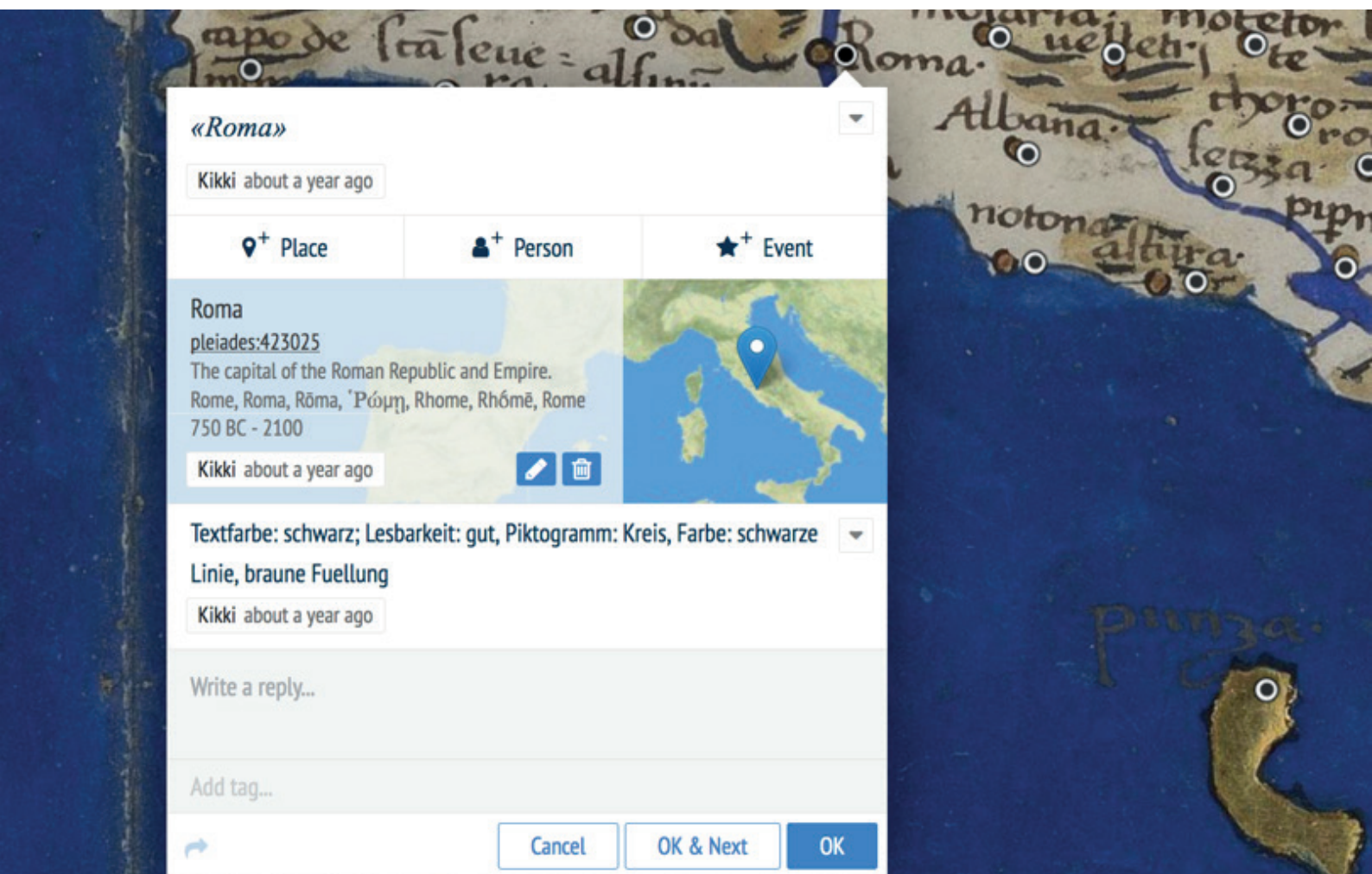


Walking Through History

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Flavio Biondo's Spaces in the "Italia illustrata"

Edited by Tanja Michalsky & Martin Thiering



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keywords – *Space and history, Historical geography, Illustratio, Italia Illustrata*



The Italia Illustrata of Biondo Flavio logically presupposes an 'illustratio' of Italy, but Biondo's notion of 'illustratio' has hardly ever been discussed in detail. This article explores the various dimensions of this concept and tries to show how they help to elucidate Biondo's working method in his Italia Illustrata. Such an analysis also intends to contribute to a better understanding of the scope and nature of the Italia Illustrata, the most original and most personal among Biondo's major treatises. The multi-faceted idea of 'illustratio' informs, in particular, the innovative interlocking of space and history, evident in the Italia illustrata. Finally, Biondo's conception of 'illustratio' can also be used as a yardstick for measuring the precise extent of the reception and influence of the Italia Illustrata on the development of historical geography, sometimes connected with Biondo in an all too perfunctory manner.

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'Illustrating' Italy: Biondo's Concept of *Illustratio*

Marc Laureys

Introduction

The title *Italia Illustrata* has often been used as an indicator of the popularity and the influence of Biondo's historical-geographical description of Italy, arguably both the most personal and most pioneering of all his writings. In it Biondo attempted to combine in a highly original fashion chorography, prosopography, and historiography, in an effort to record the historical legacy of 'Italia', interpreted as a humanistic concept rather than a geographical space. All three of these fields of literature and scholarship share precedents that ultimately reached back to classical antiquity, but they had never before been conjoined in a project with a very specific and, until then, unparalleled agenda, namely to document the sustained Roman-ness of the core province of the ancient Roman Empire.¹ At the end of the introductory section of the first book, devoted to the "regio prima: Liguria", Biondo articulated very clearly these three components of his work:

Postquam vero omnem Italiam peragraturus ero, viros praestantiores, qui singulis in urbibus et locis pridem geniti fuerunt, eosque qui sunt superstites, praesertim literarum aut cuiuspiam virtutis gloria claros, enumerabo, atque res in singulis locis scribi dignas breviter narrabo, ut non magis haec Italiae sit descriptio quam virorum eius illustrium praestantiumque catalogus ac non parvae partis historiarum Italiae breviarium.

