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# DIBATTITI

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THE ITALIAN EXCEPTION: A DEBATE  
ON RONALD WITT'S "TWO LATIN  
CULTURES OF MEDIEVAL ITALY"

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# The «Documentary Culture» of Ronald Witt: A New Perspective on the History of Medieval Culture?

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*The article discusses the concept of «documentary culture» in Ronald Witt's *The Two Latin cultures*. The starting point is a historiographical contextualization of the work, followed by a reflection on the categories of «culture» and «documentary culture» in Witt's research. Then the discussion traces the trajectory of the «documentary culture» in the book, to arrive, in a last section, to a discussion of three critical points: the choice of the Carolingian age as a starting point; the development of communal documentary practices; the centrality of chanceries in the cultural processes investigated.*

In the following pages I discuss «documentary culture» as presented in Ronald G. Witt's *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy*. I am very interested in discussing the concept because I find it a strong point of his work. I focus here mainly on the benefits of its use and, in doing so, I would like to begin with a somewhat more general discussion on the categories that underlie Witt's research. In particular, I will begin with a brief reflection on the historiographical genre of *The Two Latin Cultures* and the concept of “culture” as Witt could have defined it. I say *could have*, because the author never explicitly defines it, although he has a rather specific idea of it. From there I will move on to documentary culture and its possible historiographical contextualization before shifting to its actual use and

to its historical trajectory in Witt's study, and the implications of the author's choices. Finally, I will concentrate on several critical points that pertain to the same discourse: 1) the choice of the Carolingian age as a starting point; 2) the development of communal documentary practices and their relation to episcopal documentary culture; and 3) the centrality of chanceries in the cultural processes investigated.

1. What exactly is *The Two Latin Cultures*? I think it can be defined in two ways. On the one hand, it is a historiographical proposal that can be counted among the studies on the origins of Humanism, in the "Anglo-Saxon" line inaugurated by Paul Oskar Kristeller and which is still alive today. On the other hand – and this is more important for the discussion at hand – we are dealing with something that very much resembles a French-style "regional thesis", but with one big difference: Witt's *thèse* does not speak about economics, society, and politics, but rather about culture as the center of wider reflections which are primarily political and economic, and only secondarily relate to society and religion. In fact, this book finds almost perfect parallels in at least four other works by Rosamond McKitterick [1989], Nicholas Everett [2003], Michel Zimmermann [2004], and Konrad Hirschler [2012]. But it also has explicit points in common with Michael Clanchy's volume on England [Clanchy 1979], as well as with Brian Stock's work on literacy and exegetical cultures [Stock 1983]. One can also contextualize it within recent Italian studies [De Angelis 2009; Rossi 2013; Marrocchi 2014]. I do not wish to discuss each of these studies here, but simply to demonstrate how Witt's book and its methodology fall within a historiographical season that, in Italy, smells new and that, at least superficially, could be defined as the "History of Medieval Culture". Witt's research is perhaps the only work on this list that finds its *raison d'être* in the strong link to a great underlying thesis, that of the genesis of Humanism. And in this sense we could consider it a sort of hinge between a history of culture conceived of as a path to a literary

perfection, Humanism, and a history of culture conceived of as a problematized reflection on a field of human action in society, in close dialogue with other fields such as economics, politics, and religion.

The concept of “culture” must be clarified at least from the heuristic point of view. Unless I am mistaken, Ronald Witt never clearly defines the category, but after reading his works one can understand that he had a rather precise idea of it, which I will attempt to summarize. According to Witt’s view, “culture”, or better “cultures” in this book, seem to coincide with the relationship between human societies and the phenomenon of writing or, more generally, of textuality: reception (reading, listening, thinking), the approach to conservation, circulation, and above all production. The production of texts is the focus of Witt’s analysis, and his research analyzes the phenomenon in its materiality and in its particular relations with politics and economics, while leaving social and religious aspects in the background. The use of “culture” here is, therefore, very close to the traditional meaning of the concept, and different from the anthropological connotation prevalent today, which is rooted in a different historiographical strand.

2. Obviously one cannot speak of “Wittian culture” in abstract terms. Like all humans belonging to the *Sapiens* species, the scholar has modified and structured his thought over time. “Culture” conceived of as a textual phenomenon within a given area or community seems to be, in this sense, the point of arrival of his scientific reflection on Humanism. Anyone who reads *In the Footsteps of the Ancients* [Witt 2000 (2005)] after *The Two Latin Cultures* [Witt 2012 (2017)] will notice that *In the Footsteps*, although important work and one much more linked to the genetic process of Humanism, engages with certain texts while excluding others: it reflects in depth on historiographical, poetic, and epistolographic production while almost never touching upon documentary production *stricto sensu*. On the contrary, *The Two Latin*

*Cultures* presents itself as all-encompassing, including every type of text within its horizon.

