

SHIFTING TIMES, CONVERGING FUTURES: TECHNOLOGIES OF WRITING BEYOND POGGIO BRACCIOLINI

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ABSTRACT: Bracciolini's contribution to visual materiality, graphical innovation, and the book trade is the driving force in the development of a new philological turn. This essay explores the textual consciousness that marked the passage to scrupulous criteria of editing and writing, which ultimately indicates and emphasizes the historical dimension of hermeneutical tradition. With a powerful impact on readership and authorship, Bracciolini stands behind this groundbreaking entanglement, as we rethink textual transmission and modern scholarship in this digital age.

KEYWORDS: Textuality, transmission, origin, philology/digital philology, *littera antiqua*, penmanship

I have my hand and I have my pen.
That's it.
(Robert Palladino)¹

1. *Within Humanism*

Among the remarkable range of topics with which Bracciolini was concerned as a humanist, I will consider his interest in, and contribution to, the *mare magnum* of hermeneutics, primarily, but not solely, for reasons of imitation and restoration. A journey across this terrain of inquiry, where philology and paleography, two giant disciplines, were combined by Bracciolini into a single instrument of research, suggests a new relationship between readership and authorship: one that demands the time-consuming labor essential for commentary practices and philological exegesis (*varia lectio, collatio, editio*). The relevance of his rigorous and diligent effort to record and document primary sources still serves as the reference point for future ramifications of philology in addressing textual problems, while adapting the canonical scholarship to the challenges of the third millennium. That is to say, the humanist endeavor of collecting manuscripts and constructing methodologies with critical attention to the perspective of the language, the scribal process, the annotations and apparatus, including visual images, remains today standard for textual interpretation, including the *variantistica (lectio variorum)*. A focus on genealogy has proven to be an immensely powerful tool in the empirical investigation of the manuscript population in general, and that of Greek and Latin in particular.

¹ Margalit Fox, *Robert Palladino, Master of Calligrapher, is Dead at 83*, «The New York Times», 6, March 2016, p. A 25.

The increased significance of the written word within the *studia humanitatis* undoubtedly becomes the privileged location of understanding the past as well as the vector of truth, within the new philological dimension of the manuscript. At a time when the Greek and Latin cultures had acquired great importance, humanists became occupied and preoccupied with the study of antiquity and saw it as the unquestionable foundation for Western intellectual development within a variety of fields – ethics, history, language, and script. The practices of enhancing manuscript scholarship (*restitutio textus*) and deciphering the evolution of writing systems (*facies graphica*) joined forces to engage with literary history to discover the paths by which ancient texts were transmitted during that time and, indeed, are still being transmitted in our millennium. In fact, the discipline of Manuscripts Studies (in all its branches – calligraphy, paleography, codicology, apparatus, visualization, materiality, transmission) has been shown to be a focal point for methodological considerations within the humanities, providing significant contributions to the study of literary and documentary texts in the classical Greek and Roman world, in the attempt to reconstruct the archetype in its historical complexity and literary essence. For this purpose, in sixteenth-century Italy, early publishers and leading intellectuals worked together to establish and publish the correct text in its official version (*reductio ad unum*), in sharp contrast with the discrepancies found in earlier medieval transmission: such was the case in the collaboration between Pietro Bembo and Aldus Manutius in Venice, in which the roles of the author, editor, and publisher successfully overlapped with innovative learning programs². Bracciolini's figure within the intellectual milieu of this time articulated the foundations of what would become the specialized culture of the technology of writing, of which today the word «processor» is an extension. Not coincidentally, by reviving, copying, and circulating the Carolingian script in the name of clarity and legibility, 15th-century humanism enacted a cultural process that led to technical competence and resourceful expertise.

