

Humanism and Learning

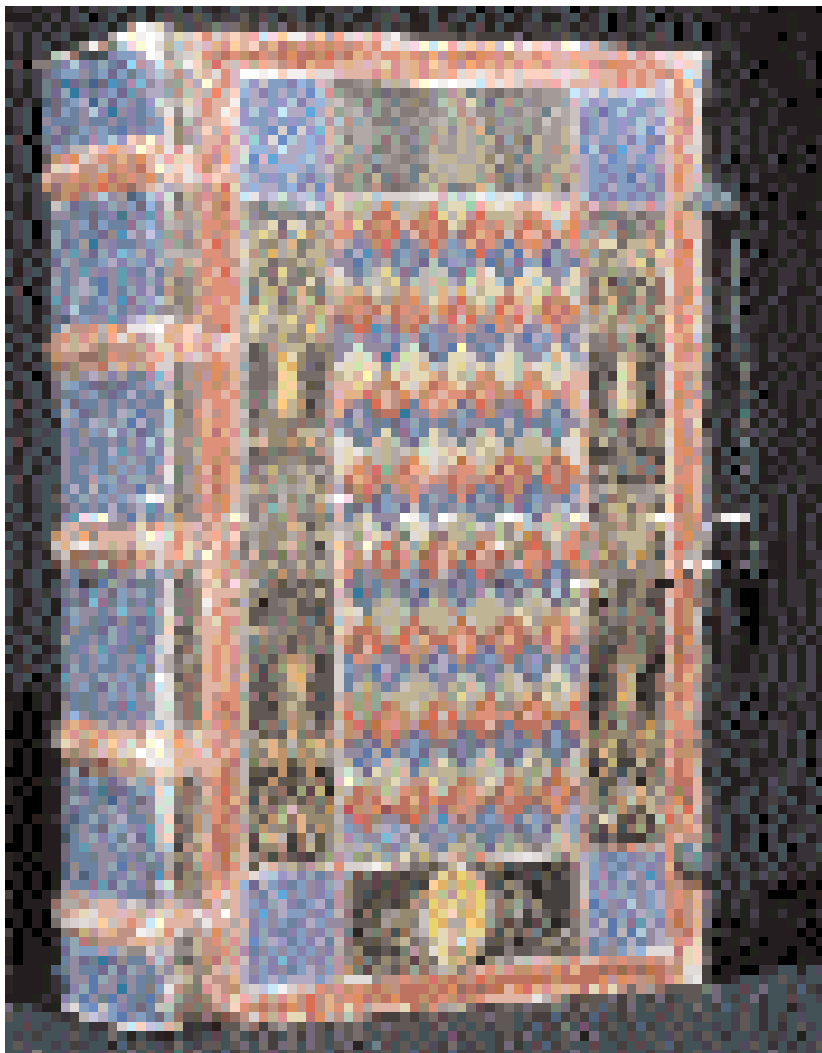
HUMANISM WAS FOUNDED UPON THE STUDY OF THE LITERATURE OF ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME. THE STYLES AND IDEAS IN THESE WORKS WERE INTEGRATED INTO RENAISSANCE WRITING AND TEACHING.

▼ Thanks to the efforts of humanists, many classical works—including *Noctes atticae* (Attic Nights), a collection of notes on literary and cultural matters by the second-century Roman author Aulus Gellius (pictured here in a 1515 Venetian edition by Aldus Manutius)—were made available once again to scholars throughout Europe.

Humanism is a modern term whose origins lie in the Latin phrase *studia humanitatis* (“humanistic studies”). In the Renaissance *studia humanitatis* referred to the study of a set of five subjects in which classical texts were used as models. These five subjects were grammar (that of Latin and sometimes Greek), rhetoric (the art of writing and speaking eloquently and persuasively), poetry (the literature of ancient Rome and Greece), history, and moral philosophy.

Moral philosophy was a practical philosophy that related to aspects of everyday life, notably ethics, politics, and economics.

To humanists the ancient world represented the height of civilization, and the period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire (around 470 CE) was viewed as a time of decline. Humanists believed that the intellectual life of Europe had decayed and Latin, the common language of learning all across Europe, had become corrupted because the writings of the ancient world had been lost. The rebirth of civilization required the recovery of the lost works of the classical world. Humanists would use the language of these works to return Latin to its former elegance and the ideas of the great thinkers and statesmen of Greece and Rome to transform the intellectual life of their age.



The Medieval Heritage

Humanists tended to exaggerate the degree to which the works of the ancient world had been neglected during the Middle Ages. The works of classical Rome (and to a lesser extent Greece) were highly valued in the period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire; indeed, Roman writings survived to be “rediscovered” in the Renaissance because of the efforts of medieval scholars and monks who copied the ancient texts by hand.

Profoundly influential were the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), which were known through medieval translations into Latin. Although Aristotle lived long before the Christian era, he was considered an authority of great importance, and during the Middle Ages professors of theology tried to incorporate his philosophical and logical methods into the study of the Christian religion. The result was an abstract intellectual approach known as Scholasticism.

Although scholars in the Middle Ages valued classical learning, their understanding of it had many limitations. Copying manuscripts by hand created errors in ancient texts. Scholars were not aware that the Latin language had changed over time, nor did they realize the ways in which

MANUSCRIPT HUNTING

The first step in recovering the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans was to find manuscripts of their writings. Although a wide range of Roman works had been copied during the Middle Ages, many of them lay forgotten in dusty corners of monasteries, cathedrals, and university libraries.