(After I have ranged over all of Italy, I shall enumerate the preeminent men born in former times in her cities and regions severally, as well as those who are living still, especially

those who have distinguished themselves with a reputation for letters or for any great virtue; and I shall briefly set forth the noteworthy historical events of her individual regions. So this work will not just be a description of Italy, but also a catalogue of her famous and outstanding men, as well as a summary of no small part of Italian history.)²

As far as I know, no author in the field of historical geography after Biondo used these connected categories, "descriptio", "catalogus", and "breviarium historiarum", to characterize his work. The term *illustrata* nonetheless appeared countless times in treatises all over Europe and seems at first sight to denote scholarly endeavors similar to the one Biondo pursued for Italy. On a closer inspection though, it emerges that, first, Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* was never comprehensively and faithfully imitated in all its facets and, second, the concept behind the term 'illustrata' was interpreted by different authors in varying ways and consequently represents various types of scholarly treatises. The reception of Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* is therefore less straightforward than one may initially think. In all these works *illustrata* logically presupposes an act of *illustratio*. What exactly such an *illustratio* means, however, has to date hardly ever been assessed in detail. In any case, the term *illustratio* needs to be understood on several levels, all of which help the reader to understand the nature and scope of the treatises concerned. Unfortunately, the authors themselves usually have little to say about the methodology of their scholarship. Biondo, too, never explained the theoretical principles of his investigations at length. Instead they need to be culled from a few scattered statements about his

¹ Laureys 2019; Laureys 2020, and the literature quoted there. In this paper, I draw substantially on those two earlier studies. The most extensive analysis of Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* remains Clavot 1990. For a more

recent general assessment of the work, see also Paolo Pontari's very rich introduction in Biondo 2014, pp. 25–241.

² Biondo 2014, pp. 18–19; Biondo 2005b, p. 18; Biondo (1531) 1559, 295C. All translations

from the *Italia Illustrata* are drawn from Biondo 2005b. Translations of other source texts are my own.

research³ and above all deduced from his works themselves – a concern that lies at the heart of the project from which the present volume of proceedings emanates.

In this paper, I would like to explore Biondo's understanding of *illustratio* and I want to argue that Biondo's use of the term spans nearly the entire semantic range it can cover in Latin. All possible facets of the word in classical antiquity consistently derive from the basic meaning of the verb *illustrare*: to shed light (*lux*) on a person or object that was previously indistinct or unknown. This general notion can be made more specific in three ways. *Illustratio* can mean: (1) vivid description or visualization; (2) explanation or elucidation; and (3) celebration or glorification.⁴ The natural opposite of *illustrare* is *obscurare*: to cast darkness (*obscuritas*) over someone or something that was previously distinctly perceptible or well-known. The words sometimes appear as a contrasting pair, for instance in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyricus* (69.5): "Tandem ergo nobilitas non obscuratur, sed illustratur a principe" (In the end, then, nobility is not obscured but rendered illustrious by the ruler). Biondo, too, employs this contrast in an important passage of the introduction to his *Italia Illustrata*, where he explains the main goal of his treatise:

Itaque, postquam propitiore nobis Deo nostro meliora habet aetas nostra et cum ceterarum artium tum maxime eloquentiae studia revixerunt ac per ea historiarum diligentius noscendarum amor nostros cepit homines, tentare volui si per eam, quam sum nactus Italiae rerum peritiam, vetustioribus locis eius et populis nominum novitatem, novis auctoritatem, deletis vitam memoriae dare, denique rerum Italiae obscuritatem illustrare potero.

(And so, seeing that the times have changed for the better, our God being more gracious to us now; and seeing that the cultivation of the

rest of the arts and of eloquence, especially, has come alive again; and seeing that, because of these developments, a passion to study history in greater depth has caught up the men of our time, I wanted to discover if, through the practical experience of the history of Italy I have gained, I shall be able to apply the names of current coinage to the appropriate places and peoples of Italian antiquity, to settle the authenticity of the new nomenclature, to revive and record the names that have been obliterated, and in a word to bring some light to bear upon the murkiness of Italian history.⁵

The second and the third meaning of *illustrare* can immediately be sensed in this passage. On the one hand, Biondo emphasizes his expertise (*peritia*), which enables him to take on the task he has set himself. The *Italia Illustrata* is, in other words, a scholarly project for which he feels well-prepared thanks to his previous work. His objective is an explanation of Italy's history, which takes as its point of departure an analysis of old and new names of its places and peoples. On the other hand, Biondo points out that he is lucky to live in an age of cultural renewal, favorable to intellectual and literary pursuits, not least historical projects, since they make people eager to familiarize themselves with the history of their country. This passionate longing for a more careful knowledge of this history ("historiarum diligentius noscendarum amor") is what drives Biondo himself and what he expects his readers to share with him.⁶ His *Italia Illustrata* is, therefore, evidently also a celebration of Italy's 'illustrious' past. Accordingly, Biondo feels he cannot start his description of Italy but by singing its praises: "Italiam describere exorsi, provinciarum orbis primariam, a laudibus suis incipere debuimus" (Having undertaken to write a description of Italy, the foremost of the provinces of the world, I ought to begin with her praises.)⁷

3 The most important statement about his method occurs at the beginning of the third decade of his *Decades*, where he reflects on the concept of *mutatio* and its implications for his historiographical writing: Biondo (1531) 1559, 393A–395A.

4 A further, more specific meaning is also well attested: enlightenment, in the sense of an initiation, used in the context of pagan mystery cults (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11.27.2

and 28.5), and also in a Christian context for baptism (compare the Greek term φωτισμός). Here *illustratio* comes close to *illuminatio*. This meaning, however, does not seem to be of any relevance for Biondo; the cultural renewal or "renaissance", in which he contextualized his work, is different from the idea of baptism as a spiritual renewal, a purification.

5 Biondo 2014, p. 4; Biondo 2005b, p. 4; Biondo (1531) 1559, 293B–C). Biondo tacitly

alludes in this statement to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*, Praefatio, 15; Pliny adopts a similar wording and also uses the metaphor of light ("obsoletis nitorem, obscuris lucem dare").

6 One is reminded of the logo of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, which still appears on the frontispiece of all its publications and its website: *Sanctus amor patriae dat animum!*

7 Biondo 2014, 5; Biondo 2005b, p. 10;

Two further passages in which Biondo alludes to the title of his treatise convey the same picture. In a famous section of the *Italia Illustrata*, Biondo locates the origins of the revival of literature and culture in his native Romagna (called "Romandiola" in the *Italia Illustrata*) and presents himself, alongside Giovanni Malpaghini⁸ and Alberico da Barbiano, as an exponent of this felicitous development:

At postquam Dei munere eloquentia per viri Romandioli Ravennae geniti virtutem reviviscere coepit et nova tutiorque rei militaris forma in Italia, externis eiectis, per Albricum item Romandiolum est reddita, eandem quoque Romandiolam per nostras manus tertiam in rebus maximis gloriam Italiae speramus dedisse, qui latentem supra mille annos historiam tanta attigimus diligentia, ut omnem nedum Italiae, sed totius etiam olim Romani imperii provinciarum regionumque statum, ad quorum vel regum vel principum vel nationum manus pervenerit, clare magis et quam fieri posse videretur diffuse ostenderimus, cum, Roma interim instaurata, Italiam quoque, abstersa errorum obscuritatumque multa rubigine, noverimus illustrare.

