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RANKE AS THE TEACHER OF JACOB BURCKHARDT

FELIX GILBERT

RANKE AND BURCKHARDT are the two greatest historical thinkers whom the nineteenth century has produced within the area of German culture." With these words the eighty-six-year-old Friedrich Meinecke began his address on "Ranke and Burckhardt" in 1948.¹ This is only one of the many distinguished contributions to a much-discussed subject: Leopold von Ranke and Jacob Burckhardt. Frequently this theme is treated as a confrontation: Ranke believed in the power of the State as guardian of order and stability, Burckhardt regarded power tied to evil; Ranke, the Protestant scholar, trusted to find the hand of a benevolent God in the events of the past, Burckhardt, skeptical and withdrawn, saw in history an unending struggle among antagonistic forces. The central issue in all the reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt is the difference between political and cultural history.

I want to discuss a different, almost contrary, issue: the bonds that tied Burckhardt and Ranke together, explaining why, despite differences in historical interest and approach, they respected and appreciated each other's work. That Ranke assigned great importance to Burckhardt's works is suggested by his repeated recommendation of Burckhardt for the newly established chair of history at the University of Munich in 1852; it was an appointment in which Ranke, because of his friendship with the Bavarian king, took the greatest interest.² Burckhardt expressed his admiration for Ranke's work in two different statements, both providing insight into what constituted a common bond between the two scholars.³ The first of these statements is in the curriculum vitae that accompanied the submission of Burckhardt's dissertation to the faculty of the University of Basel in 1843; the other is in the retrospect of his life which he composed in 1889, to be read in accordance with the customs of Basel at his funeral.

It is only appropriate that a curriculum vitae written for an academic body names the teachers under whom the applicant studied. Burckhardt's mention of Ranke in the list of his teachers stands out by its length. Burckhardt said he had been particularly fortunate in his historical studies because he had had as a teacher "a man who could not be praised enough, Leopold Ranke, who, not only through his teaching but also through his always-ready advice, was willing to further me."⁴

Burckhardt had reason to emphasize that he was a disciple of Ranke; Ranke

1. F. Meinecke, *Werke*, Zur Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung, vol. 7 (Munich, 1968), 92: "Ranke und Burckhardt sind die beiden größten historischen Denker, die das 19. Jahrhundert innerhalb der deutschen Kulturation hervorgebracht hat."

2. Werner Kaegi, *Jacob Burckhardt Eine Biographie*, 7 vols. (Basel: Bruno Schwabe, 1950), 2:72-73.

3. The two statements can be found *ibid.*, 72.

4. "Sed plurimum mihi gratulor, quod in historia magistrum nactus sum virum omni laude maiorem Leopoldum Ranke, qui non solum scholis suis, sed etiam praestantissimo consilio studia mea iuvare dignatus est."

was then becoming recognized as the leading historian in the German-speaking world. When Burckhardt abandoned theology and decided to study history, he went to Berlin because Ranke was there.⁵ And from his second semester on, as long as he was in Berlin, Burckhardt never missed Ranke's lectures and seminars.⁶ The two men differed sharply in their outlook on the social world. The young Basel patrician, in his student years moving chiefly in liberal circles, was contemptuous of Ranke's concern with rank and position. Burckhardt's disapproval of Ranke's civil-service attitude, however, did not extend to the work of the scholar. In a letter from Berlin, Burckhardt wrote that "Ranke has never spoken about history in a frivolous manner. . . . The seriousness of history penetrates in a distinct, almost uncanny manner his deeply furrowed features."⁷ Burckhardt himself stated soon after he had begun to attend Ranke's seminar that he now had an inkling of what history really was.⁸ With this he probably had first in mind Ranke's critical method: the preeminent importance of contemporary sources for the reconstruction of "how it actually was."⁹

