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TOWARD A CONJECTURAL HISTORY OF CONJECTURAL HISTORIES

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ABSTRACT

Most intellectual historians use the term "conjectural history" to designate a new form of speculative history created in eighteenth-century Scotland by Adam Smith and a few others. These writers traced the development of human society and culture through conjectural reasoning based on philosophers' views about human nature and travelers' accounts of "primitive" peoples. Their work had a deep impact on eighteenth-century philology: it helped to shape such original and influential studies of the ancient world as Edward Gibbon's history of the fall of Rome, Johann Joachim Winckelmann's history of the rise of ancient art, and Friedrich August Wolf's demonstration that Homer was an oral poet. But the connection between conjectural history and classical philology began long before any of the varied Enlightenments conjured up by modern scholars came into being. Conjectures about the past were deeply rooted in the central humanistic discipline, rhetoric; this gave Lorenzo Valla the tools for his conjectural refutation of the legend of the Donation of Constantine. But these same tools were plied with similar skill and originality by many other humanists, from Valla's contemporary in the Roman curia, Leon Battista Alberti, to the Jesuit historian of the New World, José de Acosta, a century later. And they saw them not as an innovation but as part of the philological and historical tradition in which they were grounded. Valla, for example, saw Thucydides—whose histories he translated into Latin—as a conjectural historian and thus identified conjecture as a central feature of historiography in the classical tradition.

Keywords: conjectural history, conjectural status in rhetoric, humanism, philology, conjectural emendation, verisimilitude

HISTORIES OF CONJECTURAL HISTORY

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Scottish thinkers created a new kind of history. Instead of crafting narratives about high politics and decisive battles, they traced the development of human society. Instead of consulting earlier chronicles or official documents—much less the Bible—they worked from travel accounts that described peoples they regarded as primitive and natural histories that classified regions by climate. Instead of treating politics as the core of history, they argued that four ways of wresting a living from nature—hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce—had formed the societies, cultures, and polities they supported. These too developed through four stages, each created and shaped by its distinctive economy. Dugald Stewart, who appreciated the

novelty and value of this approach, baptized it as "theoretical or conjectural history." Edward Gibbon and other eighteenth-century writers distinguished between what they called philosophical and erudite forms of history. This highly philosophical form transformed ways of imagining the distant past and provided a foundation for future efforts—of which, of course, there have been many—to achieve a materialist understanding of the development of societies.[1]

Most historians have agreed with this evaluation of the Scots' accomplishments, but, over time, they have also qualified it, wrenched it from its heroic isolation, and set it into a much wider context. They have shown that contemporary French thinkers—above all, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—carried out a very similar range of historical thought experiments, which had a deep impact of their own.[2] They have noticed—as earlier scholars did not—that conjectural history opened spaces that earlier forms had lacked: for the roles and activities of women in the past, for example.[3] They have shown that other forms of what could be called conjectural history also took shape in this period—for example, the humanistic histories of society, religion, and language (also based on reasoning from multiple forms of evidence) that Vico, Herder, and many others devised and that had a vast impact even though they did not adopt the Scottish stadial system.[4] Some have traced the impact of conjectural history forward and into the work of the many later thinkers who built ambitious new towers onto the modest edifices crafted by Adam Smith and Rousseau.[5] More important, some have also traced it backward, noting that there is no special reason to accept the Scots' belief in the unique originality of their particular project. Dmitri Levitin,

1. See the classic study by H. M. Höpfl, "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of British Studies* 17, no. 2 (1978), 19–40, and the informative but even more teleological survey by Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). For the key passage in Stewart's memoir of Adam Smith, see ibid., 113. For a subtle interpretation of Stewart's views, see Hans Medick, *Naturzustand und Naturgeschichte der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 305–13.

2. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, 68–98.

3. Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68–109.

4. Frank Palmeri, *State of Nature, Stages of Society: Enlightenment Conjectural History and Modern Social Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 27–58. For critiques of the identification of conjectural history with stadial theory, see P. B. Wood, "The Natural History of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment," *History of Science* 28, no. 1 (1990) 89–123; David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 161–69; and especially Roger L. Emerson, "Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers," *Historical Papers/Communications historiques* 19, no. 1 (1984), 63–90, and Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 171–89. On conjectural histories of language and expression, see Valeria López Fadul, *The Cradle of Words: Language and Knowledge in the Spanish Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025); Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, transl. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), part 3; and Avi Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. ch. 7. For speculative histories of philosophy, see Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

5. See, for example, Palmeri, *State of Nature, Stages of Society* and Stefanos Geroulanos, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and our Obsession with Human Origins* (New York: Liveright, 2024).

for example, has argued that "the turn within historical scholarship towards conjectural or developmental narratives" represented not a departure from older forms of humanistic learning but a development of them.[6]

I plan to argue, in a larger study for which this article is a very partial sketch, that conjectural narratives—and conjectural efforts to repair damaged sources and reconstruct lost ones—were rooted in the practices of humanistic scholarship. Students of conjectural history have not, as yet, had much to say about the relations between that enterprise and philology. Yet conjectural histories played a vital role in the reshaping of the study of the ancient world that took place in the decades leading up to 1800. Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764) and Friedrich August Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795) were both densely annotated and precisely argued, in a style quite different from that of Scottish and French conjectural historians. Nonetheless, at the core, both enterprises were conjectural, as Katherine Harloe has shown.[7] Winckelmann argued that the flowering of Greek art in Athens in the fifth century BCE was made possible in the first instance by the perfection of the climate: "Where Nature is less enveloped in clouds and heavy vapors, she gives the body a riper form earlier; she expresses herself in powerful, particularly female creations, and in Greece she will have perfected its people to the finest degree."[8] But institutions also played a part: the city's political freedom fostered creativity and its gymnasia enabled artists to examine at first hand "the beauty of the body's build, and the daily opportunity to view the most beautiful naked youths heated the imagination."[9] Wolf argued that Homer must have been an oral poet, urging his readers to imagine, systematically, what it would have been like to compose poetry in a society without writing: "At this point, let us quite forget the bookcases and libraries that nowadays preserve our studies, and be transported to other times and another world, where many of the inventions which we think necessary for the good life were unknown to both wise men and fools."[10] Homer was not an author who wrote for posterity but a performer who sought "the applause and praise of the contemporary audience."[11] Both men's books bore the marks of their authors' reading in contemporary conjectural histories. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, I will argue, conjectural

6. Dmitri Levitin, "Egyptology, the Limits of Antiquarianism, and the Origins of Conjectural History, c. 1680–1740: New Sources and Perspectives," *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 6 (2015), 701. See also the sprawling but stimulating collection of materials in Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 433–71; Phyllis Leffler, "The 'Histoire raisonnée,' 1660–1720: A Pre-Enlightenment Genre," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 2 (1976), 219–40; and Hans Christian Hönes, *Kunst am Ursprung: Das Nachleben der Bilder und die Souveränität des Antiquars* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014).