Here, the difference between Witt's first and second work lies precisely in the introduction of «documentary culture». What is «documentary culture»? Faithful to his concreteness, Witt does not define the concept even in his second study, but it is clear that for him it coincides with the production of documents in a diplomatic sense: charters recording events of legal significance, composed by “lay” writing professionals – that is, notaries. When inserted into a wider historiographical context, the decision to focus on this evidence within a broader discourse on intellectual history and Humanism seems both bold and successful to me. It is *bold*, because it does not have many precedents: Michel Zimmermann [2004] reflected on Catalonia in a very similar way, but Witt apparently did not know his book, and the same can be said for the other studies listed above, such as that by Gianmarco De Angelis [2009]. Nor, if we consider the book's final bibliography, was he familiar with Emily Steiner's [2003] research on interactions between documentary culture and literary practices in late medieval England. For *The Two Latin Cultures*, his own direct precedent seems to be Michael Clanchy's book [1979] on English practical literacy [quoted on: Witt 2012, 51 (2017, 71)], which, however, remains focused solely on documentary practices. The works of Rosamond McKitterick [1989] and Nicholas Everett [2003] on the Carolingian and Lombard realms also seem to have been influential antecedents. One can conclude, therefore, that the choice to include documentary culture in the discourse on Humanism is the result of Witt's personal reflection and experience, probably a consequence of his familiarity with the above-mentioned studies, as well as Italian diplomatistic research [cf. Petrucci 1992 and Nicolaj 1991]. Most of all, however, Witt writes with an awareness of the great wealth of written sources that has always characterized Italy. This also appears to be a *winning* choice, because it allows us to study certain aspects of Italian history in a new and broader way: without

attributing *a priori* exclusive importance to one kind of text rather than another, by using Renaissance-era rather than medieval parameters; by recognizing relationships between sets that have long been separated by scholars, as today we know that charters and books were preserved together; by introducing the laity as new protagonists; and by creating a new perspective for evidence usually indissolubly linked to a “Marxist” historiography of economics and society. In Witt’s book a notarial deed is potentially as useful for understanding the culture of a layman (a notary) as much as a liturgical manuscript is for understanding the profile of an ecclesiastic. And if we consider the directions of the most recent historiography, documentary culture may be seen to be gaining prominence as a theme and historical problem: one can refer to the collective study coordinated by Warren Brown on the relationship between documentary culture and the laity in the early Middle Ages [Brown *et al.* 2013], that by Ana M. Gomez-Bravo [2013] on «textual agency» in 15th-century Spain, or that currently in press by Clémence Revest on Humanism [cf. Revest, forthcoming], which will likely revolutionize our perception of the phenomenon by focusing not on Padua or Florence, but rather on the papal chancery of Rome in the 15th century. In short, the choice to include documentary culture in a broader discussion on culture shows incredible potential. Above all, because it has created a strong precedent: it could be the key element in structuring a historiographical field which many scholars already practice but which has not yet been clearly defined as a distinct disciplinary focus.

3. Throughout the book, and especially in the first half, the history of documentary culture and its protagonists stands out quite clearly. Beginning with a fluid situation in the 8th century, a period characterized by a certain lack of homogeneity in the preservation of archival sources and a fair degree of interaction between laity and clergy in charter production within the *Regnum Italiae* and especially in the Lombard

areas, the Carolingian and Ottonian periods allow us to grasp two phenomena in particular. The first is of a quantitative nature and, for Witt, it was directly linked to the economic growth of the region: written documents increase considerably from the 8th century onwards, particularly between 900 and 1050, so that «the ratio between the latest and the earliest is almost four to one» [Witt 2012, 100 (2017, 127)]. The latter is qualitative in nature and also concerns charters: by the end of the 10th century written documents show greater uniformity, with more standardized and typologically narrower *arengae* and *sanctiones*. The explanation lies in a third phenomenon with a socio-professional dimension: the crystallization of a formerly “confused” range of individuals responsible for the drafting of documents into better-defined groups of judges and notaries who were trained in a form of practical literacy based on the direct assimilation of documentary texts through forms of apprenticeship, and who were very interested in the study of law. It is precisely this final process that reveals the progressive exclusion of ecclesiastics – the main actors in book culture – from documentary culture. This exclusion makes Italy “exceptional” compared to the rest of Europe, where until the late 12th century documentary production was still in the hands of the clergy. Witt came to this conclusion through a comparison between Italy, France, and various areas of northern Europe, but I think further comparisons would confirm his conclusion. In Michel Zimmermann’s Catalonia, too, lay and “Justinianic” notaries do not emerge before the late 12th century.

