus and Eutropius. Valuable as Gerbert's contribution to the preservation of ancient Latin texts was, it was his technical knowledge of music, mathematics and science which earned him renown and notoriety.

Although referred to as the twelfth-century renaissance, the next resurgence of interest in classical antiquity began around the mid-eleventh century and lasted until the early thirteenth. Unlike the Carolingian and Ottonian renaissances, it was not fostered by a particular court or dynasty; its geographical scope, moreover, was much broader, encompassing Sicily, Salerno, Bologna, Toledo, Montpellier, Chartres, Paris, Canterbury and Oxford. The cultural advances of the long twelfth century were also wide-ranging, involving literature, art, law, medicine, science, philosophy, and education; and the influence of the classical tradition was felt in all these spheres. Vernacular romances such as the *Roman de Thèbes*, *Eneas*, and the *Roman de Troie* drew on material and themes from the Latin literature of antiquity. Illuminated manuscripts of classical or pseudo-classical texts depicted figures from pagan mythology and history, while the sculptural decoration of Romanesque cathedrals and churches abounded in motifs borrowed from ancient art. The *Digest* of Justinian was rescued from neglect and became the foundation of the discipline of Roman law. Greek medical, scientific, astronomical and mathematical works were recovered, sometimes via Arabic versions, and rendered into Latin. Previously unavailable treatises of Aristotle were translated, commented on and taught in the universities which began to be founded in this period. The strengths and weaknesses of twelfth-century classical scholarship are exemplified by John of Salisbury (c. 1115-1180): a fine Latin stylist, intimately familiar with a broad range of ancient Latin literature,

which he was able to adapt and apply to the concerns of his own time; yet much of his effort still went into compiling collections of related classical texts, and his knowledge of certain authors was dependent on earlier anthologies, which continued to be the mainstay of his less accomplished contemporaries.

The existence of the Carolingian, Ottonian and twelfth-century renaissances was uncovered through the research conducted by medieval historians over the past hundred years. Scholars had begun to hint in this direction as early as the nineteenth century: Jean-Jacques Ampère, for instance, suggested in his *Histoire littéraire de la France avant le douzième siècle* ("Literary History of France before the Twelfth Century", 1840) that the intellectual movement at the end of the eleventh century "presented all the characteristics of a veritable renaissance." But it was Charles Homer Haskins, with his groundbreaking volume *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927), who initiated what has been described as "the revolt of the medievalists." Haskins and his followers were determined to refute the idea that the cultural and intellectual revival that occurred from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth century, first in Italy and then spreading throughout Europe, was a distinctive and singular event that merited exclusive ownership of the term renaissance. In contrast, however, to their novel idea of medieval renaissances, the concept of the Renaissance which they set out to undermine had a long history, going back to the founders of the movement.

For Petrarch (1304-1374), the first Renaissance man, the thousand years between the collapse of the Roman Empire and his own day was a *medium tempus*, a "middle period" of unrelieved darkness and ignorance, a "sleep of forgetfulness," as he portrayed it in his unfinished epic *Africa*, from which he earnestly hoped future generations would awaken, enabling them to return to "the pure, pristine radiance." No stranger to the art of self-publicity, Petrarch associated himself with this return through his participation in the revival of the ancient ceremony of poetic laureation. His devoted admirer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) reinforced this association, in a

letter of around 1370, in which he praised Petrarch for bringing back "to his own age the laurel wreath which had not been seen for perhaps a thousand years or more," for "cleansing the fountain of Helicon, clogged with mud and rushes, and restoring its waters to their former purity," and for "returning the Muses, sullied by rustic uncouthness, to their pristine beauty." Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), first in a distinguished line of humanist chancellors of Florence, expanded on the closely related ideas that classical culture had entirely died out after the fall of Rome and was undergoing a rebirth, or renaissance, in his own time. In a letter of 1395, he lists the leading lights of the twelfth century, including John of Salisbury, maintaining that they were unworthy of being compared to ancient authors, from whom they were "more remote in style than in time." Salutati then goes on to chronicle the re-emergence of literature in the fourteenth century, at the hands of Dante in the vernacular and of Petrarch and Boccaccio in Latin.