2. *Beyond Humanism: Post-Human?*

How has this groundbreaking entanglement influenced textual awareness beyond early-modern studies? *Quantum*? How has the traditional

² «This convergence of scholarship and technological innovation had a huge impact on the culture of the early modern period and became the vehicle for the diffusion of new religious ideas developed alongside Biblical philology. The publishing industry has for centuries used philological arguments to promote their products with labels such as “newly corrected, accurately checked against the oldest manuscripts”, “improved” and “purged” used as advertising, establishing a strong and long-lasting partnership with scholars». Pierazzo, 2016: 43.

understanding of a critical edition changed in function and method over time, depending on specific historical sensibilities? More clearly, will philology in this new millennium still embrace a leading role in authoritatively stressing textual practices and genetic reconstruction in the face of more recent, evolving bodies of scholarship? Will we change from the problem of texts or resist doing so? A parallel reading of different approaches and practices gives rise to some considerations.

In general terms, critical editing is a central field in the humanities, spanning nearly all disciplines and subjects. In Europe the discipline bears the distinct label *Editorik* or *Editionswissenschaft* in German and *ecdotica*, *ecdotique* or *ecdotics* in Italian, French, and English respectively. The scope of current trends on textuality, transmission, and recovery has become broader, often starting with preoccupations about the legitimacy of the philological endeavor as a dusty discipline. In 1986, Guglielmo Gorni, in reviewing the *Atti del congresso di Lecce*, titled *La critica del testo. Problemi di metodo ed esperienze di lavoro*, wrote: «La filologia italiana sta bene. È ben insediata nell'insegnamento universitario, anche con varie dizioni più specifiche; ha riviste e cultori in buon numero; collane ancora attive, malgrado i tempi grami; incontri e congressi anche» (1986: 391)³.

Elaborating along the same lines a decade later, in his 1999 polemical article titled «The “New Philology” from the Italian Perspective», Alberto Varvaro asserts that indeed «in Italy it is almost impossible to become a university professor of Romance philology or of Italian literature unless one has done a critical edition», in as much as in Italy for a long time philology was defined as the only textual criticism. Perhaps this credo is still valid today, as evident in Varvaro's clarification:

Everyone attributes to us this preconceived position, yet few try to understand how Italians ever developed this stubborn conviction [...] Aside from the technical work of Pasquali, Barbi, and Contini, if elsewhere textual criticism is felt, as always, very distant from modern culture, in Italy it *is* modern culture (1999: 52).

Indeed the glorious Italian philological schools of thought of the '60s, '70s, and '80s with Ezio Raimondi, Domenico De Robertis, Lanfranco Caretti, Gianfranco Contini, the *stagione pavese* (Dante Isella, Maria Corti, Cesare Segre), along with the school of semiotics (Umberto Eco), set a milestone in textual scholarship and critical editions, whether fol-

³ «Italian Philology is doing well. It is well embraced by university teaching, even with its specific ramifications; despite financial restrictions, it has a good number of peer-reviewed journals, active series, meetings and conferences» (my translation).

lowing the Lachmannian stemmatology or dissenting approaches⁴, which opened the door to contributions by Silvio Avalle, Luigi Poma, Giorgio Petrocchi, Pier Giorgio Ricci, Cesare Bozzetti, Franco Gavazzeni, Pietro Gibellini, Paolo Trovato, Gian Franco Folena, Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, Alfredo Stussi, Giuseppe Billanovich, Guglielmo Gorni (and the list of distinguished scholars continues).

Additionally, today the relevance of philology not only explicitly concerns textual transmission in a more or less wide range, but interestingly emerges in contrast to the dynamic configurations of new *modi sciendi* branched out from Cultural Studies and Media at large, on the one hand, and from Theory in a comparative way across the globe on the other. Scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks – such as the notion of diaspora, displacement, post-colonial engagement, female agency, and so on – to approach present and past struggles outside national borders through imaginative processes, all under the umbrella of Anglo-Saxon and Continental critical legacies. This structural shift, with further digressions in *fieri*, resonates vigorously within the intellectual community and reflects widespread antagonism between editorial norms that enable scholars to capture and encapsulate the authorial intentionality of the text and theoretical approaches that move beyond textuality and navigate social, cultural, and political queries best matched to the spirit of the time («più intonati allo spirito dei tempi», Giunta, 2016) outside the literary work.

