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Article

# History of the Humanities

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**Abstract:** This paper provides an introduction to the burgeoning field of the “history of the humanities”. It discusses the scope, goals, and challenges of this new discipline. While histories of separate humanities disciplines have been written since the early twentieth century, it is only over the last decade or so that we have witnessed works that ask the question: how do these separate histories fit together to form the *history of the humanities*? After an introduction to the origins and the development of the new discipline, we question why the history of the humanities emerged so late, especially compared to the history of science. We make a case for a comprehensive history of the humanities, and we discuss several problems and challenges for the field, i.e., the problems of eurocentrism and triumphalism, and the challenges of the global, comparative, polycentric, and multidisciplinary histories of the humanities. The paper concludes with a discussion about the future of the field, arguing that it should be opened up to the history of the non-academic humanities as well as the colonial humanities.

**Keywords:** *History of Humanities*; polycentric history; multidisciplinary history; triumphalism; eurocentrism; non-academic humanities; colonial humanities; humanities versus science



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## 1. Introduction: The Emergence of a New Field

The history of the humanities is arguably the youngest offspring in the history of the “sciences”. Until about a decade ago, virtually nobody would identify as a historian of the humanities, and yet today it is a vibrant field with an annual conference, a journal, a society, and several university chairs. While histories of single humanities disciplines have been written for more than a century—ranging from histories of philology, art history, linguistics, and musicology to historiography—it is only over the last decade that we have witnessed histories that question how these separate histories might fit together to form the history of the humanities. This has resulted in a set of broad-ranging books, such as Rens Bod’s *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (2013), James Turner’s *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (2014), Eric Adler’s *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today* (2020), Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (2021), and Christopher Celenza’s *The Italian Renaissance and the Origins of the Modern Humanities: An Intellectual History, 1400–1800* (2021).

The history of the humanities as a general field of study can be traced back to 2008 when, together with colleagues, we organized the first conference on this topic, *The Making of the Humanities: First International Conference on the History of the Humanities*, held at the University of Amsterdam. The conference emerged from a long-felt need to understand the development of the humanities historically and comparatively:

“How did the humanities develop from the *artes liberales*, via the *studia humanitatis*, to modern disciplines? This is the first of a biennially planned conference that focuses on the comparative history of the ‘humanistic sciences’. Although there exist separate histories of single humanities disciplines, a comparative history would satisfy a long-felt need and fill a conspicuous gap in intellectual history.” (Bod et al. 2008)

A selection of papers from this conference was published in an edited volume *The Making of the Humanities*, and two additional volumes followed suit, all published under open access (Bod et al. 2010, 2012, 2014). In the following years, *The Making of the Humanities* conferences were organized annually and in various countries over the globe, including Italy, the USA, the UK, South Africa, and Spain, and the field was quickly opened up to include humanities traditions from other cultures and regions. Rens Bod's transcultural monograph (Bod 2010) helped to further stimulate the writing of global, comparative histories of the humanities. The subsequent conferences increasingly hosted keynote speakers from Asia, Africa, and South-America, accompanied by a growing number of papers from the Global South. In 2016, the need was felt to create a journal for the new field, *History of Humanities*, which was published by the University of Chicago Press. The editorial of the first issue described how the history of the humanities as a field had changed in a just a few years from a predominantly Western perspective to a more polycentric and global history of the humanities which "compare[s] methods or principles stemming from different regions" (Bod et al. 2016).

In the same year, the *Society for the History of the Humanities* was founded, which among other things has taken up the task of making textual resources in the humanities digitally available on its website, and to create anthologies of the classics in the history of the humanities, from the art-historical classic by Johann Winckelmann and the linguistic classic by Roman Jakobson to the philological classic by Josephine Miles (Eskildsen and Bod 2019). Moreover, the last few years have witnessed the publication of many new monographs on the history of the humanities, resulting in a thriving new field (e.g. Turner 2014; Adler 2020; Celenza 2021; Reitter and Wellmon 2021; Hayot 2021; Bod 2022; Paul 2023). In addition to these research activities, historians of the humanities have become acutely aware that for a new field to become sustainable, it must be taught to the next generation. This has resulted in the creation of new university chairs, courses, and curricula in the history of the humanities—especially in Europe, Asia, and North America.

