Civic Humanism

The rediscovery of ancient texts and the growing belief that they expressed great truths worthy of study during the period in Italy known as the Renaissance challenged the dominant values of the medieval world from which it emerged. Ancient texts, such as the letters of Cicero to his friend Atticus—rediscovered by Petrarch—and the guide to oration by Quintilian, celebrated urban life. These texts showed that the active life in cities—that of statesmen, lawyers, notaries, merchants, and, increasingly, artisans—was one of value. Also, these texts demonstrated how one could and should persuade, praise, criticize, and encourage others to accept or reject decisions. This was especially important in cities such as republican Florence, where decisions were made by popular vote in the main governing council. Men in cities needed the skills of rhetoric and the ability to deliver persuasive speeches and write persuasive prose. Thus, the lessons of ancient texts served the needs and purposes of civic life.

The revival of the study of these texts also included a revival of the educational curriculum laid out in their content. Described by Cicero as the *studia humanitatis*, those studies befitting of free men, the urban elite in Italian cities began pursuing a curriculum of history, oratory, poetry, grammar, moral philosophy, and ethics. This new learning focused on studying the classics in their original form and language, adopting classical antiquity as a model and standard for life. This curriculum highlighted ancient examples of good character, moral development, and endowment of dignity and virtue. These studies were concerned with lessons men needed in daily life in order to withstand the blows of fortune, make sound moral decisions, and display eloquence. In essence, education was training for an active, civic life: it made good citizens. However, with its inherent pursuit of worldly honor and glory, the active life ran counter to the notion that dominated the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, the contemplative life—the life of religious seclusion, perhaps in a monastery—was prized as superior to the active life of merchants, artisans, and statesmen. In this line of thinking, removing oneself from the sins and temptations of the world was the only true way to achieve virtue. Those contending with the politics of the Italian city-state argued the possibility of leading a virtuous life while in the world. This belief was a key component of new learning, and those individuals who followed it were known as humanists.

The city of Florence was an early center of humanist learning and expression. Here, leading statesmen popularized classical rhetoric, mimicking the writing style of ancient authors such as Cicero in their official state correspondence. Figures such as Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) and Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), both of who served as Chancellor of Florence and wrote all official correspondence, adapted the new learning to political purposes. These humanists praised the active life, wrote official histories of their city state, and incorporated classical references in their letters and other writing to make a point, connecting their own experience to that of the ancients. The eloquence and persuasiveness of Salutati’s letters during conflicts first with the pope in the 1370s and then with Milan in the 1390s were said to be worth a thousand cavalry, because they were so powerful in supporting the Florentine cause. As Chancellors of Florence, Salutati and Bruni attached the ideals of humanist learning specifically to republican life.
and institutions. This was especially the case with Bruni. While Bruni authored a variety of types of writings—including histories, translations of Aristotle, and orations—his political writings praising the city of Florence, its republican institutions, and the liberty these intuitions provided and protected led the twentieth-century scholar Hans Baron to dub Bruni as an example of “civic humanism.” Baron reads Bruni’s praises of Florence, in particular, Bruni’s *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (c. 1403-1404) as a defense of republican liberty at a time when the Duke of Milan, Giangaleazzo Visconti (1351-1402), was marching through Italy, conquering lands in Lombardy to the Veneto and into Tuscany. In 1402, after the city of Bologna came under attack and fell to Visconti’s forces, the city of Florence was the remaining holdout. Before Milanese troops could reach Florence, however, Giangaleazzo Visconti died unexpectedly. Florence was saved. Baron reads Bruni’s reflections on the event in his *Panegyric* as a full-fledged commitment to the active life and a turning point in humanism in which humanist ideals became firmly attached to republican values. Civic humanism was Florentine in origin and, for Baron, represents the fullest expression of humanist values of the active life and political involvement.