

The Renaissance in Europe 1350-1600

THE STORY MATTERS...

The word *renaissance* means "rebirth." What was reborn during this period? One of the most enduring innovations of Renaissance culture was a new view of human beings. This outlook, embodied in the intellectual movement known as humanism, celebrated the extraordinary individual. The Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci, who was also an architect, inventor, and mathematician, was seen by those around him as a model of this humanist ideal.

Lesson 15-1

The Italian States

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

dominate decline

Content Vocabulary

mercenary burgher republic

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- How can trade lead to economic prosperity and political power?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The Renaissance served as a bridge between the Middle Ages and modern times. Beginning in the prosperous states of Italy, the Renaissance marked the emergence of a new urban culture that was largely spread by trade. This culture had a more worldly outlook than that of the Middle Ages.

The Major Italian States

GUIDING QUESTIONS *What contributed to the rise of the Italian states during the Renaissance?*

How did Machiavelli's work influence political power in the Western world?

In the late Middle Ages, Italy was much more urban than the rest of Europe, and a thriving trade network was based in Italy's many cities. The energy that trade gave to Italy's urban environment encouraged an exchange of ideas that helped stimulate the development of Renaissance culture.

Italy had prospered from a flourishing trade that had expanded during the Middle Ages. Italian cities such as Venice had taken the lead in establishing merchant fleets and trading with the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations to the east. High demand for Middle Eastern goods enabled Italian merchants to set up trading centers in eastern ports. There they obtained silks, sugar, and spices, which were sent back to Europe.

Italian trading ships had also moved into the western Mediterranean and then north along the Atlantic seaboard. These ships exchanged goods with merchants in England and the Netherlands. Goods, however, were not the only cargo. The ideas of the Renaissance, developed in Italy, spread north along trade routes to the rest of Europe.

During the Middle Ages, Italy had failed to develop a centralized monarchical state. The lack of a single strong ruler made it possible for a number of city-states in northern and central Italy to remain independent. By early in the fifteenth century, five major territorial states had come to dominate the peninsula. These were the city-states of Milan, Venice, and Florence, the Papal States centered on Rome, and the Kingdom of Naples. Because of their economic power, these states played crucial roles in Italian politics and culture.

Economics and Politics in the Major Italian States

Each of the five major territorial states dominated the economic and political life of its region. Milan, Venice, and Florence were located in northern Italy. One of the richest city-states, Milan stood at the crossroads of the main trade routes from Italian coastal cities to the Alpine passes. In the fourteenth century, members of the Visconti family established themselves as dukes of Milan. They extended their power over the surrounding territory of Lombardy. The last Visconti ruler of Milan died in 1447. Francesco Sforza (SFAWRT • sah) led a band of **mercenaries** – soldiers who fought primarily for money. Sforza conquered the city and became its duke. The Visconti and Sforza rulers built a strong centralized state. Using an efficient tax system, the Sforzas generated huge revenues for the government.

Another major northern Italian city-state, Venice, served as a commercial link between Asia and Western Europe. The city drew traders from around the world. Officially, Venice was a **republic** with an elected leader called a doge (DOHJ). In reality, a small group of wealthy merchant-aristocrats ran the government of Venice for their benefit. Venice's trade empire was tremendously profitable and made the city-state an international power.

The republic of Florence dominated the northern Italian region of Tuscany. During the fourteenth century, a small, wealthy group of merchants established control of the Florentine government. They waged a series of successful wars against their neighbors and established Florence as a major city-state.

In 1434 Cosimo de' Medici (MEH • duh • chee) took control of the city. The wealthy Medici family ran the

government from behind the scenes. Using their wealth and personal influence, Cosimo, and later his grandson Lorenzo de' Medici, dominated the city when Florence was the cultural center of Italy.

As the Italian states grew wealthier, the power of the Church began to decline slightly. Some Church doctrines, such as the sinfulness of usury, or charging borrowers a fee on money loaned to them, were openly ignored. Many Italian leaders borrowed and loaned money without fear of reprisal.

During the late 1400s, Florence experienced an economic decline. Most of its economy was based on the manufacturing of cloth. Increased competition from English and Flemish cloth makers drove down profits.

During this time, a Dominican preacher named Girolamo Savonarola began condemning the corruption and excesses of the Medici family. Rejecting Medici rule and frustrated by economic events, citizens turned to Savonarola. His attacks weakened the power of the Medici, and a French invasion of Italy in 1494 resulted in their exile from Florence.

Eventually the Florentines tired of Savonarola's strict regulation of gambling, horse racing, swearing, painting, music, and books. He also attacked the corruption of the Church, which angered the pope. In 1498 Savonarola was accused of heresy and sentenced to death. The Medici family returned to power in Florence.

The two other dominant centers in Renaissance Italy were the Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples. Located in central Italy, Rome was the capital of the Papal States. These territories were officially under the control of the Catholic Church at this time. By contrast, the Kingdom of Naples, which dominated southern Italy, was the only one of the five major states ruled by a hereditary monarch.

The growth of monarchical states in the rest of Europe led to trouble for the Italian states. The riches of Italy attracted the French king, Charles VIII. He led an army of 30,000 men into Italy in 1494. The French occupied the Kingdom of Naples. Northern Italian states turned for help to the Spanish, who gladly agreed to send soldiers to Italy. For the next 30 years, the French and the Spanish battled in Italy as they sought to dominate the region.

A turning point in this struggle came in 1527. On May 5, thousands of troops arrived at the city of Rome. This army belonged to Charles I, king of Spain and ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. It included mercenaries from different countries. They had not been paid for months. When they yelled, "Money! Money!" their leader responded, "If you have ever dreamed of pillaging a town and laying hold of its treasures, here now is one, the richest of them all, queen of the world."

