

History and apologetics in XVth century Hispano-Jewish thought

It would be pleasing to think that the origins of the modern historian's craft developed in an atmosphere of serenity which gave it its characteristic objectivity and distinguished it from its medieval counterpart characterized by zeal for preconceived ideas. It would be pleasing but probably not entirely correct. It might, in fact, be argued that modern historical instruments developed out of apologetics and controversy. The medieval clerical historians studied by Lasch tend to use scepticism and critical concepts especially when dealing with pagan stories and folktales, i.e. non-Christian sources. Nicholas of Cusa when demonstrating that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery, and thus paving the way for the critical treatment of historical documents was not indulging in an academic exercise but trying to further the cause of the lay party in the conflict between conciliarist and papal parties. Much of Valla's work grew out of controversy and occasional anticlericalism. Machiavelli, similarly, used history as a means of argument against the rulers of contemporary Florence¹.

One cannot therefore, discount a priori the apologetics genre as a proper subject of enquiry on the beginning of Jewish use of historical method. In the present state of

1 On medieval historical technique before the Renaissance vid. Berthold Lasch, *Das Erwachen und die Entwicklung der historischen Kritik im Mittelalter (vom vi-xii jahrhundert)* (Breslau 1887), especially pp. 20, 21, 23. Cf. also Ed. Fueter (transl. Emile Jeanmaire), *Histoire de l'historiographie moderne* (Paris 1914) p. 3, on Petrarch's reasons for studying and writing history; also p. 97, where the histories of Machiavelli and Guicciardini are characterized thus: «sont issues exclusivement des luttes constitutionnelles et des discussions politiques dans la Florence de leur temps».