## 2. Why Did the History of the Humanities Emerge So Late?

The story as told above seems like the classic narrative of how to create a new discipline: one starts with setting up conferences, monographs, and a journal, and arrives at developing new university courses, a learned society, and institutionalized chairs. The question is perhaps not why there is now a field called history of the humanities, but rather why it took so long for such a field to develop as a counterpart to the history of science. Put differently: why is it that humanities scholars, who are said to be the most historically minded scholars, cared about the history of everything except about the history of their own overarching field for so long? If the "humanities" are more than just an umbrella term, this very recently closed conspicuous gap in history-writing needs an explanation.

The development of the discipline of history of science (itself, of course, a humanities discipline) helps clarify the gap. Since the publication of William Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* (Whewell 1837), there has been a steady stream of books on the general history of science. But it is only in the early 20th century, after the Belgian historian George Sarton founded the history of science journal *Isis*, and the History of Science Society was established, that a distinct academic discipline emerged.

The early history of science focused on astronomy, but it also connected with the other sciences, especially physics, chemistry, and biology. It hailed the great scientific discoveries and turning points, offering natural science as a genuine example of human progress. While this kind of triumphalist "Whig interpretation of history" (Butterfield 1931) is seen today as a scholarly vice, these narratives brought about an unprecedented public awareness of science and its role in society. They supplied scientific discoveries with an immense public attention and helped figures like Galileo, Newton, and Darwin become part of our cultural DNA.

All this focus on major achievements and discoveries came with a cost for the humanities. Humanists were not prepared to talk about the "great discoveries" in their fields, and

many rejected such a notion as meaningless for the humanities altogether, although we do find such a notion sometimes in the history of separate disciplines such as philology. The first clear-cut division between the science of nature and the science of the human may date back to Giambattista Vico (Vico 2000 [1725]), but at least as influential was the distinction introduced by the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey in the 19th century: While the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) aimed at explaining the world, the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) focused on understanding the world (Dilthey [1883] 1959). According to Dilthey, humanists would be failing if they observed, measured, or hunted for apparent regularities. What they should be doing is searching for the motives and intentions of humans in their historical context. The specific objects investigated by the humanities are “the expressions of the human mind”. Dilthey’s ideas were further developed by 20th-century philosophers like Rickert, Cassirer, and Gadamer, and they gained wide currency when Western-style curricula were introduced around the globe.

In the later 20th and early 21st century, the humanities were mainly promoted—and more often defended—by emphasizing their importance for social and critical thinking (Said 1978) cultural consciousness, and democratic citizenship (Nussbaum 2010). Searching for laws and regularities became highly suspicious, and “grand narratives” were rejected. It became common wisdom that the humanities do not deal with solving concrete problems and do not produce discoveries. Instead, the humanities were taken to deal with value, interpretation, and finding meaning.

### 3. The Case for History of the Humanities

The exclusive focus on value, interpretation, and meaning provides a caricature of the humanities that is as biased as the triumphalist view of science. And it is here that a closer look at the integrated history of the humanities shows something that is still surprising to many a humanist: besides demonstrating value and interpretation, the humanities have actually solved concrete problems too. For example, the problem of reconstructing a text from extant copies (in philology), of comparing different art works to figure out the provenance and the author (art history), of determining whether a tale about the past is trustworthy (history), and of finding general principles underlying different languages (linguistics). In all these activities, humanists sometimes make discoveries, some of which have applications in entirely different fields. Surprisingly, these discoveries are sometimes erroneously credited to the sciences.

Take one from the ancient humanities, the insight by the Indian linguist Panini from about 500 BCE that Sanskrit was based on very precise rules, a “grammar.” This discovery not only changed our perspective on language, but it also contributed to the development of computer-programming languages many centuries later (Nofre et al. 2014). Yet this unexpected application of the study of language is rarely (if ever) mentioned in works on the history of linguistics.

Or take the 15th-century Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, who discovered that the document known as the *Donatio Constantini* (“Donation of Constantine”) was a fake. According to this document, the 4th-century Roman emperor Constantine had supposedly donated the West-Roman empire to the Pope. But Valla showed that the document could not possibly have been written in the 4th century (Fubini 1996). In fact, the document contained words that did not exist in antiquity, but that were coined in the Middle Ages. With the debugging of the *Donatio Constantini*, the papal claim to worldly power appeared to be based on fiction—even though it took another few centuries before the papacy effectively accepted this loss.

