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CHAPTER 3

Heralds of Antiquity

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini and the British “Thucydides”

David Rundle

Humanists travelled, albeit often grudgingly. They had better reason to complain of the discomforts and dangers of international trips than we who sit in economy class. For them, a journey could all too often be positively life-threatening. All the same, for many, simply staying at home was rarely an option; the pursuit of a career and of fortune made them frequent voyagers. I have elsewhere discussed several of the uses of ‘beyond Italy’ to the Italian humanists, which undercut the rhetoric of disdain toward foreigners they sometimes paraded. They themselves would usually admit only to one such use: that their foreign sojourns allowed them to recover and release from captivity classical texts previously unavailable to civilization – that is to say, unavailable to their own coteries.1 The pursuit of archival archaeology was an activity central to the agenda of the studia humanitatis, written up in their own accounts as heroic tales of the humanist hunter-gatherer, enduring the privations of travel to distant climes in order to track down their quarry that would provide intellectual nourishment to sate even the most voracious learned appetite.

The following brief intervention unpacks one such incident in the heroic history of humanist archival archaeology. I say an incident but, as we shall see, it was, in truth, a feigned event, a myth rather than a moment and, in every sense, a pious fraud. The tale’s hero (if such he can be called in this context) was Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, whose own career as a manuscript hunter-gatherer is said to have taken place over two decades before he became pope and when he was merely secretary to Cardinal Niccolò Albergati. Piccolomini was in the cardinal’s entourage when, in the summer of 1435, Albergati presided at the Congress of Arras, the international conference which was to see England’s chances of a durable victory in France dealt a death-blow by the end of the Burgundian alliance.2 In those same months, Piccolomini was despatched to

2 I discuss the cultural activities at Arras in my soon-to-be-complete England and the Identity of Italian Renaissance Humanism. See also Jocelyn G. Dickenson, The Congress of Arras 1435: A Study in Medieval Diplomacy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955); Friedrich Schneider, Der
Britain. It was a journey of which he could summon up vivid memories twenty years later when, as Pius II, he composed his *Commentarii*. And well might he remember it, not least because it gave him lasting proof of the travails of travel.

The mission with which he had been entrusted was to take him to the Stewart court in Scotland, but his first attempt to reach there was thwarted by the English refusal to give him safe conduct. At least this abortive trip, Pius later recalled, allowed him *populosas ditissimasque Lundonias vidit et Sancti Pauli nobile templum*, as well as the tomb of the English martyr, Thomas Becket, in Canterbury. Having had to return to the continent, he set out again by ship, this time with the intention of sailing directly to Scotland. During the journey, though, such a storm arose that Piccolomini feared for his life and believed his best recourse was to beg the Virgin for assistance; he sent his prayers with a promise that, if she saved him, he would, on landing, walk barefoot to the first church dedicated in her honour. Who of us is fit to fathom the ineffable kindness of the Blessed Virgin in granting his wish and letting him keep his promise? He must have landed near Dunbar and he himself says he walked ten miles, to Whitekirk, an established site of pilgrimage where a new hostel had recently been built. And this was at a time of the year when Scotland is not

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at its sunniest. He records in his *Commentarii* that from that moment he suffered the rheumatic pains that were to be his companion throughout the rest of his life.

It is little wonder, then, that he does not remember Scotland fondly in his recollections. Yet, his *Commentarii* are not a full narrative of what he suffered there: it is only from a later letter that we are told that his teeth fell out during his time in north Britain. It is another epistle that gives the lie to the description in his memoirs of his rejection of the over-solicitous attention of the local ladies: he sired a son while in Scotland (the child died in infancy).

It is also the case that the specific episode that interests us does not appear in the *Commentarii* and is mentioned only in a letter written in 1451, while Piccolomini was employed at the imperial court, and sent to a German colleague, Johannes Hinderbach. The subject of the letter is the etymology of the term ‘herald’, which the humanist traces to the classical concept of the hero, characters lesser than the gods but greater than human and whom the letter equates with military veterans.