By taking a perfectly timed glance at the debate in academia, in 2016 the laudable graduate students of the University of Toronto called for papers for a conference with the title *Philological Concerns: Textual Criticism Throughout the Centuries*, the proceedings of which are now published by Franco Cesati Editore (Arancibia, *et al.* 2016). The keynote speaker, Paolo Cherchi, put forward the effectiveness of, and yet potential dispute over, philological elaboration in his opening remarks titled *Filologia, sì, ma non troppa*. He points to examples of scholarly editorial practices that require disproportional contributions from distinguished philologists, but produce seemingly small results in spite of their best efforts. His admonition against «una fungaia di edizioni ed edizioncelle che usurpano il titolo di edizioni critiche» («a mushroom bed of editions and short publications that usurp the role of critical editions», Cerchi, 2016: 28) serves as a re-

⁴ See Cerquiglini, «*Éloge de la variante*» (1989). In his vision, manuscripts are no longer simply witnesses to works but witnesses to culture and ought therefore to be studied in their own right. Cerquiglini was deeply influential for theoretical elaborations within the «New» or «Material» Philology, and Genetic Criticism. See Nichols, *The New Philology* (1990). On the Italian front, Contini and Segre did take into account both the diachronic and synchronic stage of the textual tradition in its dynamic evolutionary line. See also Giunta, «La filologia d'autore non andrebbe incoraggiata» (2011).

minder to not lose sight of how perennial questions shift in light of new media development, as in the case of textual philology after the printing age. Along the same lines, Paolo Procaccioli in his contribution to the same volume, titled *Philosophus frequenter, philologus semper distinguit: la grafia tra la difformità della pratica e la tentazione della regola*, reveals his suspicion towards a «bisogno indotto di un testo puro» («need driven for a pure text»), and explains that «[p]uro è solo ciò che non esiste e che non è toccato dalla vita, mentre il testo, al contrario e per nostra fortuna, è un momento di vita e come tale sarebbe sensato pretendere che ne mantenesse le scorie e le incrostazioni» (Procaccioli, 2016: 90)⁵.

3. Digital Transmission

On the plus side, and to further complicate the matter, there is another issue that does not go unnoticed within the philological discourse: the *informatica umanistica* that discusses the changes and the implications brought by computers within the scholarly editing world, with respect to the older print-based workflow. How shall we rethink textual transmission and textual scholarship in this digital age? Considering the increasing significance of new patterns of *collatio* and new standards of digital scholarly editions, distribution with the aid of computer analysis has become a sensitive issue and opens a series of questions about the future of scholarly editions and the role of the editor. Ever since William Pannacker declared digital approaches in the Humanities «the next big thing» at the Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention in 2009, the attractiveness of the field has kept the conversation on an array of methodologies that are vigorously moving forward. Consequently, only one year later, the digital humanities, in Pannacker's opinion, became simply «The Thing. There's no Next about it. And it won't be long until the digital humanities are, quite simply, “the humanities”» (Pannacker, 2011)⁶.

As it turns out, in the internet culture the ongoing discussion on the role covered by technological interventions on genetics may serve as a potential, fertile bridge between the humanities and sciences through

⁵ «Pure is only what does not exist and is untouched by life; while the text, on the contrary and luckily for us, is a moment of life, and as such it would make sense to expect that it maintains all its refuse and crustiness» (my translation).

