

The Origins of the Italian Renaissance

The Apex of Medieval Civilization: 1100-1300

Medieval civilization reached its high point during the 12th and 13th centuries. This was a period of population growth. There had been no major epidemics or widespread wars since about the year 1000 and so the population had gradually expanded. Europe also enjoyed an economic expansion during these centuries. Agricultural output matched the rising population and there were no significant crop failures that might have caused famines. While almost everybody lived in the countryside, town life revived after 1000. The establishment of the guild system and the introduction of a money economy led to a significant increase in manufacturing and trade. Local and long-distance trade also benefited from the relatively stable political climate. The Crusades to the Holy Land tended to rid Europe of many troublemakers who frequently looted their way through the Byzantine Empire and Muslim kingdoms of the Middle East. The 12th and 13th centuries were also socially stable. Kings and nobles had a feudal relationship. Nobles enjoyed the rights to their lands, exemption from taxes, and ownership of their serfs, in return for their support for the king. Serfs comprised the vast majority of the population, and while their lives were hard, their harvests were generally reliable, their taxes were stable (in fact, taxes hadn't risen much at all over the course of the two centuries), and the Church guaranteed them eternal salvation if they followed its teachings. Finally, the High Middle Ages is often referred to as an "Age of Faith." The Roman Catholic Church was at the height of its power. The Pope who sat on the throne of St. Peter in Rome, was respected and feared by all in Christendom – kings and peasants alike. Beneath the pope, in hierarchical order, cardinals, bishops, and a multitude of priests, monks, and nuns, ensured that the population obeyed and paid. Everyone was subject to the 10% tithe for instance as well as countless fees for baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc. The Church provided great comfort to Europe's population. It explained the origins and purpose of life; it provided the path to Heaven; it taught how to avoid eternal damnation; and on a practical level, it provided alms to the poor, and educational opportunities to the bright. The soaring gothic cathedrals that dominated the skylines of most major towns were an ample testament to the religiosity of the age.

The Crisis of the 14th Century: The Collapse of Medieval Civilization

In stark contrast to the 12th and 13th centuries, the 14th century was a period of unparalleled disaster in almost every aspect of European life, and had the effect of causing medieval civilization to crumble thus setting the stage for the Renaissance. The root cause of all this disaster was famine and disease. Exceptionally bad weather during the first two decades of the century caused widespread crop failures and famines. Any

chance the population had for recovery was dashed by the arrival of bubonic plague in 1348. The plague, unknown in Europe since the 5th century, first arrived in Sicily in the bellies of fleas that lived on rats that had boarded an Italian merchant ship in the Black Sea. Once ashore, the fleas jumped from rats to people and spread the plague among a population that had no biological resistance. The plague spread rapidly throughout the Italian peninsula and had spread throughout Europe by 1350. It is estimated that between one third and half of Europe's population perished by 1400. Never before or since in European history has there been a demographic disaster of such magnitude.



This medieval illustration depicts a woman and a man covered in the swollen blisters characteristic of bubonic plague. In the background, a physician appears to be attempting some kind of cure.

The demographic collapse caused a severe economic depression which lasted for the remainder of the century. The loss of population led to a collapse in demand for goods, and as a result manufacturing and trade came to a standstill. So many serfs died that food production declined at an even greater rate than the population. Kings found that their traditional tax base (serfs and townspeople) had been decimated. Nobles, who similarly benefited economically from taxing their serfs, were also negatively affected.

Economic dislocation led to social upheaval. First, as kings and nobles tried to increase taxes on the surviving serfs, they triggered widespread serf rebellions. A massive rebellion, called the *Jacquerie*, broke out in northern France in 1358. Perhaps the most serious occurred in southern England in 1381. There, a large serf army brought great destruction to the countryside, burning noble homes and marching on London. They

made radical demands including the abolition of serfdom, church tithes, and state taxes. The serfs were finally defeated in battle by the king and nobles and none of their demands were met. Revolts also took place in towns and cities. The most famous took place in Florence in 1378. In an effort to reduce manufacturing costs, the Florence city council imposed a wage freeze. This was severely resented by the poor wool workers known as the *ciompi*. They, like all urban workers, were organized into a guild, and they led all the lower guilds of the city in a revolt against the government. The *Ciompi* were successful and they seized control of Florence for four years. In 1381, however, the upper classes returned to power when a lockout by the owners of the wool industry (which employed one-third of all Florentines) brought down the lower-guild regime.

