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“A ‘New’ Narrative: Historical Writing, Chancellors, and Public Records in Renaissance Italy (Milan, Ferrara, Mantua ca. 1450-1520)”

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A “New” Narrative?  
Historical Writing, Chancellors and Public Records in Renaissance Italy (Milan, Ferrara and Mantua, ca. 1450–1520)

Isabella Lazzarini*

Introduction: A “New” Narrative?

Consider that, having written as I did, I saw letters by the duke addressed to all the lords, lordships and communities in Italy in which his ducal highness openly told them of the capture and death of sir Nicolò da Este, and that day I wrote myself some of them in his name.¹

In this short paragraph, Ugo Caleffini notes en passant something revealing but not uncommon about the nature and method of his historical work, the Croniche, while telling us about the failed conspiracy of Nicolò, son of Leonello d’Este, against his uncle Ercole, duke of Ferrara, Modena and Reggio, in September 1476. After a detailed account of Nicolò’s violent but awkward attempt to stage a coup against Ercole and his brutal execution, the chronicler uncovers how he had read the letters sent by the duke to the Italian powers to account for the whole story, and, more interestingly, that he himself wrote some of those letters. As a consequence, quite obviously, the official version coincided in every point with his own narrative.

* First drafts of this paper have been presented both at the conference “Medieval Urban Life: ‘Facts’ and ‘Fictions,’” at the University of Swansea (17–18 June 2011), and at the seminar at the Italian Department of the University of Oxford, in November 2012: I would like to thank respectively Matthew Stevens and John Law, and Nicola Gardini and Nick Davidson for inviting me, and for giving me the opportunity of discussing and debating such topics with them and their friends and colleagues in Swansea and Oxford.

¹ Caleffini, Croniche, 188 (1476).
A political arena, a series of events, a chancery: in the second half of the fifteenth century, these ingredients were increasingly mixed together into a unitary narrative by men who were both part of all of them, and something more. Namely, such elements were related in a structural relationship whose features and characters are most typical of a peculiar way of writing history. At the same time, their combination renovated and re-interpreted the originary link between chronicles and public records, and between professionals of written communication and historians that was characteristic of the Italian urban culture.²

Daily attention to contemporary history was rising steadily in the second half of the fifteenth century in order to answer to the growing anxiety that permeated public life and international relationships in the increasingly frantic succession of public and secret political alliances, small-scale conflicts and conspiracies, that punctuated half-a-century that was much more a time of semi-permanent war than the often mythicised golden age of political balance and edenic peace described in the sixteenth century by the likes of Guicciardini.³ Such attention to contemporary events had many roots and was culturally multi-faceted: its most fully examined side is of course linked to humanism and its cultural challenge.⁴ However, Hankins argued in 1995 that research on humanism has benefitted significantly from the work of social historians by feeding the cultural and textual analysis with focused enquiries on power, social classes, patronage networks, marriage patterns and political institutions.⁵ Also, Gary Ianziti’s most recent monograph on Bruni pushes research towards the analysis of the daily “mechanics and processes of history writing.”⁶

Therefore, relating history writing to broader patterns of political and social change — namely the growth of innovative territorial polities and their

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³ Fubini, Italia; Lazzarini, L’Italia; Gamberini and Lazzarini, The Italian Renaissance State; Bullard, Lorenzo.

⁴ Fubini, Storiografia; Witt, In the Footsteps.


⁶ Ianziti, Writing History, 3.
re-shaping of governmental practices and political languages—entails the inclusion into the major picture of the many “minor” chroniclers and diarists whose works piled up in princely and republican private and public chanceries. Taking Ianziti’s methodological suggestions a step further, the analysis would therefore encompass not only the intellectually refined work of a Bruni, but also blueprints and raw materials like Cicco Simonetta’s diary, or the anonymous fifteenth-century Este chronicles. Ianziti himself, while working on Milan, defined such materials as “rough, chronologically organised narrative in the vernacular, interspersed with documents of various kind.” What I am suggesting here is that such materials could be conceived not only as “the starting point for a full scale history to be written by a properly accredited humanist,” but also as proper — although less ambitious — forms of history writing composed by officials and statesmen of less refined education and/or more amateurish skills and purposes, but still deeply interested in contemporary history. By including the uncertain domain of daily recording practices and writing habits, the field of the “practicalities” of history writing would extend to the increasingly common adaptation and re-working of documentary sources both for personal and/or public purposes.