The training of professionals in documentary writing and the growth of documentary culture across the cities of the *Regnum Italiae*, in their qualitative and quantitative aspects, created all of the favourable premises for the most striking phenomenon of the 11th and 12th centuries: the so-called “legal Renaissance”, which led to the rediscovery of Justinian law, the crystallization of canon law, and their use to reconfigure local societies in all aspects. For Witt, it was lay notaries who favoured such developments, especially those in Pavia who converged around

the royal palace but whose privileges had already been extended to other notaries of the *Regnum* under the Ottonian dynasty. This time the author follows such developments not from the perspective of documents, as he does in previous sections, but rather from that of the new lay «book culture», or «legal book culture». Thus, participation of the laity in «book culture» favoured a strengthening of their intellectual profiles, especially in the post-Gregorian period and in conjunction with the emergence of city communes. The spread of the new laws, the bureaucratic crystallization of institutions, and the intensification of diplomatic relations ensured that rhetoric became a fundamental component of the activity of legal experts, and of notaries in particular: speeches at assemblies, diplomatic pacts, legal judgments, and collective communications all greatly benefited of the new tools by which to structure a letter, and make it effective through *cursus* or other techniques. This is why the *dictamen* came to constitute a fundamental part of lay education. Italian education, formerly concentrated in city cathedrals or monasteries, was now articulated and “commercialized”, Witt observes, and the appearance of a number of lay schools was accompanied by their formalization in societies and legally-organized institutions: universities. Here, I will not discuss literary book production, but it is at least useful to mention that the pre-humanistic parable of Witt’s book ends with the sudden bursting upon this field of the laity, and of notaries in particular, who acquired a prominent role in the progressive assimilation of the style of ancient Latin authors – something which Witt considers the keystone of Italian Humanism from the 13th to the 15th century. After the passage from *charta* to *instrumentum* and the acquisition of *fides publica* by notaries between the 11th and 12th centuries, the history of documentary production gradually fades into the background, except for a few words on the structuring of *artes notariae* in the 13th century. Such *artes* are important inasmuch as they show the progressive enrichment of textual production in the form of books and manuals used for lay education.

The narrative presented here clearly reveals the particular “slant” the author wished to give his study. Documentary culture was important throughout the early Middle Ages, especially from the 8th to the 11th century. It allows us to grasp both a series of processes in textual production and the formation of secular intellectual élites. However, it lost this importance from the 12th century onwards, when the same élites gained access to «book culture» and could challenge the medieval dominance of the clergy, activating the genetic process of Humanism. The problem is clear: the author was mainly interested in proposing a discourse illustrating – in its longest duration and in its deepest structures – the process that established Italy at the center of a revolutionary cultural reform, Humanism, which to this day lies at the basis of Western educational programs.

I have no objection to the use of a basic thesis for a historiographical plan: it is an acceptable choice for a historian. But such a choice has meant that documentary culture has progressively moved into the background while literary culture has been privileged. It is clear, then, that as much as it is innovative and useful, the documentary culture introduced into the narrative (and into the title) still rests on a lower level than “mainstream” culture: literary and book culture. All things considered, book culture is judged according to parameters of originality and creativity, parameters that are not always useful in the study of medieval texts. In other words, documentary culture is nothing more than a kind of purgatory that the laity had to face in order to reach the paradise of literature. It is needless to say that Witt was a man of his time: when he first conceived of his scientific project – in Paris in 1979, as he himself has explained on several occasions – the textual study of charters was still confined to *chartistes*, and Anglo-Saxon historiography on literacy was not yet particularly well-developed. It is important to explain this design because it is the reason why documentary culture is only partially present in the book; therefore, its history still awaits to be written, particularly as regards central and northern Italy between the

12th and 13th century. There is much to investigate: leaving aside the phenomena of rationalization that concern every documentary form, especially during the “podestà” period, one point that might lead us to further reflect on the subject is the introduction of paper for documentary uses during the 13th century: this development leads the historian to adopt a broader perspective, as she or he is forced to keep the Islamic and Byzantine East in mind. And she or he will probably find many points of contact with a series of better-known intellectual phenomena, like the reception of Greek texts following their translation from the Arabic, or the imposition of an encyclopaedic culture which, according to Konrad Hirschler [2012], seems to have been established some time earlier in Egypt and Syria.

