Cicero against Caesar? Humanism in Italy, 1390-1450

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MHIS322 Culture and Power in Renaissance Europe

The Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni praised Cicero for living the active life of a statesman despite also being a philosopher: ‘From the same secret chamber of philosophy [Cicero] brought forth his actions for governing the republic and his words for writing and teaching others . . . he was born to be advantageous to men both in the republic and in learning.’ Through undertaking the traditional studia humanitatis, humanists rediscovered philosophical and political knowledge from antiquity and revived classical rhetorical and literary styles. This cultural revival coincided with a tumultuous period of political transformation across the Italian peninsula as communal government declined and was replaced by new systems of government. Although these cultural and political developments may appear separate from one another, they were actually interconnected. It was the humanists who played a central role in this merging of culture and power. Whereas humanism had originally emerged as a private intellectual pursuit, by the end of the 1300s and early 1400s, humanists were becoming increasingly prominent in the public domain. Equipped with socially useful knowledge and skills, humanists came to serve governments as politicians, diplomats and bureaucrats. In a society that highly valued the past and was profoundly suspicious of the new, humanists evoked concepts and imagery from classical culture as a legitimising force in the political sphere. In order to demonstrate this, the leading Florentine humanist text will first be examined. Second, the interpretation of the Baron Thesis will be evaluated. This will be followed by an examination of two alternative interpretations to the Baron Thesis. Finally, humanism will be examined beyond Florence in the context of Milan and Naples. Overall, this essay will demonstrate that humanism should not be understood in terms of a dichotomy between the republican ideal of Cicero and the tyranny of Caesar. Rather, humanists used their expertise in classical culture to serve a variety of political systems across the Italian peninsula.

The starting point for any examination of fifteenth-century humanism is Bruni’s Panegyric to the City of Florence, which is generally regarded as the most significant

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humanist work. An analysis of the literary elements of this text provides important insight into how classical antiquity was selectively used by humanists to enhance their own arguments and discredit the arguments of others. Bruni commences by claiming that the Florentine race arose from the Roman people. In doing so, he establishes continuity between Rome and Florence, which serves as the basis of his argument throughout. Bruni then asks the rhetorical question: ‘What nation in the entire world was ever more distinguished, more powerful, more outstanding in every sort of excellence than the Roman people?’ This indicates the high regard in which Roman society was held, as well as the legitimising force it provided Florence with. However, Bruni only regards the republican phase of Roman society to be the ideal. In fact, the way Bruni has juxtaposed Rome’s republican and imperial phases has raised the most questions among historians as to underlying ideological motives of the text.

The apparent abhorrence Bruni displays towards imperial Rome is evident when he claims that the Roman people were deprived of their liberty by the ‘Caesars, Antonines, Tiberiuses, Neros – those plagues and destroyers of the Roman Republic.’ Furthermore, he laments how the republic ‘fell into the hands and under the domination of Caligula and other monsters and vile tyrants who were innocent of no vice and redeemed by no virtue.’ He then declares, ‘O Gaius Caesar, what manifest crimes have you visited upon the city of Rome!’ Bruni proceeds to indicate that Florence inherited Rome’s republican tradition because it was founded when ‘the city of Rome flourished greatly in power, liberty, genius, and especially with great citizens.’ Because of its origins, ‘Florence knew that it was a Roman tradition to defend the liberty of Italy against its enemies, precisely as its ancestors had dared to fight against the Cimbri, the Teutons, and the Gauls.’ Finally, Bruni concludes by reassuring ‘that Florence would never be turned away from the sound policies established by its forbears, nor would it ever come under the control of men of different political sentiments.’ It is clear that Bruni evokes imagery from classical antiquity in order

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3 Ibid., p. 149-50.

4 Ibid., p. 151.

5 Ibid., p. 152.

6 Ibid., p. 153.

7 Ibid., p. 154.

8 Ibid., p. 167.

9 Ibid., p. 173.
to present Florence as the rightful heir of republican Rome and therefore, the defender of liberty and rightful protector of the Italian peninsula. In order to understand why Bruni did this, the text needs to be understood in terms of the political conditions under which it was created.