The socially widespread attention towards contemporary history, in fact, went together with a massive growth of written records, and an increasingly conscious attitude towards their organised preservation and varied use, directly linked to changing governmental practices. The social groups that monopolised the production and use of public records and the building of orderly archives were composed by men who often were both at the heart of the decision-making process and its recording, and at the frontline of historical writing and sometimes of political thought. The link between government and history writing deepened towards the end of the century,

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7 For a European overview, see Watts, *The Making of Polities*; on Italy, see Gamberini, “The Language.”
8 That is, taking into account what Hyde, in his pioneering research on diplomatic correspondence and chronicles, defined “the multitude of ricordanze and civic chronicles,” Hyde, “The Role,” 243.
infecting a broadening range of public officials and statesmen on all levels of administration and institutional routine.\textsuperscript{13} As a consequence, and in response to the increasingly detailed attention to daily events, the recourse to public records as main sources for historical writings in the form of diaries or chronicles — this old distinction deriving from Muratorì should be banished, at least for the fifteenth century\textsuperscript{14} — became a basic practice for minor and major “historians” of humanist or notarial education and ambition, both professionals and amateurs.

As suggested by the general proposal of the volume, that is to focus on the intricate relationship between thought and action in Renaissance Italy, this chapter aims to investigate the “grey zone” of history writing represented by the diaries and texts composed sometimes over the course of a lifetime by average statesmen, minor chancellors and officials.\textsuperscript{15} The time scale is the second half of the fifteenth century. The analysis focuses on three texts composed in the northern Italian principalities of Milan, Ferrara and Mantua, putting them in the context of a larger framework of historical writings produced both in princely and in republican polities of urban origin. Cicco Simonetta’s Diari, Ugo Caleffìni’s Croniche and Andrea da Schivenoglia’s Cronicha de Mantoa are unambitious works half-way between blueprint, diary, chronicle, and history. Nevertheless, they let us perceive, here and there, a certain degree of awareness in the usage of tools and models typical of the métier d’historien. Their analysis possibly will lead us to a better understanding of how, when and why a public official or a member of a princely social and political elite would invest a considerable part of his life and attention in telling the events of his time to a more or less wide range of potential readers, both of his own or the succeeding generations. Such research charts its way through very different fields — political, intellectual and documentary cultures and languages, the social history of history writing, and urban and princely society — and different historiographical traditions: however, at the very heart of these multiple crossroads stands the crucial problem of the

\textsuperscript{13} For Milan, see Ianziti, Humanistic Historiography; for Ferrara, see Folin, “Le cronache;” for Venice, see Neerfeld, “Historia;” for Florence, see at least Fubini, “Cultura” and “Antonio,” esp. 139; for Naples, see now De Caprio, Scrivere la storia.

\textsuperscript{14} On such a distinction, and the difficulty of defining the diaries, see Neerfeld, “Historia,” 1–25.

\textsuperscript{15} See Covini, “La fortuna,” for a similar reconsideration of the work of Antonio Minuti.
control of information, its uses, its circulation, its manipulation through different media and texts, during the troubled and changing decades of the end of the middle ages in Italy.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Simonetta, Caleffini, Schivenoglia: authors and texts}

Our three texts are scarcely homogeneous in form, nature, or purpose. We can hardly define them as traditional chronicles, and we can even less classify them properly as historical works, because they are mostly summaries of news and information on the urban and courtly world of their authors, even though such urban worlds were increasingly part of a larger universe. However, three common features facilitate their comparison. First and foremost, they each present the sketchy character of notebooks or blueprints of memories, notes and heterogeneous data, more or less vaguely organised into a diaristic framework half-way between an intentional narrative and an alluvial build-up of news and information. Such a fragmented nature, only at times made more coherent by some chronological order or internal organization, derives from their authors using a host of public written records, collective rumors, and shared memories. Ancient and anonymous urban chronicles, summaries, annals, family records and genealogical collections in fact circulated widely within late-medieval, urban, literate society, creating a collective background of echoing memories around which the personal experience of the author could gather more precise and documented information. Moreover, and because of these local grounds, such texts are deeply linked to the city where their authors were living, to its court and chancery, and to their ruling dynasties. Finally, the social profile of the authors is quite homogeneous. Although the extremely powerful Cicco Simonetta had far more social status than the almost unknown Schivenoglia and the opaque Caleffini, these three men were in fact all members and products of the same princely political society of officials and public servants that flourished in communal cities later turned into capitals of larger or smaller principalities.