⁶ Over the past thirty years there has been an evolving and increasing body of digital scholarship on literary texts (and computational literary analysis) and on electronic editorial practices (electronic literature and other forms of born-digital fiction) thanks to volumes such as Bernard, *et al.*, 2006; Siemens & Schreibman, 2008; the MLA's first born-digital anthology, Price & Siemens, 2013; Hall, *et al.*, 2017; Lloret, 2018.

interdisciplinary collaboration between textual scholars, computer scientists, and bio-geneticists. *From Gene Editing to AI, How Will Technology Transform Humanity?* is the title of a recent article that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* (16 November 2018) that discusses the human mania to edit genetics (Jannot, 2018). While scientists claim that editing genes is now «extraordinarily easy» in laboratories, philologists still face challenges to reach the fidelity of the textual system as a fixed object of study through conscious genealogical editing. We could then interrogatively rephrase the title into the more pertinent query for scholars working in this digital age: how is technology transforming philological procedures and which practices and data are available to critics to take advantage of the remarkable power of a computer?

Due to the long history of the discipline, the tools designed to deconstruct and reconstruct a textual system, and thus expand our cognitive capacity, have shifted considerably over time, along with our *accessus ad auctores*. Experts in digital scholarly editions deal extensively with cross-solutions concerning recent editions developed entirely on the web, including related philological and conservation issues posed by the recent «born digital» literature⁷. In this regard, Peter Shillingsburg's *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts* (2006) explores the tension precisely between traditional editorial practices and computational approaches. While Humanism revolutionized the modality of reading with the advent of the printing industry and graphic innovations that became the ancestor of typefaces for printed texts, conversely the end of the age of Gutenberg is now witnessing the expansion of literature beyond the printed page and towards digital media territory, with an unprecedented explosion in methods and theories of scholarly electronic editions (including sounds and images). Even if we increasingly wonder how «revolutionary» the critical representations in the electronic medium may be as compared to their print counterparts or the extent to which the digital humanities are simply and solely a «paradiscipline» (O'Donnell), the rapid feedback of innovative solutions in web design has led digital scholarly editions to work independently from the categories of their paper counterparts (*editoria cartacea*)⁸. Consequently, Maryanne Wolf urges us to become «bitextual», maintaining proficiency in both the print (old) and digital (new) media, overcoming intransigence, distrust, and anxiety that scholars

⁷ See works by Schreibman (2012), Siemens & Schreibman (2004 & 2008), Clement (2016), Burdick, *et al.* (2012), Fitzpatrick (2011), Liu (2013), Moretti (2007), McGann (1983), Boralejo (2013), Flanders (2009), Nowvieskie (2014), Risam (2018), Rockwell, *et al.* (2014), Terras (2016), Underwood & Sellers (2012).

⁸ See Sahle, 2016. About the digital critical apparatus, see Buzzoni, 2016; and Cipolla, 2018.

may experience towards a new notion of literariness⁹. This statement is significant for the purpose of the present study, and time, in regard to manuscript production and distribution. In fact, James Turner in *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* claims precisely that philology is the «historical» foundation of the modern Humanities, which, therefore, derive from the discipline developed back at the library of Alexandria as textual scholarship, including critical editions, commentaries, and glossaries.

From manuscripts to digital manuscripts, from philology to materiality, from *collatio* to computerized assessments criteria, the author-reader relationship has evolved substantially with new nuances in light of historical transformations. Yet, the poignant articulation of proximity with the aforementioned issues shows how, in the age of «distant reading» (Moretti, 2007) and digital collaboration, humanistic perspective on editorial care survives in various ramifications of today's scholarship. By the same token, humanistic production, in the form of textual analysis and traditional editorial practice, can greatly benefit from emerging computational methods, as in the case of the digitization of Pico della Mirandola's *Conclusiones Nongentae publicae disputandae* at the Virtual Humanities Lab of Brown University, which adheres to the same rigor and richness of traditional scholarship (Riva, 2002).