The systematic hunt for unknown works by authors from ancient times was begun by the Italian poet and scholar known as Petrarch. The most famous manuscript hunter was Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), whose work as a papal secretary gave him the opportunity to search libraries across Europe. His greatest find was a complete copy of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (*Training in Oratory*), a major work that had been known only in fragments.

At a time when all books had to be copied by hand, it was important not just to find new works but to make copies that scholars could study. A Florentine book collector, Niccolò Niccoli (c. 1364–1437), collected copies of many of the works found by his fellow humanists and left instructions that on his death his collection be made into a library available to scholars.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the systematic efforts by humanists to find the works of the classical world had uncovered almost all of the writings now known.



ancient Roman society had differed from their own; as a result they often had a poor grasp of what they were reading and copying. Almost no one knew Greek or the work of any Greek authors other than Aristotle. Finally, they focused on only a limited number of ancient works and left many others neglected, even though copies existed.

Origins of Humanism

At the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, a small circle of lawyers and notaries in some northern Italian cities, notably Padua, began to study classical Roman works more closely. They copied classical styles in their own writings and also started to analyze the works in a scholarly manner. For example, they worked out that the scientific writings and letters attributed to the Roman author Pliny were actually produced by two authors (Pliny the Elder and his nephew Pliny the Younger).

Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304–1374) shaped this enthusiasm into a coherent movement. Reacting against the limitations of medieval scholarship, he argued that the ancient world had embodied the height of civilization. To restore learning to its former glory, it was therefore necessary to go back “to the sources”—to retrieve, understand, and follow the example of the works of the great classical writers.

Petrarch showed the way toward implementing this program through his own scholarly activity. He discovered important works, such as some of Cicero's speeches and letters. He improved corrupted classical texts by comparing different manuscripts and using his unrivaled knowledge of the ancient world and classical Latin to correct errors. Although he never learned Greek very well himself, he realized the importance of learning the language in order to gain access to the little-known writings of ancient Greece. Finally, he began to develop a new style of writing modeled

▲ The works of classical Rome were preserved thanks to the copies made by medieval scholars, such as the Franciscan monk depicted in this Flemish manuscript of around 1500.

CHRONOLOGY

1315

Albertino Mussato of Padua publishes *Historia augusta* (*Imperial History*), the first imitation of classical prose.

1345

Petrarch discovers Cicero's *Ad Atticum* (*Letters to Atticus*) in Verona.

1375

Coluccio Salutati becomes chancellor of Florence.

1397

Manuel Chrysoloras is brought to Florence to teach Greek.

1403

Pierpaolo Vergerio writes the first manual for humanist education.

1404

Leonardo Bruni publishes *Laudatio urbis Florentinae* (*Praise of the City of Florence*).

1415

Bruni begins writing his history of Florence.

1416

Poggio Bracciolini discovers a complete version of Quintilian's rhetorical treatise in a Swiss monastery.

1421

Cicero's lost writings on rhetoric are discovered in Lodi.

1423

Vittorino da Feltre (1378–1446) establishes a model humanist school at Mantua.

1427

Leonardo Bruni is appointed chancellor of Florence.

1440

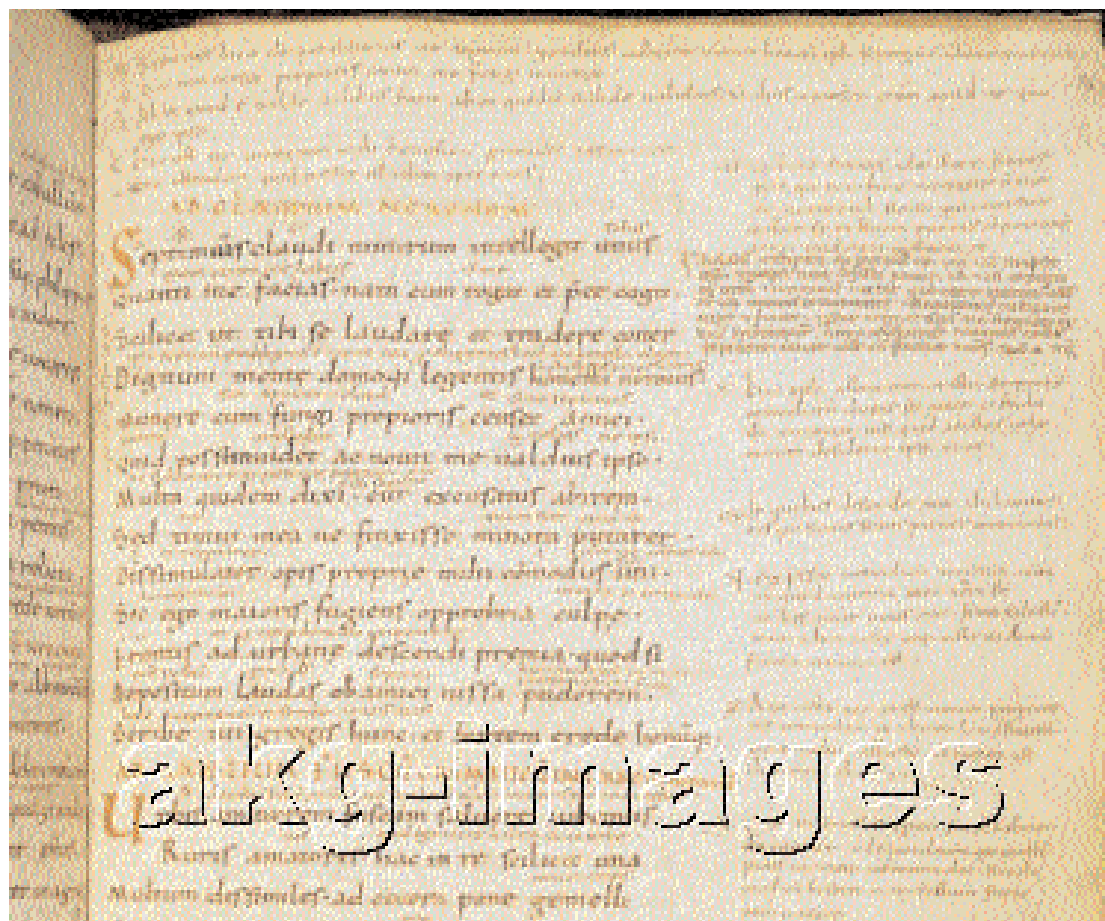
Lorenzo Valla exposes the Donation of Constantine as a forgery.

