The Renaissance

By the late 15th century Europe’s population was recovering from the losses inflicted by the plagues, famines, and wars of the fourteenth century

Many places saw the establishment of stable, centralized governments

The city-states of Italy were doing especially well in this regard

Italy’s strategic location permitted it to dominate the trade which still centered on the Mediterranean

The great wealth that trade brought to Italy’s rulers and merchants allowed them to become patrons of government, education, and the arts

The result was a rebirth of civilization based on a classical heritage of Greece and Rome

Study in Greek and Latin was revived, and the classical literary heritage was recovered

Education was reformed and scholars were able to reach out to the public, thanks to the development of the printing press and the expansion of literacy

During the 15th and 16th centuries powerful nations arose in western Europe and engaged in unprecedented territorial expansion as colonies were beginning to be planted around the world

The flood of gold, silver, and other exotic new products transformed the western way of life

The Renaissance is a time of transition from the medieval to the modern world

Renaissance Europe was characterized by growing national consciousness, the development of an urban-based economy focused on commerce and market economics (capitalism?), and an increasingly secular society

During the 13th and 14th centuries the cities in Italy began to extend their influence into the countryside and they began to develop into great city-states

The growth of Italy’s cities and urban society was promoted by the endemic warfare between the Guelf (Welf or pro-papal) factions and the Ghibelline (Hohenstaufen or pro-imperial) factions

The fighting between these factions each weakened the other, and left the merchant oligarchies free of dominance by kings or territorial princes

This allowed the influence of the Italian cities to expand into the surrounding countryside and assimilate the rural nobility

Through intermarriage?

The five greatest city-states were

The Duchy of Milan

The republic of Florence

The republic of Venice

The Papal States

The kingdom of Naples

Competition for power was intense within the city-states

By the 15th century most had concluded that they could preserve order by allowing despots to rule

Venice was an exception in that it remained an oligarchic republic dominated by a small number of merchant families

Florence exhibited the basic model of early renaissance Italian government

The social ranks were

The old guard (the *grandi*)

The noble and established merchant families

The emergent merchant and investor rank known as the *popolo grosso* (fat people)

The middle-burgher rank of the guildmasters (skilled labor), shop owners, and professionals

The lowest rank was called the popolo minuto (little people)

In 1457 about one-third of the population of Florence were listed as paupers

Earlier in 1378 the dislocation associated with the Black Death prompted a revolt called the Ciompi Revolt among the poor in Florence

Stability was not restored until Cosimo de Medici took control in 1434

Medici was a very wealthy merchant and an astute statesman

He controlled Florence from behind the scenes by manipulating the constitution and the elections in his favor

Florence was governed by a council of six to eight men, the *Signoria*, elected from the most powerful guilds

Through his relationship with the electoral committee, Medici could make sure that the Signoria was made up of loyalists

Medici’s grandson Lorenzo established absolute control over Florence by 1478

Elsewhere, when internal fighting and foreign intrigue paralyzed the management of city-states, warring factions agreed to the appointment of a podesta

A neutral outsider, but a strongman who was empowered to do whatever was necessary to maintain law and order and establish a good environment for business

The podesta could be dismissed by the oligarchy that hired him or could be assassinated by those whom he offended

However, a podesta might establish a dynasty such as the Visconti family in Milan in 1278 and the Sforza family that followed them in 1450

However Italian city-states were governed, Italian despots ultimately provided an environment for intellectual and artistic pursuits

The Florentine Leonardo Bruni was the first to describe the scholarship of the Renaissance as the study of *humanitas*

This scholarship emphasized rhetoric and sound scholarship

It championed the study of Latin and Greek classics as well as Christian church fathers as a guide to reforming society

These humanists were orators and poets, but others taught at universities, or worked as secretaries, speech writers, or diplomats in princely or papal courts

Although there had been earlier interest in classical and Christian antiquities, the humanists of the Renaissance consulted with the original sources

They avidly searched out neglected manuscripts in an effort to recover Greek and Latin literature and make it available to all scholars

Humanists were activists who treated the manuscript sources as if they were the answers to all of societies’ ills

The goal of their study was to discover the good and to practice virtue

Humanist learning was to ennoble people by fitting them for the free use of their mind and body

The discovery of Quintilian’s *Education of the Orator* provided humanists with a classical guide for the revision of the educational curricula based on mastering various works from ancient Greece and Rome as well as vigorous physical training

Other humanists not only promoted the classical works, but athletic, military, and musical skills as well

In addition to these skills, a person educated in the humanities was also to have good manners and an exemplary moral character

Women, most notably Christine de Pisan also helped shape humanity-based educational reform

He father was an astrologer and physician to the French King Charles V

She received an advanced education and became an expert in classical languages and literature

Her most famous work *The City of Ladies* chronicles the accomplishment of the great women in history

The revival of ancient Greek literature, particularly the works of Plato, was the most important of the Renaissance’s renewed contact with the classical past

In 1397, Florence invited a Byzantine scholar to immigrate to that city and open a school (Manuel Chrysolaras) to teach Greek and other subjects

In 1439, the Council of Ferrara-Florence was held to discuss the reunion of the Eastern and Western churches brought more Greek scholars and manuscripts to Florence

The number of Greek scholars and documents arriving in Italy greatly increased when the Turks overwhelmed the city of Constantinople in 1453

Medieval Scholastics had been preoccupied with Aristotle’s logic and science

However, Renaissance thinkers were more interested in Plato’s poetry and mysticism

Platonism’s appeal lay in its flattering view of human nature and its apparent congruence or agreement with Christianity