(But now, by God's grace, eloquence has begun to revive thanks to the talent of a Romagnolo born at Ravenna, and following the expulsion of the foreigners, a new and safer form of warfare has been introduced in Italy by Alberigo, another man of the Romagna. Following these, I hope that the same Romagna has given Italy a third glory in a great enterprise through this work of mine. I am putting my hand to a history that has been hidden for more than a thousand years with such care that I have revealed the whole situation, not just of Italy, but of all the provinces and regions of the former Roman empire as it passed into the control of the various kings, princes or nations; and this with greater clarity and detail than seemed possible, since by Restoring Rome in the meantime, I have been able to Illustrate Italy by scraping away the rusty accretions of errors and obscurities.)⁹

In this long sentence Biondo again refers to his earlier work, the *Decades* and the *Roma instaurata* in particular, suggesting once more that the *Italia Illustrata* is the logical continuation of his scholarship, now devoted to "scraping away the rusty accretions of errors and obscurities". Just as in the preface, the general climate of cultural reinvigoration serves as a stimulating backdrop to his own undertaking.

The fact that 'illustrating' Italy is especially appropriate at this time of cultural rejuvenation is also evoked somewhat earlier in that same section, when Biondo first mentions Giovanni Malpaghini as one of the famous scions of Ravenna:

Genuit etiam eodem tempore Iohannem grammaticum rhetoremque doctissimum, quem solitus dicere fuit Leonardus Aretinus, omni in re sed potissime in hac una gravissimus locupletissimusque testis, fuisse primum, a quo eloquentiae studia tantopere nunc florentia longe postliminio in Italiam fuerint reducta – digna certe cognitio, quae a nobis nunc illustranda Italia in medium adducatur.

(At the same time she bore the learned grammarian and rhetorician Giovanni Malpaghini, who was the first to bring back to Italy the study of eloquence, now so flourishing here after its long exile, as Leonardo Bruni used to say – a most solid and reliable authority on all matters, but especially on this one. It is a subject that certainly merits discussion here in my illustration of Italy.)¹⁰

A tribute to the actors of the flourishing of letters and learning, into whose number Biondo proudly reckons himself, is clearly an integral part of the *illustratio* of Italy. It is one of the features that make the *Italia Illustrata* a genuinely humanistic project.

These two dimensions of the notion of 'illustratio' (i.e., explanation and celebration) are manifest throughout the entire treatise. The first meaning of the term however (i.e., visualization) is also relevant for Biondo's understanding of the 'illustration' of Italy. In

Biondo (1531) 1559, 294E.

⁸ Or perhaps Giovanni Conversini, as Pontari seems to think, see Biondo 2017, pp. 144–145, n. 40. These two Giovannis, both from

Ravenna and belonging to Petrarch's circle, have often been confused with one another.

⁹ Biondo 2017, p. 183; Biondo 2005b, pp. 326–328; Biondo (1531) 1559, 350H.

¹⁰ Biondo 2017, pp. 142–144; Biondo 2005b, p. 300; Biondo (1531) 1559, 346E.

what follows, I illustrate (*sit venia verbo!*) the three modes of his practice of ‘*illustratio*’ with examples taken from Book II, devoted to the *Regio tertia: Latina (Latium)*.¹¹

I will add some thoughts on how a precise assessment of the *illustratio* in the *Italia Illustrata* may help to grasp the scope and nature of the treatise more accurately.

1. Rhetorical *Illustratio*

The most efficient way to visualize topographical or geographical evidence in studies of historical geography has always been to produce visual documentation that accompanies the text. In the course of the sixteenth century this documentation, in the form of maps, city views, or images of individual buildings and monuments, became ever more important and sophisticated, both in scholarly treatises and in publications that served an epideictic purpose above all and were meant to glorify a particular city or region. The advent of the printing press made possible new production techniques for and a wider range of such illustrative material.

The precepts of ancient rhetoric, however, offered another means of ‘illustrating’ a text. As Quintilian mentions (*Institutio oratoria*, VI.2.32), *illustratio* is another word for what is also known as *evidentia* (in Greek: ἐνάργεια), a quality of style that consists in vivid description, evoking the unseen as if the listener or reader would see it with his own eyes; *sub oculos subiectio*¹² is another term for this concept. In this sense, *illustratio* is an essential quality of a *descriptio* (in Greek: ἔκφρασις), a description of persons, places, or events. In the theory of rhetoric, a *descriptio* is, in the truest sense, a means of enhancing persuasiveness by arousing the emotions of the audience, namely by suggesting that the listener or reader is actually witnessing and living through what is being described. As a written composition, the *descriptio* was one of the standard exercises (*praeexercitamina* or

προγυμνάσματα) taught in schools and conveniently presented in a manual by Aphthonius (circa 350–400 A.D.). The description of a place was of course a very common variant; the example chosen by Aphthonius¹³ is a description of the citadel of Alexandria. For this category of *descriptio* the term τοπογραφία is attested in Roman rhetoric by Quintilian (in *Institutio oratoria*, IX.2.44, where it is explained as a “*locorum dilucida et significans descriptio*”) and continued to be used beyond antiquity.¹⁴

I do not want to suggest that Biondo was familiar with Aphthonius’s handbook of *Progymnasmata*. The reception of this text in Western Europe only occurred on a grand scale once it had been translated into Latin and been made available in printed editions;¹⁵ Biondo’s knowledge of Greek, moreover, was very limited. However, Biondo was surely familiar with the rhetorical dimension of the work he was doing, since these insights could be gained from the standard treatises on rhetoric in classical Latin literature. He no doubt understood the crucial significance of rhetorical *illustratio* for any author of historical writing (not to mention for an orator): a vivid depiction strengthened both the credibility of what was being reported and, importantly, the reliability of the narrator – in Quintilian’s words:

Multum confert adiecta veris credibilis rerum imago, quae velut in rem praesentem perducere audientes videtur.

(It is particularly useful to add to the authentic facts a plausible picture of the events, which seems to turn the audience into live witnesses of the scene.)¹⁶

In the writing of history, this rhetorical rule went hand in hand with the requirement of autopsy, introduced by Herodotus (*Historiae*, 1.1) and inherent in the very term ιστορία or historia, i.e., knowledge derived from empirical observation; this idea was codified most succinctly by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* (1.41.1).

