

## The Early Renaissance

The 1300s were marked by the recurring Black Death plagues, inflation and economic depression, and pesky wars which made life in later medieval Europe a challenge. The Church experienced serious challenges from secular rulers resulting in the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism.

Monarchy survived the century, mainly because most Europeans of the period believed kings to be the best means of governing. Yet many kings and queens functioned badly, were constantly challenged, murdered their own family rivals, and rarely stirred patriotic confidence in the people.

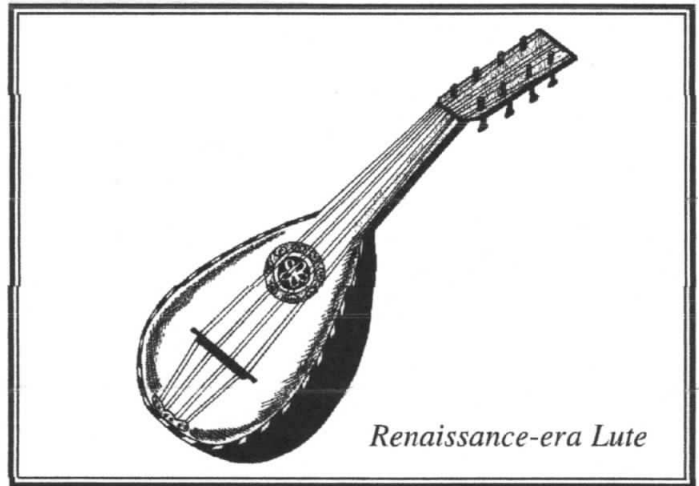
By the end of the 14th century, many people across Europe had grown pessimistic about their future and the future of their political state. There was an air of hopelessness about the new century.

However, by the end of the 1400s, Europe had experienced great change. The recurring economic downturns were leveled out, new domestic industries were created—especially in the areas of textiles and armaments, new trade routes were established, and a New World in the Americas lay ahead, yet to be tapped for its wealth and potential.

As for Christianity, Rome was once again the center of the religious world of Europe. Kings, queens, and princes gained the upper hand over the often divisive nobility. Even learning had changed as Europeans became increasingly curious about the world. The arts were changing as new styles of painting, sculpture, and architecture were introduced.

Above all, however, there was a new sense of optimism about the future. People from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean to the Baltic saw their futures filled with possibilities. There was an excitement about what was going to happen next in Europe, although no one really knew what to expect. Those who thought much about these exciting times wrote about a “new age” dawning across the continent. Some writers used the word *renaissance*, a *rebirth*, to describe their own times. They put behind them the *dark age* of plagues, wars, and inflation.

By 1500, the new optimism of Europe developed into a new way of looking at the past, the present, and the future. The medieval world, with its superstitions, its limited scholarship, its religious values, was a thing of the past. The next world—



*Renaissance-era Lute*

historians refer to it as the beginning of our modern world—was destined to be different from anything which had come before it. It was to be a world dominated by kings and queens ruling over powerful nation-states, robust, international economies, broader intellectual and moral values, and secular ideals.

How all this came about is hard to determine. In some respects, Europe just shook off its immediate past and moved ahead. We can see today more clearly why these changes occurred.

The new economics was generated by Northern Europeans in great trading and merchandising centers in Paris, London, Bruges, Bremen, Lubeck, and the Hague. The new art was created largely by Italians, and later fanned out to nearly all corners of Europe, creating a new European civilization.

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### *Review and Write*

1. From your reading of this sheet, make a list of the changes which came to Europe during the 1400s. Why might such changes cause Europeans to become more hopeful about their world?
2. List some of the problems Europe faced during the 1300s.

## The Italian City-States

For over two centuries, from the early 1300s to the early 1500s, the city-states of Italy directed Europe, creating new forms and styles of painting, sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts. They created a new ideal male image: the gentleman. This image took the place of the chivalrous knight, the male symbol of the Middle Ages.

Even Italian schools were different. While nearly all medieval schools and universities were church schools and cathedral-based universities, the new Italian center of education emphasized a broader education, independent of the Church. The concept of a *liberal education* developed, one free to explore subjects frowned on in Church schools (or simply considered too trivial for serious study.)

