“Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness”.
T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

**CONTEXT**

The year 1484 witnessed the death of Pope Sixtus IV, “a hard, imperious, im-
placable character” who “achieved nothing for the institution he had headed ex-
cept discredit”.¹ His successor was Cardinal Giovanni Battista Cibo, who chose
the name Innocent VIII. From all over Europe delegates came to the Vatican to
congratulate the new pope on his election. On behalf of Philip, Count of the Pa-
latinate, it was Johann von Dalberg, the Bishop of Worms, who presented him-
self at the papal court in July 1485. Among his retinue was Rodolphus Agricola
Phrisius (1444-1485), an old friend of Dalberg’s from their student years at
Pavia. The year before, Agricola had settled in Heidelberg in order to become
Dalberg’s private academic tutor. It was Agricola who had written the speech
which Dalberg was to address to Pope Innocent VIII.²

Agricola was a humanist, i.e. a scholar of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history,
and moral philosophy. His profession was the *studia humanitatis*. During Agric-
ola’s lifetime, Italian humanism crossed the Alps into the West and the North
of Europe. Partly this happened because young men came to Italy in order to

⁠¹ B. W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly. From Troy to Vietnam* (New York, 1984),
pp. 62, 65.
⁠² For detailed biographies of Agricola, see H. E. J. M. van der Velden, *Rodolphus
Agricola (Roelof Huusman): Een Nederlandsch humanist der vijftiende eeuw* (Leiden,
1911); P. Mack, “Agricola, Rodolphus”, in *Die Deutsche Literatur zwischen 1450 und
(Bern, 1994); and the six *vitae* written by his (near) contemporaries.
For a summary with references to primary and secondary sources concerning Agricola’s
life and works, see *Rudolph Agricola: Letters*, ed., transl., annot. A. van der Laan and F.
Akkerman (Assen and Tempe, 2002).
study in one of its famous universities. When they returned home, they brought humanism back with them. Not so, however, in Agricola’s case. Well before he arrived at Pavia in 1468, he had become acquainted with the ideas of Italian humanism. As early as the 1460s he was a member of a group of men who convened regularly in the Cistercian abbey at Aduard (near Groningen) and who cherished the ideas of Italian humanism.\(^3\)

In a number of ways, humanists significantly resembled the Greek sophists of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Like sophists, humanists were teachers of rhetoric, thinkers, writers, moral philosophers, and political theorists.\(^4\) Like sophists, humanists taught how to speak, how to reason, how to make decisions – all things that citizens would be expected to do throughout their lives. Like sophists, humanists contributed to the professionalisation of society by teaching its citizens the skills they required *qua* citizens. Like sophists, humanists came to maturity amid the developments in society which set an increasingly high value upon human beings and their faculty of reason, causing a turning of society’s attention to problems concerning ethics, law, war, and peace: the problems of the city state. Like sophists, humanists entered the stage after a long period of time in which the aristocracy – and its cult of the body – was prominent in society (feudalism) and metaphysics the dominating factor in philosophy (scholasticism). Like sophists, humanists differed from their intellectual predecessors by not being theorists in quest of metaphysical truths.\(^5\) The teaching of both sophists and humanists had a practical side to it and was designed to be just as useful in life as any other professional skill or *techne*. Their aim was for quality and the greater well-being of human beings. Both were teachers offering, or selling, an intellectual education – first and foremost through rhetoric – for use in practical life, and designed to improve their aptitudes in every domain of life, not just in one. This is what the Greeks called *arete*, the Romans *virtus*, and what we call *excellence*. It is a concept which implies, to quote the words which so thrilled Robert Pirsig’s narrator, “an efficiency which exists not in one department of life but in life itself”.\(^6\)

---

\(^3\) The Aduard group is best portrayed by the contemporary letters of Antonius Liber and Rodolphus Langius, and by a letter written some fifty years later by Goswinus Halensis. See Agricola, *Letters* (as in n. 2), pp. 4-5, with further references.