7. Katherine Harloe, *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity: History and Aesthetics in the Age of Altertumswissenschaft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, transl. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 186.

9. Ibid., 197. See also ibid., 187, 196–97.

10. Friedrich August Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer, 1795*, transl. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E. G. Zetzel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 104.

11. Ibid. For the development of the view that Homer was a street performer, see William Theiss, "The Abbé d'Aubignac's Homer and the Culture of the Street in Seventeenth-Century Paris," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 84, no. 1 (2023), 77–102.

and developmental histories existed in profusion. But the traffic between them and philology ran mostly, though not entirely, in the other direction. The scholarship of the humanists offered patterns and ingredients that proved essential for the early development of what became the projects of Smith, Rousseau, and many others.

<div align="center">JOSÉ DE ACOSTA: CONJECTURES SMALL AND GREAT</div>

We can begin with a well-known example of conjectural history. The Jesuit José de Acosta's *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590) was a massive and original work that rested on almost twenty years of teaching and traveling in the Andes and Mexico as well as information gleaned from his fellow Jesuits and other learned missionaries.[12] Translated into several languages, it impressed Protestant as well as Catholic readers. In book 1, chapter 20, Acosta put forward a dramatic conjecture: that dry land must once have connected, and might still connect, the Americas with the rest of the world.[13] His argument was simple but dramatic. To be acceptable to Acosta and his readers, any account of early history required that all humans—and all animals—have a common origin on the Ark.[14] Yet he did not believe that the human and animal inhabitants of Europe, Asia, and Africa, all of them descended from Noah, his family, and his livestock, could have sailed to the Americas. They lacked the lodestone and compass, and they could not have deliberately embarked on long journeys out of sight of land.

True, some ships might have been carried westward by storms.[15] But Acosta found one logistical problem impossible to solve: how large animals that served no purpose in human society could have crossed the ocean. Men might have transported animals that they trained and used, such as elephants and horses, or animals that they hunted and displayed, such as lions and tigers.[16] But how did wolves and foxes make the crossing? Men would never have deliberately taken creatures like them, or their American counterparts, on ships: "Who can convince himself that, with such a very long voyage, there could have been men who took the trouble to carry foxes to Peru, and especially those animals called *añas* [skunks], which is the dirtiest and most stinking species of animal I ever saw?"[17] The beasts could not have traveled so far under their own power, "for our ocean would make a mockery of such swimmers."[18] Augustine had suggested that God drew the large animals on small islands directly from the earth.[19] But Acosta held

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12. José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan, transl. Frances López-Morillas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). For an edition of the Spanish text, see Josef de Acosta, *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, ed. Fermin del Pino-Diaz (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2008). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

13. Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 61–64 [1.20].

14. Ibid., 51 [1.16].

15. Ibid., 51–57 [1.16–17].

16. Ibid., 61–62 [1.20].

17. Ibid., 62 [1.20].

18. Ibid.

19. Augustine, *City of God* 16.7.

that only "frogs and mice and wasps and other imperfect creatures" came into being without procreation.[20]

Accordingly, he could conclude only that all the continents were somehow connected. He made clear that his argument did not rest on a source or authority:

This discourse that I have spoken is for me a great conjecture [Este discurso que he dicho es para mí una gran conjetura]: to think that the new world, which we call the Indies, is not completely divided and separated from the other world. And to state my opinion, I have held for some time that the one land and the other are joined and continuous at some point, or, at least, that they approach and come very close.[21]

The history of the earth and its peoples was transformed, through one thought experiment, into a complex tale of long, slow migrations across land. Acosta put forward complex arguments and drew on varied evidence. For the present, however, what matters most is his terminology, which both contemporary and recent translations have obscured. In the original Latin version of his text, published in Salamanca in 1588, Acosta called his theory a "nontrivial conjecture" (non levis . . . conjectura) without further explanation.[22] But in his expanded Spanish version, which is quoted above and was aimed at a less learned public, he explicitly described his treatment of the question as a "discourse" that he had "spoken" and, at the same time, as "a great conjecture." Acosta found it natural to connect these terms. He did so to give his readers a precise and recognizable account of what he offered them—one that requires some reconstruction.

The term "conjecture," as we will see, could bear several meanings in the early modern world of learning—most often, perhaps, the one still current in philology: an explication or emendation of a text based on corrupt or fragmentary evidence, proposed as plausible, giving readers the chance to judge whether they agreed. Acosta sometimes used it in this sense.[23] Benito Arias Montano, Hebraist editor of the polyglot Bible that Plantin published from 1568 to 1573, had included a conjectural history of his own in one of the treatises he appended to the texts. He used a common period argument, the apparent similarity of names, to show that modern Peru was the biblical Ophir, to which Solomon's fleets had traveled every three years for gold.[24] Acosta held that such voyages would have been impossible

20. Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 62 [1.20]. For a full study of Acosta's views on the species of the Americas, see Mackenzie Cooley, *The Perfection of Nature: Animals, Breeding, and Race in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 184–91.

21. Acosta, *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, 36 [1.20].

22. Jose de Acosta, *De natura novi orbis* (Salamanca, 1588), 57.

23. On Montano's polyglot, see Theodor Dunkelgrün, *The Multiplicity of Scripture: The Making of the Antwerp Polyglot Bible* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2025).

24. Benito Arias Montano, *Antiquitatum Iudaicarum libri ix* (Leiden, 1593), 20. On Montano's views and those of the many others, before and after him, who developed these arguments, see Giuliano Gliozzi, *Adamo e il nuovo mondo: La nascita dell'antropologia come ideologia coloniale—Dalle genealogie bibliiche alle teorie razziale (1500–1700)* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1977), 147–74; Fernando Navarro Antolín, Luis Gómez Canseco, and Baldomero Macías Rosendo, "Fronteras del Humanismo: Arias Montano y el Nuevo Mundo," in *Orbis incognitus: Avisos y Legajos del Nuevo Mundo—Homenaje al professor Luis Navarro García*, ed. Fernando Navarro Antolín, vol. 1 (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2007), 126–31; and Maria M. Portuondo, *The Spanish Disquiet: The Biblical Natural Philosophy of Benito Arias Montano* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), ch. 6. On Acosta's critique of Montano's theory, see López Fadul, *The Cradle of Words*, 176–84.

at the time (an argument from verisimilitude). But he also did his best to undercut Montano's conjecture by showing that the evidence would not support it. In its place he offered his own conjectural interpretation of the relevant passages in the Book of Kings and the Book of Chronicles:

