

# European Society in the Age of the Renaissance



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- I. The Evolution of the Italian Renaissance
    - A. Economic Growth as the Basis of the Renaissance
      - 1. Venice, Genoa, and Milan grew rich on commerce between 1050 and 1300.
      - 2. Florence, where the Renaissance originated, was an important banking center by the fourteenth century.
    - B. Communes and Republics
      - 1. In northern Italy the larger cities won independence from local nobles and became self-governing communes of free men in the twelfth century.
      - 2. Local nobles moved into the cities and married into wealthy merchant families.
      - 3. This new class set up property requirements for citizenship.
      - 4. The excluded, the popolo, rebelled and in some cities set up republics.
      - 5. By 1300 the republics had collapsed, and despots or oligarchies governed most Italian cities.
    - C. The Balance of Power among the Italian City-States
      - 1. City patriotism and constant competition for power among cities prevented political centralization on the Italian peninsula.
      - 2. As cities strove to maintain the balance of power among themselves, they invented the apparatus of modern diplomacy.
      - 3. In 1494 the city of Milan invited intervention by the French King Charles VIII.
      - 4. Italy became a battleground as France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Emperor vied for dominance.
      - 5. In 1527 the forces of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sacked Rome.
  - II. Intellectual Hallmarks of the Renaissance
    - A. Individualism

1. Renaissance writers stressed individual personality, greatness, and achievement, in contrast to the medieval ideal of Christian humility.
  - B. Humanism
    1. The revival of antiquity took the form of interest in archaeology, recovery of ancient manuscripts, and study of the Latin classics.
    2. The study of the classics became known as the “new learning,” or humanism.
    3. Humanist scholars studied antiquity not so much to find God as to know human nature and understand a different historical context.
    4. Humanists derided what they viewed as the debased Latin of the medieval churchmen.
  - C. Secular Spirit
    1. The secular way of thinking focuses on the world as experienced rather than on the spiritual and/or eternal.
    2. Renaissance thinkers came to see life as an opportunity rather than a painful pilgrimage toward God.
    3. Lorenzo Valla argued that sense pleasures were the highest good.
    4. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote about an acquisitive, sensual, worldly society.
    5. Renaissance popes expended much money on new buildings, a new cathedral (St. Peter’s), and on patronizing artists and men of letters.
- III. Art and the Artist
- A. Art and Power
    1. In the early Renaissance, corporate groups such as guilds sponsored religious art.
    2. By the late fifteenth century individual princes, merchants, and bankers sponsored art to glorify themselves and their families. Their urban palaces were full of expensive furnishings as well as art.
    3. Classical themes, individual portraits, and realistic style characterized Renaissance art.
    4. Renaissance artists invented perspective and portrayed the human body in a more natural and scientific manner than previous artists did.
  - B. The Status of the Artist
    1. Medieval masons were viewed as mechanical workers/artisans. Renaissance artists were seen as intellectual workers.
    2. The princes and merchants who patronized artists paid them well.
    3. Artists themselves gloried in their achievements. During the Renaissance, the concept of artist as genius was born.
    4. Renaissance culture was only the culture of a very wealthy mercantile elite; it did not affect the lives of the urban middle classes or the poor.
- IV. Social Change
- A. Education and Political Thought
    1. Humanist writers were preoccupied with education for morality and virtue.
    2. Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Courtier* (1528) presented an image of the ideal man as master of dance, music, the arts, warfare, mathematics, and so on.

3. Daughters of the elite received an education similar to sons and a few went on to become renowned painters or scholars.
4. In *The Prince* (1513), Niccolo Machiavelli argued that politics could not follow simple rules of virtue and morality—that it ought in fact to be studied as a science.

B. The Printed Word

1. Around 1455 in the German city of Mainz, Johan Gutenberg and two other men invented the movable type printing press.
2. Methods of paper production had reached Europe in the twelfth century from China through the Near East.
3. Printing made government and Church propaganda much more practical, created an invisible “public” of readers, and stimulated literacy among laypeople.