1447

The reign of Nicholas V, the first humanist pope, begins.

1484

Marsilio Ficino publishes a complete Latin translation of Plato.



▲ A tenth-century manuscript with Petrarch's handwritten notes. Petrarch studied medieval manuscripts of classical works closely and made extensive notes. He marked probable errors in the copy, noted references to other classical works, worked out the meaning of difficult passages, and recorded his own impressions.

on classical prose, organized according to the principles of ancient rhetoric, and filled with references to classical texts.

Florence

After Petrarch's death in 1374, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), chancellor of the republic of Florence, took the lead in developing the humanist movement. The chancellor was the head of Florence's civil service, a position of great influence that demanded the skills in writing and persuasion treasured by humanists.

Salutati's most important contribution was the network of young humanists he brought together in Florence. This group included Poggio Bracciolini, a manuscript hunter; Niccolò Niccoli, a book collector; Pierpaolo Vergerio (c. 1369–1444), an educational theorist; and Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444), a writer and administrator. Salutati also brought the Greek scholar and

diplomat Manuel Chrysoloras (c. 1349–1415) to Florence to teach Greek; the arrival of Chrysoloras opened up the world of ancient Greece to these young scholars.

Through their work as schoolteachers, professors, editors, collectors, and civil servants, this new generation established humanism as an influential intellectual movement across Italy. Its leading member was Leonardo Bruni, who also became chancellor of Florence. Bruni was known for both his beautiful Latin style and his excellent understanding of Greek. His numerous writings addressed many areas of humanist work: translation from the Greek (including the first major work on translation theory); education of girls; literature; and moral philosophy, which examined, for example, the true nature of nobility. His history of Florence, modeled on the work of classical historians (especially Livy), transformed the writing of history.

CIVIC HUMANISM

A common issue for debate since classical times had been the relative merits of the active life (the bustle of politics and business) versus the contemplative life (peaceful leisure spent thinking deeply). In the Middle Ages the spiritual, contemplative life, exemplified by that of the monks, was generally considered superior to the active life in a sinful world. Petrarch, too, favored the contemplative life, which gave him the opportunity to think and write in peace.

The German-American historian Hans Baron (1900–1988) proposed that a major change in favor of the active life took place in the humanist movement in the republic of Florence around 1400. With the republic's freedom threatened by the duchy of Milan, he argued, Florentine humanists became active citizens who used their skills in writing and persuasion for the good of their city. Led by Leonardo Bruni, they developed “civic humanism,” a merger of classical learning with republican values. The Florentines participated in and defended the active life of democratic politics and wrote in praise of their city and its republican government.

Subsequent historians have challenged the details of Baron's thesis. Long before Bruni and even before Petrarch, civil servants and politicians had been attracted to humanism precisely because it trained men to be effective active citizens. Many humanists led a political life in the service not only of republics but also of authoritarian rulers, such as the dukes of Milan or the popes; in any case, Florence's government was itself only partially democratic. Even when the threat from Milan was at its height, some of the city's humanists, such as Niccolò Niccoli, ignored politics and continued to live a life of scholarship.

Historians now generally believe that there were both active and contemplative strains in humanism throughout its existence, depending on individual personalities and political circumstances. Baron's argument that humanism was closely related to the active life and made it respectable once again, however, remains a key insight into the movement.

CHRONOLOGY

1489

Angelo Poliziano publishes his groundbreaking philological study, *Miscellanea* (*Miscellanies*).

1494

Aldus Manutius opens his printing press in Venice.

1516

Erasmus publishes his translation of the New Testament; Thomas More publishes *Utopia*.

1518

Philipp Melancthon is appointed professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, where Luther teaches.

1531

The faculty of theology of the University of Paris condemns Erasmus's writings.

1559

The first Index of Forbidden Books includes all of Erasmus's books.

1572

In Geneva, Henri II Estienne publishes his five-volume dictionary of Greek.

1593

Joseph Scaliger leaves France for the University of Leiden.



◀ Leonardo Bruni's importance as both a humanist and a political figure in the Florentine republic was recognized in the impressive marble tomb, in the new classicizing style, erected in his honor in the Church of Santa Croce, in Florence. The tomb was sculpted in 1446 and 1447 by Bernardo Rossellino.

Lorenzo Valla ■ 1407–1457

Lorenzo Valla, perhaps the most important humanist of the mid-fifteenth century, set the stage for many important developments in humanism. Born in Rome, the son of a papal civil servant, he received a humanist education from the city's leading scholars.