And if conjectures and guesses are worth anything, mine are that in Holy Writ the words *Ophir* and *Tarshish* often do not mean any particular place but that they are of general meaning to the Hebrews, just as in our vulgar tongue the word *Indies* is general, for the name Indies in our usage and language simply means lands that are very far away and very rich and very different from our own. And so we Spaniards indifferently call Peru and Mexico the Indies, and China and Malacca and Brazil.[25]

Acosta showed little sympathy for the more imaginative conjectures of his contemporaries—especially, perhaps, those who theorized about world travel but remained in their studies, reading. Some of them inferred from the clothing of the indigenous inhabitants of the New World that they were descended from the Jews. Others drew similar conclusions from their language. He described these arguments as "lightweight conjectures."[26] He did not, however, condemn them absolutely. For he lacked either an argument that could refute them definitively or evidence that could disprove them beyond a shadow of a doubt. He was arguing not about claims that could be verified or falsified by autopsy, not about the buildings and ruins that he had examined, the indigenous customs that he had heard about, or the diseases that he had witnessed (and caught), but about ancient times and obscure places. In these cases, he had to content himself with accepting certain pieces of evidence and excluding others because they had or lacked "verisimilitude"—they looked or did not look probable.

RHETORIC AND CONJECTURE

Acosta's "great conjecture" moved on a larger scale than these conjectures on points of detail. But it too was an argument about probabilities. The art of the probable, in Renaissance Europe, was rhetoric—the ancient art that taught how to argue not about timeless truths but about the complexities of human life. Orators addressed crimes, policies, and battles in the stately palaces, packed courtrooms, and massive assemblies where decisions were made. Acosta knew this better than anyone. He had studied and taught classical rhetoric—he was, in fact, a renowned expert—at the first Jesuit college he attended, at Medina del Campo, a cosmopolitan town in western Spain, and elsewhere.[27] And he made clear that not only his individual arguments about evidence but his larger theory about the continents belonged to that realm. Acosta identified his passage on the land bridge as a

25. Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 47 [1.14].
26. Acosta, *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, 27 [1.13].
27. Luis Fernández Martin, SJ, "El Colegio de los Jesuítas del Medina del Campo en tiempo de Juan de Yepes," in *Juan de la Cruz: Espiritu de Llama: Estudios con occasion del cuarto centenario de su muerte (1591–1991)* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1991), 41–61; Claudio Burgaleta, SJ, "The Theological Humanism of José de Acosta (1540–1600): A Study in the History of Theology" (PhD diss., Boston College, 1996), 24–49.

"discourse"—a speech, the basic product of rhetorical training.[28] In both ancient rhetoric and the Jesuit version of it, a *status* was one of three standard procedures "for determining the decisive issue under dispute in legal cases by posing a series of questions."[29] Quintilian, one of the Jesuits' favorite authorities on rhetoric, defined these three forms: *status conjecturalis* (Has a thing been done?); *status finitivus* (What has been done?); and *status qualitatis* (Has it been justifiably done?).[30] The same triad appeared in the handbook of rhetoric by Cyprian Soarez that became the Jesuits' favorite.[31] Students of rhetoric, Quintilian explained, specialized in "history, which contains the narration of actual events"—as when they composed a speech that addressed the *status conjecturalis* by arguing about what a defendant had or had not done.[32]

Historical narrative, in turn, required mastery of key critical skills: "refuting" and "confirming."[33] After all, as Quintilian explained, "there is a great deal to be said on both sides if we ask whether it is credible that a raven should have settled on Valerius' head as he was fighting, and struck the face and eyes of his Gallic opponent with its beak and wings."[34] Any schoolboy who studied in a Jesuit college—or a Lutheran or Reformed one, a British grammar school, or a French *collège*—would have known immediately, when assigned to compose a speech in the conjectural status, that he had to craft a convincing narrative about a question of fact—one that included formal arguments to show that the evidence supported it. Another way to say this is that though the *status conjecturalis* itself was not directly conjectural in the modern sense, it often rested, like Acosta's, partly or wholly on conjectures: probable arguments about the evidence, or some of it, used in the speech, since certainty could not be attained.

It is hard to identify the exact genre to which Acosta's brilliant, prejudiced, and devil-haunted history of human societies and natural environments belonged. But the genre of his discussion of the land bridge is clear. Acosta composed a conjectural discourse, in which he addressed the sort of big issue—how humanity, not to mention animals, dealt with nature—that would engage later conjectural historians. Like them, he argued from general experience of human and animal nature as well as from textual or historical evidence. (As a good orator, he also took care to argue that the evidence that supported his case was valid and relevant, while the evidence that undermined it was neither.) Like them, he imagined his way into a past very different from his own—one, for example, in which sailors

28. See Robert A. Maryks, "Rhetorical Veri-similitudo: Cicero, Probabilism, and Jesuit Casuistry," in *Traditions of Eloquence: The Jesuits and Modern Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Cinthia Gannett and John Brereton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 60–72.

29. "Glossary of Greek and Latin Historical Terms," in *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Michael J. MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), s.v. "stasis."

30. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and transl. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2:48–101 [3.6].

31. Cyprian Soarez, *De arte rhetorica libri tres, ex Aristotele, Cicerone, & Quintiliano deprompti* (Lyon, 1636), 93: "Cum tria sint, quae in omni disputatione quaerantur, sic necne, quid sit, quale sit, fit ut constitutiones quoque tres sint. Prima coniecturalis, in qua sit necne quaerimus, ut sic necne insidiatus Miloni Clodius?" Cicero discussed this question in *Pro Milone*.

32. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 1:281 [2.4].

33. Ibid., 1:289 [2.4].

34. Ibid.

lacked the navigational equipment that mariners possessed in his day. Like them too, he often made conjectures in a much narrower sense: educated inferences about what a text or a term meant, or what human experience taught. And though, unlike them, he accepted the authority of the biblical account of the past, he made clear that he saw it as radically incomplete and couched his own arguments in material terms. Modern students of conjectural history have noticed that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers sometimes adumbrated the methods and arguments of their eighteenth-century subjects. Hugo Grotius, for example, sketched an elegant history of private property, one that made no reference to Scriptural narratives, in *The Law of War and Peace*. In the days when intellectual historians chased precursors, they sometimes identified Grotius as a precursor of Smith and David Kames.[35] In fact, however, Grotius's account—itself based on multiple detailed conjectures—was only one of many such discourses. It was singled out less for its virtues as a piece of exposition than because it addressed a topic of central interest to the later stadial theorists.

