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Reviews of Biondo Flavio, *Italy Illuminated*. Biondo Flavio's *Italia Illustrata*

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Reviews

Biondo Flavio. *Italy Illuminated*.

Vol. 5. Books 1–4. The I Tatti Renaissance Library 20. Ed. and trans. Jeffrey A. White. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. xxvii + 490 pp. index. append. bibl. \$29.95. ISBN: 978–0–674–01743–9.

Catherine J. Castner, ed. and trans. *Biondo Flavio's Italia Illustrata: Text, Translation, and Commentary*.

Volume 1: Northern Italy. Binghamton: Global Academic Publishing, 2005. xxxvi + 386 pp. index. illus. map. bibl. \$36. ISBN: 978–1–586–84255–0.

Catherine J. Castner, ed. and trans. *Biondo Flavio's Italia Illustrata: Text, Translation, and Commentary*.

Volume 2: Central and Southern Italy. Binghamton: Global Academic Publishing, 2010. xvi + 488 pp. index. illus. map. bibl. \$36. ISBN: 1–58684–278–9.

Biondo Flavio was an erudite and prolific humanist writer who began his literary career in the 1430s and continued producing Latin works until his death in 1463. Scholars have attributed Biondo with primary roles in the development of archaeology, topography, historical research, historical criticism, and historical periodization. His writings themselves influenced the content and approach of scholars across Europe for centuries. However, until recently Biondo Flavio's popularity and influence in the early modern period sharply contrasted with the small amount of scholarship on him and the almost total lack of modern editions of his major written works. Scholars interested in Biondo have long been forced to sift through fifteenth- or sixteenth-century editions of Biondo's four longest works, his *Decades*, *Rome Triumphant*, *Rome Restored*, and *Italy Illuminated*. Fortunately, Biondo has seen a relative upswing of interest in his written works over the past decade. In Italy, the Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo has commissioned editions of most of Biondo's works, including all of his major treatises and most of his minor ones. In the United States, the I Tatti Renaissance Library has also commissioned scholars to publish editions of several of Biondo's longer treatises accompanied with what will be the first translation of most of them into English. Catherine J. Castner's and Jeffrey White's respective editions and translations of Biondo's important *Italy Illuminated* fit into this historiographical context. Biondo wrote his *Italy Illuminated* at the height of his intellectual powers, and both of these versions of the book do it justice.

Biondo began the *Italy Illuminated* at the prompting of Alfonso of Aragon, King of Naples, in 1447. Alfonso envisioned the work as a geographically divided discussion of the illustrious men of his age. Biondo began the work in 1449 during a period of professional problems and estrangement from the papal curia. At that point he expanded upon Alfonso's original idea and created a large work that defies easy description. Divided along fourteen regions (four additional regions were left

unfinished), the work describes the geography, topography, history, and famous individuals of the entire Italian peninsula. Biondo based the work on an impressive array of ancient, medieval, and contemporary written and cartographic sources in addition to archeological and epigrammatic remains as well as direct observations of topography and information taken word of mouth. He initially published the book in 1453 and dedicated it to Pope Nicholas V, Biondo's primary patron at the time but a person with whom Biondo had a history of conflict. Biondo continued to revise the work after its publication, and later manuscripts of the text remove this original dedication as well as favorable statements about Pope Nicholas. The work had an immediate impact on Biondo's contemporaries and near contemporaries, giving rise to imitators in Italy and across the Alps, including the famous German humanist Konrad Celtis, among others. Despite this popularity, a Latin edition of the work last appeared in 1559.

