Early modern European antiquarians made plenty of blunders—but they were such interesting blunders.¹ In the first third of the fifteenth century, for example, Italian scholars developed a fluid and legible handwriting based on the manuscripts of classical texts that they had found in monastic libraries.² They then instructed painters to adorn the initial letters and page borders of their own books with crawling, interlocking growths of vine, curling white stems and shoots, much like those they had seen in the old books. An initial E from a Bolognese manuscript of Suetonius, datable to the middle of the fifteenth century, adorning a text written in a round humanist hand, is a good example (fig. 1).³ But the white vine scroll and the minuscule alphabet were born of a

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¹ This paper is closely tied to a long-term collaborative project with Alexander Nagel. See our paper “Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism,” *Art Bulletin* 87 (2005): 403-32.
chronological misconception, for the ancient models that scribes and painters looked to were not so ancient. Their models were actually twelfth-century Italian manuscripts which in turn transmitted interlaced forms developed in transalpine monasteries such as St. Gall between the ninth and eleventh centuries; for example an initial C from a Homiliary, an Italian manuscript of the early twelfth century (fig. 2). There can be no mistake about the derivation, for fifteenth-century white vine ornament duplicated even the blue, green, and red color scheme of the intervals between the vines found in the medieval sources. The philologists in their enthusiasm were reviving not an ancient Roman but an early medieval and northern European form.

An art historian might describe such a cross-wiring as a pseudomorphosis, following Erwin Panofsky who used this term to characterize an historical form invested by Renaissance artists with a meaning that it had not possessed in the past.

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5 Pächt, “Notes and Observations,” 189.

ornament and other false antiquities were not the fantasies of mere ill-informed artists, however. They were promulgated by scholars, the pioneers of the modern disciplines of philology and archeology, critical minds who defined themselves as the enemies of all hopeful or blurry thinking about the past. Just as the reform-minded theologians of the day deplored superstition and the cult of relics, so too did new-model historians ridicule the credulities of unlettered clerics, professorial imposters, and the common folk. In his Bavarian Chronicle of 1526 the historian Johann Aventinus—to invoke only one distinguished figure—drily mocked the "good, foolish, and ignorant cathedral canon" in Regensburg who on the basis of an inscription mistook the tombstone of Aurelia, a Roman woman, for the tomb of a certain Saint Aurelia, who in fact there was no reason to believe had ever been in Regensburg. The local cleric, untutored in epigraphy and archeology, had no idea how to date an inscription.

And for all that the humanists, not excepting Aventinus himself, managed to find their own winding path into error. Renaissance scholars often display the same combination of severity and suggestibility that we find two centuries later in Giambattista Vico, who derided the “unclear, frivolous, inept, conceited, and ridiculous” opinions of other scholars on the origins of languages, and then went on to assert that the most ancient peoples had spoken a natural, non-arbitrary language and that this was the language of Atlantis, just as Plato had said; or who dismissed as “groundless, inappropriate, or simply false” the views of other authorities on the reasons for the monstrous stature of ancient giants, but was himself completely confident of the

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7 Johann Aventinus, Bayerische Chronik I, 2 (= Sämtliche Werke, IV, 2) (Munich, 1883), chap. 49, p. 699.
historical reality of giants.\textsuperscript{8} Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century scholars were peculiarly prone to credulity, as if archeology itself, the epochal turn to material evidence as a supplement to oral and textual authority, only led them to ever more wonderful and lucid errors.

Credulity was the matrix of creativity. Ernst Gombrich, in one of his most ingenious essays, associated Leon Battista Alberti and Filippo Brunelleschi’s reform of architecture with Poggio Bracciolini and Coluccio Salutati’s invention of the minuscule script.\textsuperscript{9} In both cases, the modern-pointing innovations were grounded in what Ingrid Rowland calls an "antiquarianism of false premises."\textsuperscript{10} Just as the Florentine scribes had modeled their antica alphabet on Carolingian precedents, so too did the pioneering architect Filippo Brunelleschi select as his paragons the Baptistery and the basilica of SS. Apostoli, both eleventh-century structures.\textsuperscript{11} For his own S. Lorenzo (begun 1421), as Gombrich and others have shown, Brunelleschi borrowed from SS. Apostoli not only the plan but the Romanesque device of arches resting directly on columns. The entablature blocks he interposed between capital and arch, meanwhile, were derived from the exterior

of the Baptistery. Alberti styled his façade for S. Maria Novella (begun c. 1458), with its corner pillars with horizontal incrustations and blind arcades, after the Baptistery and the façade of the twelfth-century basilica of S. Miniato al Monte. Throughout the fifteenth century, the most archeologically-minded and antiquity-oriented architects were as attentive to local pre-Gothic churches as they were to ancient ruins. The paradox was explained already by Giorgio Vasari, who following two centuries of commentary described the Baptistery as a “most ancient temple” and went on to argue that because the architects of medieval buildings like SS. Apostoli had emulated the “good antique order” that they had found in the Baptistery, Brunelleschi was therefore justified in taking SS. Apostoli as his model.