Closer, in some ways, to the eighteenth-century thinkers, and even closer to Acosta, is a work by a very obscure contemporary of his: the sixteenth-century British antiquarian John Twyne, who died in 1580. His grandson Brian published John's book *On Albionic Matters* in 1590.[36] A surviving notebook that belonged to both men suggests that Brian revised and enlarged the text. But it also shows that John devised the work's basic argument. The presence of boars and other wild, destructive beasts proved that England must have been a promontory before it became an island—an argument for which John Twyne drew support from Augustine.[37] Aristotle's demonstration that the world had lasted a very long time and changed in multiple ways fascinated Twyne even more. He referred to it in his notebook and inserted a long extract from Aristotle's *Meteorology* into his text.[38] Knowledge of natural history—a fertile source of evidence for the later conjectural historians—gave him confidence that he could track changes in the face of Europe. Distinctive structures (such as Stonehenge) and objects (such as urn burials found in England) served as evidence that the island had been

35. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, 12–17.

36. John Twyne, *De rebus Albionicis, Britannicis, atque Anglicis, commentariorum libri duo* (London, 1590). See Arthur B. Ferguson, "John Twyne: A Tudor Humanist and the Problem of Legend," *Journal of British Studies* 9, no. 1 (1969), 24–44; T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1950), 106–8; Josephine Quinn, *In Search of the Phoenicians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 176–86; and Anthony Grafton, "Brian Twyne: University History and the Traditions of English Antiquarianism," in "Renaissance College: Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in Context, 1450–1600," ed. John Watts, *History of Universities* 32, no. 1–2 (2019), 287–312.

37. Twyne, *De rebus Albionicis*, 107.

38. See ibid., 29–30 and Aristotle, *Meteorologica* 1.14. See also Twyne's note in MS 256, fol. 137v, Corpus Christi College Oxford: "Vide et transfer in dialogos tuos omnia illa aristotelis verba ex meteorologis quae observasti in commentariis Melethii in lxxxvi cap. pli. libri primi de temporis longitudine qua plurima abolentur, et etiam quae sunt ibi ad isthmum inter galliam et albionem probandum olim extitisse Hespulele script. Temporis longitudo isthmum obliteravit." Twyne's reference is to *Liber II C. Plinii de mundi historia, cum commentariis Jacobi Milichii*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt, 1543), fol. 178r–v. For the impact of the *Meteorologica* on early modern visions of geological time, see Ivano Dal Prete, "'Being the World Eternal . . . ': The Age of the Earth in Renaissance Italy," *Isis* 105, no. 2 (2014), 292–317, and Ivano Dal Prete, *On the Edge of Eternity: The Antiquity of the Earth in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

populated long before the Trojan War—and thus refuted the long-established myth that Brutus the Trojan had founded Britain.[39] In other sections, Twyne made clear that those who imagined the England of Arthur or the early Middle Ages as a single, unified kingdom, "as if it was ruled in those days as it is in ours," were projecting later circumstances back on a very different time.[40] Writing as a recusant, a Catholic in a Protestant kingdom, Twyne probably shared liturgical views, but few others, with Acosta. Certainly, the former explorer of the Andes and the former sheriff of Canterbury had few experiences in common. Yet the arguments from verisimilitude and the critical conjectures based on texts and objects that Twyne mustered in his little book showed a striking resemblance to the way in which Acosta developed his "great conjecture."

<center>A CONJECTURE ABOUT CONJECTURES</center>

As James Franklin noted in his wide-ranging and witty survey of *The Science of Conjecture*, humanists—like lawyers—used conjectural reasoning to argue about the veracity of sources and the course of events. But his dour view of the humanists' mental capacities ("for all their criticism of science, logic, law, and so on, [they] were not incompetent at everything") limited his ability to see the story as a whole.[41] In fact, early modern philological conjectures and the larger project of explicitly conjectural history were both brought into being by Italian humanists. Those who experimented with these new forms of humanistic knowledge-making—Leon Battista Alberti, Poggio Bracciolini, Biondo Flavio, and Lorenzo Valla—all worked, at one time or another, as papal secretaries in the years when Eugenius IV and Martin V established humanism and philology at the core of the Curia, supported scholars by creating the new Vatican Library, and provided commissions for historical works and translations from the Greek. But they also worked at other centers of power and learning: for example, the Neapolitan court of Alfonso of Aragon. These men came to maturity in the hunting and gathering phase of the revival of the Latin and Greek classics. Works that now seem central to any account of ancient Roman literature, such as Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* and Cicero's *On the Orator*, entered circulation late and slowly. Even long-canonical texts, moreover, were corrupt, thanks to long centuries of scribal transmission. Once a humanist "rediscovered" a text—often by stealing it from the monastic library that had preserved it for centuries—the original manuscript had to be copied. Yet this might be written in a script that looked like barbed wire, and its text might swarm with errors of every kind. The

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39. See MS 256, fol. 34r, Corpus Christi College Oxford, and Twyne, *De rebus Albionicis*, 73–74. See also Twyne, *De rebus Albionicis*, 92–93, and MS 256, fol. 30r, Corpus Christi College Oxford: "observa ex davidis chythraei chronologia res egregie gestas, ut bella, expeditiones, regnorum mutationes, populorum migrationes: ante troiae excidium etc. eoque credibile non est britanniam tot millibus annorum ad illius fictitii bruti tempus fuisse vacuam et incultam, et non ibi fuisse nisi a demonibus genitos. hanc rem perpende etiam atque etiam."

40. Twyne, *De rebus Albionicis*, 56.

41. James Franklin, *The Science of Conjecture: Evidence and Probability before Pascal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 187. See also ibid., 162–94, a chapter titled "Soft Science and History."

scribes who undertook these jobs were often expert neither at decipherment nor at Latin. And the next copy in the chain might deteriorate even further.[42]

In these circumstances, Poggio—a brilliant manuscript hunter and a skillful scribe—found ways not only to correct corrupt texts but also to describe his philological practices. In ancient Rome, *coniectura* had been a term for forms of thought or divination, not for literary or philological practices of analysis. Its senses were multiple, and sometimes quite far from those that the term now evokes. It could refer as readily to forms of augury and divination as to guesswork or a conclusion founded on facts or signs.[43] Learned men often used it to designate a rigorous form of prediction—one, perhaps, that involved political analysis rather than scrutiny of entrails. Thus, Cicero wrote to his friend Atticus that he predicted the future, "not engaging in divination, in which no one believes, but looking forward with a very certain form of conjecture."[44] Yet no one took conjecture as a source of certain knowledge. In *On Divination*, Cicero explained that "in court cases, the accuser has one conjecture, the defender another, and yet both are credible."[45] Renaissance scholars read Cicero pen in hand in order to master his usage. John Dee—a master of astrological prediction—marked the last passage, like many others in which the term occurred, in his copy of Cicero's complete works.[46]

Cicero also compared the interpretation of prophecies, oracles and dreams to that of texts: "there are explicators, like the grammarians for poets."[47] Poggio and other humanists may have followed this hint when they borrowed the terms *coniectura* and *divinatio* from politics and applied them to textual criticism. They distinguished considerably more sharply than Cicero had between "divination," wild guesswork bordering on necromancy, which was legally forbidden, and "conjecture," creative but responsible inference from surviving traces, the fragmentary evidence that the manuscript provided.[48] Divination meant desperation: it could be employed only when traces of the original text were absent. Poggio made this distinction again and again. As he wrote of a ninth-century manuscript of Cicero,

42. For surveys, see L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Michael D. Reeve, "Classical Scholarship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20–46. For an exemplary case study, see Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

43. *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*, s.v. "coniectura," accessed 19 February 2025; *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "coniectura," accessed 19 February 2025.

44. Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 8.11.3. These distinctions were not used consistently. In *On Invention* 2.152, Cicero stated that, in some circumstances, a conjecture can become a (mere) divination.

45. Cicero, *On Divination* 2.55.

46. John Dee, note on *On Divination* 2.55, in his copy of Cicero, *Opera*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1539), Royal College of Physicians Library, 270: "coniectura affert ancipitem orationem." This document is available online via the Archaeology of Reading: https://archaeologyofreading.org/viewer/#aor/RCP10549-50v2/409v/image.

47. Cicero, *On Divination* 1.116.

48. See the classic account in Silvia Rizzo, *Il lessico filologico degli umanisti* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1973), 287–93, and Anthony Grafton, *Inky Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 56–77.

"it is written in such a childish way, with so many errors, that when I copied from it I needed divination rather than conjecture."[49]

Valla despised Poggio—he wrote a dialogue in which a cook and stableboy exposed his rival's feeble Latinity—and he practiced and savored conjectural emendation. He especially enjoyed showing off his prowess at the "hours of the book" held by Alfonso of Aragon at Naples, where Valla competed against Antonio Beccadelli, known as Il Panormita, and others to emend the "royal manuscript" of Livy convincingly in public, while their opponents kibbitzed.[50] In a polemic against Bartolomeo Facio, Valla published his emendations. Usually, he said simply "I believe it should read . . . " or "You correct it this way. . . . I correct it that way."[51] But, at times, he strove to show that his opponents' errors stemmed not only from stupidity but from ignorance of philological principles. They had failed to grasp that conjecture should be a rule-based practice: "This is how you corrected. . . . Oh, you myopic men who falsely charge others with myopia! Is this the way to preserve the resemblance [between the manuscript reading and the correction], to preserve the number of letters in conjecturing the true text, to throw out words and add others? See how I preserve it in a much sounder form."[52] A plausible conjecture, in other words—rather like a good proof correction in the days before texts were produced with no human intervention—meant one that took up only the same number of letters and words that had appeared in the corrupt text.

Valla did not use the nouns for conjecture very often. But he made clear that he saw conjecture as a normal process, for which Latin offered a variety of terms with subtly varied meanings, in a short chapter of his long manual of correct Latin usage, the *Elegancies of the Latin Language*:

To guess, to infer by conjecture, to make a conjecture and other words are taken as meaning the same. I guess, I conjecture, I make a conjecture, I form a conjecture, I perceive by conjecture, I am led by conjecture, are taken as the same or differ little. For there is something more powerful in "I perceive by conjecture" and "I gather by conjecture" than in the rest. It would take a long time to cite examples for them.[53]

Conjecture, in this hopefully rigorous sense, constantly occupied every humanist who copied, edited, or taught a Latin text.

Ancient buildings were just as corrupt, in their way, as ancient literature. Ruined and rebuilt, their statues burnt for lime and their inscriptions battered to dust, even grand ancient structures could be hard to connect to their builders, to say nothing of reconstructing their original forms. Poggio and Biondo explored the streets and piazzas of Rome, building by building and stone by sone. Sometimes

49. Poggio Bracciolini, *Epistolae* 3.17, quoted in Rizzo, *Il lessico filologico degli umanisti*, 327, quoted Grafton, *Inky Fingers*, 62.

50. Daniele Miano, "The Two Tarquins from Livy to Lorenzo Valla: History, Rhetoric, and Embodiment," *Intellectual History Review* 32, no. 3 (2022), 359–86.

51. Lorenzo Valla, *Antidotum in Facium*, ed. Mariangela Regoliosi (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 327–70.

52. Ibid., 329–30.

53. Lorenzo Valla, *Elegantiarum libri sex* (Strasbourg, 1521), 3.79, fol. h5r; Lorenzo Valla, *Libri elegantiarum sex* (Cologne, 1522), 5.112, fol. aav.

they encountered baffling problems. Poggio complained eloquently that one set of ruins did not yield even a hint of their identity:

I learned from a passage in the *Lives of the Popes* that the [baths] of Diocletian, of which few fragments can be seen, were in those places where the church of Silvester is now. The obscure oblivion of the rest leaves us nothing certain, not even enough for a conjecture about the places where they were. Age has destroyed their very name, though they built with such expense and such strength.[54]

Examining this same collection of rubble, Biondo turned up what he called "squared stones" in which a potter had filled letters with clay before it dried, spelling out "Domitianus major" and "Domitianus minor." "Hence," he wrote, "I have conjectured that whatever was seen, around San Silvestro from baths to the basin for sea battles, should all be held to be the work of Domitian."[55] When clues materialized, conjectures drawn from them could restore lost chapters of the history of the material world.

By the early sixteenth century, scholars were trying to impose method on antiquarian as well as philological conjectures. In 1521, Polydore Vergil published the last five books of his *The Inventors of Things*, a provocative history of the church in several dozen objects.[56] Important, even vital, objects and buildings, it turned out, could not be securely identified. At the start, he declared that he could not establish for certain where the first Christian church had been: "I do not dare to state where the first temple was dedicated to our Savior after the teachings of the Gospels were disseminated among the nations, lest I seem to engage in divination [*divinare*] rather than to stick to the truth. Still, in matters that are barely known, it is permissible to propose a conjecture [*coniectare*]."[57] Hesitantly, Polydore guessed that the first church might have been in some distant corner of the Christian world, safe from imperial persecution—unless it had been built by James in Jerusalem.

ORIGINS OF THE CONJECTURAL HISTORY

Fifteenth-century humanists also engaged energetically with the conjectural status, which they used as a matrix for critical discussions of the past.[58] The formal criteria used for accrediting or discrediting a narrative, as Carlo Ginzburg made clear long ago, derived from the rhetorical tradition.[59] As Quintilian said in his handbook of the subject, "the time and place of a supposed occurrence, and sometimes also the person involved, is often questioned."[60] Everyone could agree

54. Poggio Bracciolini, *De varietate rerum*, in *Visitiamo Roma nel Quattrocento: La città degli umanisti*, ed. Cesare d'Onofrio (Rome: Romana società editrice, 1989), 75.

55. Biondo Flavio, *Rome Restaurée: Roma instaurata*, ed. and transl. Anne Raffarin, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005–2012), 2:24–25 [2.12].