Valla's independent character interfered with his career but enabled him to make important intellectual innovations. He did not get a hoped-for job in the papal civil service because he irritated local humanists with his unconventional opinions. After being expelled from a job at the University of Pavia for attacking the way law was taught, Valla eventually found a position in 1435 with the king of Naples, and it was in Naples that he wrote many of his works.

Much of Valla's reputation rests on his superb command of language. He wrote a sophisticated analysis of Latin, *Elegantiae linguae latinae* (*The Elegances of the Latin Language*, 1444), which became his most widely published work, and also translated many works from Greek. He developed a more rigorous approach to philology, which he famously applied to exposing the Donation of Constantine, an important legal text, as a forgery.

As well as writing a great deal about philosophy, Valla was one of the first humanists to focus on religious issues. He applied humanist techniques to the Latin Bible in *Adnotationes novi testamenti* (*Notes on the New Testament*, 1444). He tackled the question of free will and argued that the contemplative life of a monk was not superior to life in the world. As a result of his outspoken opinions on religion, he was investigated by the Inquisition and forced to retract some of his statements. The tables turned in his favor in 1448, however, when the new humanist pope, Nicholas V (reigned 1447–1455), invited him to Rome, where Valla held various important positions until the end of his life.

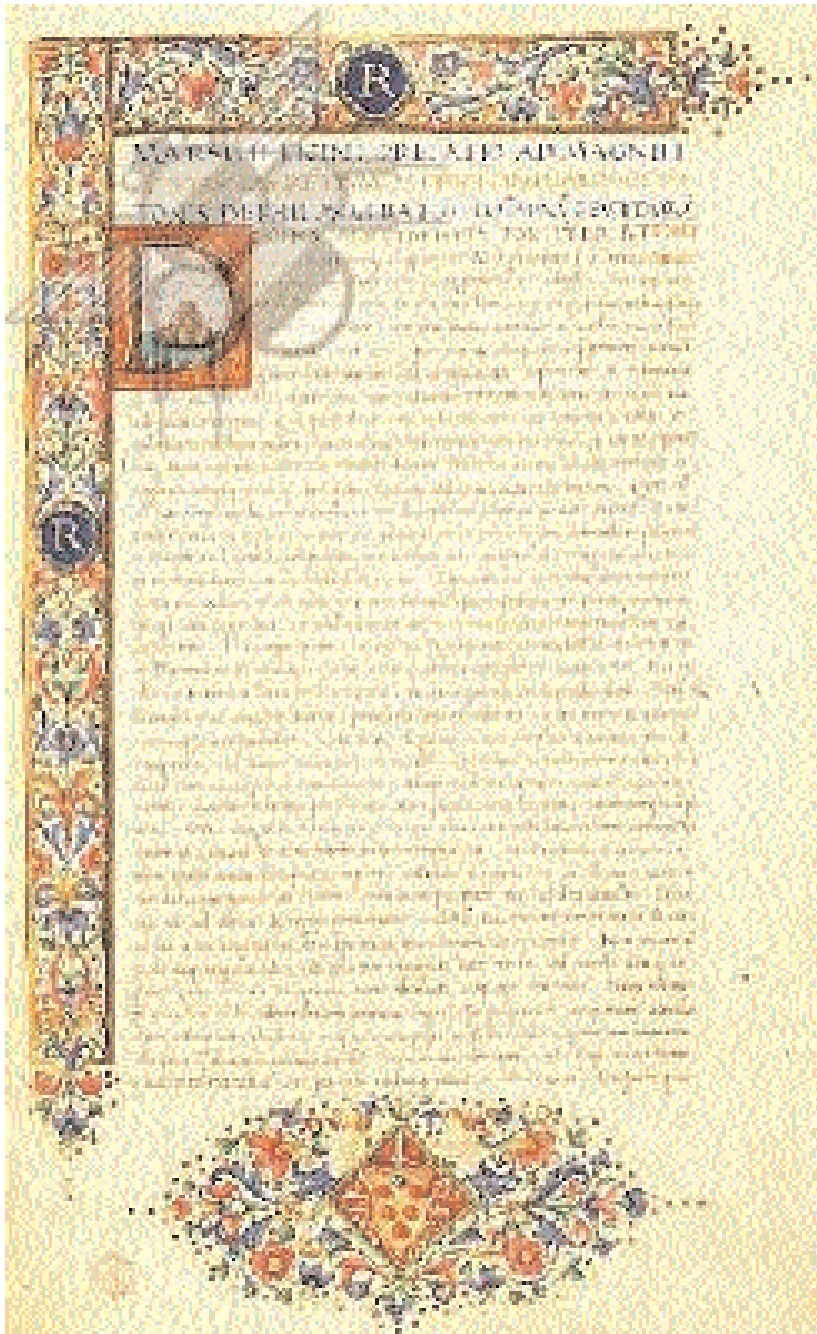
Rediscovering Ancient Greece

The training in Greek provided by Chrysoloras and others opened the unknown world of ancient Greece to humanists. Few educated Italians learned Greek well, however, and so it was important for humanists to translate the works of classical Greece into Latin to reach a wider audience.

Throughout the fifteenth century, humanists such as Bruni and Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) made a great effort to acquire manuscripts of ancient Greek works and translate them into Latin, a task that became even more urgent after 1453, with the fall of the Byzantine Empire, which included the lands of ancient Greece, to the Turks. The biggest project of all was the acquisition and translation of the works of the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 428–348 BCE), a task completed in 1484 by the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499). The final step in the recovery of the works of ancient Greece was to print high-quality editions of the original texts to make them widely accessible, a project implemented by the famous Venetian printer Aldus Manutius (c. 1449–1515) at the end of the fifteenth century.