4. Finally, I will move on to some critical reflections on more specific points, in the hope that all of this may enrich the scholarly debate.

The first point concerns the chronology adopted and, in particular, its starting point around the year 800. For a book which aims to study literary and documentary production in the *Regnum Italiae*, beginning with the 9th century is almost a must: before that date, the sources are particularly fragmentary and varied, while later one finds a certain stabilization and articulation, especially within the available documentary archives. Thus, in order to be fruitful, a comparative analysis must necessarily begin with the year 800. If the choice is constrained by the structure of the sources, the historical narrative that rests upon it would benefit particularly from a reflection – even a succinct one – both on the earlier processes that determined that structure and, more generally, on the cultural dynamics of the immediately preceding period. Instead, from the very beginning the book employs a primarily political framework for the narrative, and only includes an economic framework as a secondary element. In such a way, it considers most of the cultural aspects analyzed to be a consequence of measures taken by public powers since the late 8th century, or as the direct outcome of particular

economic conjunctures. In many cases, events indeed appear to have unfolded in this way, but there are other cases in which a more nuanced reflection, one attentive to the configuration of the sources and not completely unaware of the “prehistory” of the culture of the *Regnum Italiae*, could lead to different interpretations. For example, almost all Italian documents written before the 8th century have disappeared. I say *almost* because at least one of the oldest archives has survived until today – of course, not in the best conditions – namely that of the archbishops of Ravenna. Up until 800, this archive is comprised exclusively of papyrus documents, something which immediately reveals the fragility of charters produced before the 8th century and signals one of the possible reasons for their disappearance. Given that almost all other sources from the *Regnum Italiae* preserved from the 8th century onwards were written on parchment, one might conclude that the increase in documents evident from that date, which for Witt is an evident sign of economic recovery, actually reflects the very opposite: that is, a more restricted economy that drove writers to use animal skins much more frequently than before, owing to the limited supply of papyrus paper, as this was a material produced in distant lands [cf. Internullo, forthcoming]. But a comparison between the *Regnum Italiae* and its “prehistory” would also be helpful in other ways: in the same archive we note that *forenses* and *tabelliones*, lay notaries of the late Roman tradition, were imbued with Justinianic legal culture. The studies conducted by Giovanna Nicolaj [1991] have shown that the *tabelliones* in Ravenna used *Codex* and *Novellae* as early as the 10th century, and the more recent studies by Francesca Santoni [2011] have identified the survival of these *tabelliones* in Ravenna even beyond the 12th century. We could attribute greater weight to the “Roman-Byzantine” structure of some Renaissance legal structures, and we could do so beginning with a more in-depth analysis of documentary culture in the 11th and 12th centuries. In this sense, I find, the great importance that Witt attributes to Pavia in the emergence of a legal book culture would beco-

me a bit blurred, whereas the Ravenna of Peter Damian would possibly gain greater prominence. The preserved manuscripts are not the only sources that provide some indicators by which to better understand cultural phenomena, just as the year 800 may not be a good starting point for studying the deep roots of Italian Humanism.

The second point concerns the permeability between the laity and the clergy in the genetic process of city communes and their documentary practices. Witt envisioned the emergence of Italian communal institutions as the driving force behind a series of cultural transformations in Italy: in particular, the enlargement of professional groups of jurists and notaries, the increasing importance of rhetorical culture, and more generally the growing prestige of the laity in *Regnum* societies. In these processes the presence of ecclesiastics in proto-communal administrations – and here I am thinking of Landolph of Saint Paul, *dictator* for the consuls of Milan in the 12th century – was interpreted as follows: «[Landolph] provides us an early example of a common practice of Italian communes down at least into the 15th century: the employment of clerics, usually in religious orders, to fill certain sensitive administrative offices required a high degree of probity and political neutrality» [Witt 2012, 273 (2017, 320)]. I believe, rather, that the example of Landolph (and other similar cases) stands for a different phenomenon, namely the emergence of communal bureaucratic structures, including chanceries, starting within episcopal milieus. The more we study the formation processes of communal structures and cultures – and today this problem has gained even more importance [cf. Wickham 2015 and Faini 2018] – the more we notice that communal documentary culture is not *a priori* alternative and antagonistic to that of bishops. Actually, as Milan did with Landolph, many other cities in central and northern Italy employed intellectual élites trained within bishops' palaces: Gianmarco De Angelis [2009] showed this to be the case for Bergamo, but the same can be seen even in other cities. The studies of Francesca Santoni [2011] on Ravenna demonstrate that the permeability between