Cicco Simonetta (1410–1480), the influential and secretive chancellor of Dukes Francesco and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, was an old client of Count Francesco and followed him as his personal chancellor from 1430. By monopolising the central chancery of Milan in the age of Francesco, he was

\textsuperscript{16} Lazzarini, “Renaissance Diplomacy;” de Vivo, Information; Rospocher and Salzberg, “El vulgo zanza.”
able to become the plenipotentiary of Milan during the subsequent reign of Galeazzo Maria, only to end his life and career on the gallows in 1480, four years after the brutal assassination of his master in 1476.\(^\text{17}\) He was an educated man, although not an intellectual. As a man “most excellent by prudence and long experience,”\(^\text{18}\) he knew “omnia secreta, quamvis ardua et importantissima” of his masters.\(^\text{19}\) Portrayed in the “red room” of the castle of Pavia behind Duke Galeazzo Maria. “standing up in act to perform and carry out matters,”\(^\text{20}\) Cicco, in a broader sense, was obsessed with putting events, men, records, even books into some level of order. In 1466, his tasks and skills were summarized in a privilege by listing an impressive series of gerundives connected to the main duty of actively mastering the spoken and written word: “conferring, proposing, treating, considering, discussing and concluding […] doing, acting, managing, executing and making executed […] committing, imposing, dictating, concluding, ordering, signing, writing, subscribing and stipulating.”\(^\text{21}\) Apart from performing all these acts in the service of his dukes, and probably much more for himself and his family network, Simonetta also found the time to keep record of his daily activity from 1473 to 1476, and then in 1478, in three surviving volumes of notes, the so-called *Diari*.\(^\text{22}\)

Gary Ianziti in 1988 showed in detail how much Cicco’s brother Giovanni Simonetta, himself a member of the Milanese chancery, used to recur to diplomatic letters in writing his humanistic *De rebus gestis Francisci Sforiae*.\(^\text{23}\) Cicco’s diaries represent for us today an even more interesting case. They are not chronicles or histories but rather Simonetta’s personal diary, in which the secretary registered day-by-day in a very bare and effective style.


\(^{18}\) Machiavelli, *Istorie*, 8.18, 830: “uomo per prudenza e per lunga pratica eccellentissimo.”

\(^{19}\) According to a privilege granted to Cicco by the dowager duchess, Bianca Maria, and young Galeazzo Maria in 1466, published in Rosmini, *Dell’istoria*, 4:106–108.

\(^{20}\) Welch, “Galeazzo,” 364.

\(^{21}\) Rosmini, *Dell’istoria*, 4:106.

\(^{22}\) Milan, Archivio di Stato di Milano (ASMi), Archivio Sforzesco (AS) Registri delle missive 111A, 111B, 135: few missing pages (not edited by Natale) are in BNF, ms. Ital. 1595, ff. 437–446; Simonetta, *I Diari*.

every noticeable event that happened in Galeazzo Maria’s court. The title of *Diari* was applied much later, as the first surviving register does not present any sort of *incipit*. The three extant volumes appear, in all likelihood, to be just a fraction of an uninterrupted series whose other elements have been lost. The registers are not autographic and are organized as a contemporary agenda, with every page devoted to a day of the year starting from January. The handwriting of more than one chancellor is recognizable, and the scribe who noted all the dates at the beginning of every page usually did not coincide with the chancellor who afterwards registered the events day-by-day. In a characteristically bare style, Simonetta mixed political reminders, chancery practicalities, news of the court and the duke’s life, personal notes and raw materials like records, letters, lists of magistrates and officials, both Milanese and foreign, and chancery procedures, gradually filling the empty space allocated in the register to every day of the year. Sometimes, family events interrupted the sequence of public commitments, but no traces of personal or emotional accents broke the plain narrative tone of the recording. More rarely, the *Diari* registered with the same dry understatement some natural events that deserved to be remembered.

However, despite their plain and unambitious form, the result is very close to a proper historical narrative. The *Diari* represent clearly a first, almost unconscious, step towards keeping track of, and putting some order in, facts and news that in different contexts — and with different men (Cicco was, and remained, a statesman with no ambitions nor time for literature) — could have formed the basis of more detailed and self-conscious historical texts.