The next humanist chancellor of Florence, Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370-1444), gave voice, in his *Dialogi ad Petrum Histrum* ("Dialogues dedicated to Pier Paolo Vergerio," c. 1405-1406), to what had by his day become a conventional lament for the lost patrimony of classical antiquity: "even the few books that do exist are so corrupt in their texts that they cannot teach us anything." The work nevertheless ends on a cautiously optimistic note, with the hope that Florence, inspired by the example of her three glorious poets – Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio – will soon lead the way out of darkness into the light. In the biographies of Dante and Petrarch which he wrote in 1436, Bruni gave a rather grudging assessment of their contributions to the revival of classical culture. Though Dante excelled in vernacular rhyme, in Latin verse and prose "he barely comes up to average"; and while Petrarch was the first "to call back to light the antique elegance of the lost and extinguished style," he did not himself achieve the elegant perfection of Ciceronian Latin but instead "opened the way" for those who followed him – Bruni no doubt has himself in mind – to attain it.

In his *Rerum suo tempore gestarum commentarius* ("Commentary on the Events of His Time," 1440), Bruno recalled his life-changing decision in 1398 to abandon the study of law and to attend instead the Greek classes given by the Byzantine scholar and diplomat Manuel Chrysoloras (c. 1349-1415), noting that "for 700 years now, no one in Italy has been able to read Greek, and yet we admit that is from the Greeks that we get all our systems of knowledge." The humanist educator Guarino of Verona (1374-1460), who in the first decade of the fifteenth century had followed Chrysoloras back to Constantinople in order to learn Greek, shared Bruni's conviction that the renewed study of Greek was an essential factor, alongside the recovery of lost works by Cicero, in the revival of antiquity going on in their time. So, too, did the historian Flavio Biondo (1392-1463). In his *Italia illustrata* ("Italy Illustrated," 1453), after celebrating his own role in the rediscovery of Cicero's *Brutus* – he was the first to make a copy from the manuscript found in Lodi in 1421 – he claims that although Chrysoloras taught in Italy for only a few years, this had the effect of making those who did not know Greek appear to be ignorant of Latin. Learning Greek, according to Biondo, not only provided access to a "massive supply of historical and moral matter," which stimulated the acquisition of eloquence, but also improved the writing skill of those who translated Greek works into Latin. By the time Paolo Giovio (1486-1552) published his *Elogia virorum litteris illustrium* ("Brief Lives of Illustrious Men of Letters", 1546), Chrysoloras – "the first to bring back to Italy after 700 years Greek literature which had been driven out by the barbarian invasions" – and a host of other Byzantine émigrés had become a staple feature in accounts of the rebirth of classical culture.

The revival of ancient art also became a standard element in such narratives. In his *Decameron* (1348–1351), Boccaccio had praised Giotto for "restoring to light" the art of painting, "which for many centuries had been buried under the errors of those who painted for the sake of pleasing the eyes of the ignorant rather than satisfying the intelligence of the knowledgeable." In his chronicle of 1382 Filippo

Villani (1325-1407), while placing Cimabue among the "first to recall ancient painting to life," maintained that Giotto had not merely equalled but surpassed ancient painters and had "restored painting to its ancient dignity." The sculptor and goldsmith Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) spoke with the professional authority of a renowned artist when he stated in *I Commentarii* ("The Commentaries," begun 1447) that after Constantine: "Art was dead, and the temples remained white for some 600 years." Paralleling his humanist contemporaries' dismissive attitude toward medieval Latin literature and learning, Ghiberti looked with disdain on medieval Byzantine painting: "The Greeks began painting and produced some works of great crudity; as the ancients had been highly skilled, so the men of those times were rough and crude." It was Giotto who had abandoned the "crude manner of the Greeks" and brought in "the new art" by inventing or discovering doctrines that "had lain buried for about 600 years."

A link between the humanist revival of classical Latin and the artistic revival of ancient art was postulated by Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) in the preface to his *Elegantiae Linguae Latinae* ("The Fine Points of the Latin Language", 1441-1449). "Is there anyone," he asked, "who does not know that when the Latin language flourishes, all studies and disciplines thrive, just as they fall to ruin when it perishes?" Similarly, "the arts of painting, sculpture, modeling and architecture," which had degenerated and almost died along with the liberal arts during the Middle Ages, were now reawakened and brought to life again. In an inaugural lecture delivered in 1455 to the University of Rome, Valla explained that it was the ability of ancient artists to communicate in a single language – classical Latin – and therefore to compete with one another for fame and glory that had driven the flourishing of art in antiquity. And when that capacity was lost, art, too, declined, just as the men constructing the Tower of Babel "stopped building it precisely because they did not fully comprehend each other's speech."