The foundational interpretation of Bruni’s *Panegyric* and humanism more broadly, is the Baron Thesis. Hans Baron proposed that towards the end of the fourteenth century in Florence, a new historical outlook and ethical attitude arose amongst scholars that promoted the family and civic life, rather than withdrawal from social obligations.\(^{10}\) This accounts for the celebration of Cicero as a philosopher statesman and role model for humanists. The cultural changes of the period were a product of new attitudes towards citizenship that occurred in the political arena in defence of civic freedom and independence of the Florentine Republic.\(^{11}\) For Baron, civic humanism was a reaction against geopolitical developments, because in ‘around 1400 great dislocations in the political interrelations of the Italian states came to a head and produced a violent upheaval that had long been in the making.’\(^{12}\) In particular, Milanese expansion under the Visconti fostered a greater commitment to classical republican ideology amongst the Florentines, who sought to resist tyranny and defend their liberty. In terms of Bruni’s *Panegyric*, Baron considered it to be the most vigorous and most complete expression of the new complex of politico-historical ideas that arose during the struggle against Giangaleazzo Visconti.\(^{13}\) Just as Aelius Aristides composed a panegyric to celebrate Athens saving the Greek city-states from being engulfed by the Persian monarchy, Bruni’s purpose was to celebrate how Florence protected the liberty of the Italian peninsula from Visconti tyranny.\(^{14}\) Under this interpretation, Florentine humanism was an ideology committed to classical notions of republicanism and opposed to tyrannical forms of government such as monarchy. However, despite the historiographical significance of the Baron Thesis, it has since been extensively critiqued by historians.

The Baron Thesis has been criticised by historians as too naïve and limited, and for its failure to understand Bruni’s *Panegyric* in its correct historical context. Hankins identifies

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\(^{12}\) *Ibid*.

\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, p. 163.

that after reading all of Bruni’s works – histories, letters, treatises and prefaces – it becomes difficult to maintain an argument that his humanist activities were motivated and shaped by a strong ideological preference for a particular regime or constitution.\(^\text{15}\) More broadly, humanists should not necessarily be viewed as political ideologues committed to republicanism. Indeed, historians now generally accept the interpretation of Paul Oskar Kristeller that humanists were a professional class of lawyers, notaries, secretaries and rhetoricians that were eloquent articulators of whatever cause with which they happened to be employed.\(^\text{16}\) The implication of this is that humanists used classical antiquity for much more than merely promoting republicanism. Two alternative interpretations regarding the use of classical antiquity by humanists will now be considered.

It is now widely accepted that rather than being a republic, the Florentine political system was an oligarchy. Of course, this was not unusual as most Italian city-states during this period were functioning oligarchies. Rather than using the classical past to promote republicanism, humanists used it to legitimise the establishment of a new oligarchy in Florence. The Florentine humanist Matteo Palmieri wrote: ‘The very wise ancients, who extended their empires so greatly, raised foreigners, workers, and men of the lowest condition to the highest positions of rulership when they recognized in them noteworthy excellence in virtue.’\(^\text{17}\) Because of this, ‘no one [should] disdain being governed by virtuous men from humble beginnings and unknown family origins...It would take a long time to recount those in Rome who, although humbly born, through their virtue alone gained the most honoured ranks and splendidly adorned the republic.’\(^\text{18}\) Here, Palmieri clearly appeals to antiquity to justify the growing political power of non-noble mercantile families in Florence. This has important implications for the way humanism is understood, because it creates a very different picture of the Florentine political landscape to that presented by Baron.

Whereas Baron suggested that humanists used the classical past to instil civic spirit, Najemy interprets so-called ‘civic humanism’ to be ‘a deeply conservative ideology which


\(^{17}\) Matteo Palmieri, Vita civile, cited in John M. Najemy, ‘Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics,’ in Renaissance Civic Humanism, p. 94.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
provided cultural, educational, historical, and moral buttressing for both the newly established hegemony of Florence’s elite families and for the subordinate political and social status to which the middle ranks of Florentine society were now relegated.\footnote{Najemy, ‘Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics,’ p. 103.} According to Najemy, humanists adopted ‘the family’ as the perfect metaphor for a republic because it assumed the natural leadership of experienced ‘fathers,’ tolerated no opposition from its ‘children’ (i.e. citizens) and conceived of citizenship in terms of modelling young men to emulate the virtues of their elders.\footnote{Ibid., p. 101.} Bruni expressed such a sentiment by declaring, ‘this city has been governed with such diligence and competence that one could not find better discipline even in a household ruled by a solicitous father.’\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Panegyric}, p. 173.} Drawing parallels with Rome, Bruni evoked another familial metaphor: ‘Now if the glory, nobility, virtue, grandeur, and magnificence of the parents can also make the sons outstanding, no people in the entire world can be as worthy of dignity as are the Florentines, for they are born from such parents who surpass by a long way all mortals in every sort of glory.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 150.} Therefore, humanists should not be understood as necessarily reviving classical antiquity in reaction against the threat of Visconti tyranny. Rather, the rekindling of Roman discourse of the family and state should be viewed as a reaction to the class conflict and tensions occurring since the end of the fourteenth century, culminating in mercantile families consolidating their political power. With their knowledge of the ancient power structures, humanists played an important role by giving legitimacy to these new oligarchies.

