

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
FRANCESCO SANSOVINO AND ITALIAN POPULAR HISTORY
BY PAUL F. GRENDLER

1969 A.D.

Note: This text, containing a brief sketch of Polybius' Anacyclosis, describes Francesco Sansovino's efforts to popularize Anacyclosis during the Italian Renaissance. Footnotes have been omitted.

II.

The popularizers occasionally pondered man and history. They wrote no formal treatises but they wrote many prefaces and dedicatory letters in which it was standard procedure to discuss briefly the purpose of a work and to reflect on man and history.

... Influenced by the events of his century and the current discussions of man and history, Sansovino assigned limits to man's participation in shaping his world. He believed that man could shape his political destiny in day-to-day affairs but that politics was in the long run subject to an inevitable cycle. Sansovino viewed the growth and decline of states in terms of Polybius' anacyclosis. The initially good government of one man, monarchy, became a tyranny. Then the state was renewed by the efforts of a few good men who made it an aristocracy. This in turn decayed into oligarchy and was replaced by democracy which became mob rule which, in turn was supplanted by one-man rule as the cycle continued. Sansovino noted that worthy men attempted unsuccessfully to establish principates or republics to endure a thousand years. The reasons for failure were twofold. By their nature all human institutions carried within themselves the seeds of corruption which were human excesses and disorders. Second, one could not provide for everything. The accidents which befell states were so many and so diverse that it was impossible to provide against, or to correct, all of them.

Although governments were subject to inevitable corruption in the long run, men could control their immediate destinies through their daily political decisions, and history enabled men to make intelligent decisions. The study of history was useful because human actions were normally consistent in every period and for most men. Political precepts learned from history could not be 'determined and fixed rules', but they were useful to intelligent statesmen Unexpected and incomprehensible misfortunes overtook men from time to time but the fault did not lie in the study of history and politics.

Sansovino filtered and simplified current speculation on the problem. He could have derived his notions of anacyclosis and human corruption from either Polybius or Machiavelli. His rejection of 'determined and fixed rules' because of the mutability of life echoed Guicciardini's approach. However, Sansovino's resolution of human intervention and historical inevitability begged questions. What was the relationship between the actions of statesmen and incomprehensible misfortune? To what extent were human actions consistent from period to period in history? However, neither the popularizers, nor their readers were philosophers of history. Sansovino formulated a simple pragmatic resolution which assumed that men would continue to live the *vita civile* and which justified the study of history. Neither very pessimistic nor excessively optimistic, Sansovino's views reflected Italian political reality. He did not share the hope of Polybius and Machiavelli that a mixed constitution would check the cycle, but he believed that men normally could control their own affairs and learn from the experience of others. ...

* * *