

our own age has always repelled me, so that had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I should have preferred to have been born in any other period than our own. In order to forget my own time, I have constantly striven to place myself in spirit in other ages, and consequently I delight in history; not that the conflicting statements did not offend me, but when in doubt I accepted what appeared to me most probably, or yielded to the authority of the writer.

My style, as many claimed, was clear and forcible; but to me it seemed weak and obscure. In ordinary conversation with friends, or with those about me, I never gave any thought to my language, and I have always wondered that Augustus Caesar should have taken such pains in this respect. When, however, the subject itself, or the place or listener seemed to demand it, I gave some attention to style, with what success I cannot pretend to say; let them judge in whose presence I spoke. If only I have lived well, it matters little to me how I talked. Mere elegance of language can produce at best but an empty renown.

translated by James Harvey Robinson in *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*. New York: Putnam's, 1907.

Lorenzo Valla: On the Forgery of the Alleged Donation of Constantine, 1440

The Donation of Constantine had been used since the late eighth century as a basis for papal claims of sovereignty over much of central Italy, a territory known as the Papal States.⁷³ Valla, a humanist scholar, philosopher, and court secretary, used the techniques of textual criticism developed by the humanists to prove that the Donation was a forgery. Valla wrote this essay while he was secretary to King Alfonso of Aragon, who ruled Naples at the time. This position may explain the polemical tone of the piece.

II, 5. I understand that the ears of men have been waiting for a long time to hear with what crime I am about to charge the Roman Pontiffs. Surely it is a most serious crime, of either lackadaisical ignorance or enormous greed, which is a form of idolatry, or the vain will to power, which is always accompanied by cruelty. In fact, for several centuries now either the Popes have not understood that the donation of Constantine is a forgery and a fabrication, or they have invented it themselves, or else, as followers treading in the footsteps of their predecessors' deceit, they have defended it as being true, even while knowing it was false. Thus they have disgraced the dignity of the Pontificate and the memory of the early Popes, dishonored the Christian religion and caused general confusion with their massacres, destruction, and shameful actions. They say that theirs are the city of Rome, the Kingdom of Sicily and Naples, the whole of Italy, Gaul, Spain, the lands of the Germans and Britons, and finally, all of the West. And all these things, purportedly, are contained in the document describing the donation. Are these lands then all yours, oh Supreme Pontiff? Do you intend to recover all of them? Do you plan to strip all the kings and princes in the West of their cities or compel them to pay annual taxes to you? On the contrary, I deem it to be more just if the rulers are allowed to deprive you of all the dominion you hold, since, as I shall demonstrate, that donation, from which the Popes claim their rights derive, was unknown either to Pope Sylvester or to the Emperor Constantine.

6. However, before I come to the confutation of the text of the donation, the only defence they have, and one that is foolish as well as false, I must go back to an earlier period for the sake

⁷³ See Chapter 8.

of order. And, first of all, I maintain that neither Constantine nor Sylvester was able to carry out the transaction; the former had no motive to make the donation, had no right to make it, and no power to hand over his possessions to someone else; while the latter had no motive to accept the gift and had no right to do so. Secondly, even if this were not absolutely true and evident, as it is, the pope did not receive nor did the Emperor transmit possession of what is supposed to have been donated. It always remained in the power and dominion of the Caesars. Thirdly, Constantine gave nothing to Sylvester, but rather to the previous Pope, even before he received Baptism, and those gifts were modest ones on which the Pope could barely subsist. Fourthly, it is incorrect to say that the deed of the donation is to be found in the *Decretum*⁷⁴ or that it was taken from the *Life of Sylvester* since it is not included either in this or in any other historical work. Moreover, it contains certain elements that are contradictory, impossible, foolish, strange, and ridiculous . . . I shall add, in supernumerary argument, that even if at one time Sylvester had held title, yet, because either he himself or some successive pope was dispossessed, it can not, after such a long interval of time, be reclaimed either according to divine law or to human law. Finally, the Pope's possessions could not have been won through prescription, no matter how long he held them.

IX, 31. Since you can not prove your theory, I shall demonstrate, on the contrary, that Constantine ruled over the Empire until the last day of his life, as did all the other Caesars who followed him. Thus I shall silence you, who tell me it is a very difficult and laborious task to demonstrate this. Let all the Latin and Greek histories be consulted, let all the other authors who mention that period be cited; you will find discrepancies in none regarding this matter. Of the thousand testimonies available, one will suffice: Eutropius saw Constantine and wrote that, when he died, his three sons were made rulers over the whole world . . . This historian would not have kept silent about the donation of the Western Empire had it taken place . . .