C. Clocks

1. City people involved in commerce had a need to measure time.
2. By the early fourteenth century mechanical clocks were widespread in Europe.
3. Mechanical clocks and precise measurement of time contributed to the development of a conception of the universe in measurable, quantitative terms.

D. Women and Work

1. Early modern culture identified women with marriage and the domestic virtues.
2. Women were involved with all economic activity connected with the care and nurturing of the family, as well as working outside the home.
3. Women during the Renaissance worked in a variety of businesses—for example, sailmaking—and even in a few isolated cases managed large enterprises.
4. Wealthy women were usually excluded from the public arena and instead managed their households.

E. Culture and Sexuality

1. Women’s status in the realm of love, romance, and sex declined during the Renaissance.
2. Writers such as Castiglione created the “double standard”<sup>3</sup>—women were to be faithful in marriage, while men need not be.
3. Penalties for rape in Renaissance Italy were very light.
4. In spite of statutes against “sodomy,” generally referring to male homosexuality, Florentine records from the fifteenth century show a lot of homosexual activity going on, usually relations between an adult male and a boy.

F. Slavery and Ethnicity

1. In medieval and Renaissance Europe many Slavic, Tartar, Circassian, Greek, and Hungarian slaves were imported.
2. Beginning in the fifteenth century the Portuguese brought many black African slaves into Europe.

3. Within Africa the economic motives of rulers and merchants trumped any cultural/ethnic/racial hostility toward Europeans. They sold fellow Africans into slavery apparently without qualms.
4. Africans did not identify themselves as “black,” but as members of more than 600 different tribal and ethnic groups.
5. Black slaves were an object of curiosity at European courts.
6. The Renaissance concept of people from sub-Saharan Africa was shaped by Christian symbology of light and darkness<sup>3/4</sup>blacks represented the Devil. Race did not emerge as a concept until the late seventeenth century.

## V. The Renaissance in the North

### A. Northern Humanists

1. In the late fifteenth century students from northern Europe studied in Italy and brought the Renaissance home.
2. Thomas More (1478–1535) of England argued that reform of social institutions could reduce or eliminate corruption and war.
3. The Dutchman Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) was an expert in the Bible and Greek language who believed that all Christians should read the Bible.
4. François Rabelais (1490–1553) ridiculed established institutions such as the clergy with gross humor in *Gargantua*.
5. Flemish artists came to rival the Italian Renaissance painters.

## VI. Politics and the State in the Renaissance (ca 1450–1521)

### A. Centralization of Power

1. Some scholars have viewed Renaissance kingship as a new form, citing the dependence of the monarch on urban wealth and the ideology of the “strong king.”
2. In France Charles VII (r. 1422–1461) created the first permanent royal army, set up new taxes on salt and land, and allowed increased influence in his bureaucracy from middle-class men. He also asserted his right to appoint bishops in the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges.
3. Charles’s son Louis XI (r. 1461–1483) fostered industry from artisans, taxed it, and used the funds to build up his army. He brought much new territory under direct Crown rule.
4. In England Edward IV ended the War of the Roses between rival baronial houses.
5. Henry VII ruled largely without Parliament, using as his advisers men with lower-level gentry origins.
6. Henry’s Court of the Star Chamber tried cases involving aristocrats and did so with methods contradicting common law, such as torture.
7. Although Spain remained a confederation of kingdoms until 1700, the wedding of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon did lead to some centralization. Ferdinand and Isabella stopped violence among the nobles, recruited “middle-class” advisers onto their royal council, and secured the right to appoint bishops in Spain and in the Spanish empire in America.
8. Popular anti-Semitism increased in fourteenth-century Spain. In 1478 Ferdinand and Isabella invited the Inquisition into Spain to search out and

punish Jewish converts to Christianity who secretly continued Jewish religious practices.

9. To persecute converts, Inquisitors and others formulated a racial theory that conversos were suspect not because of their beliefs, but because of who they were racially.
10. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain.