When History Mattered[1]

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Once upon a time, many years ago, when leaders wanted policy advice, they turned not to economists or astrologers or other modern experts who predict the future, but to historians. Some kings paid historians for their work; some even had one or two on retainer. Today, the White House has a Council of Economic Advisors. Would it get better advice from a Council of Historians? It's certainly possible, though one person who would probably have said no was Charles de la Ruelle, a minor aristocrat who lived in Poitiers, France, in the sixteenth century. He was a lawyer. Then, as now, no one wanted a council of those, but that didn't stop him from attacking historians. In 1573, he published a short book entitled *Succinctz adversaires contre l'histoire et professeurs d'icelle* (Short Comments against History and its Professors).[2] De la Ruelle disliked history for a variety of reasons. It didn't offer valuable practical or moral examples, because its subject-matter was usually pretty grim. It couldn't tell you exactly what happened in the past: you only had to look at the fact that different historians come up with different accounts. And it couldn't be impartial, because most historians wrote for rich patrons and spent their time flattering them or attacking their enemies. De la Ruelle's book was sufficiently popular to go through three editions in the next four years, and he confidently dedicated the third edition to the king of France at the time, Henri III. In his address to the monarch, de la Ruelle revealed why he was so worried.[3] The problem was that the nobles of France were turning from feats of arms to the liberal arts. Law and medicine had practical value, but history, which the nobility valued above all, did not. He did not

[1] This is an abridged and revised version of an essay forthcoming in *A Cultural History of Ideas in the Renaissance*, ed. Jill Kraye (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).
[2] Charles De la Ruelle, *Succinctz adversaires...contre l'histoire & professeurs d'icelle* (Poitiers: Bouchetz, 1573).
[3] Charles De la Ruelle, *Les Succinctz adversaires...contre l'histoire et professeurs d'icelle*, third ed (Paris: n.p., 1577), sig. AIIIr-[AV]v.

speak as a concerned parent of a twenty-first-century undergrad, but as a concerned citizen. The nobles' addiction to reading about the past was enervating the state.

De la Ruelle's book could be an elaborate joke (that has not aged terribly well). It could be a serious attack.[4] Modern scholars are divided, but either way, it points to the fact that in the late sixteenth century, history mattered. Historians could tell you how to live, they could tell you what policies to follow, and they could celebrate your achievements in print for posterity. Historians had the sort of power and influence that most of us typing away today can only dream of. Here are some examples and some possible explanations.

I. Some people in the past did things better than we do

At roughly the same time as he wrote his most celebrated work, *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) also began the *Discorsi,* a long series of reflections inspired by his reading of the Roman historian Livy. In his preface, he bemoaned the fact that Renaissance statesmen failed to copy the achievements of their ancient forebears:

> I cannot help simultaneously marveling and grieving when, on the one hand, I consider how much honor people accord to antiquity and how often—to pass over countless other examples—a fragment of an ancient statue has been purchased for a high price so that someone may have it on hand to adorn his house and to have it copied by those who take delight in that art and they then strive with their utmost skill to show it in all their works; and when, on the other hand, I see the deeds of the greatest *virtù* that histories show us,

[4] For the former position, see Trevor Peach, "Contre l'histoire et les historiens: Les *Succinctz adversaires* de Charles de la Ruelle (1572–1574)," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 65 (2003): 69–82; for the latter, e.g., George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History: Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 165.

> undertaken by ancient kingdoms and republics, by kings, generals, citizens, proposers of laws, and others who have toiled for their countries being admired rather than imitated.[5]

Sixteenth-century people looked at the Romans with awe when they should have been learning from them. Some of Machiavelli's ideas have a distinctly modern tinge. For example, he argued that religion should function as social glue. Machiavelli discussed how King Numa established religion in Rome to maintain a civil society and concluded that "we can see how useful religion was in controlling the armies, inspiring the plebs, keeping men good, and shaming the wicked."[6] This was where modern Catholic leaders had failed. Thanks to them, Machiavelli wrote, Italy lacked religion and was in shambles. Leaders should "foster and strengthen all things that happen in religion's favor, even if they judge it to be false."[7]

In Machiavelli's wake, historical scholars and experts in ancient Roman law or politics presented information to help their patrons' policy-making, just as architects devised buildings in imitation of ancient structures. Military practice, in particular, brought together historians of a variety of stripes: the ancient Roman army was famously effective, which encouraged Renaissance scholars to try to distill and explicate the secrets of its success. One example was Andrea Palladio (1508–1580). Palladio is best known for his architectural theory and practice, strongly influenced by the Roman buildings he saw in Italy. In the US, the most famous exponent of Palladian ideals is Thomas Jefferson, who followed Palladio's precepts at Monticello and for the campus of the University of Virginia. Less well-known is Palladio's more general fascination with Roman civilization, including the underlying reasons for the Romans' military success. He produced