56. See Grafton, *Inky Fingers*, 117–23.

57. Polydore Vergil, *De rerum inventoribus libri octo* (Paris, 1529), fol. 89r–v.

58. Giuliano Mori, *Historical Truth in Fifteenth-Century Italy: Verisimilitude and Factuality in the Humanist Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), ch. 2 and ch. 4.

59. Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999).

60. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 1:289 [2.4].

that errors in space and time cast doubt on a historical narrative. So did errors in the portrayed conduct of an individual: breaches of the rules that should govern a ruler's or a wife's conduct were often treated as intrusions in a proper history, even when correctly reported. Valla, however, insisted that real people acted indecorously. He introduced modern words such as *campana* (bell) and *pyxis* (compass) into his Latin history of Ferdinand II of Naples, since real people spoke in contemporary language. And he made his king yawn and others run away in terror, because real people did that too.

When it came to the criticism of others' narratives, however, Valla applied the traditional tools of rhetoric with surgical precision and literary panache. His most celebrated critical set-piece was his deconstruction of the Donation of Constantine, the document that recorded how Constantine, grateful to the pope for curing him of leprosy, presented the papacy with the western Roman Empire. Everyone knows that Valla revealed that many of the Latin terms used in the document were unheard of in fourth-century Rome. Fewer know that he also composed fictional speeches for the emperor, the pope, and others; in these compositions, he used the principle of verisimilitude to indicate what they might really have said and done in the circumstances, as one after another they denounced the pope.[61] In another set piece, this time criticizing a genealogical error in Livy's ancient history of Rome, Valla teased out inconsistencies in the historian's account, which he subjected to a fiercely granular analysis, before consulting other sources.[62] Like Acosta, Valla made clear exactly what sort of texts he thought he was writing. He described his attack on the Donation as an "oration" and "the most oratorical thing I have ever written."[63] In his second defense of his critique of Livy against Benedetto Morandi, who had criticized his arguments, he stated that he had "left no stone unturned in a conjectural case."[64] Acosta's "great conjecture" belonged to a tradition that went back—as he would have been horrified to learn—to that great harrier of the popes, Lorenzo Valla. Valla had given the master class in how to compose a cogent oration that included detailed criticisms of its object. He had found in ancient rhetoric the ingredients for a novel genre, one that could be used to advance elaborate arguments about historical facts.

Valla was not the only master of conjecture, in several senses, who worked in fifteenth-century courts. Leon Battista Alberti, humanist, antiquarian, and

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61. Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, ed. and transl. G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For Valla's use of rhetoric as an interpretative tool, see also Glenn W. Most, "Rhetorik und Hermeneutik: Zur Konstitution der Neuzeitlichkeit," *Antike und Abendland* 30, no. 1 (1984), 62–79.

62. See the analyses in Miano, "The Two Tarquins from Livy to Lorenzo Valla" and Mori, *Historical Truth in Fifteenth-Century Italy* and the splendid critical edition of Valla's text on the two Tarquins and his two defenses of himself against Morandi in *Ad Alfonsum regem epistola de duobus Tarquiniis/Confutationes in Benedictum Morandum*, ed. Francesco Lo Monaco (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2009).

63. Lorenzo Valla to Giovanni Aurispa, Naples, 31 December 1443, in *Epistole*, ed. Ottavio Besomi and Mariangela Regoliosi (Padua: In aedibus Antenoreis, 1984), 252, and in *Correspondence*, ed. and transl. Brendan Cook (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 156–57. Gregorio Tifernate analyzed the text as an oration in a response to Valla (ibid., 70–73).

64. Valla, *Confutatio altera in Benedictum Morandum*, in Lo Monaco, *Ad Alfonsum regem epistola de duobus Tarquiniis/Confutationes in Benedictum Morandum*, 179.

architect, was still polishing *On the Art of Building*, the first systematic architectural treatise of the Renaissance, when he died in 1472.[65] Sometimes he used "conjecture" in its classical sense, for a prediction. "The Etruscans," he wrote, "were taught by their ritual books how to determine the future ages of the city, starting from the day of foundation; this was not through reading the sky, as mentioned above in the second book, but by examining the evidence and making [conjectures about the present state of things]."[66] Sometimes, though, he used it as Poggio and Biondo did. Cicero, he noted, though a mere Roman provincial from Arpinum, "boasted that he found the grave of Archimedes, neglected for its age, buried in thorns and unknown to the citizens, with a conjecture from the cylinder and square that he saw sculpted on a certain column."[67] At times, the ruins spoke clearly, inviting bold inferences. When examining an especially grand and excellent ancient building, he advised, the aspiring architect could venture the "conjecture that its builders were remarkable men."[68] But when he walked in the Circus Maximus, he found that "it has been ruined in this time, and not even the tiniest conjecture as to its appearance can be found."[69]

Most striking of all, however, was Alberti's mastery of the conjectural status and the way it could be used to conjure up a history when little direct evidence survived. Discussing the origin of tombs, he used his knowledge of human nature and conduct and the wide reading he had carried out in the new Vatican Library to produce a plausible account: "To me it would seem quite [plausible (*verisimile*)] that in remote antiquity men first instituted the practice of marking any place where a corpse was buried with a stone, or possibly, as Plato recommended in the *Laws*, with a tree; later it became customary to build something on or around the place, to prevent animals from digging up and rooting out the remains."[70] In order to fill in the details—for example, to explain why people began to bring offerings to tombs—he worked speculatively from the sources. The bounty of harvest season suggested the possibility of bringing gifts to the dead, or so Alberti conjectured from Thucydides's account of the funeral oration of Pericles: "Here, as Thucydides relates, they would meet with their [splendid coverings for the dead], bearing the first fruits of harvest. Such piety and religious significance were attached to this act, that it was also performed in public."[71] That, in turn, eventually led to a more dramatic change, as his conjecture about one detail turned into one stage in a continuous conjectural discourse: "As a result—to continue my

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65. On Alberti's career as architect and architectural theorist, see Robert Tavernor, *On Alberti and the Art of Building* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

66. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, transl. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 101 [4.3].

67. Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria* (Florence, 1485), 8.4. He did not mention that Cicero, by his own admission, had read about the sculptures on Archimedes's grave in an epigram (*Tusculan Disputations* 5.64–66). John Dee drew a tiny image of the tomb in the margin of his copy of Cicero at this point; see Maren Elisabeth Schwab and Anthony Grafton, *The Art of Discovery: Digging into the Past in Renaissance Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 33 and figure 1.7.

68. Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, 9.10.

69. Ibid., 8.8.

70. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, 247 [8.2].