¹¹ This section of the *Italia Illustrata* was at the center of our attention during the workshop at the Bibliotheca Hertziana. I keep references to modern studies to a strict minimum and prefer a close reading of the texts themselves. All the concepts discussed

below are of course well known, but in my view they have not been applied systematically enough to Biondo’s *Italia Illustrata*.

¹² Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, IX.2.40; compare Cicero, *De oratore*, III.202, *Partitiones oratoriae*, 20, and *Orator*, 139.

¹³ Aphthonius 1926, pp. 36–41.

¹⁴ The meaning and use of *descriptio* in early modern antiquarianism is explored, for example, Stenhouse 2012.

¹⁵ Czaplá 2005.

¹⁶ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, IV.2.123.

In his *Italia Illustrata*, Biondo practices rhetorical *illustratio* essentially in two ways, namely 1) by using visual (i.e., vivid in the sense of the ancient rhetoricians) language, which makes his readers feel like spectators,¹⁷ and 2) by creating a mental map¹⁸ with which the reader can orient himself while perusing the text.

1) Biondo repeatedly suggests that he is watching (and that his readers can watch with him) the remains of ancient buildings, thus effectively creating a “rerum imago” (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, IV.2.123 and VIII.3.63). Here are the examples from Book II:

nihil sit reliquiarum praeter turrim
(Biondo 2014, 169; Biondo 2005b, 122; Biondo (1531) 1559, 314E);
exstare ruinas vidimus (Biondo 2014, 172; Biondo 2005b, 124; Biondo (1531) 1559, 314F);
miraculum (Biondo 2014, 188; Biondo 2005b, 136; Biondo (1531) 1559, 316F);
in conspectu speluncarum (Biondo 2014, 201; Biondo 2005b, 146; Biondo (1531) 1559, 318E);
ut ruinae indicant (Biondo 2014, 205; Biondo 2005b, 148; Biondo (1531) 1559, 318G);
cernuntur vestigia (Biondo 2014, 216; Biondo 2005b, 156; Biondo (1531) 1559, 320E);
admirandae ruinae (Biondo 2014, 230; Biondo 2005b, 166; Biondo (1531) 1559, 321D);
quos viderimus (Biondo 2014, 232; Biondo 2005b, 168; Biondo (1531) 1559, 322E);
cernitur (Biondo 2014, 244; Biondo 2005b, 176; Biondo (1531) 1559, 323C);
vidimus (Biondo 2014, 250; Biondo 2005b, 182; Biondo (1531) 1559, 324G);
videmus (twice: Biondo 2014, 255; Biondo 2005b, 184; Biondo (1531) 1559, 325A);
videmus (Biondo 2014, 258; Biondo 2005b, 186; Biondo (1531) 1559, 325C);
nullus mirabitur, qui [...] inspexerit
(Biondo 2014, 261; Biondo 2005b, 188; Biondo (1531) 1559, 325D);

spectaculo (Biondo 2014, 263; Biondo 2005b, 190; (Biondo (1531) 1559, 326E);
mirum est videre (Biondo 2014, 265; Biondo 2005b, 192; Biondo (1531) 1559, 326G).

The most conspicuous instance in Book II is the detailed report of the attempted rescue of the ancient Roman ships from the Lago di Nemi in 1446 (Biondo 2014, 261–265; Biondo 2005b, 188–192; Biondo (1531) 1559, 325D–326G).¹⁹ Biondo was among those who watched this delicate operation, planned and supervised by his friend Leon Battista Alberti, and recounts it in such great detail that the reader can witness the spectacle (*spectaculo*: see the references above), as if he assisted in it himself.

2) Biondo enables the reader to picture a mental map, designed for the mind's eyes (*oculi mentis*: Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VIII.3.62; compare Cicero, *De oratore*, III.163). With this map the reader can orient himself while perusing the text. Biondo creates this map by (a) adopting specific landmarks in the landscape (helping to structure spatial relationships between places) as a basic principle of organizing the information, and (b) providing geographical specifications to the (real or imaginary) traveler through this region.

(a) In Book II, Biondo makes an important statement on the method by which he structures his account and guides the reader through the text:

Hac autem describenda mediterranea regione modum hactenus in aliis servatum a fluviorum ostiis fontibusque et discursu servare nequibimus, sed alium certius facturum satis, qui in nulla reperiatur alia Italiae regione, tenebimus, viis incedendo tribus, Appia, Latina et Tiburtina, quae inter se diversae ad Lirim amnem et Sinuessam Caietamque perducunt. (In describing this inland region, we shall not be able to adhere to the plan used in other regions, orienting ourselves by the mouths, sources and course of rivers. We shall adopt

¹⁷ Frances Muecke has analyzed Biondo's visual language in two digressions, which occur in the section on ancient Roman festivals in Book II of the *Roma triumphans*, and has convincingly shown how Biondo's focus on visibility is an essential facet of his

writing through which he connects reader and writer as well as ancient and contemporary Rome. See Muecke 2011.

¹⁸ On the notion of a mental map, see Thiering 2015. This concept has been applied to Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* by Tanja Michalsky,

Michalsky 2019 and Görz/Seidl/Thiering 2022 in this volume.

¹⁹ On this operation and Biondo's report of it, see most recently Schwab 2019.

another method (one suited to this region alone) which will meet our needs better, by proceeding along three roads, the Appian, Latin, and Tiburtine, which lead in different ways to the river Liri and to Sinuessa and Gaeta.)²⁰

The lack of suitable rivers in Latium leads Biondo to change his strategy of surveying the territory along hydrographic lines. Instead, he chooses the three major Roman roads that run through the province, the Via Appia, Latina, and Tiburtina. Biondo seems to have borrowed this idea from Strabo (*Geographica*, V.3.9). The basic principle, however, remains the same: the framework within which all the geographical and historical information is arranged is marked by visual tracks in the landscape. The road system thus becomes a set of coordinates on a mental map orienting the reader.

(b) Very often, Biondo suggests that he is taking his reader by the hand and guiding him as a traveler through the region. Besides the numerous indications of distance, he uses expressions such as:

venientes (Biondo 2014, 193; Biondo 2005b, 140; Biondo (1531) 1559, 317B);
euntibusque sinistrorsum (Biondo 2014, 198; Biondo 2005b, 144; Biondo (1531) 1559, 317D);
limites attingimus (Biondo 2014, 203; Biondo 2005b, 146; Biondo (1531) 1559, 318F);
iter petentibus (Biondo 2014, 204; Biondo 2005b, 148; Biondo (1531) 1559, 318G);
per quam itur (Biondo 2014, 228; Biondo 2005b, 166; Biondo (1531) 1559, 321C);
est descensus (Biondo 2014, 234; Biondo 2005b, 170; Biondo (1531) 1559, 322F);
est perventum (Biondo 2014, 235; Biondo 2005b, 170; Biondo (1531) 1559, 322F);
unde digressi fuimus revertamur (Biondo 2014, 266; Biondo 2005b, 194; Biondo (1531) 1559, 326H).