At the same time, the nobility of Europe was also involved in political turmoil brought on by economic depression. With income from their great agricultural estates falling, nobles had to seek out other sources of income to maintain their lifestyle and family honor. A lucrative source of such income was government office, but unfortunately there were far more nobles than offices. As a result, noble factions began fighting each other in bloody civil wars to gain access to offices and incomes. These noble civil wars brought much destruction to the countryside, decimated noble ranks, and actually accelerated the economic decline of the nobility.

The 14th century also witnessed the decline in the power and prestige of the Roman Catholic Church. It began in 1309 when the King of France pressured and bribed the Pope to move from Rome to Avignon in southern France. This was a disastrous move. In Avignon, the Papacy fell deeper and deeper under the influence of the French monarchy. The majority of cardinals became French and, of course, all the popes were also French. Along with becoming a mere tool of the French monarchy, the Papacy was cut off from its Papal States in Italy (territories the Church owned). The nobility of these states declared their independence from Papal control. This eliminated a huge source of Church revenue. As a result, the Papacy came up with new means of raising money – increasing fees for baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc., selling church offices and indulgences (note: indulgences had originally been granted to crusaders going to the Holy Land but now the Avignon Papacy was openly selling them). This caused great resentment among the people who came to see the Papacy as greedy and materialistic. A wave of anti-clericalism arose across Europe. Rulers resented the increased flow of tax money out of their kingdoms to the Papacy, as well as French influence over the Pope.

In 1377, Pope Gregory XI finally decided that the Papal court should move back to Rome or risk total loss of public confidence. He successfully moved the Church back but died shortly thereafter. His death triggered another serious crisis for the Church – the Great Schism. The cardinals, the majority of whom were French, were pressured by the Italian

nobility to elect an Italian cardinal and they did by electing Urban VI. However, Urban turned out to have ideas for reforming the Church that the French cardinals disagreed with. For instance, Urban planned to reduce the influence and wealth of the Church in France. Reacting to this, the French cardinals convened a meeting and declared Urban VI deposed, saying that they had only voted for him under pressure from the Italians. They then proceeded to elect a new Pope, a Frenchman of course, Clement VII. Clement, along with the French cardinals, then moved back to Avignon. Urban and the Italian cardinals refused to recognize his deposition and the authority of Clement. And so, for the next thirty years, there were two Popes! Each claimed authority and each excommunicated the other. Imagine what this did to the prestige of the Papacy. The whole of Europe had divided loyalties. France, Castile, Navarre, and Scotland supported the Avignon Papacy, while the Italian States, Portugal, the Holy Roman Empire, and England supported the Roman Papacy. Kings took advantage of the situation, forcing the Popes to grant them more authority over the Church in their states in return for support against the rival Pope.

Finally, in 1409, a group of prominent cardinals realized that the fiasco was causing irreparable damage to the power and prestige of the Church. They convened a council in the Italian city of Pisa. There they elected a new Pope and ordered the other two quarreling Popes to step down. However, the Rome and Avignon Popes refused to recognize this deposition and so there were now three Popes! Things seemed to have gone from bad to worse. Not giving up, the cardinals convened a second council in the Swiss city of Constance in 1415. Again, a new Pope was elected – Martin V – and the other three were declared deposed. This time the result was different. Under intense pressure, the three pretenders were forced to step down and Martin V reigned as the one true Pope. The Great Schism was finally over but the Church would never again regain the influence it had during the High Middle Ages.

The many crises of the 14th century shook people's confidence in traditional thought and society. Many people felt that society was old, exhausted, and dying. Plague and famine caused pessimism about daily life. "Dance of death" paintings showing dancing skeletons became increasingly common. There was a general loss of confidence in the church's spiritual leadership, which bred anxiety and uncertainty. The economic depression brought financial hardship for people in all social classes. The world itself seemed to be in its last days, and apocalyptic visions proliferated.

