

CROSSCURRENTS

SECONDARY SOURCES

Most Americans have never read a historical monograph. Sure, anyone who has taken a history course was assigned a textbook for basic content. Most professional historians, however, expend their professional energies on writing monographs, or detailed studies of a narrowly defined topic. In these studies, historians address a topic of historical debate and controversy, either by providing a fresh perspective or employing new source materials, like declassified diplomatic correspondence or oral traditions among the unlettered.

Mining Monographs

Monographs fall under the category of “secondary sources.” While primary sources—such as laws, letters, artworks, memoirs, and the like—provide the raw material for historical investigation, secondary sources guide historical investigation by generating productive

questions and shaping the course of inquiry. As with science, systematic observation (primary sources) only produces valid knowledge claims when this raw material is grounded in a procedure (the scientific method) that guides the data-collection process. Many students are unsure of how to interpret and use secondary sources. On one hand, the new student of history may defer to the source’s tone of authority or the expertise of the historian. Or students may find the complex style of argumentation and its assumptions regarding content knowledge bewildering.

To address these issues, let’s work our way through an influential monograph in European history, Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860. The excerpt below has been annotated to assist you with the task of interpretation. After studying the excerpts and the annotations, we will provide further analysis of the work and its author.

Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arabian had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race. It will not be difficult to show that this result was owing above all to the political circumstances of Italy.



Historical Annotations

Notice the power of the metaphor of a “veil.” Consider how the portrayal of medieval people as “childish” frames the comparison with the Renaissance that unfolds.

Though Burckhardt doesn’t use the word, he clearly aims to show the development of individualism as a distinctive feature of Renaissance society. He claims that an objective approach toward knowledge and politics became possible for the first time in Renaissance Italy.

Here the author draws parallels between other historical instances in which a group developed a consciousness of difference based on the individual (or subjective) assertion of identity apart from the community or collective, or in opposition to another group.

Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860

...An acute and practiced eye might be able to trace, step by step, the increase in the number of complete men during the fifteenth century. Whether they had before them as a conscious object the harmonious development of their spiritual and material existence, is hard to say; but several of them attained it, so far as is consistent with the imperfection of all that is earthly.

...When this impulse to the highest individual development was combined with a powerful and varied nature, which had mastered all the elements of the culture of the age, then arose the 'all-sided man'—'l'uomo universale'—who belonged to Italy alone. Men there were of encyclopedic knowledge in many countries during the Middle Ages, for this knowledge was confined within narrow limits; and even in the twelfth century there were universal artists, but the problems of architecture were comparatively simple and uniform, and in sculpture and painting the matter was of more importance than the form. But in Italy at the time of the Renaissance, we find artists who in every branch created new and perfect works, and who also made the greatest impression as men.

You may be impressed with how elegantly Burckhardt outlines the essential features of the Renaissance: individualism, secularism, humanism, open-mindedness. Notice also how he accomplishes this by contrasting, often implicitly, the ideals of the Renaissance with their opposites during the Middle Ages, often popularly known as the Dark Ages. If you found yourself agreeing with the seductive characterizations of each era, it is largely because you have already been influenced by Burckhardt's ideas before reading this excerpt. It is due to Burckhardt's influence that we often mark the beginning of "modern man" (i.e., "us") with the Renaissance.

Many medievalists and even later historians of the Renaissance take exception to Burckhardt's presentation of both periods, if they are indeed even distinct eras. Nonetheless, the power of Burckhardt's literary tone, his use of a powerful analogy (the "veil"), and the character sketches of Renaissance thinkers and statesmen that follow, continue to exercise often unquestioned influ-



This paragraph intends also to model a version of the 4-sentence argument template by placing two perspectives on the Middle Ages and Renaissance in tension with one another.

**Historical Annotations**

By "complete men," Burckhardt means what we now call "Renaissance men," or those who have developed their perspective to the broadest extent in a number of fields, moving toward the highest state of perfection possible with the earthly realm.

Several figures may come to mind of this so-called "universal man," and Burckhardt profiles many of such in his work, including Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Leon Battista Alberti.

Notice again how Burckhardt defines the Renaissance in opposition to the Middle Ages. While he acknowledges the existence of learned people during that period, Burckhardt deflates their importance based on the "narrow limits" of their knowledge and the "simple and uniform" problems that they faced. Perhaps he has in mind for the Renaissance depiction the genius-artists whose works so powerfully define the drive of the Renaissance.

ence on popular culture. In fact, Burckhardt's work was one of the first historical studies to attempt a definition of what constitutes the "modern." Given Burckhardt's time, his focus is not surprising.

Considering Context

Any writer begins with a "project," the animating question or premise that motivates their analysis. For Burckhardt, that project was to explain the modernity that surrounded him and locate its origins. Keep in mind that Burckhardt writes in 1860:

- the year after Darwin published his theory of natural selection
- a time shaped by dizzying change in technology and industry
- also, a time fermented by movements of national unification
- lastly, a period defined by the growth of scientific approaches to all life ("social science")

If you encountered this secondary source on an exam, you would not be privy to Burckhardt's biography, though you might summon up some version of the context given above. Burckhardt grew up in Switzerland and began training as a Calvinist minister before trading his collar for academic robes by studying history under Leopold von Ranke at the University of Berlin. Von Ranke founded the modern academic discipline of history as a quasi-scientific field of study. In fact, most contemporary American universities are modeled on the German academic tradition, with departments divided into undergraduate and graduate schools, the latter focusing on specialized research and generation of new knowledge through articles and books.

Burckhardt emerged as one of the first practitioners of this new "scientific" historical approach. Though he studied many features of Renaissance society, he trained his critical eye on the "culture" of the Renaissance; that is, the values and ideas that defined the outlines of its worldview. Modernity framed the content and methods of his investigation of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but Burckhardt also expressed concern over how modern democratic movements and rhetoric might be hijacked by unscrupulous demagogues. Given the context in which he studied and wrote, we should not be shocked by Burckhardt's preoccupation with explaining modernity: when it arose, what defines it, and how it shapes humanity.

The Mindset of a Historian

When we encounter secondary sources, several questions should arise in the mind of the historian:

- How does this interpretation mesh with the primary sources I've encountered?
- How did the historical context of the historian shape their interests and perspectives?
- What other historical interpretations are on offer for this topic and how does this one contrast with those?
- How does this interpretation provide an opportunity for the historian to develop their own interpretation in response--either by supporting, qualifying, or contradicting it?

With practice, these questions will be summoned forth by apprentice historians more intuitively and help shape their investigation of a topic and use of evidence to support coherent arguments.

There is a view that the past never changes. It is our hope that this brief reflection on Burckhardt's secondary source puts paid to this misguided notion. The past requires interpretation, and that interpretive project changes based on the context of those asking and addressing the questions that motivate them. Burckhardt attempts to approximate the reality of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but his work tells us just as much about him and his times as it does about its subject matter.

More Resources Available at
www.sherpalearning.com/crosscurrents