Ugo Caletifini (1439–1503) was a Ferrarese notary and a princely official, born in Rovigo and raised in Ferrara, where he exercised his notarial activity from 1469 to 1502. He served under the marquises and dukes of Este for his

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24 A random example: “1473, Milan, Thursday 6 May. Leonardo Botto, secretary of lord Costanzo [Sforza, lord of Pesaro] and Nicolò da Bregnano, his man of arms, yesterday evening around the hour at one in the night arrived here at the castle, and visited the foresaid duke our lord, and then, having completed their visit, stayed with him in long discussions about general issues; at last, his lordship sent them back to me, Cicco, to give me in writing what they wanted in the name of their lord Costanzo. Today, therefore, they have given in written form his request, and I have showed it to the lord. Afterwards, and this was after dinner, our foresaid lord called in his presence the foresaid Leonardo and Nicolò to speak about their request, and spent some time with them accordingly.” Simonetta, *I Diari*, 104.

25 As in Simonetta, *I Diari*, 173 (about his nephew) or 106 (about an earthquake).
whole life, mostly in the offices of the spenderia and the bollette, both different branches of the ducal chamber. Apart from a juvenile poem in verses of genealogical character about the Este dynasty, he composed two chronicles. The first is the Cronaca di Ferrara dalle origini al 1471, still in manuscript and heavily dependent upon ancient chronicles. The second, the much more revealing Croniche, covers the last decades of the fifteenth century, from 1471 to 1494. Like Cicco Simonetta, who wrote his diaries in a chancery that produced in the same age a cluster of historiographical works mostly focused around the charismatic figure of the Count and Duke Francesco, Caleffini did not work in a vacuum. From the age of Borso to the death of Ercole I (1452–1505), no less than nine urban chronicles were compiled in Ferrara, and some others historical texts were written by many different authors, like the humanist Pellegrino Prisciani (1435 ca.–1510), Ercole’s chancellor and conservator iuris, librarian, archivist, astrologist and diplomat, or the theologian Giovanni da Ferrara (1409/10–1462). Such a group of texts, both chronicles and annals, histories and diaries, although well-known, are still partially unpublished, and need a systematic analysis as a whole. The texts encompass a wide variety of genres, and the authors were men of various social origin, education, role and status. However, the extent of the Ferrarese inclination to history writing is striking, as is the proximity of all these men to Ferrarese princely and courtly political society. A significant proportion of the chronicles were produced within the chancery and the central offices of the Este capital, or in the ducal court, and almost all of them were conceived as parts of a choral, collective history of the city and the dynasty well into the sixteenth century. Although still convinced of the existence of a divide between “humanist histories” and “notarial chronicles,” recent research cannot

26 On Caleffini, see Cappelli’s, “Notizie,” which prefaces his edition of Caleffini, Cronica; Petrucci, “Caleffini.”

27 Caleffini, Cronica; Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Magl. XXV, 539; Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), Chigiani, I.4: Caleffini, Croniche.


29 On the crossing of the many Ferrarese chronicles, see Folin, “Le cronache,” 486 nn 42 and 44.
deny that a common background and common purposes stand behind all these texts.30

In a traditional textual framework, marked by the usual opening reference to a date, Caleffini collected events, data, and news ranging from petty urban happenings to the prices of victuals, from ceremonies to natural events, from the arrival of prestigious guests to the usual coming-and-going of ambassadors, envoys, and captains, with a peculiar attention to judicial events. His setting was Ferrara, the Este court and the city. In the background lay Italy and Europe, so far as they interfered with Ferrara. Although very traditional at first sight, the Croniche present some interesting characteristics. First of all, Caleffini regularly included documentary records in the narrative framework of the text — often very long, like the bollette dei salariati — by transposing them into the chronicle in their originary textual form.31 In a text significantly opened with Caleffini’s signum tabellionis on the left margin of the page, such an apparent literary roughness was partially motivated by a need for credibility.32 However, apart from uncovering the vital survival of the tradition of chronicles filled with documents dating back to the communal age or even before, Caleffini’s inclination towards a documentary-grounded narrative reflects also the increasing amount of political and administrative information available to a select, but not necessarily narrow, group of public officials of various education and social standing.