The influence of Ranke's teaching on Burckhardt, however, went much further than this: Burckhardt's first two lengthier historical studies—his *Carl Martell* and his *Conrad von Hochstaden*,⁹ both written for Ranke's seminar—fitted in method and in form the series called *Jahrbücher des Deutschen Reiches*, which Ranke had initiated and whose individual volumes were the work of the chief members of Ranke's seminar. Burckhardt's two studies applied the concepts in which Ranke saw the principal constituent elements of medieval Europe: the conquest of the Germanic world by Christianity, a society of Germanic-Romance nations, and Christianity as the uniting bond. In his studies of Swiss history, which Burckhardt undertook after his return to Basel, he again followed Ranke's path. He investigated details of events of the Swiss Counter-Reformation on which Ranke had only touched in his *History of the Popes*.¹⁰ Burckhardt's dependence on his teacher is seen most clearly in his lectures on the history of the Middle Ages that he gave in the first course he offered as a university teacher at Basel in 1844–45.¹¹ Probably Burckhardt saw a greater break between the Middle Ages and the modern world than Ranke did, but a comparison of Burckhardt's notes from Ranke's course with the notes for his own course reveals that, in their organization and factual information—from the emphasis on the importance of the struggle between Western and Eastern Europe to the books listed in the bibliography—Burckhardt's lectures were closely based on Ranke's course. Thus, when Burckhardt began his academic career he was a historian of the Ranke school, and the gratitude which he expressed in his curriculum vitae is a truthful reflection of the relation which at that time existed between Ranke and Burckhardt.

IT IS LESS OBVIOUS, however, why more than forty years later, in writing his own obituary, Burckhardt again found it important to emphasize that he had been a student of Ranke. He wrote that he had had the good fortune to present in Ranke's seminar two lengthy historical studies and to be rewarded by the praise of the great teacher. Prior to writing these remarks, Burckhardt had frequently expressed his dislike of the *virī eruditissimi* who dominated historical scholarship in Germany, many of whom had been Ranke's disciples. Furthermore, Burckhardt believed

5. For a detailed discussion of Burckhardt's studies in Berlin see my article "Jacob Burckhardt's Student Years: The Road to Cultural History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986): 249–74.

6. Otto Markwart, *Jacob Burckhardt Persönlichkeit und Jugendjahre* (Basel, 1920), 397–98.

7. J. Burckhardt, *Briefe*, 9 vols. (Basel: Bruno Schwabe, 1949), 1:160.

8. *Ibid.*, 157–58.

9. Both printed in J. Burckhardt, *Gesamtausgabe*, Frühe Schriften, vol. 1 (Berlin and Leipzig, 1930).

10. Burckhardt's articles in *Archiv für Schweizerische Geschichte*: vol. 6 (1849); vol. 7 (1851); vol. 8 (1851).

11. The following is based on the notes which Burckhardt took in Berlin, where he heard Ranke's course on the "History of the Middle Ages," and on Burckhardt's notes for his own course in Basel. I wish to express my gratitude to the Jacob Burckhardt Stiftung for permission to use the Burckhardt papers in the Basel Staatsarchiv.

12. In this respect it is quite interesting that, when Ranke's works were published in the seventies, the edition started with his so-called national histories, and his *History of the Popes*, the earliest of his great works which had founded his fame, came only as volume 38.

13. Theodor Schieder, "Die Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft im Spiegel der Historischen Zeitschrift," in *Hundert Jahre Historische Zeitschrift 1859–1959*, ed. T. Schieder (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1959), 48–54.

14. Burckhardt, *Briefe*, 5:263.

15. "weil ihm hier der universalhistorische Athem und Masstab ausgeht."

16. Letter to Gottfried Kinkel, 21 March 1842, published in *Briefe*, 1:197.

that historical scholarship was going astray by concentrating on national histories and fostering nationalism and national conflicts.¹² And finally, political and cultural history had emerged as distinct, even incompatible, approaches to the past, and Burckhardt was viewed as the embodiment of the one, Ranke of the other.¹³