The second alternative interpretation to the Baron Thesis is that humanists used their knowledge of classical antiquity to justify Florentine territorial expansion into Tuscany. Although Baron suggested Bruni’s \textit{Panegyric} was created in celebration of the triumph of Florentine liberty over Milanese tyranny, the creation of this text also coincides with the Florentine defeat of Pisa. Hörnqvist identifies that the problem with Florentine humanist sources is that Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and Matteo Palmieri all served oligarchic regimes, yet refused to see a contradiction between the Florentine liberty they celebrated in their works and the city’s expansionist policy.\footnote{Mikael Hörnqvist, ‘The Two Myths of Civic Humanism,’ in \textit{Renaissance Civic Humanism}, p. 108.} As a result, there are clear expressions of Florentine imperialism in Bruni’s \textit{Panegyric}, notwithstanding its explicit celebration of

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  \item \footnote{Najemy, ‘Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics,’ p. 103.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., p. 101.}
  \item \footnote{Bruni, \textit{Panegyric}, p. 173.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., p. 150.}
  \item \footnote{Mikael Hörnqvist, ‘The Two Myths of Civic Humanism,’ in \textit{Renaissance Civic Humanism}, p. 108.}
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liberty. For example, ‘Therefore, to you, also, men of Florence, belongs by hereditary right dominion over the entire world and possession of your parental legacy.’ Here, Bruni reasons that because Florence is the inheritor of Rome, it thus has a natural right to pursue imperial ambitions. This demonstrates that the classical past was used to not only legitimise the internal political arrangements of Florence, but also to justify its foreign policy. Furthermore, Bruni justifies Florentine aggression by claiming: ‘all wars that are waged by the Florentine people are most just, and this people can never lack justice in its wars since it necessarily wages war for the defence or recovery of its own territory.’ In addition, Palmieri’s *De captivitate* (1450) is interpreted by Hörnqvist as designed to create submission and to consolidate and legitimate the principal divide between the Florentine rulers and their Pisan subjects. Therefore, it is clear that assuming that humanists only used the classical past to promote liberty and republicanism is misleading and incorrect. They used their skills and knowledge of classical antiquity to justify a range of political actions while serving the Florentine government. It is now time to examine humanist works beyond Florence in the context of Milan and Naples, in order to provide an even more nuanced understanding of the ways the classical past was used by humanists for political purposes.

Under the Baron Thesis, humanism appears to be largely contained within Florence due to its unique political circumstances. However, humanism flourished across the Italian peninsula as the skills of humanists were sought out by all political regimes, not only republican oligarchies. In particular, it is worthwhile to consider humanism in the ducal context of Milan, the greatest rival of Florence and antagonist in Florentine humanist texts. Similarly to Florentine humanists, Milanese humanists sought to reconnect with classical antiquity in order to prove the superiority of their culture and society. During the Visconti conquests of the 1390s, the Milanese court humanist Antonio Loschi produced *Invectiva in Florentinos*, an anti-Florentine pamphlet refuting the Florentine claims to be of Roman descent and accusing Florence of the ‘cruellest tyranny.’ Furthermore, just as in Florence, Milan was also presented by humanists as the intellectual inheritor of classical antiquity. For example, Milanese court humanist Uberto Decembrio began his text *De re publica* by

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25 *Ibid*.
26 Hörnqvist, ‘The Two Myths of Civic Humanism,’ p. 135.
drawing continuities with ancient intellectuals associated with the Lombard region such as Virgil, Catullus, Ambrose and Augustine. This demonstrates that creating connections with figures from the past provided a legitimising force to a city and its political system, regardless of whether it was a republic or a duchy.

A highly significant aspect of Milanese humanism is how Bruni’s *Panegyric* was appropriated. Uberto’s son, Pier Candido Decembrio, was the secretary to the Duke of Milan and produced the *Panegyric to the City of the Milanese* (c.1435-6). Considering this text is useful in understanding Bruni’s *Panegyric* in the broader context of a literary genre, which in turn changes perspectives of humanism as a republican ideology. Indeed, Komorowski interprets the genre of the civic panegyric not as a commitment to republican ideals of civic virtue, but as a pragmatic mechanism for court humanists to engage in diplomacy and communicate public policy. Decembrio’s *Panegyric* began by commenting that ‘Bruni] writes so brilliantly and elegantly that, unless you pay very close attention, you might easily be led to believe that what he is saying is true.’ Decembrio legitimised the Milanese political landscape by applying theories developed in Plato’s *Republic*, claiming that Milan was a timocracy whose rulers, unlike those in Florence, ‘were not as preoccupied with acquiring wealth as they were with the memory of glory and of posterity.’ Decembrio undermines Bruni’s claims of Florence’s Roman republican origins, pointing out that Florence was founded as a colony during the time of Sulla, the wickedest of tyrants. Furthermore, the beginnings of Florence as a Roman colony gave no right to claim the empire as their special inheritance. This demonstrates how classical antiquity was selectively used by humanists to legitimise the Milanese political situation under the Visconti and discredit Florence. It highlights the immense cultural power associated with classical antiquity and completely changes Baron’s interpretation of humanism as a republican ideology.

