The Preface of the Anonimo Romano’s Cronica: Writing History and Proving Truthfulness in Fourteenth-Century Rome

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This article aims firstly to introduce a masterpiece of medieval Italian historiography to an English-speaking audience; secondly, to provide an English translation of the Anonimo’s preface, the most thoughtful and multifaceted document of late medieval Italy on the nature, aims, and method of writing history; thirdly, to analyse those parts of the preface in which the Anonimo expounds his ideas about history in the light of other statements about writing history made by late medieval Italian historians and chroniclers; and fourthly, to consider some examples of how the Anonimo proves to his readers the truthfulness of his accounts and how he quotes his sources. The Anonimo is commonly regarded as the most important literary source on Cola di Rienzo, but neither the preface of the Cronica (with related issues of the segnali), nor the sources he used for the non-Roman chapters of his work, have previously been studied.¹

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Miglio, Anonimo romano, attempted an analysis of the preface, but the article is very descriptive.

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Abstract: This article focuses on the preface of a masterpiece of medieval Italian historiography, the Anonimo Romano’s Cronica. It provides an English translation of the text, which is perhaps the most thoughtful and multifaceted example of late-medieval Italian writings on the nature, aims, and methods of writing history. Passages in the preface are analysed in the light of other texts about writing history by late-medieval Italian historians and chroniclers. The last part of the article gives some examples of how the Anonimo proves the truthfulness of his accounts and discusses his approach to quoting his sources.

Keywords: historiography; chronicle; 14th Century, Rome, Italy, sources, truthfulness, eyewitnesses.
The Author and his Work

In 1624, in the walled town of Bracciano, not far from Rome, the well-known typographer Andrea Fei printed a *Vita di Cola di Rienzo tribuno del popolo romano* on behalf of Pompilio Totti, ‘bookseller in Piazza Navona’; a second edition of the text was issued in 1631, and was printed again by Fei for Totti. The language of the *Vita* was obscure, and its contents were intriguing — and very Roman. To all intents and purposes it looked like an ideal candidate for popularity in Baroque Rome.

In fact, the *Vita* is the second part of an anonymous fourteenth-century Roman chronicle published in full only in 1740 by Ludovico Antonio Muratori in the third volume of his *Antiquitates Italicæ Medii Aevi*. In this edition the reader is provided with Pietro Ercole Gherardi’s Latin translation of the vernacular text. In 1828 Zefirino Re published the chapters on Cola. In order to reach a wider audience he turned the Anonimo’s difficult Roman dialect into Tuscan and supplemented the text with many historical annotations. In 1905–06 Gabriele d’Annunzio published a completely new version of the text under the title of *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*. However, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, a few scholars began to work on the manuscripts and the language of the *Cronica* with the intention of producing a reliable edition of the text. Nevertheless, during the twentieth century almost all the studies on the *Cronica* were still focusing only on the second half of the text, which has always been considered one of the most important sources for the history of Cola and Cola’s Rome. It is not coincidental that the first edition of the work, which dealt with the manuscript tradition and the thorny philological issues of the text, was still

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2 In the first edition, the *Cronica* is attributed to Tomaso Fortisocca Scribasenato. The text of both editions is quite unreliable: see Anonimo Romano, *Cronica*, ed. by Porta (henceforth Porta), pp. xi–xii and 342–44.

3 *Historiae Romanae fragmenta*, ed. by Muratori. On this edition, which is as unreliable as the seventeenth-century ones, see Porta, p. xii and pp. 344–46.

4 *Vita di Cola di Rienzo*, ed. by Re. A second, enlarged edition of Re’s text was issued in 1854.


6 Fancelli, *Studi e ricerche sui 'Fragmenta historiae Romanae'*, Castellani, 'I Fragmenta Romanae historiæ'; Ugolini, 'La prosa degli *Historiae romanæ fragmenta*'; Ugolini, 'Preliminarì al testo critico degli *Historiae romanæ fragmenta*'.

essentially an edition of the *Vita*. Finally, in 1940 Gianfranco Contini pointed out that the *Cronica* was not only an invaluable historical source, but should also be considered as a masterpiece of medieval Italian literature. Since then the *Cronica* has had a place in every handbook of Italian literature. In 1979 Giuseppe Porta published a critical edition, thereby opening the floodgates to a steady stream of studies, mainly on language and philological issues.

The vernacular *Cronica*, or at least most of it, is likely to have been written between late 1357 and early 1358. Its author is unknown: he is referred to simply as the Anonimo Romano. All we know about him is what he tells us himself in his work. In 1325 he was a child and lived in the Rione Regola, near Santa Maria in Publicolis (where the modern Ghetto district is and the house of Cola di Rienzo was located). Around 1339 he was studying medicine in Bologna: this is why he was well aware of topical events in Northern Italy. In the mid-fourties he was back in Rome. At the end of the fifties he probably moved to Tivoli, where he worked on his *Cronica*. The most recent event recorded in the *Cronica* is the release of John II of France, prisoner of the English, on 25 October 1360; but this is a short Latin passage at the end of chapter 26 and it was clearly added at a later stage.

The Anonimo was a member of a rising heterogeneous class of merchants, landowners, and notaries who struggled against the Roman barons and found their champion in Cola for a while. As a physician, the Anonimo was acquainted with the work of Avicenna and Aristotle — he uses Aristotle’s *De divinatione per somnum* for a long digression on dreams. He is familiar with Livy: the most distinctive reasons he gives in his preface for writing history are drawn from this

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10 See above, n. 2; there is also an *editio minor* (Milan, 1981, 2007). The best review of Porta’s edition is Tanturli, ‘La Cronica di Anonimo romano’; see also Petrucci, [Review of Porta’s edition].


12 Billanovich tried to identify the Anonimo with Bartolomeo di Iacovo da Valmontone, but his evidence is not convincing: Billanovich, ‘Come nacque un capolavoro’; against Billanovich’s hypothesis see Delle Donne, ‘Storiografia ed ‘esperienza storica’ nel medioevo’. Even less convincing is Rossi, ‘Anonimo romano: Lello de’ Tosetti’, pp. 412–17, on which see Tognetti, ‘Una nuova proposta sull’identità dell’Anonimo romano’.
Roman historian, and two passages from *Ab urbe condita* are also paraphrased in chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 27 contains a short compendium of Hannibal’s expedition to Italy (*Ab urbe condita*, XXI–XXII), focusing on the aftermath of Cannae and the famous discussion between Maharbal and Hannibal on the expediency of attacking Rome.\(^\text{13}\) The Anonimo quotes Valerius Maximus when drawing sharp comparisons and parallels between the past and the present in chapters 9, 18, and 26. He cites passages from Isidore, Martinus Polonus’s chronicle, and Gregory the Great’s *Dialogi*; Lucan and Sallust also get a mention in the preface of the *Cronica*, as we shall see.\(^\text{14}\)

The *Cronica* is clearly divided into two parts: after the preface, which contains an index of the chapters, the first part (chapters 2 to 14) includes a large section on foreign history, while the second part (chapters 15 to 28) focuses mostly on the life of Cola di Rienzo.\(^\text{15}\) As the Anonimo points out in his preface, the *Cronica* is not a continuous history but rather a snapshot of events that took place during the author’s lifetime; these are *novitati*, or extraordinary events, and are quite unrelated to each other.\(^\text{16}\)

A large part of the *Cronica* seems to be lost: the text from the end of chapter 3 to the beginning of chapter 5 is missing; chapters 17, 19 to 22, 24 to 25, and 28 are completely lost, and many of the extant chapters are affected by a range of lacunae, some of them very large. The Anonimo says in the preface that he previously wrote his work in Latin (this is lost) and that he then rendered it, or rather rewrote it, in the vernacular, that is, the fourteenth-century Roman dialect. The language of the *Cronica* is by far the most important witness of this dialect, which, by the fifteenth century, was already disappearing. The Anonimo’s syntax and style, which are characterized by short sentences, anaphora, and highly-

\(^{13}\) On the Anonimo and Livy see Seibt, *Anonimo romano*, pp. 87–90, 252, 268–69.

\(^{14}\) On the Anonimo’s literary models see Seibt, *Anonimo romano*, pp. 73–99.

\(^{15}\) At the beginning of chapter 15 the Anonimo says: ‘We have toured a lot, we have wandered about quite a time, we have searched many foreign countries. We have searched Lombardy and Spain, Turkey and France. Now it is time to go back home. Let’s go back to Italy, let’s go back to the magnificent and unheard-of events which have lately concerned the whole of Italy’ (Porta, p. 135).

coloured words, are very different from the classicizing Tuscan prose of Guido Compagni and Giovanni Villani.

Many details — such as missing dates and names, internal contradictions, a few additions in Latin and so on — indicate that the vernacular text was never finished. According to Seibt, many of the ostensibly missing chapters were never actually written, but the big lacuna stretching from the end of chapter 3 to the beginning of chapter 5 seems to prove that at least a part of the missing text did exist at one time but subsequently disappeared owing to a loss of fascicles in the archetype. Certainly, the lost chapters were already missing in the archetype, which, according to Castellani, was copied during the first half of the sixteenth century from a badly damaged paper manuscript of the second half of the fourteenth century written in semi-cursive script. According to Seibt, many of the ostensibly missing chapters were never actually written, but the big lacuna stretching from the end of chapter 3 to the beginning of chapter 5 seems to prove that at least a part of the missing text did exist at one time but subsequently disappeared owing to a loss of fascicles in the archetype. Certainly, the lost chapters were already missing in the archetype, which, according to Castellani, was copied during the first half of the sixteenth century from a badly damaged paper manuscript of the second half of the fourteenth century written in semi-cursive script. According to Seibt, many of the ostensibly missing chapters were never actually written, but the big lacuna stretching from the end of chapter 3 to the beginning of chapter 5 seems to prove that at least a part of the missing text did exist at one time but subsequently disappeared owing to a loss of fascicles in the archetype. Certainly, the lost chapters were already missing in the archetype, which, according to Castellani, was copied during the first half of the sixteenth century from a badly damaged paper manuscript of the second half of the fourteenth century written in semi-cursive script.

Actually, the manuscript tradition of the Cronica is very late: the oldest manuscript is dated to 1550, with the bulk of the manuscripts dating from the seventeenth century; and most of these include only the section on Cola.

The Preface of the ‘Cronica’

Under these circumstances, we cannot be sure about the way the Anonimo worked on his text, but he is likely to have worked on it at different times and in a variety of ways, since each chapter constitutes a separate unit. Luckily, in the preface of the Cronica, the Anonimo offers invaluable information about his work and his ideas about the writing of history:

The glorious doctor and lord St Isidore says, in the book of Etymologies, that the first man to discover writing was a Greek by the name of Cadmon. Before his time there were no letters, and when people wanted to make something memorable, they could not write about it. Therefore, they created memorials out of stone, with sculptures and low reliefs; these were put up in famous places where multitudes of people lived, or else they were situated where the events had taken place, such