Another significant discovery was made by the 17th-century humanist Joseph Scaliger. While reconstructing the famous king lists of the ancient historian Manetho, Scaliger found out—to his own dismay—that there had been Egyptian kings living before what was then taken to be the date of the Creation of the earth (ca. 4000 BCE, as derived from the Old Testament). His discovery initiated a debate amongst scholars like Isaac Vossius, Isaac La Peyrère, and Baruch Spinoza who rejected the Bible as a reliable historical source and

which resulted in a secular worldview where citizens, not theologians, had the last word (Grafton 1975).

A more recent humanistic breakthrough is the discovery by the German linguists Jacob Grimm and Franz Bopp that languages in Europe and Asia are related via sound-shift laws. They found out that consonants and vowels systematically change across languages over time. This allowed linguists to draw evolutionary trees of language families, years before biologists started to draw such trees. These evolutionary trees point to a common origin of languages, such as proto-Indo-European. This insight changed our view of the relationships between languages and peoples alike (Bod 2010).

An even more recent breakthrough was made by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, who introduced the distinction between focalization and narration in texts, indicating that no text can be neutral and that words are always colored due to specific language use and the perspective of the narrator (Genette 1983). This insight has been taken up by the United Nations, particularly by UNESCO, to add a range of perspectives in their documents on cultural and educational policy.

These humanistic findings are just the tip of the iceberg. A longer list should also include insights by Chrysippus, Sibawayh, Chen Kui, Ibn Khaldun, De Laet, Lachmann, Propp, Panofsky, Todorov, Arendt, and others. Many humanists may be acquainted with some of these names, but probably none of us knows all of them. And while the lay person has heard of Galileo, Newton, and Darwin, what of Valla, Bopp, and Panini? Even scholars are often tongue-tied when asked about the main figures or achievements in the history of the humanities, their choices limited to the fields in which they themselves are active. One does not need to be a historian of science to come up with the main figures in quite diverse scientific fields, such as Kepler in astronomy, Newton in physics, and Darwin in biology. Yet a historian of linguistics is usually not aware of the main figures in the history of musicology, the history of art history, or the history of literary studies.

#### 4. Current Challenges in the History of the Humanities

The primary goal of writing the history of the humanities does of course not lie in the creation of awareness about its “heroes.” Neither does the value of the humanities lie in its applications or world-changing insights. But it is not wise to discard the main feats of humanists from the past. Some historians of science, like Steven Shapin, have suggested that some triumphalism is needed for a discipline to get a foothold, and after this has succeeded, “lowering the tone” can begin (Shapin 2010). Nevertheless, it is possible to avoid embracing this triumphalist approach; we could study the general history of the humanities for its own value while at the same time acknowledging the fundamental questions raised and problems solved by humanists in the past and present.

A general history of the humanities also shows that the two fields—humanities and science—have never really been separate. Their interactions have been intense and manifold, despite the constitutive distinction made by Dilthey and other philosophers. However, attempts to bring together the sciences and the humanities in educational programs have led to a rather ironic situation: natural-science students have been offered humanities perspectives thanks to courses in the history of science. Similar courses have given humanities scholars state-of-the-art overviews of science. Ergo, the history of the humanities dropped out of the equation. We could unite the history of the humanities and the history of science under the general header of the “history of knowledge” (as in (Bod 2022)). But such a step can only be taken if we first emancipate the history of the humanities such that it receives its own autonomy and cultural legitimacy.

And this was why two colleagues and I, back in 2008, started the aforementioned conference series and subsequently set up the journal *History of Humanities* and a society—and the rest is history, as one tends to say. But the history of the humanities has by no means crystallized in full. Even if an increasing number of historians of the humanities work on comparisons between rather different fields—from art history to philology—most humanists still remain in the comfort zone of their own region of interest. Few historians of



the humanities are prepared to make comparisons between fields from different regions and cultures, especially if several languages are involved. The history of the humanities in fact suffers from a strong Eurocentric bias. While the term “humanities”, as well as “Geisteswissenschaften”, is of course Western, the practice of analyzing and interpreting texts, music, languages, art, and the past have originated in different parts of the world. It can be argued that a comparative approach entails more than simply redressing an imbalance in our knowledge of the “global humanities”. The understanding of how one’s own traditions have been different from, and determined by, outside influences contributes to cultural consciousness.

