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Bruni and the Uses of the Past**

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Ianziti, Gary.

Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA and London UK: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 418. ISBN 978-0-674-06152-1 (hardcover) \$49.95.

Gary Ianziti's new book on Leonardo Bruni (Arezzo, 1370?–Florence, 1444) challenges the traditional historiographical paradigms that in the past century even brilliant scholars helped to build. The title reveals the main goal of the author: to examine Bruni's historical works and delineate the theoretical pattern (and degree of consistency) behind those works.

Although some essays that constitute the chapters of the book were published previously, the volume appears solid. It consists of four sections, preceded by an introduction and opening chapter ("Bruni on writing history") and followed by a conclusion. The order is rigorously chronological: "Beginnings," "Florence under the oligarchy," "Medici Florence," and "Late works." Ianziti includes in his analysis all of Bruni's works where a historical line is visible: the *Histories of the Florentine people* and the *On his own times*, as well as Bruni's translations from Plutarch's *Lives*, his biographies (*Aristotle* and *Cicero*, and *Dante* and *Petrarch*), and the *Commentaries on the first Punic war, on Greek history, and on the Italian war against Goths*. This "global" vision allows Ianziti to underscore just how consistent Bruni was across the various genres he undertook. One of the keywords of Bruni's method is "autopsy," a concept derived from ancient historians (Thucydides above all), affirming the value of the eyewitness account. In all of his works, in fact, Bruni refers to authors who were close to the very events they described: Xenophon, Polybius, Procopius. In his memoirs, *On his own times*, Bruni follows their example and adopts the perspective of an eyewitness to the events.

Ianziti carefully examines Bruni's prefaces (a usage re-launched by himself) which often include brilliant considerations. They typically set their respective work in its corresponding genre (e.g., history, commentary, or memoir), and include the author's statement on what persuaded him to write. Here, Ianziti is inclined to find the key to interpreting the rest of the work; moreover, the prefaces contain Bruni's deepest reflections on his own historical works. In the preface to his most discussed work, *On the Italian war against Goths*, he wrote: "it is the part of a diligent man not to be ignorant of the origins and development of his own country, or of what happened in earlier times" (trans. Ianziti, p. 298).

Starting from the studies by J. Hankins, R. Fubini, and A. M. Cabrini, Ianziti shows the main features of Bruni's way of writing history, and observes some perhaps unexpected facets. The name of Bruni is generally associated with a new approach to historical studies: a wiser and more selective use of the sources, more distance than was adopted by fourteenth-century chronicles, and a more scientific, pragmatic, and secular study of the causes of events. In fact, *Writing history* suggests that only the last point is true. Ianziti demonstrates that the first two lack any real foundation.

Bruni uses his sources in a very peculiar way. In his commentaries and biographies, for instance, he identifies a main ancient text to follow; he then starts a dialectical dialogue with that text. One of the most interesting results achieved by Ianziti is the discovery of the classical source Bruni used for his *Life of Aristotle*: Diogenes Laertius. But the question is even more complex: when Bruni was writing his biography, he had in mind both the account by Diogenes (itself contestable) and Traversari's planned translation. Since a full version of Diogenes, complete with gossiping and negative details, furthered the cause of those who discouraged the reading of classical authors, Bruni felt the need to create a more "politically correct" edition. Other sources may have helped him filter some pieces of information, but in general Bruni cuts and pastes, manipulates, and tampers with his own source text.

In his historical and therefore official works, such as the *Histories of the Florentine people*, Bruni is not the independent and impartial scholar whom one might expect. If the medieval Villani chroniclers can be accused of involvement in the current Guelphs/Ghibellines strife, similar claims can be made about Bruni. His reflections on the past and contemporary Italian history tend to support an elitist management of political affairs. This was absolutely

consistent with the oligarchic ruling class both before and after the Medici regime (Cosimo I returned in Florence in 1434 permanently), and explains how Bruni could hold his position as chancellor and even get other and more active roles, while many of his friends and political partners were exiled by Cosimo. Furthermore, while Bruni could indeed boast of his access to archival documents that few people at the time were able to consult, he did not necessarily use them in a neutral and unbiased way.

Ianziti's long-range analysis removes stains of rhetoric from the traditional image of Bruni as historian, and in the meantime encourages scholars to investigate his texts which, in many cases, still wait to be edited with modern and scientific criteria. Finally, Ianziti shows some features of Bruni's historiographical personal approach to be wider and possibly franker than the official and merely Florentine-centric one—and moving towards the Italian-national and "moralistic-free" perspective inherited by Machiavelli.

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