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[5] Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guiccardini, *The Sweetness of Power: Machiavelli's Discourses and Guicciardini's Considerations*, ed. and trans. James Atkinson and David Sices (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press 2002), 19.
[6] Machiavelli and Guiccardini, *The Sweetness of Power*, 57.
[7] Machiavelli and Guiccardini, *The Sweetness of Power*, 60.

illustrations for translations of the works of Julius Caesar (published in 1575) and of Polybius (which were never published).[8] Most of the illustrations show scenes in the battles that Caesar described. The letter key and the schematic way that the soldiers are shown make clear that the illustrations aim less at verisimilitude than explication (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Caesar, *I commentari* (Venice: de' Franceschi, 1575), fig. H. By Internet Archive Book Images.

Who did Palladio think would read his book? He targeted contemporary military men. He dedicated the Caesar edition to an active soldier, Giacomo Boncampagni, illegitimate son of the sitting pope, Gregory XIII, general of the papal armies and leader of the Spanish king's troops in Milan. In the preface, he bewailed "the miserable condition of our era," and attacked those

[8] John Hale, "Andrea Palladio, Polybius and Julius Caesar," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977): 240–55, https://doi.org/10.2307/750998.

contemporary captains who denied that they could lead armies "with the order and skill of the ancients."[9] He defended his recourse to antiquity with a personal example of its applicability:

> They also say that the ancient orders are difficult and impossible to adapt to the customs of our times, but in this (as in other matters) they are again mistaken, because the ancient soldiers were peasants and craftsmen, for the most part uncouth and uneducated, and their captains were not demigods, but men like us, and the maneuvers are easy and clear to those who understand their principles. This having been clarified to me, since I found myself in the company of some gentlemen well versed in the affairs of war, I ordered (for their pleasure) some galley oarsmen and pioneers, who were there, to do all those maneuvers and military drills that can be carried out, without creating any disorder or confusion whatsoever.[10]

As with his architectural work, he aimed at—and achieved—concrete ends.

II. History can explain why "it is how it is."

Palladio presented his historical knowledge of the Romans as a means to contemporary military success. This direct and pragmatic distillation of information was not, however, the only route that professional historians could take. They could also promote patrons in various ways. Some of the results are predictably fawning and vacuous, though others show how historians could adapt to new requirements of early modern rule.

In Spain, for instance, the royal historian Juan Páez de Castro not only celebrated the achievements of King Philip II and his family, but also collected geographical information about the regions of his territory. Páez wrote to towns in the kingdom with a questionnaire about local

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[9] Julius Caesar, *I commentari*, ill. Andrea Palladio (Venice: de Franceschi, 1575), sig.*^{v}.
[10] Caesar 1575, sig.*1v; tr. in Guido Beltramini, "Palladio and Polybius' Histories," in *Andrea Palladio and the Architecture of Battle with the unpublished edition of Polybius' Histories*, ed. Guido Beltramini (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), 70.

history and customs, the responses to which he gathered for the Escorial, the new royal library near Madrid. Another royal historian, Ambrosio de Morales, actually traveled around Spain collecting historical manuscripts for Philip's library. He wrote a *Crónica general de España* (General Chronicle of Spain), beginning in the Roman period, and an account of the Roman remains that he saw or was informed about in the kingdom, the *Antigüedades de las ciudades de España* (Antiquities of the Cities of Spain). Explicitly, and valuably, this collection presented the earliest secure historical evidence for the Iberian Peninsula, left by the Roman conquerors of the area; implicitly, though, it suggested that Philip's Spanish kingdom, only established in the late fifteenth century in the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, when the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon were joined, had long-standing roots in antiquity. The work of Páez, Morales, and their colleagues brought a new spirit of investigation and critical discernment to historical research in Spain. But we should not confuse those qualities with a lack of passion or patriotic fervor. They wanted to bolster their homeland by illustrating the wealth of its historical testimony. In addition, we can see the move to gather sources from across the kingdom at the behest of the king as part of a wider interest in defining the state as a geographical entity and in developing a bureaucracy to enhance its efficiency and the authority of its ruler.[11]

Other historians moved in more ingenious directions. Renaissance humanists' commitment to the prestige of the ancient past, and their eagerness to find the origins of things, played a hugely important role in the way in which rulers presented themselves, their families, and their states in the early modern period. Traditionally, medieval rulers had derived their right to rule through their blood lines: property, wealth, and authority usually passed from father to son. Hence, they had

[11] See Richard Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Kira Von Ostenfeld-Suske, "Writing Official History in Spain: History and Politics, c.1474–1600," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, eds. José Rabasa et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 428–48.

