

Burckhardt at 200: The „Civilisation of the Italian Renaissance“ Reconsidered

Veranstalter: Simon Ditchfield, University of York; Michelle O'Malley, Warburg Institute, London; Stefan Bauer, University of York

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Bericht von: Stefan Bauer, Centre for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies, Department of History, University of York

The bicentenary of the birth of the Swiss scholar, Jacob Burckhardt (25 May 1818 - 8 August 1897), author of *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), seemed an appropriate moment to take stock and consider whether or not the idea of an 'Italian Renaissance' is still a hermeneutically helpful one. The British Academy conference *Burckhardt at 200: The „Civilisation of the Italian Renaissance“ Reconsidered* adopted the strategy of looking at Burckhardt's classic book to understand his methods and intentions as well as to judge his continuing relevance. Burckhardt's *Civilisation* has been described as both 'the supreme expression of the 19th-century fantasy of the Italian Renaissance' and also as a 'dark, disturbing classic of modernism' which located 'the shock of the new' in Italy's sleeping ruins. For this citizen of Basel, who watched Germany's transformation from a cultural idea into a political empire with mounting alarm, the potential of humans to remake an expanding world in their own, individualistic and secular image had its origins in the ferocious political rivalry of Italian city states which sought to claim their legitimacy by every means at their disposal. Burckhardt's depiction of amorality and violence, as well as his powerful praise of artistic achievements, have fuelled 'Renaissance-cult' since the late nineteenth century.

An interdisciplinary line-up of speakers critiqued Burckhardt's themes from the perspective of their own current research not only in art history but also in the fields of religion, literature, political theory, and cultural history. MIKKEL MANGOLD (Basel) laid the foundations by presenting the new critical edition of the *The Civilisation* in its original German form (*Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*); the text should be perceived as

a living process from its very first conception. ROBERT BLACK (Leeds) pointed out that when Burckhardt titled the first section of his book as 'The State as a Work of Art', he conceived of the state in the modern sense as the supreme public embodiment of power. Burckhardt was right when he highlighted the novelty of 'the state as a work of art', but for Italian political thinkers of the early sixteenth century, this phrase was used in a different sense: Machiavelli's phrase 'l'arte dello stato' referred to *stato* as the regime controlling a political body. MARCO GENTILE (Parma) probed developments in Italian scholarship on political life and institutions of Italy in the age of the Renaissance – and Burckhardt's role in them.

Burckhardt's famous thesis about the development of the individual was approached from particularly innovative angles. VIRGINIA COX (NYU Florence) reflected on the ways in which developments in communications technology affect identity formation, and used this tool as a way of analysing the dynamics of identity formation in Renaissance Italy. WIETSE DE BOER (Miami University, Ohio) focused on Burckhardt's claim that the Renaissance marked a turn towards introspection and exploration of human nature; he drew on recent studies on introspective practices and on ideas about the soul and its faculties (sensation, imagination, memory).

In a section on the 'revival of antiquity', WILLIAM STENHOUSE (New York) looked at how Burckhardt differed in emphasis from the work of his predecessors (such as Georg Voigt and Jules Michelet). He analysed particularly Burckhardt's treatment of the early investigators of ancient Rome's material remains and his sense of the inspiring effect that objects had on the early humanists. BARBARA VON REIBNITZ (Basel) dealt with the impact of antiquity and humanism on Burckhardt's construction of the Italian Renaissance. She also revealed that Burckhardt's account is highly self-reflexive, exposing the historian's personal values as well as the critical diagnosis of his own time. JILL BURKE (Edinburgh) took up the example of Michelangelo, whom the Swiss was not as fond of as he was of Raphael. She wanted

to investigate how Burckhardt's periodization of classical revival was closely tied to a moral framework: short-lived perfection and balance themselves contained the seeds of the decadence and chaos that were to follow.

The 'discovery of the world and of man' was, for Burckhardt, the description of a new intellectual attitude. JOAN-PAU RUBIÉS (Barcelona) pointed out that much of the context for this change of attitude was not simply the recovery of classical antiquity, but also the dramatic expansion of Europe's geographical horizons and subsequent colonial experience. GIUSEPPE MARCOCCI (Oxford) reflected on the continuity between world and man, as well as the emphasis on geography and natural sciences, which encouraged an understanding of the Renaissance as a turning point in the master narrative of European modernity.

Burckhardt's representation of fifteenth-century Italian festival culture guided another very influential cultural historian, Aby Warburg, onto the path of his lifelong research interests. CLAUDIA WEDEPOHL (Warburg Institute) showed how Warburg's notions on the origin of rituals, theatre, tournaments, motion and emotion as well as their influence on Italian Renaissance visual culture were inspired by, but differed from, Burckhardt. It is surprising that, in his treatment of society and festivals, Burckhardt did not rate the *commedia dell'arte* among the types of spectacle embodying the 'national' Italian spirit. SARAH ROSS (Boston College) showed with vivid examples that the *commedia* may ultimately offer better evidence for his own thesis than the civic festivals he preferred. Burckhardt alerted his readers not only to the importance of material culture and the decorative arts in forging the Italian Renaissance but specifically also to the home as a work of art. As MARY LAVEN (Cambridge) argued, his treatment can be enriched by reconsidering the role of religious objects in bringing sacred order to the domestic space.