[19] Only a few Latin passages could cast a little light on the Anonimo’s desk: see Campanelli, “Benché io l’afia ià fatta per lettera”.
[21] See Isidori Hispolensis, Etymologiae, ed. by Lindsay, l. 3. 6.
as a great battle or a victory [...] they carved sad events, defeats [...] and they sculpted other animals or soldiers out of stone as memorials. And they placed these stones where the events had taken place, as everlasting memorials. No books were written on those subjects, since at the time the Greeks had no written language. This practice was also used by the Romans throughout Italy, and in France, and especially in Rome itself. As a means of letting their descendants know [...] about their deeds, they made triumphal arches †in solis† showing battles, armed men, horses and suchlike, such as are found now in †Persia† and in Rimini. After Cadmon discovered letters, people began to write about their events and deeds because they recognized the feebleness of memory, and, especially, because they wanted to mark outstanding and amazing deeds: for example, Livy wrote a book from the beginning of Rome up to the time of Octavian and Lucan wrote of the deeds of the Caesars; Sallust and many other writers did not allow the memories of Rome’s history to die. Likewise, should I, who [...] my nobility, as God wanted, have seen things which were very worthy to be recorded, since they were extraordinary events of great excellence in this world, let such things go by without any writing? It would certainly be a pity if these things remain in the darkness of ignorance because of my idleness in writing. So indeed, I do want to write a special book and narrative about them — the work is great and beautiful. I undertake this for many reasons.

22 This lacuna and the following one were in the archetype, as they are indicated by dots in both the families of manuscripts (a and b) that Porta used for his edition (see Porta, pp. 329–39). This and the following notes about variant readings and lacunae are based on Porta’s critical apparatus.

23 The a manuscripts do not indicate any lacuna in the text; perhaps only an article is missing: facenno asapere alli loro successori ‹li› loro fatti (see Porta, p. 444).

24 The b manuscripts have in solis; the a manuscripts have a blank. According to Porta, it could be a ‘forma etimologizzante’ of arcosolio, since the Anonimo could have connected the ancient triumphal arches with the painted arcosolia of the Christian catacombs (even though it would have been quite an odd connection; besides, it is hard to say whether the Anonimo knew anything of the catacombs).

25 The a manuscripts omit the word. It is clearly a corruption of Perugia (always Peroscia in the Cronica), whose Etruscan arch was thought to have been built during the age of Augustus, like the arch of Rimini (see Porta, pp. 444–45).

26 The Anonimo is likely to have drawn this information from Florus’s Epitome de Tito Livio, which was quite widespread in Italy during the late Middle Ages.

27 The b manuscripts have no blank, but at least a couple of words are certainly missing here (something like ‘with relation to’).

28 Here the Anonimo could be mindful of Sallust: ‘Non fuit consilium socordia atque desidia bonum oium conterrerne neque vero agrum colundo aut venando, servilibus officiis, intentum aetatem agere; sed [...] statui res gestas populi Romani carptim, ut quaeque memoria digna videbantur, perscribere’ (Cat. 4, 1).
book that will happen again in the same way; thus he will realize that Solomon’s saying is true. Solomon said: ‘There is nothing new under the sun, for everything that seems new has already happened.’ The second reason is that readers will find here many beautiful and good examples; this will help them to avoid dangerous things, and to choose and use others, so that the reading of this work will be useful to them. The third reason is that I want to highlight the magnificence of those extraordinary events, as I said above, since one does not care about things of little importance, forgets them, and writes instead about great things. The fourth reason is the one that motivated Livy. In his first ten books Livy mentions Alexander of Macedonia: how many foot soldiers and knights he had, how long his dominion lasted, how far it spread over the world. And Livy says that his greatness was nothing compared to the greatness of the Romans. By saying this, he answers a potential question one could ask him: ‘If you are telling the history of the Romans, why do you bother about recounting Alexander’s deeds?’ Livy answers: ‘I do this to give a rest to my soul.’ It is as if he said: ‘My soul is incited to write about this subject; I have to broach it. Then it can rest relieved.’ I say the same: ‘My incited soul cannot rest until I set down on paper the beautiful things and extraordinary events I have seen during my life.’ The fifth reason is the one Livy writes in the preface of his work, in the first ten books. He says: ‘While I am busy with writing down these things, I keep a distance and do not see the cruelties our city has been experiencing for a long time.’ I say something similar: ‘While I take pleasure in writing this work, I am disconnected and do not feel the wars and the troubles that overrun the country. Because of the great tribulation they bring, I feel that they are sad and miserable, not only for people who suffer them directly, but also for people who only hear about them.’ What I write is firmly true. Let God and people who are living in this same age that I live in bear witness that the things written in this chronicle are true. I saw and heard them: above all, I heard about some things that took place in my country from reliable people, who agreed on them as if they were just one person. Following the development of the subject, I will insert some signs [segni] which were concomitant with the events I describe. These signs will make the reading of my narrative certain and erase any doubts. I have written this chronicle in the vernacular so that it can be useful to people who are just able to read, people like ordinary merchants and many other good people who do not understand Latin. Therefore, I have written this work in the vernacular for the sake of common usefulness and pleasure, although I have already written it in Latin, using a language very [...] But that work is not so well arranged nor so rich as this one [...]
Some topics mentioned here are quite traditional, and the Anonimo is clearly part of a wider European framework of historians and chroniclers who, especially during the later Middle Ages, wrote about the nature and aims of history, its *utilitas* and its *dilectus*, the relationship between past and present, stressing the exemplariness of their accounts, as well as claiming to have told the truth and endeavouring to prove that to their readers.\(^{33}\) In the following pages I will try to point out the peculiarities of the Anonimo’s text, drawing a few parallels with other prefaces written by Italian chroniclers and historians.