long been concerned with documenting their connections to their predecessors. Renaissance historians could now offer princes and aristocrats plausible arguments and evidence for ancestors in deep antiquity, whether Roman, Greek, Trojan, or earlier.[12]

A related product of this concern with forebears that emerged in the Renaissance was the printed family tree. Visual depictions of royal lines were not new, but they had tended to show the direct path of descent from father to heir, with the founder at the top, making the succession very clear. Early modern scholars adapted and exploited the form to present their genealogical arguments, playing with metaphors of trees and branches to show the reach of families and placing founders, mythical or otherwise, at the bottom.[13] Historians then worked with artists and print-makers to circulate these assertions more widely. The prints they produced were not necessarily fantastical, and they could make precise historical arguments. Scipione Ammirato (1531–1601) was called to Florence in 1569 to work for Cosimo de' Medici on a new history of Florence. In that position, he researched families and genealogies, and published a series of elaborately designed family trees, connecting families with their territories (Fig. 2).

[12] Roberto Bizzocchi, *Genealogie incredibili: Scritti di storia nell'Europa moderna*, second ed., (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).
[13] Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "The Genesis of the Family Tree," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 4 (1991): 105–29, https://doi.org/10.2307/4603672.

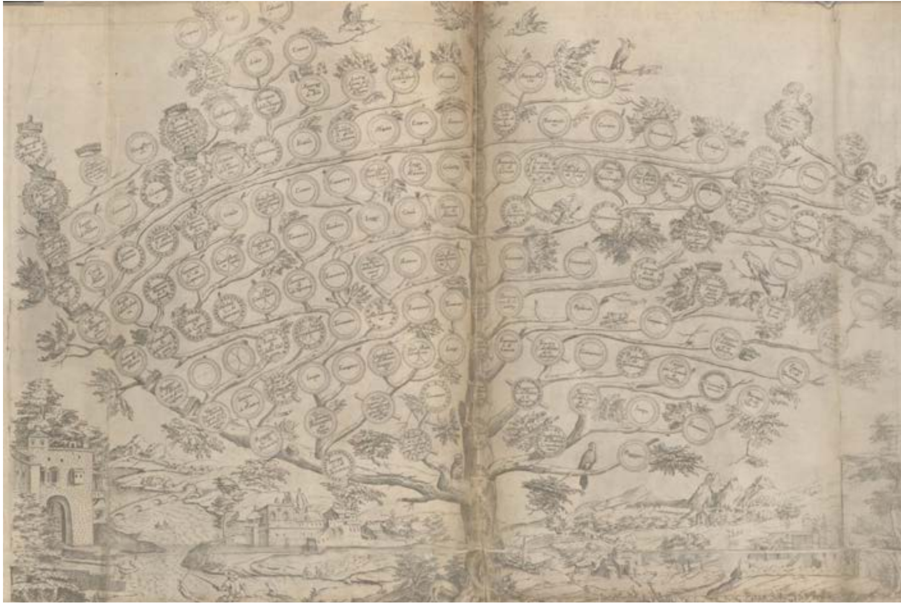

Figure 2. Family tree by Scipione Ammirato.[14]

Ammirato had the support of the Florentines, but we can also identify historians who used this technique to make more challenging arguments. In the mid-1580s, the French succession was politically sensitive and aggressively disputed: Henri III was childless, his brother had died in 1584, and the next male in line to the throne was a distant cousin, the Protestant Henri of Navarre. Versions of a broadsheet that circulated in German Protestant circles present Henri III and Henri of Navarre prominently at the head of two branches of the same tree emerging from Louis IX (the great Saint Louis, r. 1226–70), and celebrate their reconciliation as brothers. Henri, Duke of Guise, leader of the Catholic League and unwaveringly hostile to Navarre, is portrayed as the ancient wrestler Milo of Croton, who was killed by a pack of dogs after he got trapped in a tree-trunk that

[14] Scipione Ammirato, "Family tree," New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed May 5, 2023, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a16fb142-2303-4877-e040-e00a180678a8.

he was trying to split apart. In an early variant, Guise's 1588 assassination at the hands of Henri III's bodyguards is shown in the background; another, presumably made a little later, highlights the truce signed by Henri III and Navarre in April 1589, but also King Henri's own death at the hands of a Dominican friar in August that led to Navarre's accession (Figs. 3 and 4).[15] Family trees, researched and carefully presented by historians, served the valuable purpose of legitimizing potentially shaky claims to power, or of illustrating rival branches.