The circulation, manipulation and use of such information in order to build an urban and/or princely memory reflect in their own way a hunger for information and an urge to control it that seemed to dominate late Quattrocento political and diplomatic practices and social relationships.33 Although their setting is strikingly different, Pellegrino Prisciani’s Historiarum libri reveal a similar attitude. In spite of the regular recourse to a wide array of classical and medieval texts ranging from Virgilio to Isidoro, from Riccobaldo’s Chronica parva to Delayto’s Annales, and from Biondo to Sabbellico, in Prisciani’s narrative the professional attitude of the diplomat and

31 On the bollette dei salariati, in more than one case surviving only in the Croniche, see Dean, “Court;” Folin, Rinascimento; Lazzarini, “I domini.”
32 The accuracy of Caleffini’s transposition was such that in the seventeenth century his chronicle was still used in court as a proof: Libanori, Ferrara, 3:247, quoted in Folin, “Le cronache,” 486n45.
33 Lazzarini, “Renaissance Diplomacy;” Meserve, “News.”
the *conservator iurium* prevails.\(^{34}\) In this perspective, the “genre division” between the humanist Prisciani and the notary Caleffini loses most, if not all, of its relevance. Caleffini, Prisciani, and the Ferrarese cluster of various historical writings represent an ideal context for finding the missing links that lead from chancellery notes to history, through a complex and variable mixture of culturally and textually different instruments.\(^{35}\)

The Mantuan Andrea da Schivenoglia (1411–84) never was an official, a chancellor, or a notary. However, he came from a family of communal origin connected to the great clan of the Andreasi, whose urban branch, through Giovan Giacomo, provided Ludovico Gonzaga with his most faithful and powerful secretary: Marsilio. Andrea lived off his share of the family estate in Nuvolato, in the vicariate of Quistello, and owned a house in Mantua. Although he never obtained any offices, his four brothers were well-connected with the courtly and political elite of the marquisate, being officials, courtiers, warriors, and knights.\(^{36}\)

Schivenoglia’s text is definitely less tidy than Caleffini’s, or even Simonetta’s. It is autographic and anepigraphic, and was most probably not conceived to circulate outside the family or to be published in any way.\(^{37}\) The so-called *Cronica de Mantoa* (the text has no *incipit*, and starts abruptly *in medias res*) had a fragmented composition and a heterogeneous nature. Not only did Andrea intersperse the narrative of the most important events in Mantua with long lists of brief, but vivid, portraits of groups of eminent citizens, but even those lists were organised according to sometimes conflicting criteria. The intention of recording information about his fellow citizens apparently provided Andrea with the first impulse to write, the events coming second in his interest. The manuscript starts, in fact, with some notes on the author’s family and on some socio-professional groups of citizens. However, in 1467, Andrea changed his mind and focused his attention on a more ambitious

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34 On Prisciani’s source materials, Zanella, “*Le Historie*,” 258–263; on his documentarian attitude, Donattini, “*Cultura*,” 424.

35 As for the “missing links,” see Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance*, 141.


37 Biblioteca Comunale di Mantova (BCMn), 1019; on the manuscript, see Marani, “Il codice” and Lazzarini, *Gerarchie*, 150–153, with a partial edition of the social notes at 156–166. The narrative sections of the manuscript were edited in 1867 by Carlo d’Arco, who worked on an integral but later copy, building up an artificial text very far from the original one. The whole manuscript is currently being edited by Rodolfo Signorini.
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project by starting to write a chronicle at page 18r of the manuscript.\(^{38}\) The narrative covers the years from 1445 to 1481 and is grouped in two sections (1445–1467, 1468–1481/84), separated by a new, more systematic catalogue in which Schivenoglia classified Mantuan political society, proceeding in an orderly fashion from the top, that is the dynastic network of the Gonzaga, towards a decreasing array of levels of urban eminence (the princely council, the most important officials, gentlemen, knights and courtiers, and merchants). The chronicle starts again when — apparently — the urban elites have been fully examined, and proceeds with an account of what happened in Mantua between 1468 and 1481.

