

Leonardo Bruni. *History of the Florentine People*.

Vol. 3, books 9–12. The I Tatti Renaissance Library 27. Ed. James Hankins. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. xxi + 477 pp. index. map. bibl. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-01682-8.

In what amounts to a delicious *aperçu* into the art of history, the Florentine Renaissance historian Leonardo Bruni offers his readers an autobiographical sketch that James Hankins, his general translator, has seen fit to tack onto the final volume, containing books 9–12, of his bilingual presentation of Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*. Readers will be grateful for this opportunity, brief and in ways superficial-seeming though it is, to glimpse one of the major Renaissance historians at work in his carpenter's shop, so to speak, as the wheels turn and the dust, often

ancient as well as medieval, flies about and the restored horses, knights, kings, popes, and ladies tip into life again.

Bruni was actually present at one of the significant transitional moments when the Italian Renaissance became itself. At the University of Florence in 1397, he studied ancient Greek under the tutelage of Manuel Chrysoloras, who had been invited to Florence by his mentor, Coluccio Salutati. So enthralling did the young scholar find his teacher, and his delving into a new, if also extremely old, linguistic experience, that he expanded his professional enthusiasms, complicated the legal studies in which he was enrolled, and set about turning himself into a historian writing in Latin.

How fortunate his choice turned out to be is confirmed in his Florentine history (a review of its first eight books appears in *RQ* 59, no. 2 [2006]: 486–88), and perhaps especially in the present volume. This gathering of the last four of Bruni's twelve books, composing the whole, supplely extends his earlier established historical methods. The premise of these methods, it turns out, and rather surprisingly, at least from a modern reader's point of view, is a draconian principle of exclusion. The events of the past, appearing to the history-committed investigator in a manner that resembles a magnificent disorderly bush, are to be trimmed and sculpted. Trivia or inessentials are to be lopped off: ruthless elimination is understood as a crucial part of the historical procedure, with all extras treated as irrelevant. The abbreviated result of this surgery is what Bruni and his contemporaries, as well as not a few of his successors, came to regard as history proper. Only the final sculpted bush reveals any meanings: it alone may be seen as the sole sensible topiary to be fashioned of the confused lushness of human experience.

But what sort of experience? And what sort of lushness, or, for that matter, meanings? And why this particular type of sculpting? Here the modern reader may be distracted by at least two conventions of early historiography, and possibly into a misunderstanding of Bruni's aims. The incessant focus on battles and violence may easily lead the reader into a fallacious conclusion that neither Bruni nor many of his followers cared much about ordinary life. Beyond his usual emphasis on disorder, but equally off-putting from a modern point of view, Bruni's habit of repeatedly inserting speeches into the mouths of his subjects reinforces a pervasive fictional air, or the possibility that he may have been indifferent to research and facts, or to what actually happened. Hankins's insightful introduction resolves most of these quandaries. Bruni's concluding books themselves, to the extent that they are approached fairly, or on their own terms, should put paid to the rest. As a result, readers of this first translation of Bruni's history into English may come to see the seminal modern thinker about the problem of history — what is it, after all? — as a master of those exclusions that illuminate, whether one agrees with his reasons for particular types of them or not, as well as an artisan of imaginative silences and majestic pauses, with the latter promoting an awareness that it is precisely because of his methods that an entire civilization is coaxed into growth before our eyes. The maturation emerges through the trimming. In the process, Bruni's readers may also come to see him as a superb stylist who in a reliable humanist fashion conceives the

meanings of the past according to rhetorical rhythms. Revealing the designs among the facts is a major goal, and along these lines even the odd fictional speech may provide its plausible commentary. A refreshing efficiency, which never draws attention to itself and which commendably avoids the personal, absent the sketch of the historian's career, reinforces the classical-humanist focus. Its clarity is granted a fine rebirth in the limpid phrasing of Hankins's translation (the autobiographical section is as ably translated by D. J. W. Bradley).

All of which is to suggest that, as Hankins intimates, Bruni shines his lantern on those patterns of events useful to him. Picking up in book 9 from 1378, he delivers not so much on violence per se as on accounts of its intersecting varieties. The roles of murder, assassination, robbery, rape, assault, arson, and rebellion in molding both the careers and institutions of his day, which are to be seen as outweighing in significance the less intrusive influences of economics, culture, marriage, and family loyalties, stand out with enviable briskness: "Internal discord, following immediately upon external peace, threw the city into disorder as never before" (3); "the treaty signed at Pisa initially gave the Florentines great hope, but brought only a brief lull in the war-fever" (95). The pointed transitions constitute much of the achievement.

Burckhardt remained unsympathetic to Bruni's achievement, but by 1914 Emilio Santini had launched his semi-resurrection, arguing that not only was his research outstanding for its day but also that his skeins of violent *exempla* amounted to their own explorations of motives. Certainly when his Florentine history was first published in 1442, Bruni's fellow citizens could only agree. Not only did they turn all twelve volumes into a collective bestseller but they also excused their ex-Chancellor from paying his taxes — and this not for his government service, but for what they understood to be his first-rate work as a historian.

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