4. Back to Humanism (with Poggio Bracciolini)

After this digression on the recent expansion of cognitive technologies and the post-human, let us bring Bracciolini back to center stage. The sense of historical awareness within the domain of intellectual practice is the objective to keep in mind, while prudently stepping backwards to the methodological tools of discovery, reproducibility, and transmission developed by the humanists. The dominant claim on the autonomy of language led Poggius Florentinus, as he proudly called himself, to become increasingly aware of editorial emendation and textual identity, understanding philology as a textual theory and practice. He conceived of manuscript transmission as a product of specialized training with

⁹ «Perhaps the “Next Big Thing” will be Algorithmic Criticism, perhaps it will be Distant Reading, perhaps it will be the Geohumanities, or perhaps, and perhaps more likely, it will be some other approach to understanding culture and history we haven't yet realized. But whatever it is, we can almost certainly depend on it having two main features: it will involve computation, and it will involve a commitment to openness and collaboration unheard of in previous generations of scholarship. Because as Pannapacker suggests, by then Digital Humanities will no longer be a special kind of humanities. It will be the humanities» (O'Donnell, 2012).

expertise in reading and writing, in manuscript transmission and material tradition, as the calligraphic experience was taking a new lead under Coluccio Salutati, Bracciolini's employer and mentor. All is discussed at length in works by Petrucci, Witt, Ullman, Casamassima, and Braxton Ross. In giving editorial scrutiny to classical texts, and in accurately transcribing them, he revived, by copying it, a previous script known as the antique minuscule, *littera antiqua*, used from the eighth to the early twelfth centuries during the Carolingian Renaissance in France, with which classical manuscripts were copied; this recovery was in sharp contrast to the obscure Gothic *littera moderna*, which circulated until the thirteenth century. By copying and popularizing a legible script, Bracciolini was able to enhance textual faithfulness and reduce the corruption of manuscript tradition. Thanks to a new interest in graphic experimentation during the Quattrocento, Renaissance scholars could finally recognize many misperceptions of the previous decades made by less philologically skilled and trained copyists. Ms. Strozianus 96, dated to 1402-1403, housed at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, is a beautiful early example of Bracciolini's hand, and by 1420 a significant number of scribes were copying codices in this round book hand, even if penmanship varied according to geographical areas and professional fields (Zamponi, 2004). Nevertheless, in this heterogeneous experimentation, one factor remained certain: the improvement of writing came from practice over time of an old script at the hand of professional scribes, who began also to sign their products to avoid further corruption. In other words, all these varieties appear to strive towards a new goal: that of a legible script. As illustrated by Pluteo 48.22 and Pluteo 50.31, both with his signature (*Poggius scripsit*), Bracciolini copied the Carolingian script also with a keen appreciation of its visual dimension, as we learn from Philippa Sissis in this volume. The critical significance of this graphic innovation resulted in complex ways of perceiving textual practices not as a stable entity, but as a historical system with which to investigate manuscript tradition and determine its ecdotic status. Thus, the Carolingian lower script had acquired – in the hands of professional copyists and thanks to Bracciolini – a momentum of its own, soon to carry its influence throughout the Italian peninsula and beyond by becoming a few years later the standard Roman type in printed books.

At this historical point, nothing could stop the triumph of the printing press all across Europe with Gutenberg's invention of the movable type in Germany, and with Aldus Manutius (1449-1515), founder of the Aldine Press, in Italy, who designed typefaces in the *rotunda* and in cursive to produce the first scholarly editions of Greek and Latin texts. Printing technologies spread quickly, books began to travel much faster across Europe. For the first time, advanced modes of learning were freshly brought into focus and permanently altered the structure of society,

thanks to a collaboration that channeled the perception of history with rigorous analysis of its transposition criteria in print and script. Humanist original contribution in penmanship led, therefore, to the concept of the standardized edition in the modern sense, the growth of the republic of letters, and a broader learned community.