◀ The Venetian printer Aldus Manutius was the first to specialize in publishing ancient Greek works in the original Greek. By hiring skilled humanists as editors, he ensured that the text of his editions, such as this 1495 volume of the works of Aristotle, was of the highest quality. Through his efforts rare Greek texts were made available across Europe.





▲ As rulers of Florence, the Medici family supported the work of a group of humanists, led by Marsilio Ficino, who studied the works of Plato. Known as the Platonic Academy, the scholars introduced Platonic ideas into humanist thinking. This manuscript (c. 1480) of Plato's dialogues, translated into Latin by Ficino, is dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–1492) in gratitude for his support.

Philology

Humanism's primary contribution to the body of classical knowledge of the Middle Ages was the development of philology—a method for understanding, analyzing, and correcting texts. Humanists realized that languages changed over time; for instance, that new words developed that had not existed in earlier periods. They also realized that ancient societies had been very different from their own, and so ancient texts could be understood correctly only in the context of the time in which they were written.

With this knowledge humanists could begin correcting the mistakes that had developed as ancient texts were repeatedly copied by hand over the centuries. They proceeded in two ways: by comparing different manuscripts of the same text and by using their knowledge of classical language and history to find errors and deduce what the original text had been. During the fifteenth century humanists such as Lorenzo Valla and Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494), a Florentine professor, developed rigorous philological methods to determine which of a given set of manuscripts was the oldest and therefore probably the most accurate, to explain difficult passages by identifying the Greek models and references used by Roman writers, and to record their sources and the reasoning they used when they made their corrections.

Material Remains

The recovery of the civilization of the ancient world was accomplished not only through the study of texts but also by investigating material remains, such as the ruins of ancient buildings, inscriptions on monuments and tombs, works of art, and coins. Inscriptions had the advantage of being originals (rather than copies, as the texts were), but in many cases the abbreviations used in the writing of textual inscriptions had made them difficult to decipher.

The first step was to collect and record these sources. Ciriaco d'Ancona (1391–1452), a merchant and diplomat, sought out classical ruins during his extensive travels in the eastern Mediterranean in order to copy the inscriptions and sketch the remains for his humanist friends back in Italy. Other humanists systematically recorded inscriptions found in Italy itself; they were eventually collected in massive reference works. Meanwhile, Niccoli and others began collections of ancient coins and art objects.

Humanists learned to cross-reference the information from material remains with classical texts in order to better understand ancient history and society. For example, Flavio Biondo (1392–1463), a papal civil servant, used a combination of material and textual sources to reconstruct the map of ancient Rome and its buildings in *Roma instaurata* (*Rome Restored*; 1446).

The Consolidation of Humanism in Italy

Over the course of the fifteenth century, humanism became established as the dominant intellectual current among educated Italians. A humanist education provided young scholars with an excellent training in writing and speaking, and it was thus in great demand; humanism gradually came to dominate pre-university schooling. In Italy's universities humanists soon took over professorships of rhetoric and poetry, though the humanist movement had less influence on the more prestigious professional faculties of law, theology, and medicine. By the latter half of the fifteenth century, recipients of humanist education were emerging from schools and universities and establishing themselves as civil servants in governments across Italy. By the end of the century, most educated Italian men and a small number of women had a grounding in humanism.

▼ Pictured in this detail from a fresco by Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507) are the three leading humanists of the second half of the fifteenth century: (from left to right) Angelo Poliziano, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Marsilio Ficino. Their work in Florence on language and philosophy was supported by the ruling Medici family.



With the help of patrons inspired by humanist ideals, including the Medicis in Florence and some popes, key humanist projects such as locating classical manuscripts and translating the works of ancient Greece came near completion. These projects were assisted by the development of mechanized printing in the second half of the fifteenth century, which overcame some of the problems associated with manuscripts. Now that a book with a fixed text could be published in large numbers, there was no danger of corrupting an edition, as had happened with hand copies; newly discovered and edited classical works could be distributed widely and at a cheaper price.

Humanists also deepened their influence on the areas of learning that were part of the *studia humanitatis*. With the help of newly discovered treatises on rhetoric by the Roman writers Quintilian and Cicero, they developed rhetorical argument as an alternative to Scholastic logic. Inspired by the rediscovery of Latin and Greek historians such as Tacitus and Thucydides, they developed the new style of historical study begun by Bruni, which included a critical approach to sources. In moral philosophy they used the ideas of classical and early Christian writers to challenge medieval opinions. Although humanists rarely agreed on any issue, there were now much stronger voices arguing, for instance, that the human condition was dignified rather than miserable, that nobility came from one's own achievements rather than from birth and wealth, and that the active life was equal or superior to the contemplative.

The Expansion of Humanism

During the fifteenth century there had been individuals in other European nations who were interested in the intellectual developments happening in Italy. Only at the end of the century, however, did this occasional interest become a coherent movement.