Gombrich’s paradoxical argument stripped the narrative of the rebirth of antiquity of some its revolutionary grandeur. He showed how a pedantic compulsion to emend

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12 Gombrich, "From the Revival of Letters to the Reform of the Arts,” p. 106.
15 In the preface to Book One of his Lives, Vasari says that the architects of S. Miniato were able to "recognize" and emulate l'ordine buono antico they found nell'antichissimo tempio di S. Giovanni [the Baptistery] nella città loro; Vasari, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori, 9 vols., ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), 1: 236-37. In the “Life of Andrea Tafi” he refers again to the Baptistery as quel tempio antico...la quale è dagli architetti moderni come cosa singolare lodata, e meritamente: perciocchè ella ha mostrato il buono che già aveva in sè quell'arte, and confirms that Brunelleschi, Donatello, and other masters used both the Baptistery and SS. Apostoli as models for their own work; Le vite, 1: 332.
could yield serendipitous results. Yet despite Gombrich’s warning, modern scholars have found few ways to describe creative misidentifications of old forms and artifacts other than as errors. Things only get worse when the Renaissance scholars figure not merely as passive gulls, but as active forgers, interventionists within the monumental record. For it is the case that humanist scholars in this period actually fabricated facts. The epigraphers copied many dozens of fascinating but inauthentic texts into their sylloges, or anthologies of classical inscriptions. The early sylloges included the epitaphs of Lucretia, Caesar, and Lucan, and much else of little historical value. Most syllogists knew which texts were “good” and which were not. Still, the ultimate truth content of a given tradition was never quite clear. Scholarship often drifted into a disorienting middle ground where the fabricated supplements to fact could cycle back and become corroborating testimony to their own reality, especially before the era of print (which antiquarians entered alarmingly late). Confusingly, some of the pseudepigraphic texts, as well as inscriptions recorded in classical texts such as Livy, had been carved in stone in modern times. But such stones would have been hard to date on stylistic grounds alone. The last to see the epitaph of Lucan--M.A. Lucano Cordubensi poete beneficio Neronis

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17 In some cases, the syllogists surely suspected inauthenticity but copied the texts anyway; after all, they sometimes included openly modern texts, including their own inventions, alongside the ancient ones. Therefore one cannot always assume maximum credulity every time a scholar copies a spurious text.


19 Calabi Limentani, "Primi orientamenti,” p. 162.
Caesaris fama servata, someone’s outright invention—was the Florentine philologist Pietro Crinito (d. 1507), who reported that it was done in priscis litterís, "ancient letters."  

Through repetition, circulation, and association with material evidence, such ludic contrivances could take on a specious factual existence. Huius Nympha Loci was a modern poem, devised perhaps as early as the 1460s by the humanist Giovanni Antonio Campani, invoking the classical and pastoral topos of a girl sleeping near water. The poem then appeared in the anthology of ancient inscriptions compiled by Michael Fabricius Ferrarinus in the 1470s or 1480s, together with the explanation that the poem had been found super ripam Danuvii, above the banks of the Danube, inscribed on a tablet and accompanied by a statue of a sleeping nymph. From that point on the inscription and the statue were handed on from sylloge to sylloge, often accompanied by a drawing of the statue. The Danubian location was remote enough that no one would bother to check—that was part of the joke. In Rome, the pseudo-antique poem and statue fell into a mutually corroborating relation with a family of real statues of recumbent sleeping females, ancient and modern. The most celebrated was the Ariadne, known in the Renaissance as Cleopatra, a Roman copy of a second-century B.C.E. Pergamene original, first recorded in the Maffei collection at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Pope Julius II acquired the work 1512 and mounted it in the Belvedere as a fountain.

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22 Vatican Museums, inv. no. 548. See Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein, Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture (London: Harvey Miller; Oxford: Oxford
The statue and another like it, now lost, served as the basis for modern copies and adaptations.23 The humanist scholar Angelo Colocci, for example, installed a nude version of the sleeping nymph together with the inscribed poem as a fountain in his garden on the Pincio. Eventually inscription and statue entered into the published sylloges (fig. 3).24 Print recreated the modern work as a “false antiquity.”25 Meanwhile, the symbiosis of statue and poem was extended in drawings and paintings by Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach, who as Danubians, more or less, claimed a proprietary relationship.26


26 Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum VI.5.3*e. Otto Kurz, "Huius Nympha Loci: A Pseudo-classical Inscription and a Drawing by Dürer," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 16 (1953): 171-77. See also Millard Meiss, “Sleep in Venice: Ancient Myths and Renaissance Proclivities,” Papers of the American Philosophical Society 110 (1966): 348-82. Edgar Bierende connects Cranach’s painting of the nymph to local interest in a miraculous spring associated with the prehistoric foundation of the city of Meissen; and more generally to Tacitus’s account of the early Germans’ cult of nature and attentiveness to prophetesses; Lucas Cranach d. Ä. under deutsche
Another example of a humanist scholar's critical charity toward recent material evidence is the discovery of apparently antique medals by the German poet and antiquarian Conrad Celtis. Petrus Apianus and Bartholomeus Amantius in their anthology of antiquities, *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis* (1534), published woodcut illustrations of the artifacts. A circular image represents a nude man seated in a rocky landscape and accompanied by a winged child and a skull (fig. 4). The man holds his head in his hands as if anguished by contemplation of the skull. The caption reads: "Found by Conrad Celtis not long ago on a lead plate [or coin] in Styria, on the hill with the church near St. Andreas, in the year 1500" (*Nuper a Con. Cel. inventum in plumbea lamina in Stiria in Colle: in quo est Ecclesia circa Sanctum Andream. Anno M.D.*).27

The woodcut in fact reproduces the reverse of a self-portrait by the Venetian medallist Giovanni Boldù (d. before 1477).28 Bizarrely, the man, the child, and the skull are

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labelled in the woodcut reproduction Cloto, Lachesis, and Atropos, i.e., the Three Fates.\(^{29}\) Celtis was apparently not the only one to overestimate the composition’s antiquity. In the 1490s the sculptor Cristoforo Solari transposed the composition to a marble medallion and mounted it on the façade of the Certosa di Pavia, alongside other antiquities, including copies of Roman coins as well as the medallic portrait of Emperor Constantine, the famous “remake” of a non-existent late antique object.\(^{30}\)

On his travels Celtis was constantly detecting traces of the presence of the Druids, the ancient priestly caste that supposedly brought religion to the Germans from Greece: forest monasteries, pentagrams stamped on Frankish coins, echoes of Greek in the modern German language; identifications that were received with interest and respect by such authorities as Johannes Aventinus, his own pupil.\(^{31}\) If Celtis’s numismatic discoveries muddle pagan and neo-pagan iconographies, then his pursuit of the Druids among the Germanic antiquities points to a comparable period confusion surrounding medieval artifacts.