At the start of his epistle, the humanist recalls that: *apud Angliam, quae olim Britannia dicebatur, in sacramento nobili aedibus sancti Pauli Lundoniensis vetus historia in manus venit*. This venerable manuscript in St Paul’s Cathedral, he went on to explain, contained an elegant Latin version of Thucydides, including a passage which described the generations of heroes who inhabited India from the time of Dionysus’ invasion until that of Alexander. Some scholars have recounted this information without even a quiver of an eyebrow; others have felt their heart-beat quicken in surprise and hope that it is true in all its details. It would, indeed, be remarkable if there were a ninth-century translation of any major pagan historical work in a Latin acceptable to humanists;
it would surely revolutionise our understanding of the Carolingian Renaissance and its interest in Greek. What would be equally breathtaking is that, faced with such a find, a self-promoting humanist like Piccolomini did not proclaim it to the world with fanfares and prestissimo, but instead waited a decade and a half, and then, sotto voce, dropped the reference into a letter with preternatural sprezzatura. If this does not make us suspicious, another basic fact should: there is, naturally, no place in The History of the Peloponnesian War for mythical histories of India, the subject of Pius’ passage. Though many have recognised that Thucydides could not have been his source, scholarship has tended either to throw up its hands or to shrug its shoulders at the quandary; the identification of a plausible alternative has been long in coming.

I cannot claim that like a humanist I had to travel far or delve deep in dusty archives to unravel this conundrum – but, then, neither did pious Æneas when he composed his letter. To put the case plainly: Thucydides has no passage that describes the descent of kings in India from Dionysus to Heracles, but another Greek historian does – Flavius Arrianus. There can be no doubt that Arrian is the source for Æneas’ description, as it presents much of the same information in the same order. It might be wondered how Piccolomini came to know the text of this late antique historian; Arrian’s major works, a biography of Alexander supplemented by a book entitled Indica, were unknown in the West until 1413, when they were brought to Italy from Byzantium, with many other texts, by Giovanni Aurispa. It is true that, fairly soon after its arrival, Arrian was rendered into Latin by Pier Paolo Vergerio, but that scholar’s career is often taken as a case-study in the apparent dangers of accepting employment

11 On this topic, see Michael W. Herren ed., The Sacred Nectar of the Greeks: the study of Greek in the West in the Early Middle Ages (London: King’s College, 1988).
13 Compare Wolkan, Briefwechsel, 111, i, 11–13 with Arrian, Indica, vii–x (see Appendix below).
beyond humanism's Italian heartland. Celebrated for his early association with the *studia humanitatis* and, in particular, for his tract on education, *De Ingenuis Moribus*, Vergerio entered the service of the Holy Roman Emperor, Sigismund at the end of the Council of Constance. It is said that, in Buda, Vergerio ‘disappeared into obscurity’; it was there, probably in the mid-1430s, that he produced his translation of Arrian. His work was not known in Italy during his own lifetime and only reached the peninsula when the autograph copy was offered as a gift to Alfonso the Magnanimous, King of Naples in 1454; at that court, the cabal of scholars was unimpressed by Vergerio’s prose and went about refining it “to such an effect that the original Arrian was almost completely obscured in the process, but at least it was now in elegant Latin.”

If we ask who it was that made a present of the work to Alfonso, the answer is none other than Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini. He had followed Vergerio’s footsteps into imperial employ and in his master’s library had found this work. He had shown it, in the mid-1440s, to his former colleague, Tommaso Parentucelli, who had a copy made. He also mentioned it in his own educational treatise, recommending “Arrian, whom Pier Paolo translated” as a suitable text for the classroom. That treatise was written the year before his letter to Hinderbach.

In short, there was no copy of Thucydides; there was no ninth-century manuscript; there was no discovery on the hallowed ground of St Paul’s.