Why then did Burckhardt continue to consider Ranke a determining element in his historical thinking? This is a significant question because it focuses our attention on aspects of Ranke's historical thought that do not emerge when he is chiefly regarded as the father of a political school of history. Some light might be thrown on this question if we take into account a further reference to Ranke from Burckhardt's later years. In a letter to his friend, Friedrich von Preen, Burckhardt wrote that he envied Preen because only now, in his mature years, had he begun to read Ranke.¹⁴ Burckhardt considered *The History of the Popes* and the first volume of *The German History in the Age of the Reformation* as Ranke's real masterworks. He had read them as a student, and he had known passages of them by heart. He felt that in *The French History* something was lacking, and he found *The English History* somewhat boring; in these histories the perspective and the criteria of universal history were wanting.¹⁵ We are now inclined to regard Ranke's oeuvre as a great unit, with each of its parts expressing the same message about the principles and methods that ought to guide historical scholarship. That Burckhardt distinguished among Ranke's histories and emphasized their qualitative differences might be a useful cautioning against such an oversimplified view.

Burckhardt preferred Ranke's first two extended histories, *The History of the Popes* and *The German History in the Age of the Reformation*; they alone had his full approval and admiration. *The History of the Popes* had been published a few years before Burckhardt came to Berlin. *The German History in the Age of the Reformation* was in the course of appearing while he was studying there. Undoubtedly Burckhardt's view of these works reflects something of the impression they made when they were first published. It is significant that Burckhardt remembered that he knew passages from them by heart. Clearly these histories were evaluated and appreciated as works of literature. Indeed, Ranke's impressive literary power is seen, for instance, in his report about Luther's entry on a covered wagon in Leipzig for the disputation with Eck—it seems like a sixteenth-century woodcut having come to life—or in his description of the aging Charles V walking from the monastery of St. Juste to his favorite hermitage protected from the heat of the sun by the foliage of closely planted chestnut trees. Admittedly, in Germany and in France the past had been treated by great writers before (Schiller and Johannes von Müller, or, in Ranke's time, Thierry and Michelet, for example). But the conjunction of literary art with accurate scholarship was a unique feature of Ranke's first two great histories. When histories had previously been the result of archival research, the past had been presented, Burckhardt wrote, "in labyrinthine paragraphs," and history had declined in popularity because of the boring manner in which the historians had strung together one fact after the other. Under the impression of his studies with Ranke, Burckhardt wrote, "I have made a vow. Through my entire life I shall write a legible style."¹⁶

There was another feature in these two works which must have made them particularly attractive for Burckhardt. Nobody who knows Ranke's histories

Prediche de fra hieronymo per quadragesima.

Prediche utilissime per quadragesima del sacro theologo frate Hieronymo saouarola da ferrara de lordene di frati predicatori: sopra amos propheta : & sopra zacharia propheta : & parte etiam sopra li euangelii occorreti: & molti psalmi de dauid. Nouissimamete reuiste: & cō molti exemplari scontrade : & reposto ai suo lochi tutte le cose trunchade per la impressione ueneta de lazaro facta del. 1514.



*Title page from **Prediche de fra Hieronymo per quadragesima** (1519). Sermon written by Fra Savonarola; published c. 21 years after his martyrdom, which is illustrated in the woodcut.*



17. Ranke, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 15:87.

18. In the chapter on “Changes in the Intellectual Direction” in the fourth book of *The History of the Popes*.

can say they are exclusively concerned with political history. Each of his great histories contains a chapter called “Outlook on the Literature.” In *The English History*, however, Ranke wrote, “not the times of the great political struggles are most favorable for literary and artistic production, rather those times which precede them or follow them.”¹⁷ Thus, in *The English History*, which centers on the English civil war, he rapidly surveyed the literature of the preceding Elizabethan age from Bacon to Shakespeare. And in *The French History*, which has as its main theme the French religious wars of the sixteenth century, he described the intellectual outlook of Descartes, Corneille, and Pascal in the framework of an outline of the age of Louis XIV. These discussions of art and literature belong to the introductory and concluding sections of these histories and are not part of the great conflicts which form the center of these works. This cannot be said, however, about the treatment of aspects of cultural history in *The History of the Popes* and in *The German History in the Age of the Reformation*. In these works the treatment of the literature is not only more detailed, but the titles of the relevant sections—“Changes in the Intellectual Direction,” “Tendencies of Popular Literature,” “Development of Literature”—indicate that they are integrated into the entire story and treated either as reflecting the political developments or as influencing their course. To Burckhardt, for whom these two histories formed the introduction to Ranke’s oeuvre, political and cultural history cannot have appeared to be sharply separated. What must have particularly impressed and delighted the young Burckhardt, who, at this time, was also studying art history, was that in *The History of the Popes*, the chapter on intellectual developments not only contained a long analysis of Ariosto and Tasso but also—and this cannot be found in any other of Ranke’s works—a detailed discussion of painting and painters, from the Caracci to Domenichino and Guercino.¹⁸