bishop's *notarii* and municipal *tabelliones* becomes evident in the period of communal development in the 12th-century *Regnum Italiae*. Outside the *Regnum* the situation does not appear very different: in Terracina consular documents were kept in the cathedral until the 13th century [Caciorgna 2008], and in Rome too, a city often considered (in a prejudiced way) to be different from all others, the incredible vitality of the commune is well explained by the migration of papal judges and notaries to the new institution. Even outside the traditional "communal area" one finds similar phenomena: when Naples proclaimed itself a commune at the end of the 12th century, it was a *notarius archiepiscopi* who wrote the first municipal acts [Filangieri 1970]. All this, in my opinion, shows the need for greater caution when studying the "Italian exception", or at least suggests that we should refine our research methodologies to better understand the complex relations between the communal and episcopal documentary cultures.

The third point concerns chanceries. Witt speaks about them several times, but never fully engages with them. The development of chanceries explains the launch of the *dictamen*; the complexity of episcopal chanceries provided jobs to lay notaries during the early Middle Ages; and, further, the history of chanceries reveals one aspect of the phenomenon of notarial secularization. However, although the offices responsible for administrative and diplomatic writings play a central role in Witt's book, such texts are in fact never analyzed as cultural evidence. I think it is precisely chancery epistles – whether episcopal, imperial, royal, or communal – that in many cases constitute the point of connection between book culture and documentary culture. In addition, they would explain very well the *raison d'être* of certain cultural capitals (in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu [1983 and 2008] gave to this concept), some of which were directly linked to traditional book culture. It is true that legal books are an excellent beacon by which to illuminate the practices of re-using ancient texts for practical purposes, but chancery epistles could also have a similar function. When pro-

perly analyzed, their *arengae* clearly reveal the way in which an officer might exploit his readings; consequently, they also bring us close to readings which the extant manuscripts often do not preserve. In this sense, Michel Zimmermann's book truly constitutes an exemplary model of analysis: it compellingly demonstrates, for instance, how officers of the 10th-century bishops of Girona used Latin-Greek glossaries by ancient authors, preserved in local churches and monasteries, to improve the lexicon of their chancery epistles. Not to mention the *dictamen*: the new rhetorical culture, which was central to Witt's discourse, found its best outlet in the writing of public epistles, texts that in most cases were read aloud in institutionalized assemblies. Thus, given that Witt repeatedly discusses the styles of the imperial and papal chanceries during the 13th century, something that his book suggests we do is explore local institutions more deeply, particularly episcopal and communal ones, in order to fully understand an intellectual landscape as rich as it is complex. In addition to this, the concept of a «textual community» that Witt uses to explain the activation of stylistic imitation of the ancients could also be applied to chanceries. Around 1200 one witnesses the crucial phase of the transition from a largely oral society to one in which writing has become the most important means of public expression of ideas and feelings [Witt 2012 381-382 (2017, 440-441)]. The concept of «textual community», which Witt consciously borrows from Brian Stock [1983], was used by the latter in a rather narrow sense, to indicate a religious community organized around a founding text which is often shared within the group through the figure of a «mediator» possessing direct knowledge of it. It is clear that Witt greatly broadens its meaning, showing that in the 13th century all the *litterati* of the *Regnum Italiae* became a «textual community» based on the common assimilation of certain rhetorical, grammatical, and legal texts. Although the culture of the *Regnum* truly seems to have been shared by a group of individuals that was both socially and geographically broad – something that I believe has recently been demonstrated

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by Faini's [2018] study – for the moment I am not very persuaded by the idea that the *litterati* of the *Regnum* had a sense of shared identity, or rather a sense of belonging to a multi-city space, especially one determined above all by their readings. Rather, given the central role of jurists and notaries in the institutional changes of the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, it would be useful to return to a narrower meaning of chanceries as «textual communities». Of course I am not speaking here of religious groups with strong mediators, but of professional groups whose identity was based on the sharing of a practical culture developed within the same institution. Such groups represented the institution itself through the use of a number of varied texts, ranging from the *instrumenta* to the Bible and Cassiodorus. Indeed, the groups were many and similar to one another because they were part of wider communication networks; but, at the same time, they were also different, because of their continuous effort to represent their own institutional work in a distinct form.

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