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18 The copy is now Paris BnF, MS nouv. acq. lat. 1302. It is the only extant manuscript cited by Stadter in *CTC* III, 5 but there is another codex recorded in Kristeller, *Iter* III, 117b, Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 9893–9894, fols. 1–116 (non vidi).


20 The first translation of Thucydides was, of course, that of Lorenzo Valla, a friend of Aeneas, made at the behest of Aeneas’ former colleague, Nicholas V. That translation was completed in 1452 and there is no evidence that news of the work reached Aeneas ahead its completion. On the translation, see Pade, “Thucydides” *CTC* VIII, 120–126 and, for the sole extant letter between Valla and Piccolomini, see *Laurentii Valle Epistole*, eds. Ottavio Besomi and Mariangela Regoliosi (Padua: Antenore, 1984), no. 20 [243–44].
Piccolomini was, in fact, working from a humanist translation of another Greek author, available to him at his desk. This much, I should say, will not come as a complete surprise to the best scholars. While I was unpicking this issue, so was another – and Gilbert Tournoy has already demonstrated Piccolomini’s debt in print. All that leaves me to do on that specific point is to provide, as it were, chapter and verse corroborating the insight by presenting in an appendix the relevant passages of Vergerio’s translation alongside portions of the text of the epistle. But, before you turn the page, I want us to consider further what Piccolomini was up to in his letter; we now know the detail of what was happening but what was going on?

We can discount the possibility that the mention of Thucydides is simply a lapsus calami, the humanist misremembering his source’s identity; the detail he provides of his supposed discovery demonstrates that. We can also exclude the suggestion that it was done to fool his correspondent; their intellectual proximity and the fact that Hinderbach most likely knew Vergerio’s translation of Arrian militates against it. We should suspect that something more is afoot – and the conclusion of Piccolomini’s letter strengthens our suspicion. There, having given his made-up genealogy of the concept of the herald, he reiterates his spurious claim that the term had, in the ancient world, been reserved for men who had seen active service in battle – but, he goes on, why the term is now used by base men who have never fought, he could not tell, unless it was that everything is subject to decline: cur autem nostris diebus qui nunquam militarunt et abiecti quidam homines hoc nomen assequuntur; nescio causam, nisi quia omnia degenerant . . . It is a comment that might remind the reader of the manner in which another humanist began a tract on a similar topic: Leonardo Bruni, writing thirty years before Piccolomini, opened his De militia by saying he was curious to investigate the origins of the military, a tradition which, he said: verum ita per varios degeneravit mores, ita per


22 On Hinderbach, I have found useful Daniela Rando, Dai margini la memoria: Johannes Hinderbach (1418–1486) (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003); Fabrizio Leonardelli, “Pro bibliotheca erigenda.” Manoscritti e incunaboli del vescovo di Trento Johannes Hinderbach (1465–1486) (Trent: Biblioteca Comunale, 1989); I manoscritti medievali della biblioteca comunale di Trento, ed. Adriana Paolini (Florence: SISMEL Galluzzo, 2006), sub indice. For his knowledge of the Arrian translation, see Rando, Dai margini, 192.

23 Wolkan, Briefwechsel, 111, i, 15.
multa secula e via deflexit, ut proprie videatur nature primevique instituti parva admodum vestigia retinere.²⁴ Bruni proceeds by discussing Greek authors – Hippodamus and Phileas of Carthage – whose texts were no more available to him than Thucydides to Piccolomini, but he had culled knowledge of them honestly, through his study of Aristotle’s *Politics*. If there are similarities of outlook and approach between Bruni and Piccolomini, and if, indeed, the latter is intentionally echoing the former, there is also a substantial contrast. Bruni’s criticism of modernity is up-front, while Piccolomini’s undercuts what has gone before, subverting the apparently straightforward celebration of the institution of the herald. Except, of course, that the description is not straightforward – and that, surely, is the purpose of his fabrication of his ‘discovery’: it is intended to alert the sharp-eyed *lecteur*, to act as a warning for those who have ears to hear.