The reaction to the 14th century in northern Italy

In the city-states of northern Italy, intellectuals had a different reaction to the calamitous 14th century. Instead of giving way in the face of such pessimism, they determined to make a new start. They decided to build a new culture to replace the dying old one, to create a new society through a search for revival, renewal, or rebirth that would come to be called the Renaissance. Reflecting on the disasters of the 14th century, these intellectuals came to see the entire Middle Ages as a time of disaster, decay, and corruption. By contrast, they saw the era of ancient Greece and Rome as a golden age of civilization and culture; a time of joy, prosperity, and learning. Of course, it was inaccurate to portray the entire 1,000 years between the fall of the Roman Empire and their own day as a millennium of darkness and ignorance. As we have already established, there had been noteworthy achievements between the years 1000 and 1300. But these northern Italian intellectuals simply lumped them all together and called them the “Dark Ages.”

To improve and renew their own society, these intellectuals sought to return to the golden age of ancient Greece and Rome; to remake their own world in that image. This vision of their own society as a discontinuation of the corrupt Middle Ages, this determination to make a clean break with the Middle Ages and bring about a rebirth of Classical antiquity, was the heart of the Renaissance vision.

The plan these northern Italian intellectuals had for achieving this Renaissance was largely an educational program. First, they stressed the recovery and re-reading of all the great Greek and Roman writings. Some of this had been done earlier by scholastics - medieval intellectuals - but in these cases the teachings of the ancients had been manipulated to fit and serve Catholic theology. Medieval scholasticism was far more interested in strengthening faith than in learning about ancient Greece and Rome. In contrast, Renaissance intellectuals believed that the classics contained wisdom to help 14th century people solve their political, social, and moral problems, and that they should be read in the original language and on their own terms. They were strongly opposed to the Catholic Church filtering them through a theological prism. Second, Renaissance intellectuals hoped to revive the ancient Roman educational system based on the liberal arts. While medieval scholasticism narrowly focused first and foremost on theology and then on law, and medicine, a Renaissance liberal arts education stressed the study of Greek, Latin, history, rhetoric (public speaking), literature, philosophy, and politics. Together, this liberal arts education and devotion to the classics became known as Humanism. So, Renaissance intellectuals were called Humanists, and they took every opportunity to distance themselves from scholastics.



Two of the Italian states are of major significance. The **Republic of Florence** was a republic led by elected representatives of the major guilds, and dominated by the leading *popolo grosso* families, the most powerful of which was the Medici family which had made a fortune in the wool trade and, especially, in banking. Florence was the center of banking and textiles in Italy. **The Papal State** was ruled by the Pope who was elected by the cardinals of the Catholic Church. Most cardinals came from wealthy Italian *popolo grosso* families, and so the Pope was almost always from one of these families. As such, having a relative sitting on the throne of St. Peter was a tremendous boost for any *popolo grosso* family and so a great deal of political intrigue surrounded papal elections. Besides being the spiritual leader of Christendom, the Pope ruled over a sizeable portion of central Italy. As secular rulers, Popes were no strangers to military campaigns and diplomatic intrigue.

Why did this Renaissance begin in northern Italy?

Northern Italy differed from the rest of Europe in at least four important respects:

First, northern Italy had a higher concentration of cities than any other part of Europe. Florence, Milan, Rome, Venice, Genoa, Turin, Pisa, Siena, Padua, Bologna, Ravenna, Urbino, Modena, Verona, Mantua, Ferrara, Lucca, and Perugia were all located in relatively close proximity to one another. About 30% of northern Italians lived in cities compared with a 15% rate for the rest of Western Europe. As an urban society, 14th century northern Italy resembled ancient Greece and Rome more than it resembled the rest of medieval Europe. The ancient period had been a time of urban civilization. Athens at its height was a city of more than 300,000 people; Rome, more than 1 million. Medieval Europe, by contrast, was a largely rural, agricultural society in which towns were small and played only a peripheral role. The ancients also shared the same elements of civic pride and identity that Renaissance Italians called *campanilismo*, or love for the bell-tower (*campanile*) of one's birthplace. So when political and social problems arose in the Italian cities, it was natural for people to look for solutions in the ancient classics, literary products of a society much like their own, with concerns and problems much like their own. Medieval literature, which was largely religious, was less relevant to urban problems.