A global comparison of the humanistic disciplines has indicated, for example, that Islamicate scholarship formed the basis for the famous *studia humanitatis*, the humanistic curriculum in fourteenth-century Italy from which the modern humanities emerged (Makdisi 1990). The Islamic curriculum known as the *studia adabiya*, which was established as early as the ninth century, comprised of the study of grammar, poetics, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy (Brentjes 2018). These were the same five disciplines that the *studia humanitatis* introduced in Italy a few centuries later. China even presents a different picture: the “six arts” that Confucius identified with genteel education were rites and rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and writing. Another ancient Chinese practice, to treat literature, philosophy, and history (the triad *wen-shi-zhe*) as one body of knowledge, was revived in the 19th century under the header of *guoxue* (national studies). *Guoxue* was intended as a counterweight to the term *renwen*, a calque of the Japanese denomination for the Western category “humanities” (as different from the social and natural sciences). In fact, however, *renwen*—the term still used today—was a retranslation, since the Japanese compound was originally derived from the Chinese *Book of Changes* (Hsiung 2015).

To understand these interactions and knowledge circulations from different parts of the world it is important to bring together Sinologists, Arabists, Indologists, Africanists, and others to investigate comparative humanistic practices. Such a *polycentric* approach to the history of the humanities has been neglected for too long. One surprising thing that has emerged from our comparisons is that, contrary to common wisdom, humanistic knowledge is *not* merely culture-dependent. It is to a large extent culture-independent. For example, knowledge of philological text reconstruction, of grammar construction methods, and of harmonic analysis is surprisingly similar across different cultures without any contact with one another (at the time)—from classical Greece to China and India (Bod 2022).

## 5. The Future of the History of the Humanities

In addition to the challenge of writing polycentric histories of the humanities that treat different knowledge centers in the world on par, there are several other challenges historians of the humanities are faced with. Below I will discuss three of these challenges that are likely to have an impact on the future of the field.

While female scholars have for centuries played a marginal role compared to male scholars, their contributions to the history of the humanities have been unjustly downplayed. One of the earliest female scholars, the Chinese historian Ban Zhao (45–116 CE), has only been accorded the honor of finishing the “Book of Han” (*Hanshu*) where her brother Ban Gu allegedly left off. But it has turned out that her share was far greater than was long admitted (Clark 2008). The Byzantine historian Anna Comnena, the author of the famous *Alexiad*, received a reputation of having produced a “strongly colored” history, as if her 12th-century male colleagues were not writing colored histories (Connor 2004). And take the many early modern female humanists, such as Isotta Nogarola, Alessandra Scala, and Cornelia Vossius, who had little opportunity to develop their exceptional talent. Their fate was either seclusion or marriage; other paths would have met with scorn (Wyles and Hall 2016). The celebrated seventeenth-century philologists Anne Dacier and Anna Maria van Schurman may seem exceptions to this pattern, but an academic career was ruled out for them too. There is now a revival of interest in the history of female scholars from Europe and China as well as from Africa, such as the 19th-century Fula scholar Nana Asma’u who

wrote a stunning narrative history of the Fulani wars: “The Journey” (*Wakar Gewaye*) (Boyd and Mack 1997).

This brings me also to the problem of the *non-academic* (or *non-professional*) humanities, which deals with the works of scholars who had no humanistic training. Examples include merchants writing grammars for practical and often commercial purposes such as Joan Ketelaar’s first grammar of Hindustani from the 17th century (Pytlowany 2018). Or non-academic historians who wrote about the history of a city, such as the *Ta’rikh al-fattash*, recounting the rise and fall of Timbuktu (Al Kati 2011 [1599]). Or artists and artisans who wrote handbooks with technical descriptions of the visual arts. Or musicians and actors who possessed embodied and tacit knowledge of music and theater. The latter is also relevant to the problem of oral traditions, involving historical, musicological, and art-theoretical knowledge that was never written down. Many of these non-academic productions in the humanities have been forgotten or even obscured (Lamers et al. 2020). Yet they form an essential part of the history of the humanities.

The same counts for what has been referred to as the “colonial humanities”: while it is increasingly recognized that European scholars actively took part in colonization and suppression, the contribution of the *colonized* scholars is still vastly understudied. Of particular interest are the joint productions of colonizing and colonized scholars, the study of which has only very recently begun (Merolla et al. 2021; Raj 2013; Bridges 2019). The challenge of coming to terms with the colonial heritage of the humanities is more important than ever and will have to be part of the history of the humanities.

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