Catherine J. Castner's edition and translation of the text focuses on accessibility for the uninitiated reader. The first volume of the work begins with an informative introduction to the life and works of Biondo Flavio, with a particular focus on Biondo's method in constructing the *Italy Illuminated*. This discussion, as well as its continuation in the notes that accompany the translation in both volumes, is indebted to Ottavio Clavuot's German monograph on the same subject. Castner claims that she hopes her extensive use of Clavuot's work will help introduce his scholarship to English readers, a task that she admirably accomplishes. Castner transcribed the last printed edition of the *Italy Illuminated* from 1559 for her own Latin edition, although her notes indicate that she has compared at least parts of the Latin with other printed editions to make better sense of puzzling passages. Castner's goal for her book to reach a broader audience led her to rearrange the original order of Biondo's work to conform more to a geographical orientation of Italy that she expects most modern readers will bring to the text. Hence, the first volume contains the regions of Northern Italy — Liguria, Romandiola (the Romagna), Lombardy, Venice, March of Treviso, Forumiulium (roughly modern Slovenia), and Histria (just south of Forumiulium) — while the second volume includes Central and Southern Italy (Tuscany, Lazio, Umbria, March of Ancona, Abruzzo, Campania, and Puglia). Her reliance on the 1559 edition led her to insert the original page numbers and column letters from that edition at the appropriate points of both her Latin and English texts. She uses these divisions to organize the copious explanatory notes at the back of each volume. Although the Latin edition is serviceable and her English translation is clear and accurate (a notable achievement given the propensity of Biondo's Latin for overly long sentences that sometimes lose focus and oftentimes lose clarity), these notes, which equal the Latin edition in length, are undoubtedly the strongest aspect of Castner's volumes. Not all of Biondo's places, people, and sources are discussed in these pages. However, to quibble at a handful of omissions would wrongly detract from Castner's truly impressive feat of offering the reader a clear and concise description of hundreds of difficult textual, geographic, and biographical references in Biondo's work.

Castner's edition and translation of the *Italy Illuminated* is now complete, whereas only the first of the projected two volumes of Jeffrey White's version has appeared. Nevertheless, the first volume of White's edition promises a complete edition that will complement the extraordinary erudition of Castner's explanatory notes with a much stronger edition of the original Latin text. Nearly thirty years ago Jeffrey White published an important article aimed at sorting out the difficult textual tradition of the *Italy Illuminated* and creating a critical edition of the text. His edition of the *Italy Illuminated* for the I Tatti series does not accomplish this task — he claims that he hopes the version promised by the Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo will finally and definitively sort out the entire complicated textual tradition — but White does present a Latin edition based on the most reliable printed edition — that of 1474, which was edited by Biondo's son and based on the last redactions of Biondo himself — and numerous manuscript witnesses. The net results of his work are numerous small changes in the basic Latin text in addition to several lengthy sections not included in Castner's transcription of the 1559 printed edition. Unlike Castner's version, White sticks to the original ordering of Biondo's text and thus the first volume includes the regions of Liguria, Tuscany, Lazio, Umbria, Piceno, and the Romagna. White's introduction is somewhat shorter than Castner's, albeit no less clear and successful at establishing the context for Biondo and his work. The English translation is fluid and accessible, two traits readers by now have come to expect from the fine I Tatti Renaissance Library series. White's notes on the translation are particularly strong on identifying the sources underlying Biondo's text, but they are less copious and detailed than Castner's.

As Jeffrey White in particular points out, readers of *Italy Illuminated* who are interested in early examples of a whole host of modern academic disciplines and historical approaches will find something to appreciate in Biondo's idiosyncratic work. Biondo displays an ability to compare and critically judge sources and a clear sense of historical periodization, describes rudimentary archeological expeditions, seems to conceive of an Italy beyond a simple geographical concept, and combines a humbling array of physical and written classical sources, mostly from memory, to produce his detailed study. Yet, of equal importance, historians interested in other questions about the Italian Renaissance will also find fascinating passages in this book. One particularly striking discussion consumes most of Biondo's section on the region of Histria, in which Biondo presents a long, passionate argument for the Italian origins of St. Jerome. Other passages reveal the context in which Biondo wrote portions of his book. For example, Biondo's section on the region of Campania reveals deep, albeit unstated, resonances of the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Not coincidentally, the region of Campania included Naples whose ruler, Alfonso, Biondo hoped would lead a new crusade against the Turk and to whom Biondo more or less contemporaneously dedicated a short crusading treatise. White's use of italics to indicate earlier redactions of Biondo's text reveals interesting changes made to the prose over time, such as the removal of individuals in different regions. As White points out, Biondo's rocky relationship with Pope Nicholas V explains the removal of passages favorable to that pope, but Biondo's pen stripped

others from the text as well. For example, in the section on Tuscany, it is curious to consider what caused Biondo to remove the Roman nobleman Pandolfo Savelli, who Biondo inexplicably claimed helped crown Petrarch with a laurel wreath, from not one but two separate passages.

The *Italy Illuminated* is rich in unexplored paths for future research and holds potential evidence for any number of historical questions. Ultimately, once the second promised volume of Jeffrey White's edition appears, Castner's and White's versions will be best used in tandem. Scholars will want to use White's careful and accurate edition of the text itself, but they will also want to take advantage of Castner's copious explanatory notes. General readers will enjoy either translation, both of which finally make Biondo's influential and enjoyable work more widely available.

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