71. Ibid.

[conjecture]—beyond merely erecting a mound or little column to mark or cover the grave, they began to construct shrines, to give the sacrifice a dignified setting, and made sure that they were thoroughly decent and handsome throughout."[72] The tomb had transformed itself, through collective action rather than individual leadership, from a private place of mourning to a public one of worship. In Alberti's text—as in Valla's—miracles are largely absent, and the Hebrew Bible completely so except as a source of information. Alberti—like Valla—thought his way into a past world very different from his own. And—like Valla—he made clear that he wrote in the *status conjecturalis* and used conjectures on points of detail to flesh out his account.

The good and the great were not the only humanists to devise conjectural histories. Niccolò Calvino, a little-known scholar from the Piedmontese town of Tortona, took great pride both in his ancient city, which the Romans had called Dertona, and his ancient family, which had already been prominent in republican Rome. In a manuscript now housed at Princeton, he took notes on references to the Calvini in Latin sources.[73] He then composed a letter to a relative, Stefano Calvino, in which he listed the accomplishments of their ancient kinsmen: "From all of this," he wrote, "it is clear that the family of the Calvini was once famous. I gather by conjecture [a variant of one of the formulae that Valla had recommended for proposing a conjecture with confidence] that the Senate sent colonies to this part of Liguria, and some of the Calvini stayed at Dertona. The rest of the Calvini then sprung from them, and moved elsewhere (as happens) in groups."[74] Dertona was a prominent city, he noted, with a memorable history: "from this who may deny that what was said above on the basis of a plausible conjecture could have happened?"[75] Later on, he used another verb that Valla had recommended: "I conjecture," he wrote, that many of the Calvini had left their city after Frederick Barbarossa torn down its walls. From them—as from those who had stayed in the city—"sprang jurisconsults and medical men and many other men of this city who were prominent for other reasons."[76] Calvino was no Valla or Alberti. Many Italian families cherished fantastic genealogies like the ones he drew up.[77] But his use of the conjectural mode and of Valla's chosen terms is all the more revealing: what began as a technical innovation turned into a fashion, and even a fad.

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72. Ibid., 247–48 [8.2].

73. Niccolò Calvino, notes on references to the Calvini, undated, MS Princeton 107, fols. 53v–54r, Princeton University Library. On this manuscript, see Don C. Skemer et al., *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Princeton University Library*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2:334–36.

74. Niccolò Calvino to Stefano Calvino, undated, MS Princeton 107, fol. 55r, Princeton University Library.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid., fol. 55v.

77. Stefan Bauer, "History for Hire in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Onofrio Panvinio's Histories of Roman Families," *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 4, no. 4 (2019), 397–438. For the larger context, see Roberto Bizzocchi's classic *Genealogie incredibili: Scritti di storia nell'Europa moderna*, new ed. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

OTHER PATHS OF SPECULATIVE HISTORY

The path from fifteenth-century Italy to eighteenth-century Edinburgh—not to mention Naples and Rome, Göttingen and Halle—was long and crooked. Branches sometimes appear. My story will not simply weave the development of conjecture in its modern humanistic sense, as it is still used by philologists working on critical editions of texts, into the story of the conjectural status. Another bumpy line that needs to be followed leads from the speculative discourses on early human society that figured in works by such ancient writers as Lucretius, Vitruvius, and Cicero to the ways in which their readers—who included such eminences as Piero di Cosimo and Machiavelli—used them. Thucydides, at the start of his history, provides the "Archaeology"—a systematic argument that the Trojan War was far less massive and destructive than the wars of his own day, since Greek society had been smaller, poorer, and more primitive in Homeric times.[78] In this set piece—which Christian Meier identified as the first conjectural history—Thucydides even claimed that, in many respects, "one might reveal that the way of life of the old Hellenic world resembles the contemporary barbarian one."[79] This potentially radical insight—"we were once as they are now"—has often been associated with conjectural history. In 1566, Jean Bodin argued, in his *Method for Easily Gaining Knowledge of History*, that the early past of Europe and Asia had been anything but the golden age so often imagined by Renaissance poets and artists. In fact, the early Greeks had been lawless pirates, their cities modest and vulnerable settlements. He drew his evidence from the forgeries of Annius of Viterbo, and his argument from Thucydides, whose account of Greece's rise from barbarism to civilization he paraphrased, describing its author as "the truest parent of history."[80]

Bodin, however, was far from the first early modern scholar to see Thucydides as an exemplary conjectural historian. Valla produced the first Latin translation of Thucydides for Pope Nicholas V. He provided a fine master copy of one version of it for the Vatican Library, with a subscription that identified it as the exemplar from which all others should be copied.[81] And what he discovered, as he began working on the text, suited his interests remarkably well. At the beginning of his text, Thucydides wrote that he expected that the war between Athens and Sparta

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78. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.1–23.

79. Ibid., 1.6.6. See also Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, transl. David McLintock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 200–2, 291n60.

80. Jean Bodin, *Methodus ad facilem historiarium cognitionem* (Paris, 1566), 355.

81. See Mortimer Chambers, ed., *Valla's Translation of Thucydides in Vat. Lat. 1801 with the Reproduction of the Codex* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2008). On the text of this work that actually went into circulation, see R. I. Wilfred Westgate, "The Text of Valla's Translation of Thucydides," *Transactions and.Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67 (1936), 240–51; Karl Maurer, "Thucydides, Valla, and Vat. Lat. 1801," *Latomus* 58, no. 4 (1999), 885–89; and Marianne Pade, "Thucydides," in *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries*, vol. 8, ed. Virginia Brown, with James Hankins and Robert A. Kaster (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 120–28. Pade's detailed studies are listed in ibid., 128.

would be both greater and more memorable than any earlier one. In a substantial excursus, which modern classicists call his Archaeology,[82] he did his best to prove his point by recreating early Greek society and warfare. True, he admitted more than once that it was hard to know anything with certainty about times long past.[83] He also recognized that some might reject the testimony of Homer, a poet who could be expected to exaggerate the scale of the war he narrated.[84] But he systematically weighed and discussed the evidence, and he argued that he was drawing plausible inferences—inferences with verisimilitude, which deserved credence—from it.[85] By the end of the Archaeology, Thucydides assured his reader that he would not go wrong by following his arguments.[86] The text looked like an exercise in Valla's preferred conjectural mode.