Conrad Celtis was a voyager in that middle territory of semi-belief, where scholarship appealed to the power of suggestion and to the charisma of names and

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\(^{29}\) The connection Celtis made to the Three Fates may have derived from a passage in Apuleius; see Peter Luh, *Kaiser Maximilian gewidmet: Die unvollendete Werkausgabe des Conrad Celtis und ihre Holzschnitte* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 331, n. 25.

\(^{30}\) Charles R. Morscheck, Jr., *Relief Sculpture for the Façade of the Certosa of Pavia, 1473-1499* (New York and London: Garland, 1978), p. 245 and fig. 61. The medallion is on the north side of the socle. For the medal portraits of Constantine and Heraclius, contrivances of a Burgundian court artist of around 1400 which were understood as antiquities by many scholars throughout the sixteenth century, see Scher, ed., *The Currency of Fame*, pp. 32-37.

associations. His historiographical and iconographical inquiries were guided by his poetic imagination. Like his contemporary Annius of Viterbo, the Dominican historian, Celtis was also something of a confidence-man, a *Hochstapler*. But these are complicated states of mind, not simple ones. Whatever traces of recent fabrication the Italian medal or the Frankish coins might have borne, Celtis believed that the modern artifacts reliably transmitted the essential content of their ancient prototypes. He felt licensed, or even compelled, to assign the works their "correct" iconographic labels. And this is the thesis that will be advanced in this essay: antiquarian error in this period was often just a matter of “looking through” the recentness of the artifact to a referential target far behind it and so to its true meaning.

The turn to material evidence was one of the keys to the development of modern historical consciousness, as Arnaldo Momigliano, Roberto Weiss, Francis Haskell, Alain Schnapp, Ingo Herklotz, and many others have demonstrated. Material relics of the past furnished a powerful rhetorical counterweight to the authority of texts. In a sense, the scholars were only following the lead of the clerics, who had been manipulating relics for centuries in their battles with oblivion. But the imagination is not cooled by relics,

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but heated. J. B. Trapp, who wrote perceptively on the bogus tombs of the Roman poets, spoke of "learned credulity," and with this phrase suggested that the errors of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century antiquarians were not simply missteps, but were in some sense a function of the new erudition.\(^{34}\) Learned credulity, in this view, was neither a regressive holdover nor a weakness of mind, but a phenomenon catalyzed by antiquarianism itself.

The facile “enlightened” view of the history of scholarship as a progressive illumination of darkness obstructed only by fools or knaves—a view voiced by Edward Gibbon himself when he described his seventeenth-century predecessors as "antiquarians of profound learning and easy confidence,\(^{35}\) implying that the true enemy of critical scholarship was a self-serving and superstitious religiosity—has until recently dominated the historical study of the origins of modern scholarship. For if truth be told, neither Roberto Weiss in his *Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* nor Francis Haskell in his *History and its Images* had anything really interesting to say about antiquarian credulity. In histories of scholarship, iconographic misadventures such as Celtis’s too often figure as incompletenesses or delays in the development of modern archeological and philological method, no more, no less. Yet one must hesitate before regretting or dismissing the “double think”\(^{36}\) of the scholars as bad faith or crass opportunism, even—


\(^{35}\) Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, [1932]), 1: 189.

\(^{36}\) For this concept, see Richard Krautheimer’s “Postscript” to his seminal article of 1942, “Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture,” in Krautheimer, *Studies in*
or perhaps especially—in the cases of Conrad Celtis and Annius of Viterbo. There must be a way to redescribe these episodes in period terms, and precisely not in the terms of those critical disciplines that were only just emerging in the Renaissance and were not institutionalized and internalized until the nineteenth century.

I would like to review several recent and imaginative approaches to learned credulity that avoid simple condemnation or judgment in modern terms; and then offer my own structural explanation for the credulity of the Renaissance archeologists. That explanation aims at validity beyond local circumstances and may therefore possibly contribute to a systematic, non-trivial comparison of European antiquarianism with patterns of scholarly inquiry and presentation in China and elsewhere.

The first of the recent approaches I wish to identify might be called the "poetic" or "romantic" model, following the lead of Charles Mitchell who in a well-known essay of 1960 brought out the fanciful, enthusiastic dimension of Quattrocento erudition, showing for example how readily Cyriacus of Ancona fell into a fervent, "goliardic"—that is, ludic and festive—worship of Mercury; or with what ingenuity Felice Feliciano invented monumental frames for the inscriptions he discovered.37 Scholarship, Mitchell showed,
flowed smoothly into ornamentalizing play. Indeed one is struck by how readily a suggestive sequence of carved letters triggered the supplementing imaginations of the scholars. The Venetian scholar Marin Sanudo (in the account of Roberto Weiss), “on being shown by the local humanist Giusto dei Giusti the inscription with the name L. VITRVVIVS on the arch of the Gavi, which was locally believed to have been part of the Arena [of Verona], jumped to the conclusion that this Vitruvius, whom he felt certain was the great architect, had also been responsible for the building of it.”