For example, Plato argued that the presence in the human mind of an innate knowledge of mathematical truths and moral standards proved that a part of a human being was rooted in the eternal

To encourage the study of Plato and the Neoplatonic philosophers, Cosimo de Medici founded a Platonic Academy

It was from Florence that Plato’s work circulated throughout the West, promoting a new and more optimistic view of human nature

Some of the critical work of humanists in the 15th century helped point out errors in the church’s authorized Latin Bible, as well as calling into question the authenticity of The Donation of Constantine which was said to give the pope the imperial power of the Roman emperors

Works such as these helped pave the way for the Protestant Reformation

In Renaissance Europe the interests of the laity overcame those of the clergy

As people began to value the secular world, secular learning, and human pursuits as end in themselves, medieval Christian attitudes adjusted to accommodate this more worldly spirit

This contributed to the loss of power and prestige by the late medieval church

It also contributed to the rise of patriotic nationalism, the creation of government bureaucracies staffed by laypersons rather than clerics, and the rapid growth of lay education in the 14th and 15th centuries

These attitudes and developments can be perceived in the painting and sculpture of the High Renaissance of the late 15th and early 16th centuries

Renaissance art focused on describing the natural world and communicating human emotions

It displayed rational, mechanical order

Symmetry and proportionality that reflected a humanistic faith in the harmony and the intelligibility of the universe

These ideas were expressed through new technical skills and materials developed by artists

Slow-drying oil-based paints

New methods of drafting

The use of shading

Linear perspective

The illusion of depth

Slavery

One thing that isn’t widely understood by the conventional wisdom with the practice of slavery during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Slavery flourished in Renaissance Italy

The slave market in Italy developed in the 12th century as Spaniards sold Muslim war captives to wealthy Italians where they were employed as domestic servants

Plantation slavery had appeared in the eastern Mediterranean during the High Middle Ages

Venetian sugar cane plantations were ultimate models for later west Mediterranean, Portuguese Atlantic island, and New World slavery

The demand for slaves soared after the Black Death in the 14th century reduced the supply of labor throughout western Europe

Slaves of all races were imported from Africa, the Balkans, Constantinople, Cyprus, Crete, and the lands surrounding the Black Sea

Most well-to-do Italian households had slaves, and even the clergy kept them

Like in ancient Greece, slaves of the Renaissance era were often integrated into the households

Some female slaves became mothers to their master’s children and many of those children were adopted and raised as legitimate heirs

Nevertheless, most slaves remained an uprooted and resentful people and a potential threat to social stability

Italy’s Political Decline

The protection of the Italian city-states from foreign invasion depended on their ability to cooperate

During the last half of the 15th century the Treaty of Lodi brought Milan and Naples into an alliance with Florence against Venice and the Papal States (1454-1455)

The peace ended when Naples, Florence, and Pope Alexander VI prepared to attack Milan in 1494

The despot of Milan asked France for help

He urged the French to revive their claim to Naples, but he failed to consider that France also had an earlier claim to Milan

The French king Charles VIII responded eagerly to Milan’s call for help

Charles VIII quickly took control over Italy

Ferdinand of Aragon called upon an alliance of Aragon, Venice, the Papal States, and the German Emperor Maximilian I against the French

Charles VIII was forced to retreat when Milan joined with Ferdinand and the Papal States

Pope Alexander VI sought to create a hereditary dutchy for his children in an area near Venice

Venice objected and the pope broke from his alliance with the Venetians and he allied himself with the French

This development allowed the French to reconquer Milan and for the pope to establish his desired dutchy

In 1500 Louis XII and Ferdinand divided up Naples

Pope Julius II became pope in 1503 and he solidified his control over the Papal States and proceeded to drive the French out of Italy

He formed the Holy League with Ferdinand, Venice, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Swiss to oppose the French

The French retreated from Italy again

Louis XII’s successor Francis I led another assault on Italy

The Holy League weakened after a French massacre of Swiss forces in 1515

After this debacle the Habsburg emperor took up the cause against the French and after four Habsburg-Valois wars the French were finally defeated by the Spanish led Habsburgs

Although France was eventually defeated in Italy by the Habsburgs, Francis I was successful in his dealings with the pope and the church

The Concordat of Bologna gave the French king control over the French clergy in exchange for the French recognition of the pope’s supremacy over church councils and his right to collect certain fees from clergy in France

This agreement virtually nationalized the French Catholic church, thereby undercutting any appeal the Reformation might have had for France’s kings

The armies of France, Spain, and Germany made shambles of Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries

Niccolo Machiavelli a Florentine scholar sought to make sense of this tragedy

The lesson he learned from these wars was that political ends, the maintenance of peace and order, are justified by any means

Machiavelli had been impressed by the ability of the Romans to act decisively and heroically for the good of their country, and he lamented the absence of those traits in contemporary Italy

Machiavelli was devoted to republican ideals, but he was convinced that only a strongman could rescue Italy from the calamity of the ongoing wars

Machiavelli saw that the situation required a cunning dictator willing to use manipulative techniques in order to influence his people

This was the inspiration of Machiavelli’s work *The Prince*

In the book he advised rulers to consider fraud and brutality in order to achieve the higher ends of unifying Italy

Machiavelli hoped that the Medici family would be the salvation of Italy and he dedicated his book to Lorenzo Machiavelli, the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent

The Medicis failed to rise to the challenge

When Machiavelli died in 1527, Pope Clement II, the second member of the Medici family to become pope, watched helplessly as Rome was sacked by the army of the Habsburg Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain, Charles V