Humanism spread in a variety of ways. There was a great deal of trade between Italy and the rest of Europe. Churchmen were constantly shuttling between Rome and other nations. The invention of printing made it easier to distribute new books across Europe, and the fact that all educated Europeans used Latin made it easy for scholars in

LETTERS

Letters, both public and private, were a favorite form of humanist writing. Composing public letters for diplomacy or propaganda was a basic function of civil servants, and the desire to improve such letters was one of the original impulses for studying classical texts. Trained specifically to write correctly, to know good historical examples, and to use a rhetorical style designed to persuade, humanists excelled at official correspondence. As a result, they were given important jobs. For instance, as chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati famously wrote a number of public letters that asserted the republic's position in its struggles with its neighbors and advertised the potential of the humanist style.

One of humanism's innovations was to raise the private letter to an art form. Inspired by his discovery of Cicero's letters to his friend Atticus, Petrarch popularized his ideas through hundreds of letters written in a new, more classical style to friends and leaders in Italy and throughout Europe. He gathered this correspondence in several collections, which provided examples of his writing for his followers. Humanist letter writing culminated with Desiderius Erasmus, who helped to turn humanism into a pan-European movement through the thousands of letters he wrote and published during his lifetime.



◀ The Florentine painter Masaccio (1401–1428) depicted a number of Italy's leading humanists in the frescoes he created for the Brancacci chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, in Florence. In the section pictured here, The Raising of the Son of Theophilus, the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati can be seen on the left of the image (he is the seated figure in the dark gown).

other countries to read humanist works. Perhaps the most common way in which humanism spread was through students who went to study law or medicine at the prestigious Italian universities and instead became excited by the lectures on the classics delivered by humanist professors of poetry and rhetoric. These students took their enthusiasm for humanism and their skill in classical languages back to their home countries.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, a group of active humanists eager to revive classical learning existed in all of the major nations of western Europe. The most famous individual by far was Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1467–1536). Born and trained in the Low Countries, he

became a truly international scholar who traveled and lived in France, England, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland, as well as the region of his birth. Through his advocacy, his teaching manuals, his scholarship, his editorial projects, and his wide range of friends and acquaintances, he helped to make humanism an influential movement across the continent.

The rapidly developing enthusiasm for humanism resulted in the establishment of new university posts, such as the trilingual (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew) college at the University of Louvain in the Low Countries in 1517 and the royal professorships in Greek and Hebrew at the University of Paris in 1530.

▼ The writings and political activities of the French scholar and civil servant Guillaume Budé had a profound influence on the development and direction of humanism in France. This portrait is an eighteenth-century copy of an original by the ablest French painter of the Renaissance, Jean Clouet (c.1485–1540).

Nationalism and Humanism

Humanism in Italy had a nationalistic flavor in that it celebrated the ancient Roman era when Italian civilization had reached a height of glory. Humanists in the rest of Europe also shaped the movement in a nationalistic manner by turning their attention to the antiquities, history, and culture of their own countries. In Germany scholars such as Conrad Celtis (1459–1508) and Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547) devoted particular attention to *Germania* by the Roman historian Tacitus, which described ancient Germany and praised the virtue of its people. In Spain scholars turned their efforts toward authors who

had been born and lived in Spain: Seneca, Quintilian, and the poet Lucan.

Politics and culture shaped the way humanism developed in different nations. Germany and the Low Countries were a patchwork of independent states where humanists scattered in various cities, universities, and royal courts gradually developed contacts with each other to form a powerful movement. In more centralized kingdoms humanism tended to develop first in the capital cities and at the royal courts, where influential civil servants such as the Englishman Thomas More (1478–1535) and the Frenchman Guillaume Budé took the lead.



Guillaume Budé ■ c. 1467–1540

Guillaume Budé was the most famous French humanist of his day, a scholar and civil servant who exemplified the development of national brands of humanism. Born into a family with a long history of service to the French monarchy, he worked in a variety of important positions for French kings. At the same time, he published a series of groundbreaking books. His application of humanist techniques to the law and his later analysis of the Greek language initiated a century of French scholarship in these areas. In his work *De asse* (*On the Roman Penny*, 1515), coins are used along with texts as sources in the reconstruction of the Roman monetary system. Toward the end of his life, Budé asserted the primacy of Christianity over the classics and at the same time attacked Protestantism.

In his works Budé often praised France, its culture, and its achievements, while criticizing Frenchmen who expressed too much admiration for things Italian. In addition to his writing, he helped to raise the standard of French classical learning by lobbying King Francis I (reigned 1515–1547) to establish classical studies at the University of Paris. The resulting royal professorships in Greek, Hebrew, and other subjects, founded from 1530 onward, helped to train a new generation of French scholars. Thanks to his accomplishments, Budé was held up by the French as an equal to Erasmus, a symbol of France's intellectual status. The case of Budé illustrates the complexities that beset all national humanism—indebted to the legacy of Italian scholarship but eager to assert the glory and intellectual independence of its own nation.

Christian Humanism

An important new aspect of humanism as it was practiced outside Italy was its application to the texts and the institutions of the Christian Church. Italian humanists were devout Christians, and many had worked at finding ways to reconcile the pagan classical works they loved with the Christian faith in which they believed. However, with the exception of Lorenzo Valla, they had not applied their sophisticated textual scholarship to Christian texts.

Erasmus's discovery and publication of Valla's little-known *Notes on the New Testament* in 1505 marked a new stage in the development of humanism. For Erasmus and other Christian humanists, the belief that the philosophy, literature, and art of classical Greece and Rome were superior to the work undertaken in those fields by scholars during the medieval period also extended to the field of theological study. In the opinion of the Christian humanists, the works of the so-called church fathers—the bishops and teachers who lived and worked during the first centuries CE—were better guides to understanding the Christian religion than were the speculations of medieval theologians. The humanists applied their learning and methods of study to Christian texts, including the Bible itself.