Scholarship was a matter of filling out the bare skeleton of antique remains. To charge scholars like Celtis with credulity, Mitchell taught, is to misunderstand that imagination was inextricable from scholarship. Mitchell pointed out that later antiquarians appreciated this: the sixteenth-century antiquarian Antonio Agusti despised clumsy forgeries, but admired clever practitioners like Annius of Viterbo and Pirro Ligorio.

Mitchell's approach unfolds into the more recent, and still more sophisticated, analyses of Leonard Barkan, who in his book Unearthing the Past shows how Renaissance archeology became a framework for poetic storytelling about objects and origins, dovetailing in the first decades of the sixteenth century with the emergence of a culture of art. From this point of view, the errors of the antiquaries were not errors at

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all, but rather friction produced by the interference between scholarly culture and aesthetic culture at the very moment when the modern boundaries between the two realms were first established. The “poetic” model of antiquarian credulity in the Renaissance indeed always emerges in close proximity to works of art, whether poems, pictures, effigies, or temples. The poem is fundamentally a time-bending machine, as Thomas Greene’s profound study of Renaissance intertextuality showed, and for that very reason is seldom mistaken for a document.41 The poets knew to work with and not against anachronism—learned to make a virtue out of the condition of intertextuality, in other words. The work of visual art, however, was frequently expected, in late medieval and Renaissance culture, to double as a historical document. The confusions we have been detecting around artifacts were generated by the interference between the documentary and aesthetic identities of the artifact.

Until those identities had been sorted out—if they ever have been—poetry occupied a special niche within the archeological imagination. Frequent were the reports of discoveries of the tombs of the ancient poet. A stone inscribed T. LIVIVS was unearthed in Padua around 1320 and immediately hailed as the tomb of the historian, a native son. A century later his bones were found in a sarcophagus very near the find-site of the inscription.42 In 1508 a cleric of Bratislava, Leonhard Creutzer, reported the

excavation of the tomb of Ovid in Szombathely, outfitted with six stone lamps and two plates engraved with verses, though Creutzer could not remember what they said. The tomb of the poet was the point of intersection of archeological and aesthetic cultures.

A second model that attempts to contextualize antiquarian misdatings and mischief might be designated the "forgers as critics" model, following the lead of Anthony Grafton who wrote an influential short book with a similar title. Grafton argued that forgers like Annius of Viterbo were manipulating the same sets of skills that honest scholars were developing to work with ancient texts. The passive and active approaches to the past, in other words, were symmetrical. Annius helped establish the binding rules for the choice and evaluation of sources. "A forger emerges," Grafton wrote, "as the first really modern theorist of critical reading of historians--a paradox that only a reader with a heart of stone could reject."t

This paradigm applies not only to Annius’s philological work, but also to his archeological projects. Annius announced around 1492 the "discovery" of a cache of "vases, bronzes, and marbles incised with old letters" near Viterbo. The faked finds


became the archeological basis for Annius’s extravagant theses, which he published only a few years later—in the form of counterfeited texts attributed to the Chaldean sage Berosus—on the earliest history of Europe, involving the post-diluvian movements of Noah and his progeny and the Egyptian gods. The most puzzling of Annius’s archeological fabrications is the so-called marmo osiriano, an ornamental lunette in a frame—not a forgery, in fact, but a found object (fig. 5). This object was not part of the staged "excavation"; rather, it could be seen by anyone, Annius reported, in the Cathedral, which naturally was once a Temple of Hercules: "Our forefathers...in order to keep the eternal memory of the antiquity of this city before our eyes, placed before the rostra a columnula, that is, an alabaster tablet, monument to the triumph of Osiris." The lunette, with vines, birds, and a lizard, sits in a rectangular frame with two classically looking profile heads in the corners. Annius interpreted the monument as a fragment of a triumphal column left in Viterbo by Osiris, the Egyptian god. He argued that the profile heads in the spandrel represented Osiris and his cousin Sais Xantho, a muse. This was proof that Osiris really had been to Italy. The birds and other objects in the tree in the lunette were sacred Egyptian letters symbolizing the historical encounter between the Italians, the Giants, and the Egyptians.

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47 Annius, Antiquitatum variarum volumina XVII (Paris, 1512), fol. 26r; see also his Auctores vetustissimi (Rome, 1498), fol. f i recto-f iii verso.

Annius can be forgiven for mistaking the lunette with its twisted vines and animal symbols for an antiquity, for modern scholarship judged it a late Roman artifact until 1927, when Pietro Toesca dated it to the twelfth century. The frame with the profile heads, meanwhile, belongs to more modern times, though it is not clear which times.\(^49\) It was by no means unreasonable for Annius to mistake the frame, even if less than a hundred years old, for an antiquity. The whole ensemble was strange-looking and hard to assimilate to any contemporary iconography or function. And as with the Celtis finds, there is no evidence of any doubt on the part of contemporaries. Even Giorgio Vasari two generations later adduced "the statues found at Viterbo" as evidence of the high quality of Etruscan sculpture.\(^50\)