The next day the invading forces smashed the gates and pushed into the city. The troops went berserk in a frenzy of bloodshed and looting. The terrible sack of Rome in 1527 by the armies of Charles I left the Spanish a dominant force in Italy. The Italian Wars would continue for another quarter-century, ending only in 1559.

Machiavelli on Power

Political power fascinated the people of the Italian Renaissance. No one gave better expression to this interest than Niccolò Machiavelli (MA • kee • uh • VEH • lee). His book *The Prince* is one of the most influential works on political power in the Western world.

Machiavelli's central thesis in *The Prince* is the issue of how to get-and keep-political power. He dedicated his study of practical politics to the grandson of Lorenzo de' Medici. Machiavelli offered him rules on how to govern. In the Middle Ages, many writers on political power had emphasized the duty of rulers to follow Christian moral principles. Machiavelli, however, rejected this popular approach. He believed that morality was unrelated to politics.

From Machiavelli's point of view, a prince's attitude toward power must be based on an understanding of human nature. He believed human beings were motivated by self-interest. He said, "...this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely." Based on such an assessment, therefore, political activity should not be restricted by moral principles. A prince acts on behalf of the state. According to Machiavelli, for the state's sake, a leader must do good when possible, but be ready to do evil when necessary. Machiavelli abandoned morality as the basis for analyzing political activity and argued that the ends justify the means. His views have had a profound influence on later political leaders. His influence on politics has continued to the present day.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Explaining Why might Machiavelli have argued that political activity should not be restricted by moral principles?

Analyzing PRIMARY SOURCES

Machiavelli on Trust

"Everyone realizes how praiseworthy it is for a prince to honor his word and to be straightforward rather than crafty in his dealings; none the less, contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles."

– Niccolò Machiavelli, from *The Prince*

INTERPRETING

What does Machiavelli use as the basis for his argument about how a prince should act?

Renaissance Society

GUIDING QUESTION How was society characterized during the Renaissance?

In the Middle Ages, society had been divided into three social classes: the clergy, the nobility, and the peasants and townspeople. Although this social order continued into the Renaissance, some changes became evident.

The Nobility

During the Renaissance, nobles, or aristocrats, continued to dominate society. Making up only a tiny portion of the population in most countries, nobles held important political posts and served as advisers to the king.

Nobles were expected to fulfill certain ideals in Renaissance society. The characteristics of a perfect Renaissance noble were expressed in *The Book of the Courtier* written by the Italian diplomat Baldassare Castiglione (kahs • teel • YOH • nay) and published in 1528. One of the key ideals of the Renaissance was the well-developed individual. In Castiglione's interpretation, this ideal became the social goal of the aristocracy. A noble was born, not made. He must have character, grace, and talent. The noble had to be a warrior, but also needed a classical education and an interest in the arts. Finally, a noble had to follow certain standards of conduct. What was the purpose of these standards?

PRIMARY SOURCE

“The aim of the perfect Courtier ... is so to win ... the favor and mind of the prince whom he serves that he may be able to tell him ... the truth about everything he needs to know ... and that when he sees the mind of his prince inclined to a wrong action, he may dare to oppose him ... so as to dissuade him of every evil intent and bring him to the path of virtue.”

-Baldassare Castiglione, from *The Book of the Courtier*

Thus, the aim of the perfect noble, by Renaissance standards, was to serve his prince in an effective and honest way. Nobles would aspire to Castiglione's principles for hundreds of years while they continued to dominate European social and political life.

Peasants and Townspeople

During the Renaissance, peasants still constituted the vast majority of the total European population. Serfdom continued to decrease with the decline of the manorial system. By 1500, especially in Western Europe, more and more peasants became legally free.

At the top of urban society were the patricians. With their wealth from trade, industry, and banking, they dominated their communities. Below them were the **burghers** – the shopkeepers, artisans, guild masters, and guild members. Below the burghers were the workers, who earned low wages, and the unemployed. Both of the latter groups lived miserable lives and made up a significant portion of the urban population.

During the late 1300s and the 1400s, urban poverty increased dramatically throughout Europe. One rich merchant, who had little sympathy for the poor, wrote:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“Those that are lazy in a way that does harm to the city, and who can offer no just reason for their condition, should either be forced to work or expelled from the [city]. The city would thus rid itself of that most harmful part of the poorest class.”

-quoted in *Renaissance Europe: Age of Recovery and Reconciliation*

Family and Marriage

The family bond was a source of great security during the Renaissance. Parents carefully arranged marriages to strengthen business or family ties. In upper-class families, parents often worked out the details when their children were only two or three years old. These marriage contracts included a dowry, a sum of money that the wife's family gave to the husband upon marriage.

The father-husband was the center of the Italian family. He managed all finances, since his wife had no share in his wealth. He also made the decisions that determined the path of his children's lives.

The mother's chief role was to supervise the household and raise her children, which might include their moral education. For example, the fifteenth-century Florentine noblewoman Alessandra Strozzi wrote a letter to one of her grown sons commending him for acting charitably to the son of an enemy:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“You gave Brunetto's son food to eat and clothes to wear, and you gave him shelter and money and sent him back here; out of the seven acts of mercy you have performed three.”

-quoted in *Selected Letters of Alessandro Strozzi*

A father had absolute authority over the children living under his roof. Males became adults when they left home, reached a certain age-which varied from place to place-or were emancipated (legally freed) by their fathers. Women never became legal adults while the father lived unless they were emancipated.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Contrasting How does Castiglione's view of the responsibilities of a ruling class differ from Machiavelli's?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

mercenary	a soldier who fights primarily for pay
republic	a form of government in which the leader is not a king and certain citizens have the right to vote
burgher	a member of the middle class who lived in a city or town