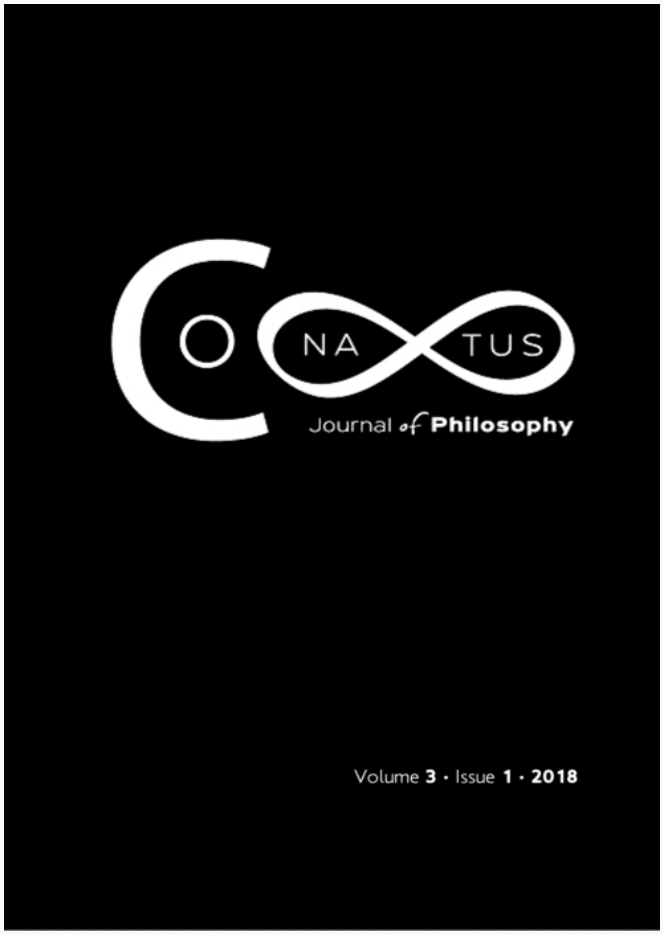
ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
EKT NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 3, No 1 (2018)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



Alexander Lee, Humanism and Empire, The Imperial Ideal in Fourteenth-Century Italy. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2018.

Georgios Steiris

doi: 10.12681/conatus.19064

Copyright © 2019, Georgios Steiris

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0.

To cite this article:

Steiris, G. (2019). Alexander Lee, Humanism and Empire, The Imperial Ideal in Fourteenth-Century Italy. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2018. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, *3*(1), 113–114. https://doi.org/10.12681/conatus.19064

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 12/10/2026 18:42:11

book review

G. Steiris/*Conatus* 3, no. 1 (2018): 113-114
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/conatus.19064

Alexander Lee. *Humanism and Empire: The Imperial Ideal in Fourteenth-Century Italy*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2018.

Georgios Steiris
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
E-mail address: gsteiris@ppp.uoa.gr
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7944-0572

The predominantly civic ideological outlook of 14th century humanists is a common locus in the history of political thought. According to modern scholarship, fourteenth century humanists defended republican liberty because of their admiration for the Latin classics. In his perspicacious book, Alexander Lee challenges persuasively the aforementioned view arguing that the humanists' attachment to the ideal of Empire was constant. Their main concern was the establishment of peace and liberty within the political community. As a result, they embraced any constitutional form –traditional or hybrid- that could serve their political goals. Based on recent findings and publications, Lee undertakes a complete survey of the imperial ideal in the fourteenth-century Italy.

The book consists of two parts, complemented with a lengthy introduction, epilogue, bibliography and index. Before the introduction, Lee attempts to define humanism. Instead of giving a brand new definition, he offers to the reader a fascinating and insightful presentation of the history of humanism from the 19th century until today. Lee's comment on humanism would be very useful for teaching purposes.

In his introduction, Lee focuses on historiographical problems. Namely, he holds that, despite the warmth with which the humanists viewed the Empire, most of modern scholarship ignores their attachment to the imperial ideals. Lee explains the basic reasons for this misconception. According to Lee, liberty and its implications shape the outline of the humanists' ideal of Empire. Lee disputes the connection between the humanists' admiration for Ciceronian thought and republicanism. Their predilection for imperial authority was conditioned predominantly by political conviction and not

by cultural concerns.

In the first part, entitled "The Defense of Empire", the author focuses on the humanists' appeals to imperial authority in the Trecento. Lee discerns five distinct phases in the way these appeals were extolled. Furthermore, emphasizing that humanists viewed peace as precondition of liberty, he revisits the dominant analyses in recent scholarship. In addition, he points up the significance of moral discourse in 14th century politics. According to the most influential humanists, liberty did not depend on the constitution; it was rather connected to the moral disposition of the governing elites.

In the second chapter, entitled "The Dynamics of Empire", Lee attempts a more thematic approach, as he discusses significant political events from different perspectives. He reappraises common views about the enforcement of Italian nationalism in the 14th century and the implications of the tension between Guelfs and Ghibellines. Lee holds that the benefits of submission to the Emperor were more significant than the disadvantages. Throughout the fourteenth century, the humanists associated the rebirth of the Roman heyday with the rebirth of Empire.

In sum, Lee offers a new interpretation of humanist political thought that contributes to the reappraisal of the foundation of early modern constitutional ideas. He argues that fourteenth-century humanists showed a consistent affection for the Holy Roman Empire, because they were convinced that the endless conflicts in Italy and Europe would cease only if the Emperor invoke his protection. The book reveals new insights in texts that are well-known to an audience larger than specialists and scholars. It is worth noticing that the ideal of Empire and monarchy is not well-appreciated in recent scholarship and Lee's book fills a lacuna in this respect. Although he contextualizes the historical conditions each thinker wrote within, his perspective is timeless and universal. Lee's analysis is broad, original and careful. As I mentioned before, the main advantage of the book is that it treats the texts with due respect and bases his conclusions on thorough examination and textual analysis. Besides the primary sources, the secondary literature is extensive and up to date.