



Agostino Sottili. *Humanismus und Universitätsbesuch: Die Wirkung italienischer Universitäten auf die Studia Humanitatis nördlich der Alpen; Renaissance Humanism and University Studies: Italian Universities and Their Influence on the Studia Humanitatis in Northern Europe.* Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Series. Leiden: Brill, 2006. Illustrations. xvii + 526 pp. \$226.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-15334-9.



Reviewed by Christine Johnson

Published on H-HRE (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Tryntje Helfferich (The Ohio State University, Lima)

This collection of previously published essays and articles by the late Agostino Sottili, whose career included positions at the universities of Cologne, Turin, and Milan, illuminates the role that northern Italian universities (particularly studied are Pavia, Padua, and Ferrara) played in the transmission of humanist values and skills north of the Alps in the fifteenth century. The essays, put together by relatives with the support of Sottili's colleagues after his death, were originally published between 1967 and 2003 in Italian (translated into English for this collection) and German. Topics covered range from the attempt to hire the Thomist Thomas Penketh to lecture in theology at Pavia, to "Ferrara: the Cradle of Humanism in Frisia," to the encomium given at Johannes Ruysch's installation as rector at Pavia. The philologist Sottili mined rich but fragmentary sources for details on institutional structures, academic life, and student careers that suggest the need to reassess the place of humanism in Italian universities and the impetus for humanism in central Europe.

Sottili's research was methodical, but his analysis and presentation were not. Many of the essays appear to have begun as lectures and retain the colloquial feel of a spoken presentation. In keeping with Sottili's engagement with language, most of the essays are organized around the examination of a particular text or sequence of texts, such as the aforementioned encomium, an autobiographical poem by a student who became secretary to the Duke of Orleans, or a collection of university diplomas. (The last are particularly crucial for Sottili's biographical investigations, as they list other students present at the examination, providing a partial substitute for the matriculation records, which have almost completely disappeared.) Generally, Sottili's discussion followed loosely the topics suggested by the text, although considerable tangents are not infrequent. Toward the end of the discussion of the autobiographical poem, for example, the reader encounters an extended discussion of the relative advantages of an arts over a law degree in progressing through the ecclesiastical hierarchy in

north Italy. In his description of the importance of Pavia for the ruling classes of Constance and Nuremberg, Sottili likewise provided extensive information not only about the members of the Richli family who did attend that university, but also about those members who did not. This focus on particulars produces masterful answers to some highly restricted questions (the identity of Johannes Roth's employer on his trip to Rome, for example, is established in two closely argued pages), but at the expense of sustaining broader arguments.

This exhaustive examination of selective aspects of German humanism in Italy nevertheless convinces this Renaissance cultural historian that the Italian university structure fostered a specific kind of humanism due to hitherto under-acknowledged institutional and curricular factors. The two essays of broadest interest, "The University at the End of the Middle Ages" and "Zum Verhaeltnis von Stadt, Staat und Universitaet in Italien im Zeitalter des Humanismus, dargestellt am Fall Pavia," lay out the main lines of these insights. Sottili described the fluid institutional development of northern Italian universities and emphasized the expectation and importance of student participation in governance. For each faculty, medicine and law (theology occupying a marginal place at Italian universities), students elected one of their own to the powerful post of rector. Rectors participated in all degree examinations, acted as the "ordinary judge" of the students, and led the student council charged with drawing up the proposed list of professors for the next academic year. Students could also make their preferences known through relocation, and many of them finished their degree at one university after starting it at another, as money and inclination took them. Patrons, such as the Duke of Milan for Pavia, also wielded considerable influence and could, for example, intervene against established customs to install a favored candidate. Sottili thus showed how these universities were far from impervious

to outside influences and student pressures, opening them (albeit slowly) to the *studia humanitatis*.

Sottili provided tantalizing glimpses of how the humanism that had already become established in Italian courts and cities trickled into the university setting. A manuscript by Johannes Loeffelholz reveals that he had mastered Greek sufficiently during his studies at Pavia to copy a Greek text of the letters of Phalaris. The treatise *De Frisiorum situ* by Wilhelmus Frederici displays the familiarity with classical authors made possible by his Italian university education. The protagonists of Sottili's stories are not officials or faculty members, but students, and particularly foreign students. To explain this variation between the study plans of northern and Italian students, Sottili pointed to the unusual position liberal arts occupied in the Italian curriculum. Propaedeutic at universities in the rest of Europe, the liberal arts were generally treated as part of the medical faculty at Italian universities. Whatever training Italian students received in such subjects as rhetoric, languages, and mathematics was acquired either at school before university or concurrently with their studies in law or medicine. While a promotion *in artibus* was possible, the ancillary status of the arts meant that students from Italy generally would not expect to acquire significant new skills in these areas at university and did not attend university with that purpose.