It is not, I would contend, simply a case that a reader aware of either or both Arrian and Thucydides would recognise something is amiss. Nor is it simply that the distant setting for the author’s act of archival archaeology is supposed to seem improbable (however thin the pickings Poggio found during his years in England).²⁵ There is something more here – a submerged reference that, if brought to the surface, should cause the alarm to be sounded. If we accept that Piccolomini made a conscious choice in the location and the identity of his specious discovery then we can say, in brief, that what he found was a *Britannus Thucydides*. Placing that place and that name together would not have been original to the humanist, for he could have found them used as feigned praise, mocking a certain poet called Cimber, in a satire by Vergil. He could have not known that phrase from the poem itself but, instead, he would have read it in the few lines quoted by Quintilian:

> Quaedam tamen adhuc vetera vetustate ipsa gratius nitent, quaedam et necessario interim sumuntur, ut ‘nuncupare’ et ‘fari’: multa alia etiam


audentius inseri possunt, sed ita demum si non appareat affectatio, in quam mirifice Vergilius:

Corinthiorum amator iste verborum,
Thucydidis Britannus, Atticae febres,
tau Gallicum, min et sphin – et male illisit:
ita omnia ista verba miscuit fratri.
Cimber hic fuit. . .26

Piccolomini made the choices he did when constructing his history as a hunter-gatherer because they allowed him to allude to a fragment of an ancient author known through another whose complete work had recently been rediscovered. Not only that, but the passage in Quintilian, as quoted above, is discussing the possible use of archaic terms – and, of course, what the future Pius is doing in his epistle is creating an antique aura for a modern term. I must say that I, for one, cannot but sit back and admire the neatness of what he has done. He has given us not an episode in the history of archival archaeology but a subtle testimony to the humanist cult of those activities. But he has also done something rather more: I have talked above about the description of his ‘discovery’ acting as an alert, a warning or an alarm. I deployed those terms because it seems to me that what is going on in this letter is that Piccolomini is demonstrating his mastery of that rhetorical technique known as dissimulatio or ironia: the art, as Cicero put it (in another re-found work), of saying something but meaning something else (alia dicuntur ac sentias).27 Cicero advises, in such cases, that the orator’s intention can be signified by some small thing (parva res) – and it is as such a gesture or hint that, I would suggest, Piccolomini opens his epistle with the tale of his supposed exploits, his allusion to his Britannus Thucydides letting the reader know they need to be careful when they read what follows.28

Yet, some might want to object, the implication of this discussion is that the future pope lied. That is true enough, but it hardly places Piccolomini apart

26 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, VIII.3.xxvii–xxix. It should be noted that, in the Appendix Vergiliana, the relevant poem, Catalepton 11, actually reads “Thucydidès tyrannus.” There is recent discussion in David K. Oosterhuis, “The ‘Catalepton’: Myths of Virgil” (unpublished PhD. thesis, University of Minnesota, 2007), 76–102.


from his fellow scholars. What is at fault in that reaction is not the humanists themselves but our desire that those we wish to consider our intellectual forefathers should act like the heroes we want them to be. But, as anyone who has studied a Poggio or a Filelfo or, indubitably, a George of Trebizond knows, these were not peaceable souls, their minds solely on quiet contemplation and shunning any baser activities. Obviously, we may account it progress that we can name no intellectuals nowadays with a hot head or sharp tongue or roaming hands; we know that temperance in all things is the modern academic’s watchword; and we may be proud that scholarship has successfully purged itself of the humour and the playfulness that bedevilled even Pius. We might, indeed, claim that modernity has not made life degenerate but, rather, refined. Oh, brave new world.