Thanks to such terms, the reader relives the “peragratio” of the region, which Biondo

announced as one of the three tasks he defined for the composition of his *Italia Illustrata*: *peragraré* (geography), *enumerare* (prosopography), *narrare* (historiography).²¹ The term *peragraré* should not necessarily be taken literally: even though we may safely assume that Biondo visited at least some of the areas he described, the ‘surveying’ of the territory seems to a significant extent to be a mental, rather than a practical voyage, a process of *intellectual* discovery, vividly depicted as a journey, not unlike Epicurus’s journey, in this case of cosmic proportions, described by Lucretius at the beginning of *De rerum natura* (1.74): “[...] omne immensum peragravit mente animoque” (in mind and spirit he traversed the unbounded universe).²²

2. Philological and Historical *Illustratio*

However one may measure the importance of autopsy and empirical evidence in Biondo’s chorographical scholarship, his work remains fundamentally grounded in the analysis of literary (and perhaps archival) sources, in the *Italia Illustrata* as well as in his other major treatises.²³ Throughout the *Italia Illustrata*, Biondo quotes and assembles various kinds of information on the localities he discusses from a wide range of literary, mostly classical Latin authors. In many portions of the work, these quotations seem almost to take over the narrative and turn the text into a patchwork of excerpts.

Biondo is quite an attentive reader, well aware of the pitfalls and hazards ancient literary sources may present. In Book II, he tries to make sense of Pliny’s description of the Lago del Fucino and its subterranean canals through which water flows at certain times (*Naturalis Historia*, 2.224), but he concedes that his text of Pliny is too corrupted or damaged to interpret the passage beyond all doubt:

Scribit Plinius Fucinum lacum, qui Marsorum appellatur, subterraneos habere cuniculos,

²⁰ Biondo 2014, p. 204; Biondo 2005b, p. 148; Biondo (1531) 1559, 318F-G.

²¹ See note 2.

²² The phrase was picked up by Cicero, in *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, II.102. In a letter to Cardinal Prospero Colonna, in which Biondo expresses his wish to obtain from the King of Naples, Alfonso d’Aragón,

a map and a list, with accompanying historical information of the contemporary toponyms of the Regno di Napoli, he plays on the similar double meaning of *perlustrare*, see (Biondo 1927, p. 163): “[...] sed huius temporis locorum nomina situmque nec satis perlustravi nec alias plene novi” (but I have neither surveyed the names and position of

the localities of our own time nor do I know them fully in any other way).

²³ Catherine Castner provides a good case study on this topic, see Castner 1998. On Biondo’s working method, Clavuot 1990, pp. 182–200; and Paolo Pontari in Biondo 2014, 155–178; as well as Götz/Seidl/Thiering 2022 in this volume.

quibus aqua certo effluens tempore amnem faciat, et sive Plinii textus, ut saepe alibi, eo in loco corruptus sive aliter vitiatus et mutilatus est, non satis potuimus intelligere, quo in loco fluvium ille oriri affirmet.

(Pliny writes that the Fucine Lake, also known as the Lake of the Marsians, has subterranean cavities through which water flows at regular intervals and creates a river. It may be that Pliny's text has been corrupted at this point[,], as is often the case[,], or is otherwise faulty or mutilated, but I was not able to determine where he maintains that this river rises.)²⁴

Biondo subsequently claims to know the origin of the river that Pliny mentions, and locates it in the district of Tufano, which is a part of Anagni. Here, then, we can observe how Biondo attempts to solve with the help of field knowledge a question not adequately addressed or explained in his classical sources. Just as in the *Roma instaurata*, however, the instances where Biondo explicitly and unambiguously states that he is relying on empirical observation are few and far between. Likewise, Biondo refers throughout his *Italia Illustrata* a few times to "picturae", by which he surely means maps, not only those that accompanied the text of Ptolemaeus's *Geographia*,²⁵ but (probably) also those conceived along the lines of Fra Paolino Minorita's map of Italy. The evidence concerning Biondo's (possible) use of maps, however, remains on the whole tenuous, vague, and difficult to pin down.²⁶ Also, in early modern Latin usage, a map was far more commonly termed *tabula*, so that it cannot be excluded that Biondo's "picturae" refer to another kind of graphic depiction of a landscape.²⁷ In any case, the literary sources always remain the predominant frame of reference, not least because Biondo considers his *Italia Illustrata* first and foremost a piece of historical writing. Significantly, the author who is most frequently quoted in this work is not any geographical writer, but the historian Livy.²⁸ In

addition, Biondo devotes the preface of his *Italia Illustrata* almost entirely to a praise of history.²⁹

As Biondo repeatedly explains, his *Italia Illustrata* is fundamentally based on an analysis of toponyms: he systematically compares old and current place names,³⁰ tries to establish which ancient Roman localities live on in places and sites in the Italy of his own time, and thus wants to reveal comprehensively the traces of Romanness (the "Romana dignitas", as Biondo calls it: *Historiae, Decadis primae liber tertius*)³¹ in the 'Italia' he (re)constructs. In his earlier reconstruction of ancient Rome, laid down in his *Roma instaurata*, he takes exactly the same approach, as he indicates in a letter to Ermolao Barbaro:

Quid, quod urbem Romam, qualis olim fuerit, eiusque ruinas, quae nunc visuntur, singulas, cuius sint aedificii reliquiae, et quisque celebris olim locus ubi fuerit, additis ubique Varronis, Livii, Vergilii, Ovidii, Plinii et quorundam aliorum vetustorum scriptorum testimoniis, tribus paene libris absolvi, numquid non tibi salivam moveo?

(What to say about the fact that I have almost completed in three books my treatise on the city of Rome, her appearance long ago, her single ruins still visible now, the buildings these remains belong to and the location of every place once famous – everywhere accompanied by the testimonies of Varro, Livy, Virgil, Ovid, Pliny, and some other ancient authors? Am I not whetting your appetite?)³²

The visible remains of ancient Rome – serving often as landmarks for spatial orientation – are identified and localized, and their discussion is underpinned by references to classical and medieval (predominantly literary) sources that are meant to testify (as *testimonia*) to the buildings and monuments of ancient Roman history. This information is structured according to a combination of topographical and thematic criteria,

24 Biondo 2014, p. 221; Biondo 2005b, p. 160; Biondo (1531) 1559, 320G-H. See Clavuot 1990, p. 222.

25 Biondo speaks twice of a "Ptolemaei pictura". See Biondo 2011, p. 171.

26 For a summary of the evidence, see Pontari's introduction, Biondo 2011, pp. 169–176.

27 Hardly a graphic representation of

individual monuments, though, *pace* Biondo 1927, XCIII, n. 114.