In a letter of 1489, the Dutch humanist Erasmus (1466/9-1536), picking up on Valla's account in the *Elegantiae*, discussed the connection between the "fortunes of literature" and those of art. After the blossoming of all disciplines in ancient times, Erasmus writes, a period ensued "when men turned their backs on the precepts of the ancients," and there was such a "stubborn growth of barbarism" that eloquence completely disappeared, so that no trace of it remained. In like manner, an inspection of reliefs, paintings, sculptures, buildings or any other works of art that are more than two or three hundred years old will provoke astonishment and laughter at the "artists' extreme crudity." And just as, in his own age, artists have once again "achieved every effect of art," Lorenzo Valla has rescued "Latin from death when it had almost expired" and has zealously fought in his *Elegantiae* "to refute the foolish notions of the barbarians" and to bring back the practices of ancient prose and verse authors which had "long been buried and forgotten."

The painter and art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), in his *Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori* ("Lives of the Most Eminent Architects, Painters and Sculptors", 1550; second ed. 1568), describes how art was "reborn" in Italy in the late thirteenth century with Cimabue and Giotto and "reached perfection" in the sixteenth with Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. In the prologue to the first edition, he portrays the surviving art of antiquity as the midwife in this rebirth. During the Middle Ages, he explains, Italians had copied Byzantine artists whose style he, like Ghiberti, regarded as "clumsy" and "awkward"; for even though they had before their eyes "the remains of arches and colossi, statues, pillars and carved columns," they had "no idea how to make use of or profit from this excellent work." The artists who came later, however, "abandoned the old manner of doing things and began once again to imitate the works of antiquity as skillfully and carefully as they could."

During the sixteenth century, the notion of cultural rebirth came to be closely associated with the idea religious reform: the recovery of classical learning paving the

way for a return to the true church of early Christianity. Erasmus – here too following the lead of Valla, who had championed the eloquent theology of the Church Fathers, schooled in the best traditions of ancient literature and rhetoric, while condemning the illiterate, jargon-ridden philosophical theology of the medieval scholastics – in his *Anti-Barbari* ("Against the Barbarians," 1520), railed against the "unlearned learning" of the Middle Ages, which had corrupted not only literature but religion too, and argued for a return to the theology of Jerome (his personal hero), Augustine, and other patristic authors who had been well versed in the classics. Two years earlier, in his inaugural address to the University of Wittenberg, Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), the German humanist who would become Luther's closest ally in the battle to establish the Reformation, had put forward a program of secular and sacred educational reform in which Greek and Hebrew, alongside classical Latin, took center stage. In explaining the need for this humanist reform, Melanchthon narrated the history of learning from antiquity to the present, observing that Charlemagne, by putting Alcuin in charge of education within the empire, had managed to revive the ancient disciplines which had perished after the barbarian invasions and which would soon die out again due to the neglect of the medieval schoolmen. Melanchthon's description of this brief shining moment in the otherwise pervasive darkness of the Middle Ages hints at an awareness of the Carolingian renaissance – also found in other German scholars of the time, such as Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), as an expression of their patriotic attachment to the empire of Charlemagne – which would not be fully developed until modern times.

The belief that the rebirth of ancient learning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was a divinely ordained precursor of the Reformation in the sixteenth became enshrined in Protestant historiography. Although this often entailed a greater emphasis on the part played by Northern humanists who had thrown in their lot with the Reformed movement, the earlier Italian phase of the classical revival was not forgotten, nor was the contribution of Byzantine scholars. In his *Histoire*

ecclésiastique des Eglises Réformées au royaume de France ("Ecclesiastical History of the Reformed Churches in the Kingdom of France," 1580), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin's right-hand man and successor in Geneva, attributed particular importance to the refugees from Byzantium who had promoted the study of Greek in the universities of Italy. This idea was repeated by a later French Calvinist, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), who noted, in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* ("Historical and Critical Dictionary," 1695-1697; second ed. 1702), that although interest in the classics did not revive in France until the reign of Francis I, "Belles Lettres" started to be reborn in Italy after the fall of Constantinople. This inaccurate theory, which ignored the role of Chrysoloras and other pre-1453 émigrés, nevertheless caught on, presumably because it was handy to have a precise date and dramatic event to mark the rebirth of classical studies. Bayle gave due credit to the Italian humanists as well, but portrayed them as having "little religion" in contrast to their Northern counterparts, who had served the cause of the Reformation.