Today, as the digital endeavor is becoming the new medium for scholarly editions, and humanistic data navigate the online environment, forms of publication acquire a global perspective in the humanities and offer the opportunity to overcome the limitations of print technology. Yet, in the wake of the humanist curriculum, evolving modes of authorship and readership are precisely what we, in the oasis of academia, persist in instilling with vigor into our students, ultimately making them, the first generation of digital natives, empowered citizens. Exactly as distinguished philologists, such as D'Arco Silvio Avalle and Gianfranco Contini, had already claimed cogently back in 1962 in the *Almanacco letterario*¹⁰, Digital Humanities and philology are not antithetic fields of research at all, but rather *il cervello elettronico* becomes the instrument of the other. Consequently, philology continues to endure as a discipline of the future, although technologies of writing will always be changing in new directions. Thus, with Bracciolini, as he was a better reader and a better copyist, let us serve our students with critical engagement and scholarly audacity to cultivate a humanist sense of citizenship and history that will enable them to disseminate knowledge and elicit the production of meanings in the post-humanist and post-human era. And let us also do so by implementing and integrating pioneering resources and digital tools with an openness towards information that can be shared in the internet age, thanks to the myriad of implications these resources provoke within the cultural shift of our time¹¹. All in the footsteps of the great humanist philological studies: with acumen and depth.

¹⁰ See Balestrini, 1962, p. 100: «L'elettronica [...] è già da parecchi anni uno strumento sempre più importante nelle ricerche linguistiche, intese nel senso più vasto e complesso del termine, e cioè la filologia, la critica dei testi, la glottologia, la lessicologia, e gli strumenti di semantica e sintattica più moderni e avanzati». I thank Alessandro Giammei for this reference and discussion of the title.

¹¹ «It could sometimes feel like a balancing act, and we can be tempted, from time to time, to tip that balance in one sense or the other, to abandon the “old” or resist the “new.” In fact, what the Brown colloquium has confirmed is that the most productive attitude is an open, critical, pragmatic, and experimental one which sees “traditional” and “new” forms as cross-fertilizing and reshaping each other in a synergetic way. This has been the inspiration of the Virtual Humanities Lab, since its creation» (Riva, 2017: 11).

Figure 1 – Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Strozianus 96.

