

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Lee, Alexander. Humanism and Empire: The Imperial Ideal of  
Fourteenth-Century Italy**

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 43, Number 2, Spring 2020

Transformative Translations in Early Modern Britain and France  
Traductions transformatives dans la première modernité française et  
britannique

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072219ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34858>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2020). Review of [Lee, Alexander. Humanism and Empire: The Imperial Ideal of Fourteenth-Century Italy]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(2), 388–391. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34858>

of grace and free will in *On Providence* offers valuable insight to the concerns of the Protestant Reformation. The final thinker addressed in this volume is John Calvin, who continued the work of Zwingli in Geneva. Translating Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and *On the Bondage and Liberation of the Will* was a difficult task, writes Knell, simply due to the "extent and depth" of Calvin's thought (235). Nevertheless, Knell brings these passages into dialogue and calls upon readers to rediscover Calvin's work, especially those readers who come from a Calvinist background.

The final chapter on the Council of Trent is broken down into sessions, and Knell explains that the Tridentine theology that arises from the Council of Trent is still central to the Catholic understanding of Christian faith. This chapter allows readers to draw parallels between Catholic and Protestant views related to original sin, justification, and the Sacrament. The contrasting arguments presented by Knell underscore his commitment to providing an objective collection of the selected passages. I found that Knell's representational approach to themes in sin, grace, and free will was well-executed, because he took great care to address points of conflict between the thinkers, but without privileging one thinker over another. The complexity of thought presented in the selected passages "stretches our minds well beyond any automatic understanding" (4), but Knell's didactic approach to knowledge exchange inspires that mental "stretch" by making it fulfilling.

SHEENA JARY

McMaster University

**Lee, Alexander.**

*Humanism and Empire: The Imperial Ideal of Fourteenth-Century Italy.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 438. ISBN 978-0-19-967515-9 (hardcover) US\$100.

In this erudite and densely researched book, packed with historical data, Alexander Lee explores the humanists' political ambitions for territorial expansions and the creation of the Holy Roman Empire. Throughout the book, Lee calls into question the connection between humanism and republicanism, providing a new definition for the "hazily defined" (185) notion of humanism.

Lee's argument is that our understanding of humanism remains deficient if we research its philosophical and philological foundations but overlook the concept of empire as it is formulated and debated in humanistic writing and commentaries. He offers a bold and revisionist take on humanism, reviewing and referring to a long line of historiographers—such as Georg Voigt, Ronald Witt, Jacob Burckhardt, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Remigio Sabbadini, Arnaldo Momigliano, and John Addington Symonds—to distinguish their views from the new direction taken in his book. Lee often writes in dialogue with Burckhardt, especially early in the book. The case studies of Padua and Vicenza are examined in comparison with other locations, like Verona, where scholars find the first new approach to empire and the Christian universalism rooted in the notion of *sacrum imperium*. The book's impressive range of evidence, and documents mined for the writing of a large variety of fourteenth-century figures of Italy's civic life, its ruling and intellectual elite, evinces Lee's encyclopaedic knowledge of his subject matter and the comprehensive archival research that went into the making of this book and into the establishment of a new historiography of Italian humanism. Lee devotes much space to explaining how and why the *signori* held a positive view of empire; what implications this view had for the idea of empire in humanist writing across different genres; and how theory underpinned practice, often uneasily and confusedly. Lee writes accessibly and engagingly, and for a great variety of readers interested in early Italian history, politics, and literature, and their European connections. The redefining nature of Lee's argument places the author among the great historiographers of the past, in whose company he begins his long and deep scholarly investigation. Lee's version of humanism, or his disclosure of humanism's untold story, is a book for the humanist historiography written about the twenty-first century: a century in which the intelligent public and readership increasingly place critical pressure on the idea and practice of imperialism, and in which empire is redefined in radical terms along different lines.