The chronicler’s point of view is of course urban: Mantua is the focus of the narrative, and the broader picture comes onto the scene only when it interferes with the city. The individual records are constructed as social, personal, and sometimes moral portraits of the men described. Giovan Francesco Suardi, knight, *iurisdoctor*, official, and poet of some talent, who is classified among the gentlemen, is described as:

Sir Giovan Francesco Suardi, knight aged 44 years: his house is near S. Leonardo; he bought it from the Cavriani family, and used to live with only 2 or 3 servants because he was not a very rich gentleman, but in 1466 he bought from the marquis the tithes of the village of Mullo, in the vicariate of Revere. This Sir Giovan Francesco sold some properties of his in Bergamo, and after that he bought land in the Mantuan territory: he has been the last podestà of Mantua until now, but he is a very nice and gracious man, with a lovely spouse, and his father was Giovanni Suardi, once lord of Bergamo.\(^{39}\)

Andrea never mentions any source materials, and does not emphasize, in any way, a possible concern for telling the truth. In this sense, the manuscript is a very rough and personal collection of notes, half-way between a very biased catalogue and a judgemental chronicle, a family book of memories and a definite balance of good and bad. However, Andrea proves himself to be very accurate in detail, and totally reliable. The documentary evidence shows that his notes on families, carriers, and patrimonial assets are incontrovertible,
and his lists of officials are precisely exact.\textsuperscript{40} Such accuracy could hardly be explained by recurring only to personal knowledge and generic, widespread rumors and gossip. Of course, in telling events and describing characters, Andrea resorted to his personal experience and testimony, but the social, political and personal information about his fellow citizens could be better explained by Andrea's possible proximity to some informers well-embedded in the princely political society and potentially having access to the public record-keeping system. Even without being personally involved in the public and princely sphere, Andrea would not have been very far from this world. He knew the rankings of status, power and wealth, the social ladders that favored urban pre-eminence, the inner mechanisms of social enhancement.

In one word, rough as he could be, he was fully aware of the social grammar of the princely world, and very keen to keep a record of it. Andrea's erratic but detailed cronica reveals how the extent both of the interest for personal, familiar and historical memory, and of the increasingly easy access to information stretched to reach the farthest limit of the literate, urban, political society, and produced texts differing in quality, purposes or languages, but unified by a common and shared need for witnessing and ordering the recent past.

Some concluding remarks:
chronicles, information and written records

Some elements of Simonetta's diaries, Caleffini's chronicles, and Schivenoglia's notebook are characteristic of a much broader group of historical writings of the second-half of the fifteenth century. Their mixed structure, half-way between documentary summary, historical writing, and family or personal notebook; their diaristic organization of events and ensembles of data; the regular use of documentary sources of public origin increasingly substituting the more traditional reference to historical contemporary or classical tradition; their blossoming within a local cluster of circulating narrative materials mostly in vernacular; their authors' connection with a political society mostly centered on a single city or a court, all these features are common not only to other texts produced in the same milieu, but also to chronicles, diaries, histories composed in very different constitutional contexts, like Venice or Florence. No single feature is really new, and their apparent homogeneity is

\textsuperscript{40} Lazzarini, \textit{Fra un principe}; Belloni, “Un lirico.”
not surprising. One by one, their origin can be easily traced back to the great mainstream of medieval urban chronicles. Their overall combination, however, appears innovative and embraces a host of features among which two elements appear particularly significant: the extensive use of documentary records, and the urge to master information.

Notably, the connection between professional and public record-keeping and historical writing flourished in the communal and notarial milieu of the thirteenth-century cities of Central and Northern Italy, as a consequence of the increasingly structural link between government, collective political identity, and the written word. However, in the second-half of the fifteenth century, the still frequent coincidence between history writing and public career put those who wanted to write about their present, perhaps as a consequence of their classical education, in the best position to take advantage, in many ways, of the unprecedented, massive amount of information provided by written records available both in public life and in increasingly well-organised archives. If Caleffini — a minor princely official — used to have direct access to the bollette dei salariati, and Cicco Simonetta or his brother Giovanni, by working in the Milanese chancery, were at the heart of political decision making, patricians like Marin Sanudo or Piero Dolfin, by participating in the regular activity of the Pregadi, assisted the reading of all the diplomatic letters received by the Signoria and the Doge. Even “simple” citizens like Bartolomeo Cerretani attended the public readings of summaries of news, collective deliberations, and elections of magistrates in the Florentine piazzas or knew about them by being admitted to smaller balie. The Venetian diaries are the most revealing of this “new” and massive use of documentary sources. Sanudo regularly registered news in the form of copies of letters, complete with salutation and date or summaries of letters all

41 See above, n. 2.

42 On Venetian diarists, see now Neerfeld, “Historia per forma di diaria” (Sanudo: 27–46; Dolfin: 72–102). Girolamo Priuli entered into the Senate in 1510 just in order to get better informed of what was happening, see Priuli, I Diari, V, fol. 229r (quoted in Neerfeld, “Historia,” 149).