One aspect of this biblical scholarship was the retrieval of the original languages of the Bible. Until the sixteenth century, the Bible in western Europe had been familiar only in its late-classical Latin translation, known as the Vulgate. In Spain a major humanist project was the preparation of a polyglot (multilingual) Bible, printed from 1514 through 1517, with the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament placed alongside the text of the Vulgate. More ambitious and controversial was Erasmus's new translation of the New Testament from the Greek into Latin, first published in 1516 along with extensive annotations. Erasmus showed that the Vulgate had mistakes in its translation, some of which had important implications for understanding Christianity. For example, in his 1519 edition Erasmus changed the opening sentence of the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word") by translating the Greek word *logos* with the Latin *sermo* ("speech") rather than the



Vulgate's *verbum* ("word"). This change caused so much controversy that Erasmus had to publish a book a year later defending his decision. Christian humanists also believed that, just as texts became corrupted over time, so too had the institutions of the church become corrupted. The humanists called for such institutional reforms as better education for priests and sometimes for a more internalized, spiritual approach to faith, one with less emphasis on external demonstrations of belief.

▲ The opening page of the book of Joshua from the Lisbon Bible, a Hebrew Bible of 1482. Knowledge of Hebrew enabled scholars to read the Old Testament in its original language but opened the possibility of making changes to the Vulgate, the fourth-century Latin translation that had remained unchanged for a millennium.



▲ The Frenchman Joseph Justus Scaliger (pictured in this sixteenth-century portrait by an unknown artist) was the leading humanist scholar of the late sixteenth century. He was the first to establish an accurate chronology of the history of ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilization.

Challenges to Humanism

Many early Italian humanists considered the Scholastic tradition that dominated university education too abstract and impractical; they attacked its limited understanding of classical authorities and its “barbarous” Latin. Scholastics responded, and the two sides conducted a haphazard feud as humanism developed in Italy. However, since most Italian humanists focused on the *studia humanitatis* subjects and showed little interest in the main university subjects

of theology, law, and medicine, the conflict remained limited in scope.

The quarrel became far more serious at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Christian humanists in other European nations began crossing the boundaries by applying humanist scholarship to the Bible. Humanists were questioning the foundations of the powerful faculties of theology and of the institutional church. The German humanist Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522), for example, was attacked for endangering the Christian faith because he studied Hebrew to improve understanding of the Old Testament.

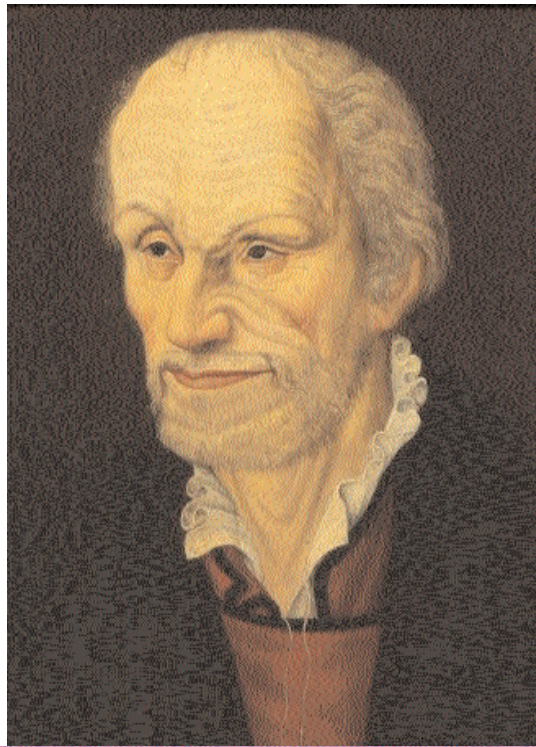
The attacks became even worse when the Protestant Reformation began in Germany in 1517. Conservative Catholics blamed the humanists’ meddling in religious issues and texts for opening the way for Protestantism. The faculty of theology of the University of Paris condemned Erasmus and some French humanists for making errors in their interpretation of Christianity. In Spain the Inquisition, an official church court charged with the task of rooting out heresy and punishing heretics, persecuted Christian humanists in the 1530s. The Catholic Church gradually condemned more and more humanist works, with the result that by the middle of the sixteenth century, all of Erasmus’s publications were on the church’s Index of Forbidden Books.

The Reformation also affected humanism in Protestant nations. In Germany from the 1520s and in England from the 1530s, the Reformation diverted the focus of intellectual debate toward religious controversy. In France, Protestantism remained a minority religion, but many leading humanists, including the printer and scholar Henri II Estienne (1528–1598) and the scholar Joseph Scaliger (1540–1609), were Protestants who spent important parts of their career outside of France. Among the regions that benefited from these French exiles was the Low Countries. After the Protestant northern provinces established their independence as Holland, a new university was founded at Leiden (1575), and it quickly acquired a reputation for open-mindedness that attracted the leading humanists of the age, including Scaliger.

The Legacy of Humanism

Despite the disruptions of religious conflict, humanism continued to mature over the course of the sixteenth century. Scholars deepened their understanding of the classical world and its languages and refined their editorial methods. By the seventeenth century the legacy of the classical world was well understood and widely accessible.

The humanist approach to teaching gradually became the core of the pre-university curriculum across Europe. The Protestant humanist Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560) and others like him developed educational programs based on the study of classical languages. In Catholic lands the Jesuits incorporated the humanist approach into their secondary schools. Universities were more resistant to change, but even traditional faculties came to absorb basic humanist principles in their approach to classical texts.