With regard to the role of monuments and the importance of writing, Boncompagno da Signa (1165–75 to post-1240) talks about the triumphal arches of Rome at the beginning of his *Liber de obsidione Ancone*, mentioning that statues and images were used by both the Romans and Greeks to keep the memory of the most important events alive. Nevertheless, Boncompagno maintains that books are better for this purpose, and that, from the beginning of the world, they have been used by most people to preserve the memory of the past.\(^{34}\) Giovanni da Cermenate (c. 1280–1344) in the preface of his *Historia* says that *notabilia exempla* are known and spread ‘by writing, which is the only faithful guardian of the sciences and liberal arts and preserves the memory of past events’.\(^{35}\) Reading the preface of Ferreto de Ferreti’s (1294–97 to 1337) *Historia*, we are told that the *litterarum industria* is the best benefit given to mankind by intercession of the Holy Spirit, since it allows people to know and almost to see events from the beginning of the world up to the present, and thereby preserves the magnificent

‘wonderful’, ‘splendid’ (*benché io l’ai fatta per lettera con uno latino moito <luculento>*); see Campanelli, “Benché io l’ai fatta per lettera”.


\(^{35}\) ‘[…] Per scripturam, quae unica scientiarum atque artium liberalium fidelis custos est ac rerum gestarum memoriam servat. This is the later version of Iohannes’ text (ms. *Aa*); in the earlier version (ms. *Bb*) there was no specific mention of history’: ‘[…] fidelis custos mortalibus ac ministra semper fuit’; see Iohannis de Cermenate, *Historia de situ Ambrosianae urbis*, ed. by Ferrai, p. 4.
deeds which deserve to be remembered: ‘Indeed this is history’ (Hec quidem ystoria est).\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Five Reasons for Writing History}

The Anonimo starts from Isidore, ‘Usus litterarum repertus propter memoriam rerum’ (\textit{Orig.} 1. 3. 2): letters were not a divine gift; on the contrary, they were found by a single man as an answer to a fundamental issue. The Anonimo points out that to preserve the memory of the past is an innate function of human nature. Before the invention of letters, human beings had already found a way of passing the memory of great events on to posterity through sculpture. The Anonimo could easily guess from Isidore himself that Cadmon came before the Romans — that is before the triumphal arches; besides, he would have seen the inscriptions on the top of the remaining arches, even though most probably he would not have managed to read and understand them.\textsuperscript{37} Anachronism was not a conscious problem for medieval historiography: the Anonimo’s anachronism is conceivably intentional. Perhaps he aimed to present the development of human culture \textit{sub specie historiographiae}, since ancient art was intended for telling history and the whole of Roman historiography is presented as a direct result of Cadmon’s invention. Thus art and literature seem directed only to the preservation of the past: it is a sort of \textit{reductio artium ad historiam}. Therefore writing history, that is, keeping the memory of the past alive, is the duty of every human being, in every epoch. On the other hand, every epoch has ‘things which were very worthy to be recorded, since they were extraordinary events of great excellence in this world’. This is why the modern historian is in almost the same position as his ancient forebear; this is why he cannot avoid telling of those extraordinary events, lest he face a charge of guilty idleness (according to an old and widespread topos).\textsuperscript{38} From this perspective the Anonimo puts himself on the same level as the ancient historians.

\textsuperscript{36} Ferreti Vicentini, ‘Historia rerum in Italia gestarum’, ed. by Cipolla, pp. 4–6.

\textsuperscript{37} Introducing Cola, the Anonimo says that ‘He was the only one who managed to read the ancient inscriptions’ (Porta, p. 143).

\textsuperscript{38} For instance, the so called Hugo Falcando (second half of the twelfth century) would not tolerate idle sloth wasting the memory of the recent and perilous events of the kingdom of Sicily which he had either seen or been faithfully told of; see Falcando, \textit{Historia o Liber de regno Sicilie}, ed. by Siragusa, p. 4; Siragusa’s text is reissued in Falcando, \textit{Il regno di Sicilia}, ed. by Lo Curto, p. 22; there is also a translation into English: Falcandus, \textit{The History of the Tyrants of Sicily}, ed. by Loud. Gerardus Maurisius (\textit{ante} 1173, \textit{post} 1237) says that everyone who happens to know \textit{merita, virtutes et bona opera} and is too slow in writing or telling them to other people,
The first reason for writing history, as expressed in Solomon’s maxim, reinforces this perspective from above: past, present, and future represent only different stages of the same process. The second reason comes directly from the first and is the most traditional. Almost every historian who has written a preface to his own work has pointed out the utilitas of history, ‘quoniam multa et magna utilitas est preterita et presentia scribere’, as Jacopo d’Oria wrote at the beginning of his Annales.  

It seems that for the Anonimo there is a line linking the ‘outstanding and amazing deeds’ of the ancients and the ‘extraordinary events of great excellence’ of the moderns, as well as his ‘great and beautiful’ work and the ‘many beautiful and good examples’ that are found in it. The usefulness of history relates to its exemplariness, but for the Anonimo exemplariness seems to be to a large extent the result of beauty and magnificence. Thus the third reason for writing history is a corollary of the first two: the magnificence of an extraordinary event deserves to be a subject of history because its exemplariness is unquestionable, since it is certain that it will take place again — so it is a point of duty to record it in writing. In fact, it is very likely that the Anonimo had a specific source for the second and probably also for the third reason, namely, Livy’s preface: ‘Hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempla in inlustri positum monumentum intueri; unde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu foedum exitu quod vites.’ It would be

is continuously affected by macula desidie; see Maurisio, Cronica Dominorum Ecelini et Alberici fratrum de Romano, ed. by Soranzo, p. 3; an Italian translation is available in Maurisii, Cronaca ezzeliniiana, ed. by Fiorese. Rolandino da Padova (c. 1200–1276) points out that he prefers to obey some prelates who had strongly admonished him to write the events of his lifetime rather than to lie piger et occiosus: see Rolandini Patavini, Cronica, ed. by Bonardi, p. 8; Bonardi’s text is reissued, with slight variations, and provided with an Italian translation in Rolandino, Vita e morte di Ezzellino da Romano, ed. by Fiorese, pp. 14 and 16. On the possibility that the Anonimo knew Rolandino’s Cronica, see Seibt, Anonimo Romano, pp. 81–84. The very first words of Giovanni Sercambi’s Croniche (1348–1424) are Per non stare ozioso (‘Not to be idle’); see Sercambi, Croniche, ed. by Bongi, i, 3.