28 Clavuot 1990, pp. 201–221.

29 Clavuot 1990, pp. 23–30.

30 See, for example, the letter to Cardinal Prospero Colonna, quoted in note 22, Biondo 1927, p. 16: "[...] ut, quod nunc facio, describendae Italiae et conferendis priscorum cum praesentibus locorum nominibus

manum apponerem" (to embark, as I now do, on the project of describing Italy and comparing old and present place names). On toponyms specifically, see Görz/Seidl/Thiering in this volume; Thiering/Berthele in this volume; and Richter, also in this volume.

31 Biondo (1531) 1559, 30G.

32 Biondo 1927, p. 161.

but always connected with the individual sites and objects they are intended to ‘illustrate’.³³

The setup and format of the *Italia Illustrata* are essentially the same: the structure of the work and the organization of its content are determined by the towns and sites, selected for discussion and arranged according to the geographical framework of ancient Italy and along specific natural landmarks, especially rivers. Literary sources are adduced – very often in literal quotations – to elucidate the name, history, special qualities, and famous people of the localities mentioned. The discussion of individual places thus automatically lends a modular structure to the *Italia Illustrata*: the historical-geographical survey is broken down into many small units or sections, for which the toponyms serve the reader as signposts.³⁴ Accordingly, the most important ones appear as key terms in the margins of the early modern editions of this text. We know that Biondo himself considered such key words an important means of facilitating the consultation of his works. In the preface to the first edition of the *Italia Illustrata*, his son Gaspare Biondo emphasized that he saw a better accessibility of the contents of the work as his primary task and main tribute to his father:

Mihi satis fuerit voluisse vobis eam
commoditatem veluti ex parentis mei
testamento quaqua possem praebere.

(For me, it may have sufficed to have wanted
to offer you this convenience from my father’s
testament, so to speak, in whatever way I could).

For this reason, Gaspare was disappointed about the inability of the printers to insert relevant keywords at the appropriate places in the margins of the text.³⁵

From this perspective, the *Italia Illustrata* offers an interconnected network of places and sites, each of which is accompanied by individual explanations and comments, drawn mostly from classical authors. Those extracts from ancient literary sources amount to a commentary on these places and sites, they ‘illustrate’ them,

just as a classical author was ‘illustrated’ by means of annotations, glosses, commentaries, or any other type of explanatory material. The verb *illustrare* has been used countless times in title pages of text editions to point to the exegetical support in the form of clarifications of individual words and phrases, singled out as lemmata; the traditional formula is *commentariis/annotationibus/scholiis illustratus*. The lemmata in Biondo’s case are not individual units of a (classical) text, but individual localities in a geographical space. “*Italia Illustrata*” thus also means: “a (historical-geographical) commentary on Italy”.³⁶ Compared to editions of the classics, one could add that the relationship between text and commentary has been reversed: whereas in a text edition, the commentary supports the text and is positioned alongside or underneath it, in the *Italia Illustrata* the text is itself a commentary on the toponyms that are placed as key terms in the margin for the orientation of the reader.

In Renaissance humanism, any kind of historical investigation and writing was always closely connected with reading and interpreting the classical authors. Accordingly, classical authors, and especially the ancient historians, were read in such a manner as to distil useful information from them in a systematic fashion. In the humanistic school curriculum, students had always been trained to collect and store information by excerpting texts according to specific thematic categories and compiling this material in so-called commonplace books.³⁷ These categories included historical facts and events, antiquarian concepts such as rites, institutions, monuments, and artifacts, but also names of (historical or mythological) persons and places. All these rubrics guided the humanistic reader in his scrutiny of the texts and helped him to absorb ancient history and civilization from all available literary sources.

The underlying assumption was the idea that ancient texts represented a storehouse of encyclopedic learning, ready to yield their treasures to any scholar who probed them, armed

³³ See Spring 1972, pp. 304–311.

³⁴ See Defilippis 2012, p. 45.

³⁵ See Laureys 2016, pp. 142–144.

³⁶ Felix Mundt independently arrived at the

same idea: Mundt 2017, p. 367. For a similar intuition, see also Biondo 2011, pp. 358–376. In an earlier article Mundt briefly addressed the connection between *illustratio* and the

rhetorical tradition of the *laus urbis*: Mundt 2015, pp. 200–201.

³⁷ For a detailed study of the large impact of the commonplace method on several areas of

with the right questions. The most eloquent example from the fifteenth century is surely Niccolò Perotti's *Cornu copiae*, conceived of as a commentary on Martial's *Liber de spectaculis* and the first book of his *Epigrams*. In his *Cornu copiae*, Perotti makes clear to what extent this approach could be stretched; he expands, for instance, his interpretation of *Liber de spectaculis*, I (on the Colosseum) into a presentation, entitled *De amphitheatro*, of all possible details of ancient theater buildings (pp. 3–36 in the editio princeps of 1489). Thus we see that by systematically elucidating the various facets of classical culture which ancient authors mentioned or touched upon in their work, a commentator could extract and explicate, sometimes to encyclopedic proportions, the historical and antiquarian knowledge enclosed in these authors, and at the same time contribute – or at least be convinced he was contributing – to a better understanding of these authors.

In Renaissance humanism, philological, historical, and antiquarian scholarship is marked by a fundamental complementarity and cannot be strictly subdivided into separate areas. The humanists' understanding of the nature, sources, and uses of history and its relevance for their own times informed their philological and antiquarian scholarship, grounded in the critical evaluation and interpretation of literary and non-literary sources of the ancient world. Conversely, this combined scholarship served to facilitate the understanding of literary texts. It is in this spirit that Biondo sent to Leonello d'Este, marquis of Ferrara and staunch promotor of Renaissance humanism, a number of ancient coins depicting *bigae* and *quadrigae*, so that "by seeing the relief, even though worn by old age, [he] might better understand the meaning of the words of Ovid and Pliny" (*ut sculpturam videns, licet vetustate oblitteratam, quid velint Ovidii et Plinii verba, melius intelligas*).³⁸ It is in this sense, too, that the title of Hieronymus Froben's edition of Biondo's *Roma triumphans* needs to be understood: *De Roma triumphante libri decem, priscorum scriptorum lectoribus utilissimi ad totiusque Romanae antiquitatis cognitionem pernecessarii* (Ten Books on Rome Triumphant, most useful for the readers of the

ancient authors and utterly indispensable for the knowledge of all of Roman antiquity).