Second, in each of these Italian cities, about one third of the population was in the upper and middle classes. Known as the "*popolo grosso*" (the "fat people") they had disposable income and were generally well educated. The wealthiest *popolo grosso* families included nobles, cardinals, bishops, bankers, and large merchants. They owned large estates in the surrounding countryside and collected rents from their peasant tenants, but they lived primarily in the city. Unlike nobles elsewhere on the continent, northern Italian noble families considered it no affront to their status to intermarry with wealthy merchant-banker families. Therefore, by the standards of the period, there was more social mobility in northern Italy than in other parts of Europe. In a competitive environment, the wealthiest *popolo grosso* used patronage to maintain their political influence and social status. They commissioned beautiful paintings and sculptures to be placed in public squares and in local churches and monasteries. They paid for the building of libraries and for the renovation of sacred buildings. And, they became avid art and book collectors. The less well-off *popolo grosso* families were smaller merchants and professionals such as physicians and lawyers. They tended to be clients of the more powerful families.

The bottom two-thirds of the urban population were known as the "*popolo minuto*" (the "little people"). They were artisans (carpenters, masons, butchers, bakers, tailors, etc.), servants, and paupers.

Third, northern Italy was one of the wealthiest regions in Europe. The geography of Italy – the peninsula sticks far down into the Mediterranean – positions it well for trade. Before the voyage of Christopher Columbus gradually shifted trade routes to the Atlantic seaboard, the Mediterranean trade was the most lucrative in Europe. Venice and Genoa dominated Mediterranean shipping routes. Florence and Milan were important centers of manufacture and distribution. In short, the *popolo grosso* of northern Italy had a lot of disposable income to spend on books, paintings, sculptures, and buildings.

Fourth, the Roman ruins that still dominated the urban landscape bore ample testimony to classical civilization. True, the Romans had left their mark around much of Europe, but the empire had been centered in Rome and, not surprisingly, Italy had a greater concentration of ruins than elsewhere. Italian intellectuals, artists, sculptors, and architects didn't have far to look for inspiration.

The Ottoman Factor

Another factor that boosted the study of ancient Greece and Rome was the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire in the 14th and 15th centuries. Fearful of allowing their precious libraries to fall into the hands of Muslim Turks, numerous Greek-speaking Byzantine scholars transported ancient manuscripts to Italy, especially to Florence. Due to the arrival of so much Greek learning, along with the scholars to teach the ancient Greek language, Italian humanists rediscovered the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. Under the patronage of the wealthy banker, Cosimo de Medici, the Florentine Academy was founded as an organization for intellectuals dedicated to Platonic studies. The appeal of Plato's philosophy for Florentine humanists was its uplifting view of human nature.

Florence: Birthplace of the Renaissance

Of all the city-states of northern Italy, it was Florence that took the lead in the revival of classical civilization. Florentine intellectuals searched monastic libraries and rediscovered important classical works. Francesco Petrarch, who uncovered the writings of the Roman authors Cicero and Livy, is credited with first proposing that a humanist education replace the medieval scholastic education. Therefore, he is known as the "Father of the Renaissance." Due to these Florentine intellectuals, the search for ancient manuscripts became a craze throughout northern Italy. Other Florentines also led the way in the recovery of classical architecture and sculpture. The architect, Filippo Brunelleschi, was inspired by the dome of the Pantheon in Rome to create a dome for the cathedral in Florence, managing to vault a wider space than had ever been spanned

before. Likewise, sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti was inspired by surviving Roman sculptures when designing bronze reliefs for the Baptistery Doors in Florence; and Donatello's *David*, was the first free-standing nude statue since Roman times. Similarly, it was Florentine artists who, by inventing a technique called depth perspective, first showed how to make a two-dimensional surface convey the illusion of three dimensions. And, of course, these men inspired other Florentines, such as Michelangelo, Botticelli, and Machiavelli, to look to the classics for inspiration.