32. At this point I wish to summon all of you recent Roman Pontiffs although you are dead and you, Eugenius, who are living. . . Why do you boast loudly of the donation of Constantine and often present yourselves threateningly before certain kings and rulers as claimants of the Empire which has been usurped? Why do you force the Emperor and other rulers—the King of Naples and Sicily, for instance—to acknowledge submission at the time of their coronation? None of the early Popes of Rome did this . . . They always recognized that Rome and Italy along with the provinces belonged to the Emperors. Furthermore, golden coins exist, not to mention other monuments and temples in Rome, that bear not Greek but Latin inscriptions of Constantine, when he was already a Christian, and of almost all the successive emperors. I own many of these myself . . . If ever you had ruled over Rome, an infinite number of coins would be found commemorating the Supreme Pontiffs, whereas none are to be found either of gold or silver and no one remembers having seen any. Yet, at that time, whoever ruled over the Roman Empire would have had to mint his own currency, probably with the image of the Saviour or of Saint Peter . . .

XI, 44. As for the text of the document, it is still more absurd and unnatural that Constantinople⁷⁵ should be referred to as one of the patriarchal sees, when it was not yet either patriarchal or a see or a Christian city; it was not yet called Constantinople; it had not yet been

⁷⁴The Decretum was a collection of nearly 3800 texts, compiled by the Benedictine monk Gratian about 1140, which became the basic text for the study of canon law.

⁷⁵ Constantinople was the city in Asia Minor that Constantine created as a "second Rome" and which eventually replaced Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire.

founded or even planned. In fact, the privilege was supposedly granted three days after Constantine was converted to Christianity, when Byzantium still existed and not Constantinople. . . . Who fails to see, therefore, that he who drew up the privilege lived a long time after the age of Constantine? . . .

50. . . . Now, let us speak to this deceiver about his crude language. Through his babbling, he reveals his most impudent forgery himself. . . . Where he deals with the gifts, he says "a diadem . . . made of pure gold and precious jewels". The ignoramus did not know that the diadem was made of cloth, probably silk. . . . He thinks it had to be made of gold, since nowadays kings usually wear a circle of gold set with jewels. But Constantine was not a king and he would never have dared to call himself a king or to adorn himself in regal fashion. He was Emperor of the Romans, not a king. . . .

XVIII, 58. . . . Is the barbarousness of his style not sufficient proof that such a piece of nonsense was forged not in Constantine's day but much later? . . .

XX, 65. . . . Therefore this text is not by Constantine but by some foolish petty cleric who does not know what to say or how to say it. Fat and full, he belches out ideas and words enveloped in fumes of intoxicating wine. But these sentences do not touch others; rather, they turn against the originator himself. . . .

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Vespasiano: On the Founding of the Vatican Library

Owing to the jubilee of 1450 a great quantity of money came in by this means to the apostolic see, and with this the pope commenced building in many places, and sent for Greek and Latin books, wherever he was able to find them, without regard to price. He gathered together a large band of writers, the best that he could find, and kept them in constant employment. He also summoned a number of learned men, both for the purpose of composing new works and of translating such existing works as were not already translated, giving them most abundant provision for their needs meanwhile; and when the works were translated and brought to him, he gave them large sums of money, in order that they should do more willingly that which they undertook to do.

He made great provision for the needs of learned men. He gathered together great numbers of books upon every subject, both Greek and Latin, to the number of five thousand volumes. So at his death it was found by inventory that never since the time of Ptolemy had half that number of books of every kind been brought together. All books he caused to be copied, without regard to what it cost him, and there were few places where his Holiness had not copiers at work. When he could not procure a book for himself in any way, he had it copied.

After he had assembled at Rome, as I said above, many learned men at large salaries, he wrote to Florence to Messer Giannozzo Manetti, that he should come to Rome to translate and compose for him. And when Manetti left Florence and came to Rome, the pope, as was his custom, received him with honor, and assigned to him, in addition to his income as secretary, six hundred *ducats*, urging him to attempt the translation of the books of the Bible and of Aristotle,

