I TATTI STUDIES IN
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE HISTORY

Sponsored by Villa I Tatti
Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies
Florence, Italy
To the memory of my grandfather

John Ianziti
All true history is contemporary history.

—Benedetto Croce
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Introduction

I wrote this book as part of a broader enquiry into the origins and development of early modern historiography. It seemed to me that while there were many fine studies on historical writing as practiced in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, much less attention was being paid to the earlier pioneers, and particularly to the Italian humanists of the fifteenth century. This was not for lack of recognition, because many of the studies being produced were quite open about acknowledging the humanists as the avatars of new methods and approaches to history that were to remain influential well into the seventeenth century and beyond. Rather, there were other reasons for this relative neglect, some of which can be attributed to the shifting currents of modern scholarship. One recent tendency, for example, has been a distinct preference for highly focused synchronic studies, a trend that risks relegating to the margins periods of rupture and transition like the Italian Renaissance.

Of course, I do not mean to imply that there have been no studies of the historical practices of the fifteenth-century Italian humanists. Indeed, a perception I encountered in many quarters was that the fundamental work on the humanist historians had been completed long ago, and that there was nothing left to add. According to this view, key figures like Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444),
Biondo Flavio (1392–1463), Lorenzo Valla (1405–1457), and others were to be seen as the founders of critical methodologies, end of story. While I accepted that these critical advances were important, I could not help but notice that when the humanists came to the act of writing history itself, many other factors entered into play, including questions of literary form, classical models, patronage, audience, career prospects, political agendas, rivalries with other humanists, and the like. How, I wondered, did these aspects relate to the thesis of the humanists as critical historians? Were they merely incidental, or did they offer a means of attaining a deeper understanding of how and why new standards of historical writing came to the fore in the fifteenth century? As it happened, I found that a number of contemporary scholars were beginning to ask the same, or similar, questions. The following chapters are thus replete with references to the recently published work of Riccardo Fubini, James Hankins, and Anna Maria Cabrini, to mention only a few of my chief guides. It is also gratifying to note that a new generation of younger scholars has now begun to come on stream, bringing with them fresh perspectives and promising signs for the future. These developments notwithstanding, it is still difficult to avoid the impression that the Italian Renaissance lags behind other areas in the specific field of historiography. While a host of studies continues to pour forth, for example, on medieval historians, the number of corresponding studies on early Renaissance historians can be counted almost on the fingers of one hand. It is a particularly sobering thought to realize that there is still no up-to-date, full-scale monograph dedicated to the historical works of a seminal figure like Leonardo Bruni. The lack of such a study constitutes a serious gap in our knowledge, since Bruni was by all accounts the leading exponent of the new humanist approach to historiography.

I have accordingly in the following pages attempted to offer a detailed account of the genesis and development of Leonardo Bruni’s engagement with history writing. After some reflection, I decided that the best way to do this was to provide a sustained, chapter-by-chapter analysis of each of Bruni’s historical works, including in this category his biographies of Cicero, Aristotle, Dante, and Petrarch. Besides these four biographies, Bruni was the author of five works belonging to the field of history, broadly defined. These were, in chronological order: his account of the first Punic War (Commentarii de primo bello punico), his History of the Florentine People (Historiae florentini populi), his monograph on fourth-century Greece (Commentarium rerum grecarum), his Memoirs (De temporibus suis), and his history of the Gothic Wars (De bello italico adversus
of these five works, the History of the Florentine People has to date attracted by far the lion’s share of the scholarly attention, and not surprisingly it continues to do so here. It is nevertheless one of the novel features of the following treatment that close attention has been paid to the lesser-known, less studied works, whose importance for understanding Bruni’s historiography is, I argue, of primary significance.

My particular focus throughout the study has been on what I call the writing of history. By this I mean to refer to the mechanics and processes of history writing as Bruni and his contemporaries actually practiced them. The first, introductory chapter is an attempt to deal with this problem in a general way, and thus sounds the keynote for what follows. Indeed, in approaching Bruni’s historiography I believe it is important to avoid imposing our modern-day definitions of what history is, or should be. Our initial task is rather to try to fathom how history writing was understood in the early fifteenth century, under what conditions historians worked, with what materials, and according to what standards and expectations. Finding the answers to such questions is by no means easy, since the humanists themselves were notoriously reticent when it came to revealing their underlying assumptions. Most of their explicit declarations on history recycle ancient commonplaces. To get beyond the classical façade, one has to dig deeper, in effect, to come to grips with the working methods adopted by historians like Bruni in the actual construction of their histories and biographies.