Figure 3. Frans Hogenberg, Family tree of the Guise and Bourbon families, ca. 1588. © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.[16]

[15] Ursula Mielke and Ger Luijten, *Remigius and Frans Hogenberg* (Ouderkerk aan den Ijssel: Sound & Vision Publishers, 2009), B55.
[16] Frans Hogenberg, "Geburt lini der Königen von Franckreich und Navarren," The British Museum, accessed May 5, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1893-0411-25.

Figure 4. Frans Hogenberg, Family tree of the Guise and Bourbon families, ca. 1589. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum RP-P-OB-78.785-239.[17]

III. History can tell you what to do (if you're a Christian, at least).

Rulers wanted to derive authority from the appearance of historical continuity, and they relied on historians to prove it. In a period of rapid political change, these scholars provided a sense of tradition and stability. A related and even more fundamental arena in which the skills of early modern historians came to the fore was religion. At a basic level, the Reformation engaged with history and approaches to the ecclesiastical past. The Protestant Reformers asked about the nature of the early church and justified their critiques of contemporary practice by drawing on evidence of contrasting customs in antiquity; Catholics pointed to the apostolic succession and the historical legitimacy of papal authority. Catholic historians did not simply defend their version of

[17] Frans Hogenberg, "Stamboom met takken van Valois en Bourbon, 1589, Frans Hogenberg, 1589 – c. 1593," Rijksmuseum, accessed May 5, 2023, https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-78.785-239.

Christianity against the Protestants; they also worked to regularize Catholic ritual and belief. Their most influential historian was Cesare Baronio (1538–1607), who worked in Rome. He began his publication career with a revised edition of the *Martyrologium romanum* (Roman Martyrology) of 1586. This fixed the calendar of saints and martyrs for the Catholic world, giving the dates on which they were celebrated and brief details of their lives and deaths. Believers could use the book to chart their yearly celebrations. It required careful research on Baronio's part, and it irked Protestants less than it did those people whose local saints he questioned and rejected. Using some of his findings, Baronio then compiled the twelve-volume *Annales ecclesiastici* (Ecclesiastical Annals), outlining the history of the church from Jesus's birth until 1198, and making clear the primacy of the pope.

The Protestants rejected Baronio's account, but Catholics, too, particularly outside the Italian Peninsula, questioned his details.[18] In Spain, for example, we can identify profound attacks on Baronio's authority. In response to his rejection of various local traditions, the Jesuit Jerónimo Román de la Higuera invented a series of chronicles that he attributed to a fourth-century author, Flavius Lucius Dexter. These chronicles filled in the gaps for the early history of Christianity in Spain, they gave the Iberian Peninsula an important role in the religion's history, and they supplied brief but explicit testimony for some of the saints Baronio had removed in his martyrology and history.[19] As a result, they were a valuable source for Spanish local historians of the seventeenth century—who raided them for evidence of their regions' sanctity and religious significance—and allowed locals to question the importance of the pope. On a higher political level, Baronio's

[18] Jan Machielsen, "An Aspiring Saint and his Work: Cesare Baronio and the Success and Failure of the *Annales ecclesiastici* (1588–1607)," *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 2 (2017): 233–87.
[19] Katrina Olds, *Forging the Past: Invented Histories in Counter-Reformation Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 172–76; Cesc Esteve, "The Chronicler's Background: Historical Discourse and National Identity in Early Modern Spain," in *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600–1815*, ed. Lotte Jensen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 87–108.

research for the *Annales* had cast doubt on the Spanish Habsburgs' claim to Sicily. King Philip III responded in 1605 by banning the volume in which the argument appeared from the territories of the Spanish Empire.[20] Histories of religion could reinforce or challenge local practices and beliefs; they could also be of national political concern.

IV. Conclusion

When we consider some of the contributions that historians claimed to make to the modern state, it is not hard to see why de la Ruelle's attack on the historical profession might be read as satirical. For King Henri III needed sagacious counselors. Perilously positioned in the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, Henri is likely to have found learned advisors, who promised to be able to shape and understand the present with reference to the past, much more valuable than bluff, belligerent aristocrats. The Renaissance was an era defined by a self-consciousness about the past. It was also an age of profound technological change and both religious and political insecurity. Historians flourished amid the uncertainties of this historical age, often in paradoxical ways: as military tactics evolved and larger armies used cannon and gunpowder to revolutionize warfare, they advocated learning from the Romans. As rulers such as Philip II created bureaucratic institutions that redefined the way the state worked, historians offered proof of dynastic right to rule. And in the face of religious revolution, they provided historical justifications for the forms in which Christian factions presented themselves. In a period of swirling change, historians, like today's economists, promised an empirically safe haven and the foundation on which solid structures could be built. Whatever de la Ruelle's criticisms, the power of historians and their subject had never been greater.

[20] Olds, *Forging the Past*, 168.

CHRONOS

The History Journal of Yeshiva University

2022-2023

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