40 Compare the Anonimo with the Dominican Stefanardo da Vimercate (d. Milan, 1297), who had to apologize for focusing only on maiora, leaving minora quam plurima, and to explain that it did not mean breaking away a fundamento historie, as he thought that collecting everything was not only difficult, but also useless; see Stephanardi de Vicomercato, Liber de gestis in civitate Mediolani, ed. by Calligaris, p. 3.

41 ‘What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance
very interesting to know how the Anonimo would have translated or paraphrased this passage. Certainly, in his eyes the link between the exemplariness of the deeds and the excellence of the work in which those deeds were told relied on Livy’s authority.

The fourth reason marks a shift towards subjectivity. If the task of the Anonimo as historian is to tell of ‘the beautiful things and extraordinary events I have seen during my life’ (again the word ‘beautiful’), he seems to have absolute freedom of choice; it is an issue which concerns only his soul. This consideration seems quite new in the panorama of medieval Italian historiography. In this case, Livy is the explicit source, but it is noteworthy that the Anonimo turns what in Livy is merely an *excusatio* into a reason for writing history. In fact, Livy says the contrary: he does not want to indulge himself with *variationes* and to look for nice stories for his readers and rest for his soul; he is just making an exception, due to the greatness of that particular subject. This distortion of Livy’s words reveals once more that the *Cronica* has no *rerum ordo* beyond the greatness of the extraordinary events told in it. This fourth reason is probably the most original; it is certainly the point at which, when quoting by far his most important model, the Anonimo is, at the same time, the most detached from it: perhaps the *primum movens* of his writing of history was to provide rest to his ‘incited soul’. The fifth reason apparently presents history as a distraction, a safe way to forget the present. In fact, this last reason serves to move the work of the historian away from contingency: history implies an abstraction from reality. This last reason provides a basis for the other four: only by detaching himself from contingency, which, as Livy proves, is sad and marked by decay, can the historian fulfil his task, which is to select *cose belle e novitati* which have an exemplary value.

The keyword of the fifth reason seems to be *diletto*: ‘While I take pleasure in writing this work’. *Diletto* (pleasure) was not a new word in the panorama of Italian historiography and was often joined to *utilitas*, usefulness, probably as a distant memory of Horace’s *miscere utile dulci*. A few examples will suffice. For a start, the earliest extant history of Florence, the *Chronica de origine civitatis Florentiae*, which ends in 1125, begins by saying that men seem to have forgotten what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result’ (Livy, *History of Rome*, 1, § 10).

42 See Livy, *History of Rome*, iv, 9. 17. 1: ‘Nihil minus quaesitum a principio huius operis uideri potest quam ut plus iusto ab rerum ordine declinarem uarietatibusque distinguendo opere et legentibus uelut deuerticula amoena et requiem animo meo quaererem’ (‘Nothing can be thought to have been more remote from my intention, since I first set about this task, than to depart unduly from the order of events, and to seek, by the introduction of ornamental digressions, to provide, as it were, agreeable bypaths for the reader, and mental relaxation for myself’).
some useful and pleasant *ystorias* because of their great antiquity.\(^{43}\) Rolandino, in turn, says that for some people, and especially for scholars, it will be useful or no less pleasant to read the abuses and the troubles of the moderns written in Latin than to hear the deeds of the ancients in the vernacular.\(^{44}\) According to Saba Malaspina (d. 1297 or 1298), stories which neither please nor attract the *animi modernorum*, who perhaps still remember them as recent events, will be considered pleasant by posterity.\(^{45}\) Although his *sermo* is poor, Giovanni da Cermenate hopes that the admirable novelty of the *res* might eventually attract the reader by affording a certain degree of pleasure.\(^{46}\) In all these examples the issue is always the pleasure of the reader. As far as I know, the only writer who took into account the pleasure of the writer, in conjunction with the pleasure of the reader, was Tolomeo da Lucca (or Bartolomeo Fiadoni; c. 1236–1327) in the preface to his *Annales*. Quoting Solomon, he says that the art of writing has two *fructus*: the first for the writer who enjoys his writing, the second for the people who hear or read the story to their great enjoyment. Works which tell ‘novi actus et gesta sive principum sive [civitatis seu] alicuius private’\(^{47}\) are as enjoyable as varied food, the pleasure resulting either from the *sermonis materia*, which creates *suavitas* by itself, or *ex ipsius rei novitate*, like special and unusual food.\(^{49}\)

### Telling the Truth

When the historian is free to select the events he considers most beautiful and magnificent, the issue of his reliability potentially arises. It is no coincidence then that, immediately after declaring the five reasons, the Anonimo claims so baldly: ‘What I write is firmly true.’ We have to go back to Livy again, to the passage

\(^{43}\) *Quoniam homines quasdam utiles ac delectabiles ystorias propter nimiam longitudinem dierum et temporis videntur oblitī*, *Chronica de origine civitatis Florentiae*, ed by Chellini, p. 31.

\(^{44}\) ‘Nam forte non erit inutile vel delectabile minus aliquibus, et precipue litteratis, id quod de modernorum iniuris et laboribus scriptum per Latinum inventī quam quod de gestis nobilium antiquorum per vulgare’. Rolandini Patavini, *Cronica*, ed. by Bonardi (p. 8).