Grafton’s point was that Annius was in many ways an exemplary textual editor. By the same token, he was a gifted archeologist. Annius believed in inscriptions, artifacts, and names rather than authorities: things, rather than what people said about them.\(^51\) He resented the prestigious textual authorities, among them the ancient Roman historians, who contradicted his version of things, mistrusting their literariness, their symbolized evil, that is, the Giants. The birds, finally, were the Italians who appealed to Osiris for help; and so forth. Annius also believed he saw an eye in the branches of the tree. A tablet with an explanatory inscription was appended to the object in 1587.\(^49\) Curran rightly compares them to the profile heads on the pulpit at Ravello in Campania, “The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and Renaissance Egyptology,” n. 76. That pulpit dates from about 1270 and has been attributed to Niccolò di Bartolommeo da Foggia, an artist not far from Niccolo Pisano; John Pope-Hennessy, Italian Gothic Sculpture (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 12; Lucilla de Lachenal, Spolia: Uso e rimpiego dell’antico dall’III al XIV secolo (Milan: Longanesi, 1995), tav. XXXV.\(^50\)

Vasari, preface to the Lives, Le Vite, 1: 220.

rhetoric. Annius struck back by inventing a purer ancient source to confirm what he knew was true, and pre-empted skepticism by planting solid archeological evidence in the ground.

“Retroactive” monuments like Annius’s marmo osiriano are best understood in the context of medieval document forgery, a well-researched and well-understood phenomenon. Medieval historians and clerks generated an enormous quantity of forged documents that came to carry real legal force. Forgery flourished, of course, in proximity to power. A famous case in point is the fantastical genealogical tree dreamt up by the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian’s court historians Ladislaus Suntheim and Jakob Mennel. The scholar Johannes Trithemius invented an entire source, Hunibald, to

52 C.R. Ligota, "Annius of Viterbo and Historical Method," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 50 (1987): 44-56. Ligota pointed out that Annius frequently noted problems in the texts he had forged. Either this was all part of the ruse or the texts had taken on some measure of authenticity in his eyes.


prove the genealogical connection between the Trojans and the Franks. To be sure, many document forgers were simply cynical opportunists. Medieval scholars and jurists were quite capable of applying rationalist criteria in accepting or rejecting evidence. But it has also been argued that concepts of the authenticity or spuriousness of a document are historically relative and that medieval forgers were simply complying with the conventions and expectations of their own time. It is argued, for example, that the overriding framework of salvational justification provided a legitimating context for document forgery, that the deceit was a “pious fraud” (pia fraus); or it is argued that such deceits were justified by a traditional, popular sense of fairness (aequitas) which transcended any simply binary opposition between the true and the false document.

With documents, the intent to deceive outright is difficult to disentangle from the desire to establish and publicize historical or legal precedents that were simply known to have been real even if the original material indexes of those precedents had gone astray. The forger, rational and irrational at once, thought “doubly.” The forger offered the fabricated documents as a legitimate substitute for an absent document that must have existed. To fabricate a document was just to complete a paper record that was


56. For such a “non-relativist” position in the debate about the historicity of rationalist skepticism, see the reply to Horst Fuhrmann by H. Patze in Historische Zeitschrift 197 (1963); and Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Falsitas pia sive reprehensibilis: Medieval Forgers and Their Intentions," in: Fälschungen im Mittelalter, vol. 1, 101-119.

incomplete only by accident, unfairly. If a tradition was old enough—custom beyond memory—then there was an almost irresistible tendency to believe it. The fabrication of a corroborating charter or artifact would have appeared to many a routine bureaucratic procedure. The mosaic of sources had a number of author-sized gaps in it; why not fill them with characters like Berosus or Hunibald?

A third recent approach treats scholarly error in the context of mythic thought. Credulity, in this paradigm, is an effect generated by a mismatch between scholarly and mythical thinking. Myth is a narrative coding of a culture’s cosmology and first principles. The ancient historian Paul Veyne in his brilliant book Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? sketched out an ancient intellectual world of "plural truths," an open competition of myths that made perfect sense according to its own internal rules and even made room for what Veyne called the scholarly practice of "critical credulity." Veyne’s model is adaptable to Renaissance culture. As Frank Borchardt demonstrated in his book German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth, the critical historiography of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was often just a matter of one myth replacing another. Although Renaissance scholars were quick to condemn the errors of their predecessors, they were apt to replace those errors with more errors. Borchardt called this process the "topos of critical rejection," or to give it its period name, anasceva, or "dismantling." Borchardt

argued that scholars were reluctant to dismantle a tradition and leave nothing in its place. \(^{60}\) That is, they were neither satisfied with Veyne’s “plural truths,” nor willing to face a past completely unstructured by myth. \(^{61}\)

Because myth and written history share the same narrative structure, they are easily knitted together into a common fabric. Cosmogonies or myths of national origins were frequently retained, in this period, as a prelude to more recent and better documented histories. The initiated could easily detect the seam between myth and history, perhaps tacitly sanctioning the mythic prologue through an euhemeristic assumption, that is, the theory that heroic or fabulous narratives were rooted in real but forgotten events. Other readers allowed myth and history to flow into one another. “Credulity” was a way of reading.

Antiquarianism, as Ingo Herklotz points out, is curiosity about every aspect of ancient life except events. \(^{62}\) Antiquarianism, therefore, is by its nature out of rhythm with both myth and history. Its findings, which never quite settle into their own narrative patterns, can be used either to support or to disrupt existing narratives. Objects and artifacts connect to one another across invisible webs, generating mysterious effects of survival, revival, and anachronism, as the imaginative early twentieth-century art

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\(^{61}\) Riccardo Fubini, even while warning against a voguish modern “complaisance” or even “connivance” with myth, argues that Annius of Viterbo was an authentic myth-maker, capable of expressing cultural crisis and malaise by symbolic means; “Annio da Viterbo nella tradizione erudita toscana,” p. 341.

historian Aby Warburg recognized. Antiquarianism opens more readily onto stories about art than onto narrative historiography guided by historical reason.