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30 Pier Candido Decembrio, *Panegyric to the City of the Milanese*, cited in Hankins ‘Rhetoric, History and Ideology,’ p. 150.
31 Cited in Komorowski ‘The Diplomatic Genre Before the Italian League,’ p. 54.
32 Cited in Hankins, ‘Rhetoric, History and Ideology,’ p. 150.
By examining humanist works beyond the scope of Florence, historians can appreciate how humanism functioned in a much more accurate way that Baron could achieve. This is especially evident when examining Neapolitan humanism during the reign of Alfonso of Aragon. As a Spanish monarch ruling over almost half the Italian peninsula, Alfonso’s legitimacy was discredited by humanists from rival Italian states. For example, Florentine humanist Giannozzo Manetti wrote, ‘all of our Roman ancestors viewed the arrival of foreign kings...in Italy with such abhorrence, that they dared to wage war with...Pyrrhus of Epirus, Philip of Macedon, Antiochus of Syria, Tigranes of Armenia, Mithridates of Pontus...and lastly Hannibal of Carthage.’ In order to counter such claims, Alfonso sought the services of humanists in his own court who worked to present him favourably as a legitimate ruler. According to Ryder, although in language and much else Alfonso remained consciously a foreigner among Italians, he discovered a sense of identity in the classical heritage common to both Spain and Italy.

Antonio Becadelli ‘Panormita’ was hired as Neapolitan court humanist, and reversed the image of Alfonso as a foreign invader by associating him with the Roman emperors of Spanish lineage. He identified that Rome and Italy were supplied with wheat and sugar from Sicily, leather and cheese from Sardinia, wine from Corsica and salt from Ibiza, but ‘only Spain used to give Rome and Italy emperors and kings.’ Panormita then asked, “And what kind of emperors and kings? Trajan, Hadrian, Theodosius, Arcadius, Honorius, Theodosius II. Finally Alfonso, the living image of all the virtues, who stands forth as equal to those mentioned above in every form of commendation.’ Such exploitation of the classical antiquity to give legitimacy to an illegitimate king could only be achieved by a humanist with extensive knowledge of classical history and literature. In addition to being linked to Spanish Roman emperors, Alfonso was presented as a learned ruler possessing the wisdom of the ancients. For example, Alfonso was associated with the Roman literary culture of Spanish authors such as Quintilian, Martial, Lucan and above all, Seneca. Stacey suggests that this formed Alfonso into the absolute antithesis of the bestial and savage barbarian his enemies

37 Ibid.
38 Stacey, ‘Hispania and Royal Humanism,’ p. 58.
described him as.\textsuperscript{39} This demonstrates that humanism was not confined only to Florence and the classical past could be evoked to give legitimacy to all political systems. In this monarchy, humanists used classical antiquity to suggest that Alfonso had both the right and the ability to rule. Therefore, humanism is not a simple ideological dichotomy between the liberty of republicanism and the tyranny of monarchy as Baron proposed.

At a glance, humanism initially appears to be a civic republican ideology. However, studying humanism more closely reveals that its use was not restricted to a single ideology or confined to a particular city-state. This is because humanists applied their knowledge and skills acquired through the \textit{studia humanitatis} in order to legitimise a variety of political models. As Jurdjevic notes, ‘any government’s legitimacy, whether it be monarchical, oligarchic, or popular, could be defended or undermined by examining the quality and quantity of its scholars and the presence or lack of intellectual vitality.’\textsuperscript{40} Although Baron’s interpretation of humanism is largely inaccurate, he was correct in suggesting that fifteenth-century humanists played a central role in the public domain in contrast to the intellectual seclusion of earlier generations of humanists. With Cicero as their literary role model, humanists certainly did play an essential role in the political sphere during this period. Yet it was not only Cicero’s republican ideal that humanists were to defend. Indeed, humanists defended many Caesars too.

\section*{Bibliography}

\subsection*{Primary Sources}


\subsection*{Secondary Sources}


\textsuperscript{39} Stacey, ‘Hispania and Royal Humanism,’ p. 60.