\(^{45}\) Malaspina, *Die Chronik*, ed. by Koller and Nitschke, pp. 89–90.

\(^{46}\) ‘Verum spero, cum inconditus sermo meus a lectione reiciet, ipsa miranda rerum novitas quadem delectatione aliquid poeter provocare lectorem’. Iohannis de Cermenate, *Historia de situ Ambrosianae urbis*, ed by Ferrai, p. 4.

\(^{47}\) The text is missing in Manuscript B.

\(^{48}\) Manuscript A has *primate* (perhaps for *primarie*).

on which the Anonimo bases his last and most important reason: just after the words the Anonimo paraphrases, Livy says that being absorbed in recollecting the deeds of the past, and so averting his eyes from the longlasting evil of the present, is a way to be ‘omnis expers curae quae scribentis animum, etsi non flectere a vero, sollicitum tamen efficere posset’ (‘free from every care which, even if it could not divert the historian’s mind from the truth, might nevertheless cause it anxiety’).\(^{50}\) This is what the fifth reason really points to: the historian must be detached from contingency in order to guarantee the truthfulness of his work, which mostly relies on the fact that his soul should not be affected by any external trouble.

The Anonimo says that what he is going to relate is true because he saw and heard the events. He claims that for events in his own country he uses the oral accounts of ‘reliable people, who agreed on them as if they were just one person’.\(^{51}\) Again, this was not at all a new idea in medieval historiography.\(^{52}\) Indeed, almost every medieval historian who has dealt with contemporary events and wanted to justify his work pointed out that he told only the truth because he relied on what he had seen and heard. In Italy, for example, Landolfo Seniore (11th century ex.–12th century in.) decided to write the history of the Ambrosian clergy ‘ut oculis vidi, ut auribus audivi cordeque intellexi’.\(^{53}\) Oberto says that Caffaro had written about events ‘sicuti vidit et per alios verissime cognovit’.\(^{54}\) Jacopo d’Oria put down on paper the history of Genoa between 1280 and 1283 since ‘omnia vidi et interfui vel a videntibus veraciter didici’.\(^{55}\) The anonymous author of the *Deeds of Frederick I in Lombardy* (written in 1177 or somewhat later) would

\(^{50}\) Livy, *History of Rome*, 1, § 5.

\(^{51}\) On the importance of eye-witnessing in the Anonimo’s work see Seibt, *Anonimo Romano*, pp. 3–49.

\(^{52}\) Of course historians already placed value on eye-witness testimony in Antiquity. See for instance Herodotus in his first story: ‘It happens that people trust ears less than eyes’ (1. 8. 2). See Morgan, ‘The Autopsy of C. Asinius Pollio’, pp. 51–69, with bibliography, p. 55 n. 21, especially the book by Marincola. Not only historians valued it: see Plautus, *Truculentus*, 489–90: ‘Pluris est oculatus testis unus quam auriti decem: qui audiunt audita dicunt, qui vident plane sciunt’ (‘One witness with eyes is worth more than ten with ears: those who hear relate things heard, but those who see really know’).


essay to write ‘que vidi et veraciter audivi’.\textsuperscript{56} The so-called Hugo Falcando would save the memory of what ‘partim ipse vidi partim eorum qui interfuerant veraci relatione cognovi’.\textsuperscript{57} Riccardo da San Germano (c. 1165–1244) aimed to put write of things ‘visu cognita seu fidelis relatione percepta’.\textsuperscript{58} Saba Malaspina wanted to describe ‘vera vel verisimilia, que aut vidi aut videre potui vel audivi communibus divulgata sermonibus’.\textsuperscript{59} As these passages demonstrate, it is no coincidence that the Anonimo does not quote written sources to see and to hear first-hand were clearly considered the best and most reliable ways of knowing what had happened either at home or abroad during the lifetime of the author.

\textit{Proving Truthfulness: ‘segnali’}

Evidently, then, the historian who set out to relate contemporary events, and who wanted to prove his work reliable, had to rely on ‘living’ sources, who could be questioned and swear their \textit{fides}. But the Anonimo has something more:

I saw and heard them: above all, I heard about some things that took place in my country from reliable people, who agreed on them as if they were just one person. Following the development of the subject, I will insert some signs [\textit{segnali}] which were concomitant with the events I describe. These signs will make the reading of my narrative certain and erase any doubts.\textsuperscript{62}

Here he offers to include ‘signs’ to the reader which can prove that he is telling the truth — signs which have not, to date, received scholarly attention and which constitute, therefore, a new topic in \textit{Cronica} scholarship. In my opinion, the most important part of these signs consists of parallels with either modern or ancient history. I will now focus on three of them.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Gesta Federici I. imperatoris}, ed. by Holder-Egger, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{57} Falcando, \textit{Historia o Liber de regno Sicilie}, ed. by Siragusa, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{58} Ryccardi de Sancto Germano, \textit{Chronica}, ed. by Garufi, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{59} Malaspina, \textit{Die Chronik}, ed. by Koller and Nitschke, p. 89.

\textsuperscript{60} For the only exception to this ‘rule’ see below, p. 99.

\textsuperscript{61} The b manuscripts have ‘true’ (\textit{vero}).