There is a coda to this discussion. Piccolomini’s epistle was not one of those opuscula that quickly became forgotten. On the contrary, like many of his works it gained an international reputation in the decades after his death. It was printed at Cologne as de officio et origine heraldorum tractatus in the early 1470s and, from that edition, became the basis for a discussion of heralds by Adrian de But. Meanwhile, in England, the epistle became one of the first and one of the few humanist texts to be translated into the English vernacular in the fifteenth century. Its circulation in manuscript suggests that its readers in the country where the discovery of the Latin Thucydides is supposed to have occurred took the text as a sober disquisition on the history of heraldry. They, like But, became the butts (unwitting and unintended) of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini’s learned humour. They provide an object-lesson in how irony – the mode of expression which escapes any attempts to have an agreed punctuation mark imposed upon it (despite John Wilkins, Alcanter de Brahman, and emoticons) – is difficult to identify. Of course, those early readers

29 Tournoy, “Enea Silvio Piccolomini nella storiografia fiamminga.”
30 Copies of the Latin text with British provenance are: London, British Library, mss Harl. 6149, fols. 79–82 and Stowe 668, fols. 3–5, and Oxford, Queens College, MS 161, fols. 63–64v. It is also recorded in the contents list to Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 6729A but does not now appear in the manuscript, which was owned by John Gunthorp. The English translation is available in the following medieval manuscripts: London, College of Arms, MS 63, fols. 41–51v and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 764, fols. 1–8, with Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 271, fols. 64v–73 (s. xv3), presenting a text which begins with this translation but soon diverges; there are also several copies of the translation from the sixteenth century or later.
of Piccolomini were not the only ones who failed to get the joke. At the same time, perhaps there were a few who chortled. If nothing else, we can say for certain that Piccolomini’s engagement with the practice of humanist archival archaeology did not stop with his own demise. In the early sixteenth century, the Scotsman Hector Boece announced to the world that he himself had rediscovered some long-lost manuscripts. Their story was this: there was a Scottish king present at the Fall of Rome in 410 AD who took a chest of books for safekeeping to the far-off Hebridean island of Iona. Boece admits he was not the first to know of them: he heard tell that, when visiting Scotland, the future Pius II wanted to travel to the Hebrides in the hope of unearthing those venerable books and finding, in particular, lost sections of the text of Livy – but circumstances did not allow the journey to take place. The tale is implausible in so many aspects, not least the idea that Piccolomini, after his recent experience, would willingly step onto another ship setting out for the North Sea. Did Boece make it up simply because he wanted to place himself in association with a humanist who had achieved such pre-eminence? Or did he mention Piccolomini’s name because he had read the epistle in which he announced his Thucydides and recognised it for the fabrication it was? Was Boece, then, providing that small thing which should let us know that some dissimulation is occurring here? We cannot know. We are left only with the certainty that this Scotsman wanted to present himself as a participant in the humanist escapades of archival archaeology in which a few were hunter-gatherers, but others were farmers, harvesting a reputation from the tales they nurtured in their adventurous prose.

Appendix
Piccolomini’s Debt to Pier Paolo Vergerio’s Translation of Arrian

I have used the copy of Pier Paolo Vergerio’s translation of Arrian, which is Paris, BnF, Ms nov. acq. lat. 1302; De rebus indicis begins at fol. 139. I have compared it with the text as provided by Wolkan, Briefweschel (see n. 8 above), marking specific verbal echoes with superscript letters.