Is it any wonder that of all the cities in northern Italy, Florence is unarguably the Birthplace of the Renaissance!



The massive dome of the cathedral dominates Florence's skyline.

The Moveable Type Printing Press

While the Renaissance began in northern Italy, its influence spread because of a major technological breakthrough that occurred in Mainz, a town in the Holy Roman Empire. The man credited with the invention of the moveable type printing press is the printer and publisher, Johann Gutenberg. In 1454, a 1,272-page copy of the Latin Bible was the first ever book to roll off Gutenberg's new printing press. The information revolution was born! [As of 2016, there are 21 complete original 1454 Bibles in existence. Depending on condition, each is valued at between \$25 and \$30 million].

Gutenberg's moveable type printing press was made possible by the earlier invention of paper which, by the 15th century, had largely replaced vellum (leather). It used to take 170 calfskins to produce one copy of the Bible, so the use of paper reduced the cost of books. However, prior to Gutenberg, scribes still had to copy texts by hand thus keeping books financially out of reach for many people. In addition, copying errors were common.

In the 1460s, printing presses spread to other German towns. By the 1470s, they were widespread in the Italian states, France, England, the Netherlands, and Spain.

Books provided scholars with identical ancient and medieval texts to study and critique. New professions developed: the librarian, the bookseller, the publisher, to say nothing of the various trades involved with the printing and publishing process, from typesetters to editors. Moreover, with the greater dissemination of knowledge came an increase in the number of universities in Europe, rising from twenty in 1300 to over seventy in 1500.

Impact of Humanism and the Printing Press on the Universities

The traditional philosophical and theological framework of the university system was known as scholasticism. In other words, scholasticism was the educational philosophy that determined what was taught, how it was taught, why it was taught, and what constituted an educated man. Underlying scholasticism was the requirement that all knowledge should be in agreement with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Since it was believed that God revealed Himself through the teachings of the Church, any "knowledge" that appeared to contradict the Church also contradicted God, and therefore was false knowledge. Either knowledge had to be made to fit with the teachings of the Church or it had to be discarded as the product of human error. For instance, when the writings of the famous ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle were reintroduced to Europe in the twelfth century (by way of the Islamic scholars who translated Aristotle from Greek into Arabic and later into Latin) Christian theologians faced a major crisis. There

was no denying that Aristotle was a genius but he also had been a pagan, living some 300 years before Jesus Christ. It was the famous medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas who set about reconciling the reason of Aristotle with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Aquinas made Aristotle fit. He proved that faith and reason both came from God and therefore could not contradict one another. When they appeared to contradict, then faith had primacy. Therefore, theology was the most important of all subjects and was referred to as the “Queen of the Sciences.”

Under the framework of scholasticism, university professors and students read few original texts. Instead, they relied on translations and on the commentaries of respected scholars. For instance, the Bible had been translated into Latin from its original Greek by Saint Jerome in the fourth century. Since then, knowledge of Greek had disappeared in Western Europe. All medieval theologians had based their work on the Latin translation of the Bible. While these theologians knew that the original Bible had been in Greek, it never crossed their minds that the Latin version may have included inaccuracies in the translation process. Students were introduced to the writings of Aristotle through the filters created by Thomas Aquinas.

Scholasticism had the effect of making professors and students complacent. To be an educated man meant mastering the approved texts in the approved manner. There was little creativity or effort to discover texts that had been long forgotten. There was no effort to study Greek, Hebrew or Arabic because it was believed all the classic texts had already been translated into Latin.

Sixteenth-century English humanist, Thomas More, mockingly said that *“scholasticism is about as useful as trying to milk a male goat into a colander.”*

Since many humanists were free-lance intellectuals not employed by a university, the increasing use of the printing press to spread their new ideas challenged the traditional authority of university, and of the Church. It is important to remember that humanists were not aiming to destroy the universities or the Church. Rather, they believed that these institutions could be strengthened by ditching scholasticism and embracing humanism.