In modernity, the concept of myth names a flight from the rule of fact. Myth narrates poetically and so becomes the recourse of those who are unconvinced that linear sequences of documents or artifacts can tell the whole story; or of those unwilling to adapt human existence to a historical narrative “fenced in by the cardinal mysteries” of beginnings and endings, as Wolfgang Iser has put it. For cultures deprived of the framework of meaning provided by, at one end, etiological myths and, at the other, prophecy—i.e., devices that unlock those cardinal mysteries—must be prepared to take seriously the mere events of human history. Iser argues that such cultures develop literature and art, fictional re-enactments of life, as compensations for the loss of its cosmogonies and eschatologies. The credulous early modern scholar, then, is that seeker of origins who is already beyond myth but not yet ready to surrender to art. Giambattista Vico, who grasped the power of “poetic wisdom,” found himself in just that predicament, still protesting deep into the eighteenth century the dogma of fact established by the Renaissance scholars. But this also made him the first to anticipate the modern rebellion, initiated by Nietzsche, against historical reason.

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Each of these three accounts of learned credulity in the Renaissance identifies a mixing of categories that in modernity are notionally kept distinct: historical scholarship is compromised, in the first instance, by the poetical or aesthetic imagination; in the second by propagandistic or doctrinal ends; and in the third by mythic thinking.

I would like to offer still another account of early modern scholarly credulity, here too attempting to overcome what Grafton calls the "distressingly rectilinear" rationalist accounts.\textsuperscript{65} In this account, the temporal instability of historical artifacts follows from their \textit{mutual substitutability} in the imagination of the antiquarian. The basic premise behind any pre-modern use of artifacts as documents was the membership of the artifact within a typological class.\textsuperscript{66} These classes were structured as chains of artifacts connected to a common source and succeeding and substituting for one another across time. In general, pre-modern culture coped with deficits of authority by inventing chains that ran backwards to a remote, identity-granting origin. If the true meaning of a word was desired, etymology would yield the answer; if a family required a new basis for its hold on power, the genealogist built a chain.\textsuperscript{67} The chain of substitutions stretching out behind any given artifact was, in practice, invisible and unreconstructible. The argument is not that production (of paintings, sculptures, or buildings) was in reality guided by

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{65} Grafton, \textit{Forgers and Critics}, 103.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Richard Krautheimer made a similar point about medieval buildings in his article, “Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture,” \textit{Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes} 5 (1942): 1ff. The model outlined here is basically an extension of Krautheimer’s thesis beyond its original chronological and medial bounds.
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constant reference to a stable origin-point. Substitution was rather the theory of production that guided the perception, interpretation, and use of artifacts.  

Substitution was a theory about the production and transmission of artifacts that allowed people to work with evidence under the tacit awareness that material vehicles did sometimes need to be replaced or repaired, that messages on material vehicles did sometimes need to be reinscribed or redrawn, and that messages could even be copied to a new vehicle altogether, just as texts were copied from manuscript to manuscript. Archeological thinking is in principle the opposite of substitutional thinking, in that archeology has decided not to accept passively the written text’s claim to be the endpoint of an invisible but reliable process of transmission and therefore a trustworthy source of information. But in its eagerness to improve upon the poor evidence of texts, early archeology accepted bad material evidence, and so ended up, paradoxically, repeating patterns of reception proper to the substitutional model. Lorenzo Valla, for instance, pointed out in his treatise on the Donation of Constantine that the evidence produced by the Papacy in favor of the Donation's authenticity was all textual. Why there was no corresponding, clinching material evidence, he wondered, challenging the papal advocates: "I should have expected you to show gold seals, marble inscriptions, a thousand authors," he wrote. "This Donation of Constantine," he went on, "so magnificent and astounding, cannot be proved by any copies, in gold, in silver, in brass, in marble, or even in books, but only, if we believe it, on paper, or parchment" he

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68 On the dynamic role of the substitutional model within the self-understanding and self-theorization of Renaissance art, see Wood and Nagel, “Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism” (as in n. 1).
wrote. Valla implies that he would have been convinced of the Donation’s reality if such a material copy could be found—as if that copy, untested by any science of historical epigraphy, would have proven anything! Scholars in Valla’s time, presented with a material artifact, tended to underrate the vagaries of material transmission and instead to presume a strong connection to an original referent. That underrating was the very basis in Valla’s century for the evidentiary force of artifacts. Archeology is thought of as the discipline that overcomes the layers of mediation that separate us from the past. But early archeology, to the extent that its preference for the material depended on an optimistic faith in transmission, was actually working with mediation.

The substitutable artifact par excellence was the painted icon, the portrait of a holy personage claiming a direct link back to ancient times. Valla, while dismissing the spurious Lentulus letter, an eyewitness account of the appearance of Christ, came to discuss a famous Roman painting: "Similarly,—there are indeed ten thousand things of this sort in Rome,—among sacred objects is shown the panel portrait of Peter and Paul."

Valla's point was to cast doubt on the legend that the panel was miraculously produced as a confirmation of a vision by Emperor Constantine. But, significantly, Valla does not doubt the portraits themselves: "I do not say this because I deny that they are portraits of the apostles (would that the letter sent in the name of Lentulus about the portrait of Christ

69 Lorenzo Valla, Treatise on the Donation of Constantine, transl. Christopher B. Coleman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), pp. 74-75, 80-81; see also 86-87 on the value of numismatic and epigraphic evidence.

were as genuine, instead of being no less vicious and spurious than this “privilege” which we have refuted), but because that panel was not produced for Constantine by Sylvester. At that story my mind cannot restrain its astonishment.”71 When it came to painted icons, in other words, Valla dropped his critical guard. He was ready to believe that the icons were substitutionally linked to their referents. The portrait of god, saint, or king, the relief sculpture, the tomb, and the round temple all succeeded in concretizing a past that was otherwise ghostly and obscure. Reference, once recognized, appeared ancient, inevitable, incontrovertible. A monumental shaping of the past, no matter how spurious, had a powerful *placebo* effect on the imagination of the beholder.