\textsuperscript{62} ‘E io le viddi e sentille: massimamente alcuna cosa che fu in mio paiese intesi da perzone fidedegne, le quale concordavano ad uno. E de ciò poneraio certi segnali, secunno la materia curze, li quali fuoro concurrrenti con esse cose. Questi segnali farrao lo leiere essere certo e non suspjetto de mio dicere’ (Porta, pp. 5–6).
Chapter 7 contains a lively account of the restoration of the roof of St Peter’s by pope Benedict XII; it shows us the Anonimo as eyewitness, since he unequivocally affirms that he was there at a crucial moment in the works:

Then pope Benedict had the whole roof of S. Pietro Maggiore in Rome renewed in a beautiful, noble and clear way. It was the year of the Lord mccc [... ] the month [...]. the work was finished. It cost eighty-thousand golden florins. The name of the master builder of the whole work was master Ballo de Colonna, a most excellent carpenter, who was so skilled that he was able to tell in advance the day, the hour, the moment at which that roof would be completely finished. And because of his knowledge he pulled down the old beams and raised up the new ones more quickly than if he were a bird. A man sat astride one end of the beam, another at the other. I would not want to have been one of them. When they were pulling down the old roof, an enormous beam of marvellous size was found there. I saw it. It was ten feet wide. It was completely bound in ropes because of its great age. This beam had lasted so long because of its great size. It was fir, like the others. And they found letters carved there, CON, as though to say: ‘This is one of those beams which the good Constantine put into this roof’. It was as old as the Alleluia. This beam was taken down and in it were found caverns and cavities, due both to age and to wild beasts, which gnawed it and made their haunts in it; nests of enormous mice were found in it, and even martins and, what is more, foxes with their lairs. Anyone who saw it could not believe it. This noble beam was broken up and planks were made from it to be used for the new building. And many gentlemen of Rome had dining tables made from it. I want to tell a marvel. All the wise masters who could be found in Rome or outside it were gathered to make this roof. Among them was one of the good men of this world, whose name was Nicola of Agniletto from Vetralla. He was aloft, working on an architrave. The beam was placed in the upper part of the wall. With an axe in his hand this master was carrying out the work that was needed, standing. Perhaps the beam was not properly lined up; indeed it was leaning. The weight was great. The beam came loose, and as it loosened rose into the air, and as it rose into the air it shifted from its place and turned. The master just avoided falling. He jumped smartly and stayed on his feet. The master was really frightened of falling together with the beam. And he could not hide his

63 The dates are quite often missing in the Cronica; it is one of the signs that the work was never finished. The restoration of the roof of St Peter’s ended in September 1341; on the works see Daumet, ‘Le Monument de Benoît XII’; Cerrati, ‘Il tetto della Basilica Vaticana’; Ait, ‘Il Manuale expensarum basilice Sancti Petri’, and Bolgia, ‘Il XIV secolo’. I would like to thank Claudia Bolgia for letting me read her article and providing me with the earlier bibliography.

64 Magister Ballus, like magister Nicolaus Angelutij (see infra), is repeatedly quoted in the book of the expenses for the restoration of St Peter’s published in Cerrati, ‘Il tetto della Basilica Vaticana’, pp. 91–117.
fright, since immediately half of his beard turned hoary. Afterwards he very often shaved it off. He often said that the hoariness resulted from the fright he had of falling together with the beam. The same happened to King Corradino. After he was defeated and captured in Astura, King Charles had him beheaded. His hair was so beautiful that, when he wagged his head, it looked as if golden strings swirled around a silver column. During the night which he spent in prison, the golden hair turned hoary. The day after, when he was beheaded, he really looked changed from a fair-haired into a hoary man. And this change took place in one night.

The Anonimo then quotes Avicenna for a physical explanation of the phenomenon. The story of Corradino’s wonderful golden hair turning white on his last night is not just an analogy; it is one of the segnali indicated in the preface, quite a sophisticated one, which serves to prove the truthfulness of the story told by the Anonimo about the otherwise obscure Nicola of Agniletto.

Sometimes the segnali are references to ancient history. In chapter 9 the Anonimo describes a terrible famine: ‘And because of a bad harvest there was such horrible starvation that it seems a hard thing to tell or to believe.’ But Livy describes a famine which was even worse, with people throwing themselves into the Tiber to avoid starvation; so the Anonimo finishes ‘Bona fide, I did not see this happening at that time.’ Later the Anonimo tells the story of Luchino Visconti’s dogs:

His bodyguards were two huge and ferocious Great Danes, as big as lions, as woolly as sheep. They had red and terrible eyes. These two Great Danes were always following him in the court, one on the right, the other on the left [...]. When Sir Luchino ate alone, he sat down at the table, the dogs always with him: he would give big cuts of meat sometimes to one, sometimes to the other. When Sir Luchino stood up, a crowd of barons waited at a distance from him silently, for fear of the dogs. Nobody makes a move, nobody speaks: if by any chance the master frowned a little at somebody, immediately the dogs would leap at his throat, would knock him down.

This account could seem exaggerated, but the Anonimo takes care to avert this criticism: ‘Nobody should wonder at this canine guard, since this is nothing new’ — and he goes on to summarize what Valerius Maximus tells about Masinissa, who did not feel safe without his two big mastiffs, although he had guards of infantrymen and knights, as well as the powerful and rich kingdom of Numidia, and the alliance of the Romans, to defend his power.

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66 Porta, pp. 55–56.

67 See Porta, p. 56; cf. Valerius Maximus, 9. 13, ext. 2.
Proving Truthfulness: Eyewitnesses

Different but somehow related to the *segnali* is the issue of sources. Of particular interest are the cases in which we can be confident that the Anonimo was not an eyewitness, as in chapter 11, on the battle of Rio Salado (1340), chapter 13, on the crusade of Smyrna (1344–46) and the subsequent operations, and chapter 14, on the battle of Crécy (with an appendix on the siege of Calais). According to what he says in his preface, the Anonimo used only oral witnesses. In fact, the first source he quotes in this triad of chapters is a written one, a letter describing Alfonso XI’s array: ‘Such was the *berbentana* letter that arrived in Rome for Sir Stefano Colonna, which was very difficult to understand.’ The Anonimo probably mentioned this document just to point out the difficulty of reading its exotic handwriting, which fits the exotic nature of the whole chapter. Otherwise, the Anonimo mentions only oral witnesses. It is no surprise to find him interviewing pilgrims:

I asked a Spanish pilgrim whether he knew anything about this rout. He answered that he was there and took off his hat and uncovered his forehead and showed a round scar in the centre of the forehead and said that it was from a stone which had hit him. Another one, to whom I asked the same question, took off his hood and showed me three scars from a sword thrust and, on his forehead, one from a stone.