Students from places like Germany, in contrast, would have been exposed to, at best, the standard medieval arts curriculum and then only if they had studied at a German university prior to their arrival in Italy. While officially in Italy to acquire prized degrees in medicine or (especially) law, which would enable or enhance professional careers on the return home, many German students also saw their stay abroad as a chance to acquire the polish and connections only available in Italy. They therefore eagerly attended the arts lectures provided as a sideline at these universities and were the major force behind the demand for

humanistically trained teachers in such subjects as rhetoric and Greek. According to the patterns Sottili's work highlighted, therefore, not only does Germany owe its humanism in large part to the presence of German students at Italian universities, Italian universities do as well.

Sottili also revealed German humanism's deep debt to these transalpine students. Through careful study of the available records, he had named dozens of Germans studying at Italian universities and reconstructed portions of their student lives and family histories. The serious study that has been accorded the leading families and individuals of German learning by German scholars then allowed him to show the position and influence these men later attained. From city secretary in Groningen to prince-bishop of Breslau, beneficiaries of Italian university training filled the council halls and cathedrals of the north. When Sottili left the story, no towering figure of the German Renaissance (Erasmus, Celtis, Pirckheimer) has yet appeared, but the foundations for the later embrace of humanism have been laid.

Sottili's studies thus provide a valuable counterpoint to the standard story of humanism's arrival in Germany, which concentrates on peripatetic teachers and scholars rather than peripatetic students. His numerous examples furthermore allow a reconstruction of the kind of humanism these students brought back with them over the Alps. Humanism in an Italian university setting meant, most formally, instruction in languages, philology, and rhetoric. University lectures provided deep exposure to classical texts, such as the works of Cicero and Terence, and the ceremonial occasions of university life provided numerous opportunities to hear and produce classically styled oratory. Other kinds of humanism expression, such as the writing of treatises and (above all) letters, were practiced more informally, in communication with native scholars or (more frequently) correspondence with those at home. The humanism Germans were most likely

to acquire in Italy thus seems to have been relatively isolated from the urgent political issues that animated much humanism produced on the peninsula.

As illuminated by Sottili's prosopographical approach, the impetus behind the introduction of humanism into Germany was both career oriented and personal. Princely and civic employers valued the ability to write in good Latin and in the humanist epistolary style, and certainly a degree from an Italian university was a prized credential, but the commitment of many German students, during and after their university studies, went beyond the polished surface to the enticing depths of the humanist project. For example, Sottili argued that, although Roth did not originally travel to Rome in search of it, his exposure there to Lorenzo Valla produced a conviction about the importance of the *studia humanitatis* at odds with the hierarchies of learning to which he was professionally obligated. This finely grained study thus reminds us that, for all the functional and political reasons frequently cited by scholars for the success of humanism, individuals frequently experienced it as a profoundly attractive intellectual identity and agenda.

This larger picture emerges from Sottili's true strength: meticulous, show-your-work biographical and philological investigation. He quoted numerous sources at length in (untranslated) Latin and included a number of documents as appendices. Whether analyzing a handwritten collection of poems produced by a member of Rudolf Agricola's circle or untangling the wording of Petrarch's poetic coronation, crucial details and turns of phrase were considered through the lens of Sottili's immense familiarity with this milieu. In the end, what Sottili said about the study of humanist speeches, that it demands "viel Geduld und ein durch Erfahrung geschultes Vermoegen, Wichtiges von Unnuetzen zu unterscheiden" (a great deal of patience and a capacity, trained by experience, to distinguish the important from the

useless), could also be applied to these series of essays (p. 336). Scholars of Italian universities (who should already be familiar with the work of Sottili) will find many useful archival and methodological hints here. Scholars of German humanism, for whom Sottili's work might be less familiar, should use its extensive index to track down the useful insights this miscellany has to offer about the subjects of their studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-hre>

Citation: Christine Johnson. Review of Sottili, Agostino. *Humanismus und Universitätsbesuch: Die Wirkung italienischer Universitäten auf die Studia Humanitatis nördlich der Alpen; Renaissance Humanism and University Studies: Italian Universities and Their Influence on the Studia Humanitatis in Northern Europe*. H-HRE, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30793>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.