Earlier we noted that artifacts generate their own temporalities that disable any easy coupling with histories of texts. The substitutional model is still another way of explaining why archeology was out of sync with philology in this period, and why antiquarianism retained its systematic and non-narrative character for so long.72

The hypothesis of mutually substitutable links in a referential chain explains how white vine scroll and the minuscule alphabet, no matter how recent the manuscripts that transmitted them, were held to have preserved the ancient ways of bookmaking; or how the strange iconographies of the medals found by Conrad Celtis could have been understood as antique. The hypothesis of substitutability shows how Brunelleschi was able to look through the eleventh- and twelfth-century buildings of Florence to the true meanings hiding behind them, the good form of ancient Roman building. Brunelleschi understood the meaning of SS. Apostoli or the Baptistery to be a referential quantum preserved across a chain of artifacts, some prior and now lost sequence of intermediary

72 See also Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian."
buildings leading from antiquity to the eleventh century. Any knowledge that one happened to possess about the particular or local circumstances of the building's absolute position within a chain of imitations was not allowed to interfere with the referential linkage and the presumption of substitutability. Brunelleschi probably knew that his models were in an important sense “medieval.” But they substituted for the missing ancient models that he really wanted. Neither architects nor scholars were capable of a philology of architecture that might have distinguished building fabrics and served as the basis for a reconstruction of building histories. The identity of the building was for them its meaning, not its physical being, which distended complexly across time and was for any practical purpose unreconstructible.

The chronicler Filippo Villani reported in 1330 that the Florentine Baptistery had once been a temple of Mars and that Christianization had brought only minor changes. It is not clear whether Villani meant that the present Baptistery replaced an ancient temple, or whether his culture had forgotten after two and a half centuries when the present Baptistery was actually built and believed that it was in fact the ancient temple itself, reconsecrated and refurnished. But that ambiguity is typical. The distinction between "being" an old building and "replacing" an earlier building is never quite drawn. It may therefore simply be unhelpful to ask whether Brunelleschi or for that matter Vasari really thought that the Baptistery was executed in pre-Christian times. They believed that

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73 John Onians argued that Brunelleschi knew perfectly well that the Baptistery was not an ancient building; rather he was attempting to reanimate and perfect a medieval Tuscan tradition of building; *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 130-36.

it stood in a reliable substitutional relationship to some original pagan building on that site, and that was enough.

A few period voices actually spelled out the principle of substitution. Annius of Viterbo, justifying his own faith in the *marmo osiriano*, admitted the possibility that it was only a replacement of a lost original: "Whether this is truly the tablet," he wrote in his *Commentaries*, "or a substitute for it—the original having collapsed through age—we cannot yet be certain. Either way, we consider the tablet to have survived." (An vero *haec illa sit, an et vetustate labenti, ad eius exemplar suffecta, nondum compertum habemus. Existimamus tamen eandem permanere.*) Walter Stephens calls this a "doctrine of congruence": any inscription no matter when fabricated could be defended as a substituted copy of a lost original. Equally revealing are the arguments that the scholar Vincenzo Borghini in 1565-1567 assembled in defence of the tradition of Florence’s antiquity.⁷⁶ Borghini adduced the Baptistery as evidence, but acknowledged that many experts considered the building’s polychrome marble revetment to have been applied in the middle ages. To meet this objection Borghini explicitly introduced a substitutional model of architectural history: he argued that the revetment imitated an earlier decorative scheme on the same building and thus reliably reflected antiquity.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ To prove that ancient buildings had been polychromed, Borghini cited a passage from Gregory of Tours on late antique churches. There is evidence that other authorities agreed with him that colored marble was an ancient custom, and that the decoration of the new Cappella Sistina in S. Maria Maggiore was imitating prototypes understood to be not
Substitutional thinking is compatible with—may even encourage—a normative approach to the achievements of the past. Gombrich showed that scribes and architects alike were more interested in reforming what they saw to be a corrupted traditions than in seeking out what might be today considered the historical identity of their models. They wanted good models, not necessarily old models; and they took their models where they could find them. The strictly historical study of architecture was overwhelmed by the normative imperative.

Virtual or desired transmission chains were generated through triages of essential and accidental features. The Florentine architects saw only those features of the Romanesque basilicas they wished to see and ignored the rest. Only the essential, the supposed links to Rome, “made it through,” while all the rest was dismissed as merely accidental. What looks like error to modern eyes is just the drawing of a different internal frontier between the constitutive and the contingent. The fantastical frame drawn around a real inscription in a fifteenth-century sylloge is ignored by the modern


epigrapher as a useless and misleading supplement. But that is precisely because the modern scholar considers the material support of the inscription to be good evidence about the past, potentially as important as the content of the text. The Renaissance antiquarian was slow to arrive at this idea.