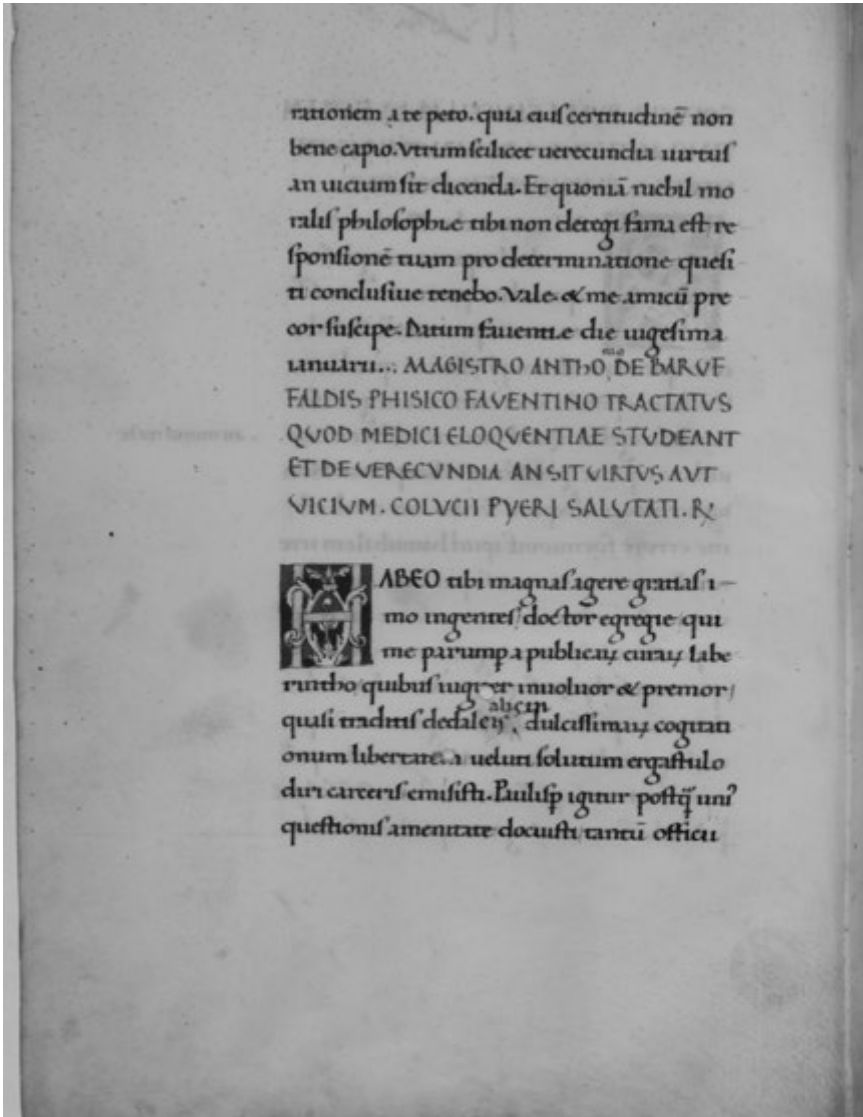


Figure 2 – Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 48.22.