43 Cerretani, Storia. Fifteenth-century Florentine history writing in vernacular is rich with examples of such crossings. Even in Bruni, as Fubini successfully argues, the awareness of the civic public debates filters into history writing, even though in a much more theoretical way: see Fubini, “La rivendicazione,” 148–152.
coming from the same place. The Italian cities and their political elites could also supplement the public and formal epistolary networks with several, different communication networks, from cultural to mercantile and financial. This flood of news sooner or later converged on the public palaces, councils, and courts, or went straight to the chroniclers, who also maintained personal information channels to get their hands on letters and news, sometimes even against the will of public officials.

At the end of the fifteenth century and in the first decades of the sixteenth, the open — although controlled — access to the official channels of information became formalized. Historians asked and obtained permission to access the archives directly for historical purposes, both in principalities and in republics. In Milan, in 1497, Duke Ludovico ordered the bishops, abbots, priests, and members of the religious orders in the area of Valtellina and Arona, the birth region of the Visconti dynasty, to show their archives to Bernardino Coiro, and the Venetian Council of the Ten, in 1531, ordered the chancery to show to Marin Sanudo all the letters and dispatches coming from the wider world “in order to allow him to compose his diary in a trustworthy way.”

The urge to control information for historiographical purposes, even more than the search for authenticity or credibility, represents the second main difference between the ‘ancient’ chronicles and the ‘new’ texts. The obsession for keeping information under control created a shared hunger for news that documentary sources could easily fill day by day.

My focus here is not on defining or redefining the notion of “history,” but rather on emphasizing the existence, among a broad group of statesmen, officials, chancellors, secretaries, and ambassadors, of a shared tension towards a way of ordering reality and information historically. Statesmen like Cicco Simonetta, who kept a daily notebook in the vernacular on what happened at the Milanese court, or ambassadors like Francesco Contarini, who

44 Sometimes these quotations could be very detailed: “From France, written by the king to the Signoria in French and on parchment, and closed with wax and without a bull because the French never bull their letters, written in Lyon the 20th of July,” Sanudo, Diari, 2:1015. Summaries of letters were common in chanceries: see ASMi, AS, Registri Missive 73 (1466).


46 ASMi, Autografi, cart. 126, fasc. 6.1.

47 Sanuto, Diarii, 1:99.
chose the form of the Latin commentaries to tell the story of his embassy in Siena in 1455,48 transferred their professional attitude towards the gathering and handling of information quite naturally to a still-evolving host styles of history writing that could suit the increasingly thick tissue of news they had to master to be part of polities both growing in size and focusing on communicative practices. If this is true, the so-called “humanist histories” and the so-called “chronicles” share more than we have been accustomed to think, and behind both of them lies a huge catalogue of blueprints, notes, and memorials that perhaps never became neither history nor chronicle. Certainly, humanistic historians like Giovanni Simonetta or Pontano, while building their narrative directly upon documentary source materials, produced a final Latin text heavily conditioned by contact with classical or humanistic histories, and their ambitions and purposes were distinctively intellectual.49 However, they shared with the “chroniclers” or the “diarists” in vernacular a method of historical research, a hunger for news, and an innovative attitude towards their times. The still ‘urban’ focus of most of fifteenth-century chronicles, in turn, proves itself to be a consequence of the political centrality of some cities that became the center of a variegated political society gathered around a changing territorial polity, rather than the vestiges of an old tradition.

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48 Contarini, Historia: on the diffusion of commentaries, see also O’Brien, “Arms;” on Venetian humanism, see King, Venetian Humanism.

49 The same urge towards a systematic collection of authors and texts is felt also on the “humanist side” of this story. Christopher Celenza firmly argues that “beyond certain fifteenth-century writings that can be considered masterpieces, there innumerable works that, collectively, bring later figures like Machiavelli, Castiglione, and many others into clearer view, as well as offering other stimuli for further thought”: Celenza, The Lost Renaissance, XIX. On the other side, Machiavelli himself has been recently analysed with a close attention to his chancellery’s experience, and his professional letters and texts: see Marchand, Machiavelli, and Guidi, “‘Esperienza.”
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