Geography, too, perfectly fitted into that conception. This discipline was always closely linked with the study of history. In a well-attested metaphor whose origin is uncertain, geography was called the "eye of history". Elaborating on that notion in the preface of his pioneering *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (1570), Abraham Ortelius, the map engraver and antiquities dealer-turned-geographer, whose "Theater of the World" set new standards for cartography, underlined "how much more pleasing it seems and it is to read ancient history, when we have maps before our eyes that allow us to watch the historical events unfold, as if we were present on the spot where they happened" (*multo iucundiores videri et esse historiarum lectionem, si tabulis ob oculos propositis liceat quasi praesentem res gestas aut loco in quibus gestae sunt intueri*).³⁹ Maps visualize history, and Ortelius, just as any early modern scholar, understood and described this principle as an application of the rhetorical technique of *ἐνάργεια* or *evidentia*, in other words *illustratio*. But besides the construction of a historical space in a combination of visual and textual media, geography was also associated with history on a philological level. The task of the geographer here was to collect, identify, and interpret the toponyms scattered in ancient historiography and other classical literary texts, and confront this evidence with contemporary place names.⁴⁰

The first edition of Ortelius's atlas of the world already contained a section entitled "Antiqua regionum, insularum, urbium, oppidorum, montium, promontiorum, silvarum, pontium, marium, sinuum, lacuum, paludum, fluviorum et fontium nomina, recentibus eorundem nominibus explicata, auctoribus quibus sic vocantur adiectis", a separately foliated (amir-eur) alphabetical list of geographical names, along with the classical sources in which they are attested. It is subdivided into two indices, based on the ancient and modern toponyms, respectively. This list was compiled by Ortelius's friend Arnoldus Mylius at Ortelius's request and on the basis of Ortelius's own notes and

Renaissance learning, see Moss 1996.

³⁸ Biondo 1927, p. 160.

³⁹ Ortelius 1570, fol. AIIIIr.

⁴⁰ On the connections between cartography, toponomastics, and historical research in Ortelius's work, and especially in his

Parergon, a supplement that appeared in the editions of the *Theatrum orbis terrarum* from 1579 onwards: Besse 2009.

excerpts, for the benefit of students of ancient and contemporary history, as Mylius himself declares in a short letter, prefixed to the list (amir). Ortelius gradually expanded this work in several companion volumes of his *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, namely his *Synonymia geographica* (1578), *Nomenclator Ptolemaicus* (1579),⁴¹ and *Thesaurus geographicus* (1587). These are real geographical dictionaries, meant to be used along with both maps and classical texts. On the title page of the *Synonymia geographica*, for example, Ortelius specifies that this is an “Opus non tantum geographis, sed etiam historiae et poëseos studiosis utile ac necessarium” (a work useful and necessary not only for geographers, but also for students of history and poetry).

The philological basis of this lexicographical variant of geographical scholarship is evinced most clearly on the title page of the crowning achievement of Ortelius's toponomastic research, his *Thesaurus geographicus*. In its subtitle, Ortelius points out that in the course of his work he has been able to solve many textual corruptions and inconsistencies in the classical authors: “Obiter multi in hoc opere auctorum veterum loci corrupti, falsi, dubii et discrepantes emendantur, arguuntur, enodantur et conciliantur” (In passing, many corrupt, inauthentic, dubious and discordant passages from ancient authors are emended, censured, unraveled, and harmonized in this work). Once again, the intimate interrelation between textual analysis and exegesis on the one hand and historical scholarship in the widest possible sense on the other is explicitly and prominently underlined.

This philological type of geographical scholarship corresponds exactly to the central objective of Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* and was later pursued in various kinds of independent publications, always closely associated with the classical sources themselves. Long before Ortelius, such toponomastical reference works emerged in the form of an index to one specific classical author. An early example that appeared in print

is the *Index commentariorum G. Iulii Caesaris*, an index of the place names in Caesar's *De bello Gallico*, composed in 1469–1470 by Raimondo Marliano at the University of Leuven, where he had been appointed professor of canon law.⁴² His index was first published in the edition of Julius Caesar's *De bello Gallico* that appeared in Milan in 1477, and was reprinted many times. In it he tried to establish exact correspondences between toponyms in Caesar and modern equivalents, thus attempting to identify and delineate in contemporary terms the historical space in which Caesar's campaigns in the Low Countries took place.⁴³ It was by all means a product of humanistic scholarship, evincing both a renewed interest in Julius Caesar, as well as other classical authors, as an ancient source for Marliano's adopted homeland and an ambition to document a Roman presence and therefore eminent historical roots in the Low Countries.

Ortelius quotes Biondo several times in his various repertories of place names, albeit often to criticize and correct him. In any case, even in the later sixteenth century Biondo remained one of the early modern scholars who were consulted in matters of historical toponomastics. His philological and historical *illustratio* of Italy through its ancient and modern toponyms was not forgotten. Generally speaking, geographical lexica have been investigated far less than the maps or editions they were meant to accompany. They reveal, nonetheless, a specific path in the reception of Biondo's scholarship that seems well worth pursuing in greater depth.

3. Political and Ideological *Illustratio*

The exemplary dimension of ‘Roma’ and ‘Italia’ in Biondo's humanistic mindset obviously implies a claim of superiority over the rest of Europe.⁴⁴ However, only in a few passages, discussed above, of his *Italia Illustrata* does Biondo address the political dimension and ideological potential of his scholarship. In these passages Biondo underlines the present *kairos* for writing a work such as the *Italia Illustrata* in the light of

⁴¹ This 1579 edition, the first of the *Nomenclator Ptolemaicus*, forms part of the *Theatrum orbis terrarum*. Later it was also published separately.

⁴² See Dalché 2012, pp. 184–189; Laureys 2020.

⁴³ A longer version, including place names from Tacitus's writings (*Veterum Galliae locorum, populorum, urbium, montium ac fluviorum alphabetica descriptio, eorum maxime quae apud Caesarem in*

Commentariis sunt et apud Cornelium Tacitum), appeared much later, from the Paris 1543 edition of Julius Caesar onwards.

⁴⁴ I draw this last section largely from Laureys 2020.

the ongoing restoration of culture and learning, inspired by Renaissance humanism and supported by Italy's princely and republican rulers. These connections with contemporary culture and politics are expressed far more emphatically in his *Roma instaurata*, especially in its prologue and concluding passage, and his *Roma triumphans*, again particularly in its conclusion. Biondo does not associate his *Italia Illustrata* equally clearly with the politics of his time or, more precisely, the role and duty of the papacy in restoring Rome and confronting the threat of the Ottoman Empire.