The last section of Burckhardt's *Civilisation* dealt with morality and religion. According to NICHOLAS TERPSTRA (Toronto), when Burckhardt framed his Renaissance dialectically, it was inevitable that what was new, rational, deliberate and free would need to mark

a departure from what was tired, incurious, superstitious and corrupt. This has raised stimulating questions for today's researchers about whether they can legitimately speak of 'Renaissance religions' in the plural. STEFAN BAUER (York) argued that Burckhardt, as a young man, had suffered a religious crisis and that, throughout his life, he reflected on the relationship between religion, secularization, the State and culture. His presentation of the Reformation went strongly against the blueprint of positive Protestant historiography. Applying what has been labelled as his 'principle of correction', Burckhardt painted a gloomy picture of both the state-sponsored Lutheran Reformation and Calvinist tyranny. Bauer concluded that his basic intention – to carry out a non-confessional evaluation of Renaissance and Reformation religion by stripping them of partisan prejudices – was path-breaking.

The concluding roundtable, which was chaired by BRIAN CUMMINGS (York), sparked an extremely rich discussion. It was felt, overall, that 'Renaissance' as a concept of historical periodization has lost its validity; however, it is very much alive as a term describing a movement in history. It became clear that Burckhardt remains an inspiration for scholars today for two reasons: firstly, because of his interdisciplinarity; secondly, because of his ambivalence and irony towards the Renaissance phenomena which he himself described. His combination of these two tones makes him a classic, as PETER BURKE (Cambridge) noted. Finally, Burckhardt was both precocious and prescient in pointing out the inherent contradictions of the so-called 'civilising process' of early modern Europe, with which scholars from different disciplines are still struggling to come to terms.

Conference Overview:

Session 1: The State of the Work as Art / State as a Work of Art

Chair: Simon Ditchfield (York)

Mikkel Mangold (Basel): An introduction to the new critical edition of *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*

Robert Black (Leeds): *L'arte dello stato: regime and state in Renaissance political the-*

ory

Marco Gentile (Parma): State of the Art: Recent Historiographical Trends in the Study of Renaissance Polities (an Italian Perspective)

Session 2: Development of the Individual

Chair: Mary Laven (Cambridge)

Virginia Cox (NYU, Florence): The Performance of Identity in Renaissance Italy

Wietse de Boer (Miami University, Ohio): Burckhardt and the Perception of Self and Society in Renaissance Italy

Session 3: Revival of Antiquity

Chair: Michelle O'Malley (Warburg Institute, London)

William Stenhouse (Yeshiva University, New York): Excavation and Revival

Barbara von Reibnitz (Basel): The Impact of Antiquity and Humanism on Burckhardt's Construction of the Italian Renaissance

Jill Burke (Edinburgh): Looking at Michelangelo with Burckhardt: Classical Revival, Morality and Decadence

Session 4: The Discovery of the World and of Man

Chair: Stefan Bauer (York)

Joan-Pau Rubiés (Barcelona): What is left of the Renaissance? The Discovery of the World and Man from a Cosmopolitan Perspective

Giuseppe Marcocci (Oxford): Parallel antiquities: The cross-cultural Renaissance of World Historians and Antiquarians

Session 5: Society and Festivals

Chair: Kate Lowe (Queen Mary University of London)

Sarah Ross (Boston College): Burckhardt Rescripted: Festival and the Commedia dell'Arte in Late-Renaissance Italy

Mary Laven (Cambridge): 'Soft, Elastic Beds', 'Costly Carpets' and the Religious Renaissance in the Italian Home

Claudia Wedepohl (Warburg Institute): From Life into Art: Aby Warburg and the Authority of Jacob Burckhardt

Session 6: Morality and Religion

Chair: Virginia Cox (NYU, Florence)

Nicholas Terpstra (Toronto): Burckhardt's Beliefs and Renaissance Religions

Stefan Bauer (York): Burckhardt, Religion and the „Principle of Correction“: From Renaissance to Reformation

Session 7: Concluding Round Table

Chair: Brian Cummings (York)

Speakers: Virginia Cox (NYU, Florence) / Peter Burke (Cambridge) / Mary Laven (Cambridge) / Martin Ruehl (Cambridge) / Claudia Wedepohl (Warburg Institute)

Tagungsbericht *Burckhardt at 200: The „Civilisation of the Italian Renaissance“ Reconsidered*. 31.05.2018–01.06.2018, London, in: H-Soz-Kult 06.11.2018.