Both the irreligion of the Italian humanists and the Fall of Constantinople as the pivotal moment in "the renaissance of literature and the fine arts" feature in the *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* ("Essay on the Manners and the Spirit of Nations," 1756), a pioneering work of cultural history in which Voltaire (1694-1778) charts the "extinction, renaissance and progress of the human mind" from the barbaric and ignorant Middle Ages to the enlightened Age of Reason presided over by Louis XIV. Voltaire gave a new twist to the story of the revival of antiquity by linking the material prosperity of Italy to its advanced civilization: the wealthy Medici rulers of Florence not only patronized the arts but also welcomed the scholars who fled from Byzantium in 1453. This brilliant culture – "the glory of genius belonged then to Italy alone, just as it had once been the possession of Greece" – was, however, suffused with immorality: no other period in history, he maintained, was "so prolific in assassinations, poisonings, treason and monstrous debauchery." Having left religion

behind but not yet reached the safe shores of rationalism, the Italians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had lost their moral compass.

The moral failings and religious shortcomings of the early Italian humanists in particular were given a thorough airing by the German historian Georg Voigt (1827-1891) in his *Die Wiederbelebung des classischen Altherthums, oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus* ("The Revival of Classical Antiquity or The First Century of Humanism," 1859). Although Voigt regarded Petrarch as "the prophet of the new age, the ancestor of the modern world" and respected the early humanists for their philological and historical studies of classical texts, as well as for their frontal attack on scholastic obscurantism, he felt that their excessive reverence for antiquity had inhibited independent and critical thought: "What they called philosophy was little more than the rehearsal and variation of classical commonplaces." With the exception of Petrarch, moreover, their religious thought was shallow and frivolous. And the self-conscious individualism which had stood forth "strong and free" in Petrarch degenerated into shameless egoism in his followers.

Four years earlier, in 1855, the French historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874) had published *La Renaissance*, the seventh of his seventeen-volume *Histoire de France* ("History of France," 1833-1862). This was the first time that the Renaissance was treated as an historical period. Michelet, however, applied this term to sixteenth-century Europe, not to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy; and, for him, the renewed study of antiquity was only one facet of a much wider phenomenon, which also embraced geographical exploration (Columbus), scientific discovery (Copernicus and Galileo), the Reformation (Luther and Calvin) and the rise of national literatures (Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Cervantes).

For the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), by contrast, the Renaissance was a period in the history, not of Europe as a whole, but specifically of Italy: an expression of both the *Zeitgeist* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the *Volksgeist* of the Italian people. Like Michelet, nonetheless, Burckhardt, in *Die*

Cultur der Renaissance in Italien ("The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy," 1860), presented the revival of antiquity as merely one element – and by no means the most essential – in the larger picture of cultural rebirth. And like Voigt, he had a low opinion of Italian humanists, whom he portrayed as amoral pens for hire, ready to put their literary skills at the service of ruthless monsters such as Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini. Voigt, in later editions of his work, would revise his view of humanists downward in light of Burckhardt's compelling picture of their rootless and licentious lifestyle.

Since its publication, Burckhardt's enormously influential book has set the agenda for debates about the Renaissance. It was against his widely adopted view of the distinctiveness of the Renaissance that Haskins and other medievalists revolted, putting forward claims for the Carolingian, Ottonian and twelfth century renaissances. In his *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (1960), the art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) attempted to explain the difference between these medieval "renascences," which were "limited and transitory," and the Renaissance, which was "total and permanent." Invoking his "principle of disjunction," Panofsky maintained that medieval art exhibited either classical form or classical content, but never both together; it was only in the Renaissance that the two were reintegrated. For his fellow art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), however, Burckhardt's Hegelian interpretation of the Renaissance was fundamentally misguided: it was not an "Age" but a "movement." Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-1999), who devoted his life to the study of Renaissance philosophy and humanism, downgraded the concept even further: the Renaissance for him was nothing more than an "historian's construct." For Hans Baron (1900-1988), like Kristeller, a German refugee scholar who made an academic career for himself in America, the Renaissance was, above all, an ideological struggle between the liberty of republican governments such as Florence and the despotism of princely regimes such as Milan – an interpretation which was strongly colored by his perception of the political

situation in Europe during the 1930s and its aftermath in World War II. These debates will no doubt continue into the future; yet however much the significance of the term is questioned and however many earlier renaissances are identified, it seems likely that the Renaissance will remain part of our historiographical vocabulary.

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