The works of Poggio Bracciolini provide a striking example of complex, articulate writing in Latin in the humanist age, and of that variety of styles which Silvia Rizzo—in a recent paper—neatly described as 'the Latin languages of the humanists'.¹ Such diversity of style was not exclusive to Poggio. In fact, it may be said that most fifteenth century authors were able to use more than one Latin register and thus demonstrated in corpore viri—if we may borrow the expression—the vitality, which they themselves championed, of the language of ancient Rome. One interesting and famous example of variety is provided by Pico della Mirandola: in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, which was to become one of the defining works of humanist culture, he openly imitated classical Latin. In his *Conclusiones*, on the other hand, a work in which his mode of reasoning is also closer to that of medieval usage, he used Parisian Latin, the language of the philosophy scholars.

Like most of the first generation of humanists, Poggio was involved in the attempt to revive ancient Latin as a living language. Its most famous fifteenth century instance was Lorenzo Valla’s *Elegantiae*. The epic tone of its foreword, in particular, is perhaps the best example of humanist *imitatio* of the classical world—imitation that was not, of course, limited to language. Valla in particular transposed the idea of Roman supremacy to the fields of culture and, as we have seen, of language. It is well-known that he liked to portray himself as a new Camillus, aiming at fighting off barbarian invaders.² It should be pointed out that this revision of the concept of *imitatio* was only apparently inspired by enlightened tolerance: the loss of political and

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military hegemony which occurred in ancient Rome is replaced by Valla with a theory of permanent cultural superiority which in Italy had ancient roots. To stray for a moment outside the humanist age, one is reminded of Petrarch’s *Contra eum qui maledixit Italiæ*: in this work, in words which today might raise a smile, Petrarch spoke of the Cola di Rienzo affair as a moment in history when the whole of Europe trembled at the thought that Rome might recover its ancient power and conquer the world once again.

For Poggio too, the idea of classical revival was not restricted to language. This is evident from his epigraphic research, an aspect of ancient culture in which Poggio cultivated an interest which led him to personally scouring the countryside around Rome for inscriptions. It is evident too, of course, from his passion for palaeography, a subject on which Albinia de la Mare has written incomparably.\(^3\) As far as his palaeographic interests are concerned, Poggio was so blinded by his love of the ancients that he even maintained—as is well-known—that the writing he himself found in manuscripts and named *littera antiqua* dated back to the classical era, whereas it was actually from the Carolingian period.

The attempt to revive the Latin language took shape primarily in Poggio’s dialogues. The serious tone of his ethical-moral writing was implicitly but obviously modelled on Cicero’s Latin. These were the years when the humanists were only just beginning to enter into the ideological debate on the principle of imitation which would assume enormous importance in the second half of the fifteenth century (Poli- ziano, Cortesi) and at the height of the Renaissance. Vincenzo Fera has recently written an accurate reconstruction of the history of humanist Ciceronianism—which is, above all, the history of the principle of imitation—from the time of Petrarch up to the end of the fourteen hundreds.\(^4\)

Poggio’s Ciceronianism in the dialogues was in any case empirical. It must be emphasised here that the imitation of models in the first part of the fifteenth century had political as well as linguistic significance, not to mention a by no means irrelevant connection with the ideology of so-called ‘civic’ humanism.\(^5\) For Petrarch, Cicero was the noblest

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\(^3\) Mare A.C. de la, *The Handwriting of Italian Humanists* (Oxford 1973).


\(^5\) On ‘civic’ humanism, see Garin E., *L’Umanesimo italiano. Filosofia e vita civile nel*