◀ A brilliant young scholar, the German humanist Philipp Melancthon (the subject decades later of this sixteenth-century portrait by an unknown artist) was appointed the first professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg at age twenty-one. There, he came into contact with his fellow professor Martin Luther and became one of Luther's most important supporters.

HUMANISM AND THE REFORMATION

The relationship between humanism, especially Christian humanism, and the Protestant Reformation is still much debated. From the beginning, some Catholics accused humanism of paving the way for the Reformation, and some later Protestant historians also argued that the Reformation was the inevitable outcome of humanism. In reaction, others argued that the two phenomena were, in fact, distinct and unrelated. Neither of these positions is still considered altogether valid, but it remains very difficult to work out the exact nature of the relationship.

The two main leaders of the Protestant movement, Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564), were certainly influenced by humanist methods. Many humanist scholars, notably Luther's lieutenant Philipp Melancthon, became Protestants. At the same time, however, other humanists (such as Melancthon's great-uncle Johann Reuchlin) opposed the Reformation, and the leading English humanist, Thomas More, was executed for his refusal to break with Rome. Many humanists, notably Erasmus, were caught in the middle—sympathetic to the idea of reform but finding Protestantism too extreme.

There were similarities between Christian humanism and Protestantism. Both looked back to a much earlier, “pure” era—ancient Rome and the early church—for inspiration. Both attacked problems in the church (such as ignorant priests) and the Scholastic approach to theology. Both argued for improving the text of the Bible and for a more internal, spiritual religious faith. The historical challenge, however, lies in working out the degree to which these aspects of the Reformation were shaped by humanism and the degree to which the two movements simply shared ideas that were common at the time.

One important difference was that the Reformation affected all levels of society, from kings and scholars down to peasants, whereas humanism affected only the educated elite who knew Latin. Another difference lies in the depth of reform each movement advocated. Christian humanists wanted reforms to church institutions; they called for better-educated priests and amendments to the manner in which Christians worshiped. Protestants wanted these changes too, but they also called for fundamental changes in the core doctrines of Christianity. For example, Luther and other Reformers argued against the traditional doctrine that humans could play a role in their own salvation through the exercise of their free will.

Even when they did not become Protestants, humanists still believed in church reform, and they played an important role in the movement to reform the Roman Catholic Church during the sixteenth century, centered on the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Whether Protestant or Catholic, humanists profoundly influenced the transformation of the Christian religion in western Europe.

THE DETECTION AND CREATION OF FORGERIES

Humanism's new approach to understanding language and history in its original context involved the detection of forgeries. The most famous case is Lorenzo Valla's exposure of the Donation of Constantine. This document purported to be a legal record proving that the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine (d. 337), gave his empire to Pope Sylvester I (ruled 314–336) in gratitude for his recovery from leprosy. For centuries popes had used this document to justify their involvement in political affairs.

Valla demonstrated that the Donation of Constantine was, in fact, a forgery written hundreds of years after the supposed donation. He showed that no other historical sources from the period mentioned the donation, and that in fact they contradicted its existence. He showed that there were no physical records, such as coins, that indicated Pope Sylvester had ever ruled the empire. He also showed that many of the Latin words in the document were not in use in the fourth century but were used only in later medieval Latin. At the time Valla's employer, the king of Naples, was fighting the pope over territory; Valla's book undermining the pope's claims to territory thus had a practical purpose.

Humanists' superior understanding of the classical period could also be used to create high-quality forgeries. The most spectacular example was the work of the Dominican friar known as Annius of Viterbo (Giovanni Nanni, 1443/4–1507). Wanting to prove his own theories about history, Annius claimed to have found previously unknown manuscripts of the works of various ancient historians. In fact, he wrote these entire "ancient histories" himself. Furthermore, he published them with his own scholarly comments, which explained how these ancient works confirmed his theories.

Some humanists realized right away that there was something wrong with these texts, but others believed them, in part because they filled inconvenient gaps in ancient history and supported their own opinions. It was not until humanist scholarship had become very refined, at the end of the sixteenth century, that Scaliger and others showed definitively that the texts were forgeries.

► This illustration of a classroom comes from a fifteenth-century French manuscript of Virgil's *Georgics*, a work written around 30 BCE and rediscovered during the Renaissance. Through new manuals and textbooks and through model schools established by innovative teachers, humanists developed a new style of education that shaped secondary schools in Europe and elsewhere up to the twentieth century.



By the end of the sixteenth century, most well-educated people in Europe had been trained with a humanist-inspired approach and shared a basic knowledge of classical languages and literature. An education founded upon Latin and the classics would remain the basis of secondary education in much of Europe up to the early twentieth century. In universities the *studia humanitatis* led to the modern idea of "the humanities"—a course of study whose objects are the cultivation of the intellect and the civilizing of the character. Humanist philology lies behind the

modern scholarly approach to literary analysis. Humanism also had a profound impact on other disciplines, from the sciences to the law, literature, and the arts. By the seventeenth century the basic lessons of humanism had been absorbed into the mainstream, and new intellectual developments took over.

FURTHER READING

- Baron, Hans. *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*. Rev. ed. Princeton, NJ, 1966.
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- Nauert, Charles G., Jr. *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*. Cambridge, 1995.
- Rabil, Albert, Jr. *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*. 3 vols. Philadelphia, 1988.

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