Good News for the City of Florence, The Late Middle Ages

Gian Galeazzo Visconti

The messenger choked on the clouds of dust blown in his face. The red and gold colors of Florence that he wore were covered with a coat of dirt and grime. Yet the good news that he bore to his home city made him smile despite the grit in his teeth. The Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, was dead. For 17 years, the Duke had used the great wealth of his territories to maintain diplomats, spy networks, and armies in order to conquer the independent Italian city-states. First, all of Lombardy yielded to him, then Genoa, Pisa, Perugia, Siena, and finally, Bologna. Now, only one important independent republic remained: Florence. Unfortunately for Visconti, as he advanced on Florence at the very height of his power, with most of Italy lying at his feet, he suddenly became ill and died. Florence was saved, it seemed, by a miracle. The Duke’s vision of a united Italy under his control was shattered. With such joyful news, the dust-covered messenger clattered onto the bridge over the Arno River and into the red-roofed city.

Italian City-States

Italy at the beginning of the fifteenth century was made up of many tiny, independent city-states. City-states were similar to small countries. Some, like Milan, were ruled by ruthless men who seized power by treachery and bloodshed. Others, like Florence, were republics proud of their freedoms. Italy’s social and political structure was different from the rest of Europe at the time. Elsewhere, kings were gaining strength and expanding their control over larger territories. Louis XII, known as the Spider King because of the webs he wove to trap his enemies, created a powerful French kingdom. The Italians, however, had no king to unite them and resisted men like Visconti who tried. Why was Italy different?

The Feudal System in the Rest of Europe

In the Middle Ages (the sixth to fifteenth centuries), most Europeans were part of the feudal system. The feudal system was a society based on the common person’s need for protection. Wealthy and powerful men known as feudal lords provided that security. The feudal structure took shape after the Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century. Earlier, Europeans had enjoyed peace and prosperity thanks to Roman military might and administration. However, as the empire weakened and fell, war became a constant problem. In this time of danger, the feudal system evolved to give people protection. Europeans exchanged their land, livestock, and freedoms in return for the right to flee into the local feudal lord’s castle when marauders attacked. They were also obliged to serve their noble lord as soldiers.
The Italians responded to the collapse of Roman government differently from other Europeans. Rather than exchange their freedoms and properties for feudal protection, they formed themselves into tiny, self-ruling, independent city-states. Because Italy was more urbanized than the rest of Europe, these states centered on the important city in the region rather than a lord's castle. This meant that feudalism did not take root in Italy.

**Italian Trade With the East and Europe**

The Italians were also more active in trade than the rest of Europe. City-states like Venice, Pisa, and Genoa sent fleets of merchant ships to the more sophisticated Islamic and Byzantine civilizations of the Middle East. There they traded for spices, medicines, and luxurious cloth. At the same time, new ideas in art, technology, science, and philosophy flowed back to Italy through the trade routes.

In addition to having a different social and political structure than the rest of Europe, the Italians were also well-positioned to economically exploit the kingdoms to the north, like France and England. By the late Middle Ages, these kingdoms were gaining power. Warfare had become more costly as powerful monarchs needed bigger armies. The arrival of gunpowder in Europe from China also meant that professional soldiers called *mercenaries* were needed to fire complex new weapons like the cannon and the *arquebus*, an early gun that was portable but heavy. Kings needed money, and the only place to find it was in Italy. Due to their trade with the Middle East, the Italians had money to lend to their northern neighbors at high **interest**.

Italian city-states were successful in trade because of their close proximity to the Middle East, but also because they lived in the most well-developed urban environments in Europe. The Roman Empire was an urban empire and believed that civilization needed cities to prosper. Long after Roman government was gone from Italy, the well-planned and fortified cities remained where goods could be safely bought and sold. Along with the city walls and streets, the Romans also left important ideals. Before Rome had become an empire, it had been a republic where parts of the population had a voice in government. Democratic ideals survived the fall of the empire and continued to prosper in the Italian city-states. Citizenship, freedom, and duty were still prized by many Italians in the fifteenth century.

The result of all of these factors at the beginning of the fifteenth century meant that cities like Florence were wealthy, sophisticated, and fiercely independent. They were also deeply religious, another legacy of Rome. The death of the Duke of Milan, just as he seemed poised to conquer Florence, was seen as a sign that God approved of the Florentines. It was with tremendous self-confidence, then, that the citizens of Florence embarked on the new century.
Knowledge Check

Matching

1. city-states     a. an early gun that was portable but heavy
2. republic        b. a way of life centered around a city
3. feudal system   c. a fee charged for money that is borrowed
4. marauders       d. independent cities that govern themselves
5. urbanized       e. those who attack or raid
6. mercenaries     f. society based on the common person's need for protection
7. arquebus        g. professional soldiers who fight for whoever pays them
8. interest        h. a government where citizens have the supreme power and they vote for officials to represent them

Multiple Choice

9. What item below was NOT something Italian traders brought back from the Middle East?
   a. spices   b. ideas
   c. luxury cloth   d. chocolate

10. What was the center of most communities in Europe's feudal system?
    a. the river   b. the castle
    c. the city   d. the fields

Constructed Response

11. What advantages did Italy have over the rest of Europe at this time? Use details from the reading selection to support your answer.

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