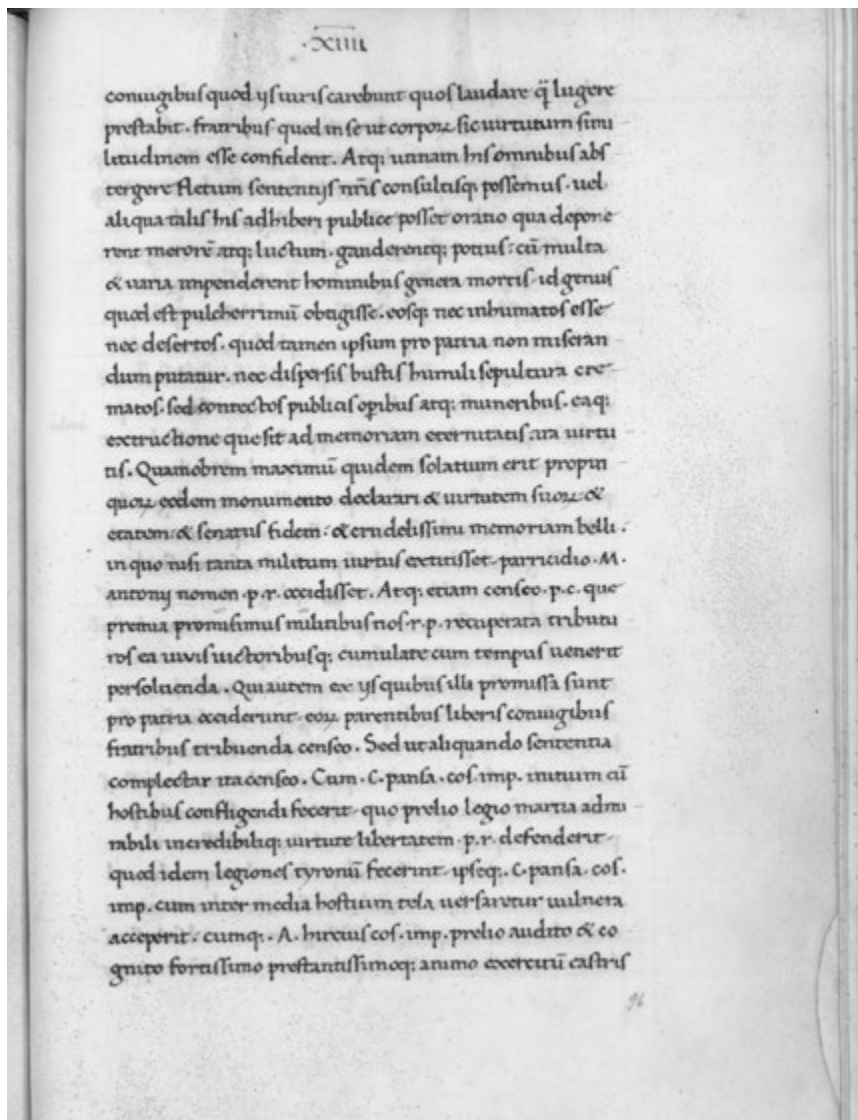
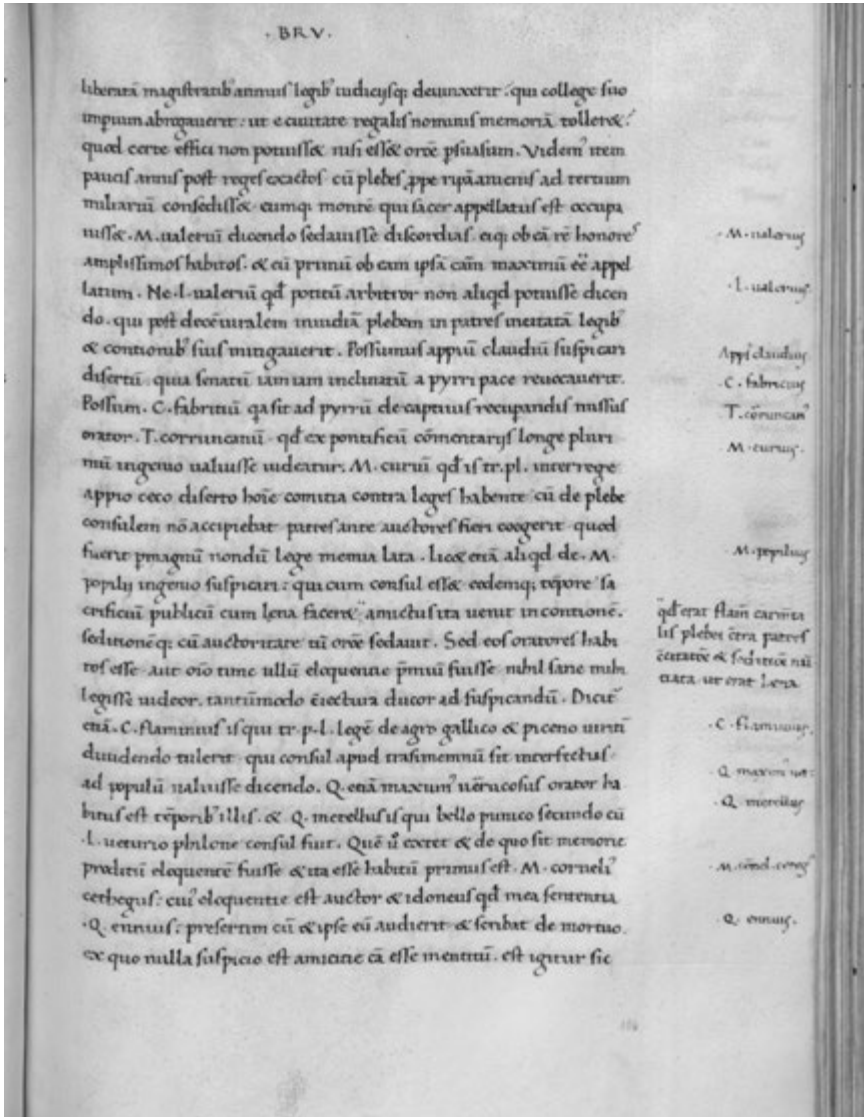


Figure 3 – Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 50.31.



Archival Sources and Manuscripts

- Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Strozianus 96
 Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 48.22
 Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms. Pluteo 50.31

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