This, in a nutshell, is what I have tried to do in the following study. But the question can certainly be asked as to why such a focus is desirable. Why dedicate so much time and energy towards reconstructing the methods used by even such a famous humanist as Bruni in writing his histories? The answer to this question has to do with the controversy surrounding the place to be assigned to leading figures like Bruni within the general history of Western historiography. Two attitudes are prevalent at the moment, and they are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, there are those—chiefly Renaissance specialists and early modernists—who continue to see humanists like Bruni as the founders of critical methodologies. Figures like Bruni in their view are consequently to be construed as representing a turning point in the development of modern historiography. Against this picture stands another one, stemming mainly from the medievalists, whose advocates tend to deny that there was any real break, and stress instead the essential continuity of medieval historiography throughout the fifteenth century and beyond. It is easy to see that the clash between
these opposing camps reflects the wider dilemma of the Renaissance itself, and
that the conflict is ultimately irreconcilable. Nevertheless, a careful study of the
historiography of a major figure like Bruni can hardly fail to bring some clari-
fication, especially if carried out along the lines suggested above.

Several points can be raised in relation to the way the early modernist posi-
tion on these issues is usually formulated. First, it is too narrowly focused on
the question of critical methods. In actual fact, the historiography of Bruni
and his contemporaries embraced a much broader agenda. One of its principal
characteristics, as the following study will show, was its challenging of tradi-
tional accounts of the past, a stance I have sometimes labeled as “revisionist.”
Attitudes of this kind obviously called into play critical methods, but they could
also conjure up less savory techniques. These might include the deliberate sup-
pression of information, the rearrangement of key facts, and even the outright
falsification of data. An important reason—often overlooked—behind such
revisionism was the need to cater to new audiences. Bruni and his fellow hu-
manists were for the most part closely associated with the inner circle of the
Italian ruling elites. Their job descriptions as humanists required them, among
other duties, to elaborate accounts of the past that would be compatible with
the needs and tastes of their readership. Essentially this meant upgrading the
outmoded accounts of their predecessors, the medieval chroniclers. The impli-
cations were, of course, stylistic in the first instance: high-sounding classical
phrases replaced the more straightforward vernacular or the unadorned Latin
of the chronicles. But the process went beyond mere questions of style. It im-
plied a more secularized history, largely stripped of references to the super-
natural. It privileged politics over economic and social features, and showed a
particularly keen interest in delineating rationally constructed chains of causa-
tion. Events were therefore to be explained as the results of human action, an
approach that held special appeal for a readership of statesmen intent on gain-
ing insights into the workings of military and political affairs.

The rise of a new approach to history writing was thus a complex phenome-
non whose significance cannot be reduced to the question of critical methods.
Yet only an intensive, work-by-work analysis of the kind foreshadowed here can
convincingly delineate the interaction of the full range of other forces in play.
Another advantage of such comprehensive coverage is that it provides access to
an alternative model of explanation as to not only how but why humanists like
Bruni broke with previous historical practices. Many of the classic accounts
either avoid seeking a deeper explanation or they take refuge in abstractions.
The approach to be followed in the present study is different, in that it aims not merely to highlight innovations in history writing but also to relate them to broader patterns of conflict and social change. Here it should be stressed that the almost exclusive concern with Bruni in the following pages is amply justified, given the central role he is usually assigned as the initiator and founder of the new trends. In addition, his position as a leading member of the humanist avant-garde in Florence, the prolific and sustained nature of his output in history, and the wide circulation his works enjoyed all make him the obvious choice for the type of investigation here proposed.

It is true, of course, that Bruni himself did not spring from the void. More attention might conceivably have been paid in the following chapters to Bruni’s humanist predecessors, and especially to Petrarch (1304–1374), whose historical writings—for example, the *De gestis Cesaris*—prefigure some of Bruni’s early efforts, most notably the *Vita Ciceronis*. But Petrarch never proceeded beyond his biographies of classical figures. Bruni was consequently among the first of the humanists to apply the techniques he had learned from his close study of ancient historians to the retelling of modern history. Significantly, he wrote from the perspective of the Italian territorial state, a dynamic new force on the political stage. This distinguished him not only from Petrarch but also from other humanist practitioners in Northern Italy, whose histories were written from the perspective of the supposedly universal Roman Empire.

Another distinguishing feature of Bruni’s historiography was his familiarity with ancient Greek historians. Bruni was in fact the first writer of history in the West since antiquity to gain an intimate knowledge of the works of historians like Thucydides and Polybius. Much will be made in the following study of the importance of these analytical historians in helping Bruni to define the specifics of his own approach. Yet while they clearly exercised a degree of influence, even Thucydides and Polybius cannot alone account for the changes in historical writing that Bruni introduced. These changes embraced a host of features, ranging from the new emphasis on providing causal explanations grounded in human behavior, to more sophisticated modes of presentation, to a freer and often critical use of source materials. Such changes did not—as has sometimes been argued—constitute the beginnings of a linear process leading in a straight path towards historical scholarship as practiced in academic circles today. A close reading shows that in writing history Bruni and his contemporaries continued by and large to respect a number of ancient codes and practices. They quite obviously worked in an environment that was not academic but rather