Renaissance antiquarian credulity was therefore the result of a clash between two models of the production of artifacts: on the one hand, the substititional model, that underrates the transmission process; and on the other hand, the archeological, that reads every artifact as an inalienable trace of its originary point and therefore as a powerful threat to textual authority. They are two competitive models of artifact production, two incompatible conceptions of the origins of artifacts, each with its own internal truth. The nefarious or farcical aspects of Annius's Viterbo “excavation,” take your pick, are only a dramatic projection of the deep-structural interference between the substititional and archeological paradigms; as if all the latent contradictions of late fifteenth-century antiquarianism were exposed in one scholar’s project. The archeological preference for material relics over texts and the mystical confidence in the mutual substitutability of artifacts across time collided, but held their ground, in Annius’s mind.

Archeology made Celtis and Annius possible by tempting them into an overzealous imposition of the substitution model onto recent objects, into the imagining or fabricating of links in non-existent chains. The power of the artifact translated the scholar back into the very frame of mind, confused and credulous, that scholarship was trying to overcome. Celtis and Annius were accidental artists, in the sense that they fell upon the truth of the anachronism of the artifact, its capacity to bend time. But they exercised their creativity within the wrong paradigm, scholarship instead of art, and so it
came to resemble either folly or crime. For archaeology over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries found its identity in the struggle to cancel out the noise and distortion of transmission. Error, in that same period, was tamed and caged within the institution of art. Only artists were allowed to make error their project. The scholars, meanwhile, found themselves liberated into an unending dialectic of critique. Modern scholarship has defined itself precisely against such doubled thinking. The empiricist algorithm locates its own origins in an overcoming of the participatory and divided consciousness. Empiricism is so fundamentally invested in a primal self-differentiation from forgery that when it doubles back on itself and tries to perceive its own historical origins, it loses its capacity for objectivity.

Before long the rinascimento dell’antichità was itself receding into the past, its achievements especially in scholarship and in the visual arts benchmarks for later generations, then as now. From the perspective of the later sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, that first and most creative Renaissance, the Renaissance of the humanists, took on a prestigious threshold character, at once facing backward to the deep past and forward to the modern era. In this way, some archeological fictions of the Renaissance entered into a strange second career, retaining their referential, documentary force, their rapport with antiquity, even as they were fully grasped as fabrications of the moderns.

An example of such an illogical retrospective appeal to a Renaissance “document” appears in the discussion of the origins of Montepulciano by Spinello Benci, a seventeenth-century historian. The Renaissance sculptor Andrea Sansovino had modelled in terracotta a colossal portrait of Lars Porsenna, the semi-legendary king of the
sixth century B.C.E.; according to Vasari the work was commissioned by the citizens of Montepulciano.\textsuperscript{79} The portrait participated in the interurban Tuscan rivalry that for some decades had hinged on claims to Etruscan origins. The so-called “sepulchre of Lars Porsenna” at Chiusi, in fact the ruins of an ancient hydraulic engineering system, was investigated by Alberti, Filarete, Peruzzi, and Antonio da Sangallo. The Florentine cleric Lorenzo Dati composed a fanciful chronicle, the \textit{Historia Porsennae}, posing as a translation of an Etruscan text by one Caio Vibenna.\textsuperscript{80} In 1492 the Sienese presented the funerary urn of Lars Porsenna, inscribed conveniently in Latin, to Lorenzo de’ Medici.

The fifteenth century knew Etruscan civilization mainly through the textual accounts of the Romans, and everyone wanted more.\textsuperscript{81} The Montepulcian colossus intervened in this story, filling a portrait-sized gap in the monumental record. Sansovino did not conceal his authorship, nor was it forgotten; still, the artist chose a prestigious and rare format, the colossus, and an unconventional medium for such a colossus, terracotta, lending the figure an archaic flavor. A terracotta bust, 46 cm. in height, only recently resurfaced in a

\textsuperscript{79} Vasari, \textit{Le vite}, 4: 522.


private collection, seems to match the accounts by Vasari and others. It would be difficult to attribute it to Sansovino without those notices; indeed it was still judged an antiquity by Luigi Lanzi in the late eighteenth century. Sansovino’s colossus had evidently already been reduced to a bust when Spinello Benci, secretary to the Medici, cited and reproduced it in woodcut as the frontispiece to his history of Montepulciano of 1641 (fig. 6). Benci knew that Sansovino was the author of the statue; he describes it as a “memorial” erected by the town to its founder. And yet the work figures in his account almost as if it were contributing to the claim, dear to him, of an ancient Etruscan presence in Montepulciano. It was as if the fact that the citizens of Montepulciano had commissioned a memorial in the early sixteenth century rendered the myth of Etruscan origins a little more probable. The folk of the sixteenth century, after all, were just that much closer to antiquity, or so Benci implies; the old traditions were perhaps still intact then, the invisible lines of communication to the deepest past still open. Modernity, by contrast, our own mid-seventeenth century, Benci seems to be saying, is forever cut off from the living past and has to make do with mere scholarship. It is worth wondering why a three-dimensional “forgery” like Sansovino’s was—perhaps still is—more effective than Lorenzo Dati’s obviously fictitious chronicle. The sculpted document activates the magic of figuration. The history of archeology is also a history of works, and for that reason can never quite be assimilated to the rest of the history of scholarship.

82 See the exhibition catalogues Il Giardino di San Marco: Maestri e compagni del giovane Michelangelo (Florence: Silvana, 1992), no. 26; and L’Officina della maniera: varietà e fierezza nell’arte fiorentina del Cinquecento fra le due repubbliche (1494-1530) (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), no. 46. The surface of the head is painted, perhaps to resemble bronze. Vasari, Le vite, 4: 510, also mentioned a pair of terracotta heads by Sansovino representing the emperors Nero and Galba and “ritratte da medaglie antiche.”

83 Spinello Benci, Storia della città di Montepulciano (Florence, 1641), frontispiece and p. 7.