Burckhardt, however, was an admirer of Ranke not only because Ranke was a great writer and his histories embraced art and literature. There is a more fundamental consensus between Ranke’s attitude in his early masterworks and Burckhardt’s approach to history. In his letter to Preen, Burckhardt praised as a distinguishing feature of Ranke’s early masterworks his inspection of the past from the point of view of universal history. It is the fading of this perspective that, in Burckhardt’s view, made Ranke’s later histories inferior to the two masterworks of his early years. There is a famous, but also somewhat startling, sentence in the preface of Ranke’s *English History* which suggests a change of approach from Ranke’s earlier to his later works and might indicate what Burckhardt had in mind. Ranke wanted to justify why he was writing about the history of a nation to which he did not belong by birth; he explained that when authors undertake writing the history of a nation that is not their own they do not try to compose its national history but deal only with those epochs when the history of that nation had strong influence on the course of events in other parts of Europe. This reflects something of the intellectual climate of the second half of the nineteenth century, with its increasing emphasis on national history—an emphasis Burckhardt disliked—and this statement seems distant from the approach that patterned the earlier works. Then Ranke wrote about developments which had a common European origin and which patterned the entire development of European history; when he focused on Germany it was because Germany was where the new movement of the Reformation first emerged. European

history was seen as a great stream into which many currents issued, and the entry of a new current into this stream was a historical subject of supreme importance. It is important to realize that the same notion had shaped Burckhardt's outlook on the past. He wrote not a *Civilization of the Italian Renaissance* but a *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* because among Europeans, Italians were the first modern people.

WET, THE IDEA of universal history—which in the case of Ranke and Burckhardt is identical with European history—encompasses a problem that is fundamental and decisive for understanding the relationship between Ranke and Burckhardt and shows most clearly where they differ and what binds them together. This is the problem of historical continuity. Although an ever-present issue in history, its full importance and complexity had come into the fore in the French Revolution. In the years when Ranke wrote his first two masterworks and Burckhardt studied under him, the stability established after Napoleon's fall had again been shaken and revolutionary movements reawakened. Thus, the problem of continuity—the question of what of the past was worth preserving and what ought to be abandoned—had again become a critical issue. “Our time is characterized by uncertainty about the future,” stated Burckhardt at the beginning of his lecture on the history of the French Revolution, and then raised the question whether anything, and if so, what, of the past had remained and ought to remain alive.¹⁹ Indeed, it was the central issue which gave validity to the search for an understanding of the past and stimulated the development of modern historical scholarship. Certainly, the answers which Ranke and Burckhardt gave were widely different. Burckhardt, averse to the descent into mass rule and vulgarization, was convinced that in the meaningless struggle of different and contrary human needs, what alone was worth preserving was the heritage of culture and of conditions of life which would allow human creativity. Ranke felt sure that “as violent as the Revolution had been, it did not break off the preceding development of the nations of the European culture.”²⁰ Ranke saw in the slowly emerging common society of nations the promise of the formation of a functioning international system, and this belief in a meaningful course of events stood behind his last historical undertaking, the writing of a universal history, broken off by his death 100 years ago. But if the one became the embodiment of cultural history, and the other of political history, it should not be forgotten that they had a common bond: the wish to preserve the heritage of Europe.



19. J. Burckhardt, *Vorlesung über die Geschichte des Revolutionszeitalters*, reconstructed by Ernst Ziegler (Basel: Bruno Schwabe, 1974), particularly 13–14.

20. Ranke, *Aus Werk und Nachlaß*, *Vorlesungs-Einleitungen*, 4:467 (from introduction to a lecture course on the history of the nineteenth century, given in 1869).