The political use of historical geography was elaborated far more clearly by the first and most important disseminator of Biondo's learning to transalpine Europe, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pope Pius II). Piccolomini wrote a series of texts, ranging from his descriptions of the city of Basel, his *Germania*, as well as his *Historia Austriacalis* and *Historia Bohemica* (regional histories of Austria and Bohemia), to his *Asia* and *Europa*, planned as a part of an all-embracing *Cosmographia*. These writings were preceded by an oration at the Frankfurt Diet of 1454, in which he spoke appreciatively of an ancient Germanic past. Piccolomini conceived all these works in the context of the political geography of his time and his own diplomatic activity, which he pursued alongside his humanistic interests in literature and scholarship. Before becoming pope, Piccolomini served as an envoy to several prelates, Pope Eugenius IV and Emperor Frederick III between 1432 and 1455. For much of that time he stayed in the German lands, and therefore acquired first-hand knowledge of their culture and history. Conrad Celtis's project of a *Germania Illustrata* as well as other early sixteenth-century chorographies of Germany probably need to be seen in relationship to Piccolomini's *Germania* (and its main idea that the Germans had become a civilized nation only thanks to the beneficial influence of ancient and contemporary Rome, and especially its Christian Church), rather than to Biondo's *Italia Illustrata*.

Of similar importance is the oration, composed by Giannantonio Campano, another humanist in

diplomatic service, and intended for delivery (but probably not actually delivered) at the Regensburg Diet of 1471; this *Oratio in conventu Ratisponensi ad exhortandos principes Germanorum contra Turcos et de laudibus eorum* evokes a Germanic warrior past, documented with the help of Tacitus.⁴⁵

Campano explicitly links a praise of the German rulers with an exhortation to taking military action against the Turks. On account of their glorious (military) past, Campano argues, the German princes are entitled to or indeed should consider it their duty to ward off the Turkish menace. In his *Italia Illustrata* Biondo does not draw that political conclusion, but the epideictic quality of this work is all the more evident. An essential component of his *illustratio* of Italy is the praise of its assets and merits. As mentioned above, Biondo insists on starting his description of Italy by duly praising its qualities: "Italiam describere exorsi, provinciarum orbis primariam, a laudibus suis incipere debui-mus".⁴⁶ The key argument that legitimizes this praise is precisely the special status of Italy as "provinciarum orbis primaria", the foremost of the provinces of the world, that is to say the only province of the Roman Empire that had retained any traces of the ancient Roman grandeur. In no other part of the world, therefore – Biondo implicitly suggests – is the search for vestiges of Romanness more justified and leads to more convincing results than on the Italian peninsula.

Throughout the *Italia Illustrata*, description remains intimately connected with praise, and this connection relates Biondo's treatise to the tradition of the *laus urbis*. Biondo was no doubt familiar with the theoretical precepts of this tradition, most readily available in Latin from Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*, III.7.26–27), as well as with specific earlier examples from antiquity onwards, be they independent texts or small essays incorporated in chronicles or biographies.

Early on in the humanist movement, the praise of a city was revitalized by Leonardo Bruni, who in his *Laudatio Florentinae urbis* explicitly imitated Aelius Aristides's *Panathenaikos* (second century A.D.), a eulogy of Athens, clearly

⁴⁵ On Piccolomini's and Campano's political speeches from 1454 and 1471: Blusch 1979; and Blusch 1983.

⁴⁶ See note 7.

structured according to the rules of rhetorical epideixis. These rules were most extensively codified in two treatises, written most likely in the late third or early fourth century A.D. and attributed to Menander Rhetor. The theory, outlined by Menander Rhetor, is clearly recognizable already in Aelius Aristides's *Panathenaikos*, but it remains uncertain whether Bruni used Menander Rhetor directly. For Biondo, Bruni's *Laudatio Florentinae urbis* was certainly a relevant reference text, not least on account of the way in which Bruni claimed the glory of ancient republican Rome for contemporary Florence and its citizens. However, since Biondo (unlike Bruni) hardly knew any Greek, it is very unlikely that he had first-hand knowledge of Menander Rhetor. In any case, the reception of Menander Rhetor spread more widely only after the publication of the *editio princeps* in 1508.⁴⁷

The format of the *laus urbis* allows Biondo not only to celebrate the splendor of the towns and cities of Italy and retrace their prestige to their classical origins, but also to extol their famous citizens. In all, Biondo pays tribute to about 400 persons, including political and ecclesiastical leaders as well as literati, artists, jurists, philosophers, and physicians. Significantly, around three quarters of these luminaries are contemporary personalities, and most of these humanists, whom Biondo considered the prime actors of the "renaissance" he witnessed and felt he was part of. This prosopographical constituent of the *Italia Illustrata* is, therefore, an essential ingredient of the treatise: the *illustratio* of Italy is at the same time also a eulogy of its "viri illustres".⁴⁸

4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to submit that various characteristics of Biondo's understanding and (re)construction of space in his *Italia Illustrata* are directly related to his notion of *illustratio*. Biondo's conception of space is: (1) determined by an ancient, not a contemporary (political or ecclesiastical) geographical framework; (2) structured into modular units

on various geographical (national, regional, and local) levels that constantly interact; (3) inspired by cultural and historical rather than political or diplomatic claims; (4) visualized by rhetorical means rather than empirical evidence; (5) underpinned by references to classical and medieval – predominantly literary – sources that serve as a commentary on the localities mentioned and described; and (6) is filled with historical rather than with topographical or ethnographical details.

Adopting specific parts or aspects of Biondo's method of investigation, northern European chorographers transformed Biondo's theoretical framework in order to construct or invent the 'antiquitas' of a northern European region or locality by elucidating its links with a real or imagined classical past and/or by valorizing autochthonous regional or local traditions. In that process, they re-defined the very notion of 'antiquitas' and not seldom exploited it for political claims and purposes. A far more visible strand in the reception of Biondo's historical geography, though, is his analysis of toponyms, which continued to attract attention from geographers and cartographers throughout the early modern age.

⁴⁷ I would hesitate, therefore – *pace* Robert 2003, 415, n. 314 – to link, let alone equate Menander's "τόπος τῶν μεταβολῶν" (Spengel 1856, 355; and Menandros 1981, 50), with Biondo's "mutatio". Menander

Rhetor's "topos of changes" is one of the many categories in his very refined taxonomy of the praise of cities and thus remains an entirely formal notion, whereas Biondo's concept of change implies a historical

development and is at the heart of his understanding of historical scholarship.

⁴⁸ Clavuot 2002.

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