In 1355, when Charles IV came to Tivoli after his coronation, the city became crowded:

I was in a shop, and there a man came in to buy wax candles, sweets and spices. This man had a sword under his arm. The pommel was completely gilded and wrought with lilies and flowers. I said ‘Do you want to sell this sword?’ and took it out of the scabbard.

The Anonimo goes on to describe the sword in great detail. Finally, the man replies that he does not want to sell the sword, not even for fifty florins, and swears an oath to confirm it:

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68 On this chapter see Ugolini, ‘Avvenimenti, figure e costumi di Spagna’.
69 Porta, p. 75. Nothing else is known about this letter. *Berbentana* is quite a mysterious word; it could be related to the Beneventan script, without any real reference to it, of course, but indicating that the handwriting was very difficult to read: see the note in Porta’s *editio minor* (2007), pp. 227–28.
70 Porta, p. 76. On this passage see Seibt, *Anonimo Romano*, p. 58.
The people who were around him asked ‘Why?’. He answered and said: ‘This sword was won at the rout of Spain, in the great battle, when the king of Bellamarina was defeated by the king of Castilla. I was there. Thus, although it is of no great worth, I am too much attached to it. I would not sell it for any money’.

The Anonimo says no more about this man, but it is pretty certain that the lively negotiation for the sword was followed by quite a few questions on the battle. Regarding the unbelievable amount of money found in the pavilion of Queen Ricciaferra, the Anonimo mentions other oral witnesses:

I was told by those who saw, who spent them, that those were golden coins, in the shape of small silver plates, a bit smaller than the patens of the chalice of the altar.

In the chapter on the crusade at Smyrna the Anonimo mentions his sources in two passages only, and they are, once again, oral witnesses. The first case is a terrible massacre of Christians, involving the patriarch and many barons, who had taken ‘a very ancient church, called St John. It is said that the blessed saint John built it’. The church had been the episcopal see of ancient Smyrna; after the destruction of the city, it became just a rural church. The Anonimo compares two different versions of events:

People talk about this extraordinary event in two ways. One person says […]. Someone else tells me it in another way, and it sounds credible. He said that he saw it himself, and swore an oath to confirm it. He said so […].

In the first version, the Christians, taken by surprise, are killed in the church during Mass. In the second they go out of the church to fight the Turks, but are poorly equipped. People lose sight of their commanders:

The more they go, the less they find them. Those places were unfamiliar, also frightening because of their many obstacles of broken walls, foundations of houses and towers; places without streets, places to hide people.

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71 Following Pietro Ercole Gherardi, who translated the Cronica into Latin for Muratori’s edition (see above, p. 84) Castellani, ‘Ritorno all’Anonimo romano’, p. 240 (Nuovi saggi, p. 1132) inserted a ‘non’ into Porta’s text (‘benché assai bona <non> sia’).

72 Porta, pp. 84–85. See also Seibt, Anonimo Romano, pp. 60–61.

73 Porta, p. 83.

74 Porta, pp. 110–11.

75 Porta, p. 112.
This is the dreadful scene of the massacre. The Anonimo records two versions, but it is no surprise that he gives far more room to the version which seems to him not only more likely but also more lively, more suitable for a gripping narrative. Further on the Anonimo writes:

Hear a nice story! Someone who saw all these things said to me that many Turks were taken, among whom there was a very fat man. They skinned this fat man alive, made the skin fall down like breeches and released him. As soon as he was released, he went modestly. When the skinned Turk got to a safe place (one could see him well), he turned and with both hands made the *ficora* to the Christians, so round that it would seem it was August.  

These examples show how the Anonimo constantly quotes his sources, both for major events and for lesser stories. These are always eyewitnesses with whom he happened to talk. An exception, however, is the curious *lettera berbentana*, but it is impossible to say whether in his work he used other written sources, contrary to what he may have claimed in his preface. Likewise, it is impossible to know just how many oral witnesses he interviewed and, importantly, how partial were their accounts.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that further study of these issues will provide a deeper insight into the Anonimo’s working methods, especially the ways in which he conceived and wrote the chapters dealing with events he did not see first-hand. This would perhaps give us a new perspective on a masterpiece of late medieval historiography which in many respects still remains an enigma.

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76 *Far le fiche* is quite a common, and vulgar, expression, in medieval as well as in modern Italian vernaculars. It is also in Dante, *Inferno* 25, 1–2: ‘Al fine de le sue parole il ladro | le mani alzò con amendue le fiche’; cf. *TLIO* <http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/>, s. v. *fica* (entry by M. Giuliani). It is ‘a gesture of insolent contempt made by extending the hands with the thumbs clasped between the first and second fingers’: Hoare, *An Italian Dictionary*, p. 249, s.v. *fica*. The Anonimo’s comparison (‘con doi mano faceva le ficora alli Cristiani, si rotonne che bastara che fossi stato de agosto’) is a joke on the double meaning of the word *ficora* (August is the month in which figs ripen).

77 Porta, pp. 113–14.

78 I have studied the Anonimo’s hidden or possible sources in the chapter on the battle of Crécy: Campanelli, ‘A New Account of the Battle of Crécy’. 
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