At the end of the fourteenth century, Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) was studying law at the University of Florence when he heard that a Byzantine émigré, Manuel Chrysoloras, had come to Florence and was offering instruction in his native language and literature. This was exciting news to the youngster from Arezzo: although some communities at the very southern tip of the Italian peninsula had continued to speak Greek throughout the Middle Ages, in most other places across Europe Greek was known very imperfectly, if at all. Some scholars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had known enough Greek to translate Aristotle’s works (and several spurious ones besides) into Latin, thus giving rise to a transformed Arts curriculum in the universities, but by the end of the fourteenth century that was all a distant memory. Aristotle now spoke Latin, and Plato’s books were mute even to Petrarch. Dazzled by an exceptional opportunity, yet uncertain whether to interrupt his studies in law, Bruni debated what he should do:

When you have a chance to see and converse with Homer and Plato and Demosthenes and the other poets and philosophers and orators, about whom such wonderful things are said, and to acquire the wonderful education that comes with their study, will you leave yourself in the lurch and deprive yourself of it? Will you pass up this god-given opportunity? For seven hundred years now, no one in Italy has been able to read Greek... There are plenty of teachers of the Civil Law, so you will always be able to study that, but this is the one and only teacher of Greek; if he should disappear, there would then be nobody from whom you could learn.¹

The outcome was, as we know, decisive for the direction humanism was to take in the fifteenth century. Having shelved his studies in law, Bruni translated important works of Plato and Basil the Great into Latin and provided fresh (if controversial) retranslations of Aristotle’s works on moral philosophy. Knowledge of the ancient languages, including Greek and sometimes Hebrew, came to be one of the hallmarks of any self-respecting humanist. One cannot but help wondering whether things would have been quite the same, had Bruni decided to continue his legal studies rather than jumping ship.

Bruni was only one of numerous Italian humanists who studied at the university but then, for various reasons, interrupted their studies without a degree to pursue their own interests. Scholars have therefore tended to contrast developments within humanism with what was happening in the universities. Indeed, humanism has typically been viewed as a movement which grew outside of and in opposition to the culture of the universities. The strictures and scholastic teaching prevalent in these conservative institutions supposedly caused the humanists to look elsewhere for satisfaction of their intellectual curiosity. Since (it is argued) the universities were not open to the new cultural ideas and methods, meaningful developments in literature, mathematics, and science took place mainly outside of their walls—whether in schools such as that of Guarino da Verona, in private circles and academies, or in independent ventures. It is often pointed out that many of the most influential humanists—from Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Salutati to Bruni, Leon Battista Alberti, and Giannozzo Manetti—were not university professors, but independent scholars, school teachers, notaries, or civil servants.

Although this picture is not entirely wrong, I would like to suggest that the humanists’ antipathy to the universities of their time has been overemphasized. The common depiction of two separate and opposed universes—humanism outside the universities and scholasticism within them—has been exaggerated. Indeed, there was a continuous interplay between the two, and the humanists often sought to challenge and reform the scholastic tradition within the universities.

Kristeller warned years ago that “The opinion so often repeated by historians that the humanist movement originated outside the schools and universities is a myth which cannot be supported by factual evidence” (P. O. Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism” in *idem, Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney [New York, 1979], 93), but the relationship between humanism and the universities received little attention. More recently, a useful corrective to the traditional view was furnished by Jonathan Davies, *Florence and Its University during the Early Renaissance* (Leiden, 1998) and Paul F. Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore, 2002). I offered some observations on this topic in my *Aristotle’s Ethics in the Italian Renaissance* (ca. 1300–1650): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education (Leiden, 2002), 2–7. Also helpful and geographically broader are Walter