Valla tried, as Marianne Pade has shown, to apply two methods at once in translating Thucydides. Like grammarians since antiquity, he explicated the text as he translated it, drawing material from Greek scholia on the text and sometimes filling in or paraphrasing the Greek. Like Leonardo Bruni and other fifteenth-century humanists, however, he tried at the same time to produce an eloquent Latin text, one that did not render the original word for word but provided a comparably eloquent text in the target language. He also made any number of mistakes, as did the scribe of the Vatican manuscript and his colleagues.[87]

In rendering the many passages in the Archaeology in which Thucydides stated or defended his conjectures, Valla missed the mark from time to time. In 1.9.5, Thucydides told the reader that "we must conjecture" ($\varepsilon\grave{\iota}\kappa\acute{\alpha}\zeta\varepsilon\iota\nu\ \delta\grave{\varepsilon}\ \chi\rho\grave{\eta}$) from the Homeric armies what earlier ones had been like. Valla rendered this as "we may conjecture" (Quod coniectemus licet), changing his author's point.[88] At 1.9.3, Thucydides wrote that Homer had given the primary evidence for the wealth of Agamemnon, "if his testimony is enough for anyone." Valla simply omitted this clause.[89] But immediately afterward, in 1.9.4, Thucydides wrote simply that Homer "said" ($\varepsilon\check{\iota}\rho\eta\kappa\varepsilon\nu$) that Agamemnon ruled over many islands and Argos. Valla transformed this into a statement about credibility: "the sign in [Homer's account] of the conveying of the scepter was also sufficient" (Satis quoque signum fuit in sceptri traditione).[90] These small slips and changes are hard to interpret.

At the very start of the Archaeology, however, Valla did his best to suggest that Thucydides had embarked on a conjectural discourse. Thucydides claimed that he drew his inferences $\dot{\varepsilon}\kappa\ \delta\grave{\varepsilon}\ \tau\varepsilon\kappa\mu\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\nu$ (from *tekmeria*) (1.1.2). $T\varepsilon\kappa\mu\acute{\eta}\rho\iota\alpha$, in Greek rhetoric, were strong proofs. Valla showed that he knew this when he rendered the words $\dot{\varepsilon}\kappa\ \delta\grave{\varepsilon}\ \tau\tilde{\omega}\nu\ \varepsilon\grave{\iota}\rho\eta\mu\acute{\varepsilon}\nu\omega\nu\ \tau\varepsilon\kappa\mu\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\nu$ at the end of the Archaeology, in 1.21.1, as "from the certain evidences that I have mentioned"

82. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.1–22.

83. Ibid., 1.1.2, 1.10, 1.20.1.

84. Ibid., 1.9.3, 1.10.3.

85. Ibid., 1.10.3, 1.10.4.

86. Ibid., 1.20.1.

87. Marianne Pade, "Valla's Thucydides: Theory and Practice in a Renaissance Translation," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 36 (1985), 275–301.

88. MS Vat. lat. 1801, fol. 3v, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

(ex his que dixi necessariis signis).[91] In translating the first appearance of the term, however, at the beginning of the Archaeology, Valla rendered ἐκ δὲ τεκμηρίων more weakly as "from conjectures" (ex coniecturis)."[92] Though the Archaeology ended with strong claims of rigorous argument, in other words, it began under the flag of conjecture. Valla's interpretation found some favor. An English humanist with good Greek—probably Roger Ascham—copied Valla's translation of the second phrase above the Greek original in his copy of the 1518 Aldine edition of the Greek text.[93] He entered Valla's rendering of this passage above the line of Greek that it corresponded to. Thomas Hobbes—the first scholar to translate Thucydides directly from Greek into English—followed Valla's reading of the text more enthusiastically than he followed its inventor. He translated the verb Thucydides used to describe his process of inquiry, τεκμαιρόμενος (inferring), with a weaker equivalent, "conjecturing," and τεκμηρίων, equivocally, as "argument."[94] In early modern Europe, Thucydides's work began its life in Latin, at least, as a conjectural history.

<div align="center">THE NARRATIVE UNFOLDS</div>

The book that will grow from this article will provide word histories of the chief terms employed by humanists and historians. They were always labile. Three hundred years after Poggio, Richard Bentley stated in the preface to his edition of Horace that the critic needed "a certain skill in divination, and a prophetic gift"—uncanny, inborn characteristics that no amount of hard work could instill.[95] Two centuries after Bentley, as positivist scholarship declined more and more rapidly from its meridian, Hermann Diels, famed for his work on the fragments of the Presocratics, published a hymn of praise to divination as the highest form of both science and scholarship.[96] Can these late developments shed any light on earlier ones? More generally, were the terms applied in different senses to different practices?

It will also be necessary to examine a number of fields barely touched on here: antiquarianism, for example, and the law. Learned lawyers, as Franklin, Giuliano Mori, and others—most recently, John Jeffries Martin—have pointed out, saw conjecture as a vital implement in their toolbox.[97] Historians and lawyers held active discussions from the middle of the fifteenth century onward. These were

91. Ibid., fols. 5v–6r.

92. Ibid., fol. 2r.

93. Thucydides, [*Histories*] (Venice, 1518), call number 2016-0006Q, sig. AAr, Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

94. Thucydides, *Eight Bookes of the Peloponnesian Warre*, transl. Thomas Hobbes (London, 1629), 1–2.

95. Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *Q. Horatius Flaccus, ex recensione & cum notis Richardi Bentleii* (Cambridge, 1711), preface, sig. Cv. For Bentley's views on conjecture, see Kristine Louise Haugen, *Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 124–54.

96. Hermann Diels, "Wissenschaft und Prophezeiung," *Internationale Monatsschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik* 6, no. 2 (1911), 2–9.

97. See John Jeffries Martin, "The Art of Conjecture: A Window into the Heart," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 54, no. 1 (2024), 33–56.

especially productive in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, which witnessed the publication of several manuals of historical research and writing, some of them written by lawyers, and of many histories, also often written by lawyers, that sought to put the principles in these manuals into practice. They scrutinized ancient writers such as Cicero, a lawyer and, in his own way, a historian, looking for conceptual aid and comfort. One place to start an inquiry into the impact of law on conjectural history may be the *Arrest memorable du Parlement de Tolose*, the pamphlet, more discussed than read, in which Jean de Coras told the story of the trial of Martin Guerre, made famous by Natalie Zemon Davis.[98] The terms *coniecture* and *preuve* flutter from layer to layer of Coras's work, with its complicated page layout of "textes," "annotations," and "marginal glosses."[99] Most often what amazes Coras is that though excellent conjectures based on solid evidence support the impostor's claims, he is in fact an impostor. An examination of this and other legal texts in which conjectures are framed, named, and evaluated seems a necessary addition.

Alberti elaborated his conjectural method in part as a way to learn about the early history of foreign peoples. Acosta did so as well while living among them. From the Valley of Mexico to China, as Acosta knew better than most, scholars in many traditions were recreating their pasts using radically different methods. Did conjectural historians draw their practices, as well as their information, in part from foreign peoples? I would conjecture that they did—and that the history of conjectural history should have many more mansions than it currently contains.

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98. Jean de Coras, *Arrest memorable du Parlement de Tolose* (Lyons, 1571). See also Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) and her reply to Robert Finlay's critique, "On the Lame," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988), 572–603.

99. Coras, *Arrest memorable*, 39, 47, 54, 58, 69. See especially the fascinating reflections on ibid., 69.