Michel de Montaigne introduced a new genre of European literary composition when he announced, in 1580, “I am myself the matter of my book.” Likewise, Venice positioned itself within the complex cultural fabric of late medieval Italy by announcing—implicitly, through the books to which it gave birth—that it would itself be the subject of its intellectual endeavor. Venice, the city, the state, the empire, and the republic fostered thinkers who thought primarily about Venice, creating an intellectual product of remarkable solidarity and uniformity from the 13th through the 15th century, even as it adapted to new currents such as Hellenism, humanism, and print technology, whose impassive surface contrasted markedly with that of Florence and such other Italian centers as Milan, Naples, and Rome.

That massive wall of consensual Venetian opinion fractured and fell at the turn of the 16th century. For about 100 years thereafter, Venice fostered a uniquely vibrant and diverse intellectual culture, in which individuals, now unleashed, sought free expression; members of social groups not formerly active in intellectual life took center stage; and novel matters and heterodox views fed the city’s churning presses.

By the early decades of the 17th century, that moment of intellectual insurgency passed. Dynamism remained in theater and opera, in music and the arts and the performances of Carnival, but the intellectual culture of Venice returned to its roots. The city thought and wrote, once again, primarily about itself and its greatness—a greatness that was now not unfolding into the future but situated in the past.

Foundations of Renaissance Intellectual Culture

In 1351, the itinerant humanist Petrarch came to Venice in the service of Milan and bonded with the doge Andrea Dandolo (1306–54)—political
prodigy, warrior, jurist, thinker.\(^2\) This event uniquely marks the beginning of the Renaissance in Venice. Even as, in the last decades of the Trecento and the beginning of Quattrocento, Venice clinched its supremacy on the seas and embarked on its domination over the cities of the terraferma, it would embrace the cultural world of the Italian and European West from which it had long remained detached. The marriage of Venetian traditions to Italian humanism embodied in the encounter between Dandolo and Petrarch would generate that future.

By the time Petrarch arrived in Venice on his 1351 mission, Dandolo had already completed one history of Venice, the *Chronica brevis*, and begun another, his *Chronica per extensum descripta*.\(^3\) These were unique in their clarity, which derived from the professional Latin prose and juridical training of the author. In other regards, however, they belonged to the Venetian chronachistic tradition\(^4\) which reached back to the 11th-century


\(^4\) For the origins of Venetian historiography, see the essays in Pertusi, ed., *La storiografia veneziana fino al secolo xvi*; a useful roundup in Christiane Neerfeld, *Historia per forma di diaria: la cronachistica veneziana contemporanea a cavallo tra il Quattro e il Cinquecento*