

Legal humanism: returning to the sources

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To understand Calvin's way of reasoning, his training must be placed within the great movement of renewal in legal scholarship that marked the beginning of the sixteenth century. Since the Middle Ages, the teaching of Roman law had rested on the glosses and commentaries accumulated by generations of jurists. This tradition, often called the *mos italicus*, had produced an imposing doctrinal edifice, adapted to the needs of practice but at times remote from the original texts.

The humanists of the early sixteenth century proposed another approach, sometimes referred to as the *mos gallicus*. They set out to return to the texts of Roman law themselves, restoring them in their philological purity and placing them back in their historical context. To this end they drew on their knowledge of classical Latin, of Greek, of history and of Roman antiquities.¹ Andrea Alciato, Ulrich Zasius and Guillaume Budé rank among the major figures of this movement.

Guillaume Budé holds a particular place for our purposes. His *Annotations aux Pandectes* (Annotations on the Pandects) renewed the study of Roman law, and his treatise *De Asse*, devoted to the coinage and measures of antiquity, is one of the great works of economic erudition of the Renaissance.² Budé was interested in the value of money, in prices and in the wealth of antiquity, and he raised questions that bore directly on the economy of his own day. The 2025 study devoted to Calvin and lending at interest stresses, moreover, that the reformer's texts must be reread in the context of the humanist research that preceded them, and it expressly cites Budé and Bucer.³

Legal humanism left several imprints on Calvin. The first is the philological method: to understand a text, whether a passage of the Pandects or a verse of the Bible, one must establish its exact meaning in its original language. The second is the historical method: a text must be read in its context, taking account of the circumstances in which it was written and of the

addressees to whom it was directed. The third is the search for purpose: behind the letter of a rule, one must discern the reason that inspires it and the aim it pursues. The fourth, finally, is the concern for clarity and brevity, which Calvin would claim as a quality of his own style.⁴

These imprints are found again in Calvin's reading of the biblical texts on usury. Calvin examines the context of the prescriptions of the Old Testament, distinguishes what belongs to the laws peculiar to ancient Israel from what belongs to universal morality, and seeks the purpose of the prohibitions. This approach, typical of the humanist jurist, would lead him to nuanced conclusions, which the following chapter sets out.

Caution. It would be inaccurate to make Calvin an economist. His interest in monetary and financial questions flowed from his legal and humanist training, from his pastoral responsibilities and from his reflection on justice. His economic positions form part of an overall theological vision, in which love of one's neighbour and equity serve as the criteria.

1 Notes

1. Wikipédia (fr), art. "Mos gallicus": humanist method introduced at Bourges by Andrea Alciato at the beginning of the sixteenth century and exemplified by Guillaume Budé, Jacques Cujas, François Hotman, Hugues Doneau and François Baudouin, which set out to restore Roman law "in its original purity" through philology and history, as against the mos italicus of Bartolus and Baldus, whose successors confined themselves to repeating and glossing the earlier commentaries. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), art. "Guillaume Budé": 26 January 1467–20 August 1540; *Annotationes in XXIV libros Pandectarum* (1508), applying philology and history to the study of Roman law; "The work which gained him greatest reputation was his *De Asse et Partibus Eius* (1514), a treatise on ancient coins and measures"; the inspiration, at the court of Francis I, for the Collège des lecteurs royaux, which became the Collège de France; *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* (DHS) (Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. "Calvin, Jean": law studies at Orléans and Bourges (licence in 1531) under Pierre de l'Estoile and Andrea Alciato. ↩
3. "Jean Calvin et le prêt à intérêt : de la chaire à la boutique", *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 2025/1, p. 155 et seq., summary accessed September 2026. ↩

4. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. VIII, § “Calvin’s Commentaries” (ccel.org): Calvin opened his series of commentaries in Strasbourg with the Epistle to the Romans (1539/1540), dedicated to Simon Grynaeus; there he formulated his ideal of “perspicua brevitās”, the duty of the interpreter being to bring to light the true meaning of the biblical authors; he then commented on most of the books of the Old Testament (Pentateuch, Psalms, Prophets) and almost all of the New Testament, with the exception of Revelation. ↩

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