Olim quidem igitur indi fuerunt pastores sicut scythe qui non sunt aratores sed in curribus errant aliam atque aliam partem scythe transferred non inhabitantes in urbibus neque templum deorum colentes sic neque indis olim urbes erant neque deorum templum fabricata sed induebant quidem pelles ferarum quascunque interficiabant comedeabant autem *cortices arborum* vocantur autem arbores ille indorum lingua tala et nascitur in illis quemadmodum in arboribus palmarum cura summitates quasi pinguedo [*sic*] quaedam Comedeabant autem et de animalibus silvestribus quaecunque ceperant *crudas carnes* & hoc priusquam dionysius venisset in terram indorum. Dionysio autem adveniente postquam obtinuit indos condidit urbes et urbibus leges posuit *fuitque indis dator vini quemadmodum & graecis* ac docuit seminari terram dans eis semina sive non praeterierint hinc triptolemus quando missus fuit a cerere ad seminandum totam terram sive ante triptolemus aliquis iste dionysius adveniens in terra indorum dedit eis semina frugum domesticarum. Primusque dionysius *diugavit boves sub aratro* & ma[fol. 143]iorem indorum fecit aratores loco pastorum *armavitque eos armis martialibus* ac *deos colere* docuit cum alios cum se maxime cymbalizando ac tymanizando saltationem quoque satyricam docuit quae apud graecos appellatur cordata sed & *nutrire comam indos in honorem*... Dionysius, qui etiam primus armatus et cum exercitu invasit Indiam ac rudes illos et agristes homines, *cortices arborum* et *crudis ferarum carnibus* utentes, in urbes legit, *boves aratro iungere*, frumenta serere, *deos colere*, *nutrire comam, mitram ferre et unctiones docuit ungentorum*. *Fuitque his dator vini sicut et Grecis armavit eos armis martialibus* et ad usum vite cultoris erexit.
ipsius ac ferre mitram ostenditunctiones
docuit unguentorum. Itaque usque in
tempus Alexandri sub cymbalis ac
tympanis indi constituebantur in pugna.

Recedens autem dionysius de terra
indorum postquam ista ordinaverat
constituit regem illius patriae
spartembam unum ex amicis
bacchosissimum.

Dionysius decides to retire from India and
addresses his troops, ending:
ceterum hexas amicus bacchosissimum
Spartebam h vos regem Indisque
constitwo, qui vos alimenta prebeta et
annuas stipes, qui custodia privilegia
vestra et honoratos vos habeat ex grege
vestro ad regni fastigium evocatus. vos ille
consultae et posteris. cuius si genus
defuerit, ex vos vestrisque liberis reges
Indorum sumite.
atque sic adhortatus heroas Dionysius ex
India duxit exercitum.

Mortuo autem spartemba recepit regnum
budian [sic] filius eius et pater quidem
regnavit super indos quinquaginta et
duos annos filius vero viginti cuius filius
cradeva regnum post eum recepit
& exinde per longum tempus secundum
genus permutaverunt regnum filii a
patre susciptius eique succedens Si vero
deficiat genus tunc secundum
excellentiam probitatis indis reges
constitui.

Hercules autem, cum domitis terrarum
monstris ac sevitia tyrannorum deleta
penetrasset Indiam, regnum heroam in se
receptit. privilegia tamen his non ademit,
ssed auxit eorum numerum conscriptis
inter eos, qui secum ab Hispania et
Mauritania militaverant et contra
Gerionem triplcis anime et Anteum,

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deferebat megasthenes dicit fuisse
thebano herculi similem sicut ipsimet
indi narrant et
quod huic valde jmulti fuerunt filii
masculi in terra indorum, multis enim
mulieribus matrimonio iunctus fuit sed
filiam micam [sic: unicam] habuit fuit
autem nomen huic puelle Pandeaj Terra
in qua nata est et quam commisit
ei hercules ut in ipsa dominaretur ex
nomine puelle pandea appellatur.
Fueruntque illi a patre kelephantes
quidem circa quingentos equitatus autem
ad quatuor milia peditum vero ad centum
et triginta milia usu,

terre filium, arma tulerant, longis
itineribus et senecta etate defunctis.
sed cum venisset ad mortem jmultosque
filios haberet, multis enim mulieribus
matrimonio iunctus fuit, unicam autem
filiam sustulisset, Pandeaj nomine, huic
regnum commisit.

et ut ostenderet, heroas quanti faceret pre
ceteris liberis, unum ex numero heroum,
nomine Jobarem, virum filie dedit, qui
regem gereret quingentosque huic
kelephantes, quatuor milia equitum et
centum triginta milia peditum
constituit, quibus regnum tuetur . . .