The book is divided into two parts, consisting of four and three chapters respectively, an introduction, and a conclusion. The introduction will be of use to anyone seeking a comprehensive critical overview of how the topic of empire was overlooked in the works of scholars who influenced humanist historiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and who still define it today. The introduction also examines the philosophical, discursive, and narrative presentation of empire as a concept in a selection of humanist texts. Lee identifies

the lacuna in the historiography and proceeds to address new textual evidence, attending to that which early scholars missed or ignored. Organized around the categories of communes, history, and the providence, and focusing on Italy and Rome specifically, the first part maps the development of the idea of empire in Italian humanism from the early thirteenth century until the end of empire at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as conceived in this book. This is the period of the “defence” of empire, Lee posits, describing almost a century and a half of the gestation of empire in humanist writing and commentaries on episodes from history. A chronological overview of examples is accompanied by a style of historiographic writing that occasionally resembles an annotated catalogue of names, dates, and titles, but which is nevertheless rich with facts. Succinct critical annotations and summaries follow, suggesting how conflicts, tyranny, and imperial authority emerged in the arena of political spectacle informed by the city states and courts of humanist Italy. Lee offers a detailed and engaging examination of how humanist political authority commented on the classics; Cicero, we are reminded often, informs the humanist terminology, the structure of thought, and the case for empire. Rome “as the seat of the Empire and *caput mundi*” (191)—the top of the imperial world that humanism created as its political and spatial vision in late medieval Europe, as it moved towards learned enlightenment—occupies a single chapter in the first part.

In the second part, Rome is used to illustrate the humanist political outlook and imperial imagination. The nuance of papal supremacy, conflicts, and contacts in kingdoms and lands of the expanding Holy Roman Empire, from northern Italy and beyond, are mapped out in detail and chronologically. This is a book about princes and the empire they forged with vision, force, and confusion. Lee’s historiographic narrative charts an appropriately lively story of the theories and controversies surrounding the notion of *imperium* that lay at the heart of the constitution of (early) modern Europe, especially the north, northwest, and central regions. What a humanist *imperium* so constituted and written about may also mean for the colonized lands and dominions of the eastern Adriatic—itsself transformed by the instruments and effects of the end of the humanist empire as a political project once it was established in fourteenth-century Italy—is a chapter that may further extend an analysis of “the humanists’ affection for Empire” (377) to one different in structure from that of the Holy Roman Empire. From such an imperialist perspective—regarded not as “civil strife” so much as further territorial expansion, rule, integration,

and exploitation, across the boundary that separated and protected the Holy Roman Empire from the Ottoman world beyond it—the imperial ideal and the humanist empire may acquire an even broader and more complex meaning.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary's University, Halifax

**Lourenço, Miguel Rodrigues.**

*A articulação da periferia: Macau e a Inquisição de Goa (c. 1582–1650).*

Lisbon: Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, I.P e Fundação Macau, 2016. Pp. 368. ISBN 978-972-8586-47-8 (paperback) €20.

Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço's book joins the important body of literature that adds to our knowledge of Portugal's tribunal of the Inquisition in Goa, the only such overseas tribunal, which was founded in 1560. The tribunal itself, which poses a host of historical problems for scholars, has seen an explosion of attention in recent years. This book is an important complement to our knowledge; it breaks new ground both in its subject and its approach. With the clear support of years of solid archival scholarship, Rodrigues Lourenço deals with the activities of the tribunal in the port city of Macau, which was a Portuguese possession until 1999, fleshing out the articulation of a periphery: citing that important city as part of Portugal's vast empire during an interval of change—the Iberian Union of Spain and Portugal under the Habsburg crown (1580–1640)—and its immediate aftermath.

As the author insightfully remarks at the outset of the book, other studies have taken into account the repressive activity of the tribunal—its mechanisms of coercion and control—to the detriment of the proper study of the institutional strategies for its implantation in the overseas territories of the Portuguese Empire, as elaborated from the centre. His book is thus a welcome addition to the lively debate on centre/periphery in current historiography. Rodrigues Lourenço rightly sees the tribunal as a manifestation of the Portuguese expansion in Asia, and his study aims to redress some of the shortcomings of current works on that tribunal and its activities, relying not only on the latest historiography but also on the social sciences and a wealth of archival sources held in several countries.