Such schools were attended not only by Italian students. Thousands of pupils from dozens of European countries streamed into the city-states to receive a Renaissance education.

How did Italy come to be such a leader and source of change in Europe by the 14th century?

One reason was that Italy had always been out of the mainstream of medieval culture, thought, and politics. It had never been truly medieval. Italy had never had a strong monarchy, did not rely on the vassal-serf model of feudalism, and medieval thought—scholasticism—had never taken deep root there. Thus making the change from the Middle Ages to a new era of progress and rebirth was a natural one for Italy.

The Italian city-states had the power and money to assume cultural leadership in 14th-century Europe. Such cities as Milan, Venice, Florence, and Rome had dominated life in Italy for generations.

Without a powerful, unifying Italian monarch, such cities came to dominate the economy, culture, and politics of vast regions, without many serious rivals—except for one another.

As city-states, political power was not centered in a landed nobility as in most other European countries of the period, but rather in an urban ruling class. Wealthy bankers, merchants, and traders (the *popolo grosso*, or “fat people”) were found at the top of the economic and social ladder. Under them were the *popolo minuto*, the “little people”: small business owners, artisans, craftsmen, and other urbanites.

Below them, typically living outside the cities in rural landscapes, were the peasants. They worked the land, farmed, raised sheep, had no political power, and no way of getting it.

Quarrels for power were common between the *popolo grosso* and the *popolo minuto*.

Such city-states not only ruled themselves but wielded great economic influence. The northern Italian cities were leaders in international trade.

In the northern city of Venice, on the northern shores of the Adriatic Sea, nearly the entire population was involved in some way with Oriental trade. Venetian traders served as the European source for such rare and prized trade goods as spices, silks, teak wood, and exotic fruits. Even if one was not a merchant of Venice, he or she worked as a banker, sailor, dock worker (called a *stevedore*), manufacturer, shipper, and was connected with trade.

The city of Florence, located along the Arno River in northern Italy, was a center for European banking and manufacturing. Great textile mills were located in Florence. Nearly one out of every three Florentines was involved in the woolens industry—from raising sheep to selling cloth to foreign buyers.



A *stevedore*

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### Review and Write

1. From your reading, list the reasons why the Italian city-states took the position of leadership in moving Europe out of the Middle Ages and into a new era.
2. How important was trade to the economy of Renaissance Venice? Give examples.

## Life in Renaissance Florence

The High and Later Middle Ages witnessed great strides in urbanization. Where city life in the Early Middle Ages almost ceased completely, the centuries to follow brought about a remarkable rebirth of town and city dwelling.

By the 1400s, some European urban centers were home to hundreds of thousands of citizens. The city of Paris boasted a population of a quarter million. In northern Italy, the city-state of Milan held 200,000. Its neighbor to the south, Florence, had a citizenry of 100,000. City life in the Renaissance served as a model for the new era.

One leading city was Florence. During the Renaissance, Florence embodied the soul of the period, rising to prominence as a source of great art produced largely under the patronage or financial support of one ruling family: the Medici [MEH dee chee]. Members of this important Italian family greatly influenced the Renaissance in Italy and France from the 1400s to the 1700s.

The Medici supported the arts of Florence with money and influence. Through them, Florence became the creative center of the Renaissance. They also gave support to the new liberal education of the period. Experts estimate that the Medici family spent the modern equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars on the arts and sciences during a single 50-year period.

The wealthy Medici family came to power in Florence in 1434. It controlled the city's politics through an oligarchy—government by a small group of powerful leaders. One influential banker, Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464) led his family in controlling daily Florentine life. Throughout most of the 1400s, Cosimo and his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449–1492), controlled Florence, its economy, its politics, and its art.

In 1444, Cosimo ordered the construction of a magnificent building, the first of such Medici family palaces. Although the Medici were not true royalty, Cosimo considered himself a duke. The title was

eventually accepted by the people of Florence. This palace, the Palazzo Medici, was the first of the Renaissance palaces, and it served as a model for many others.

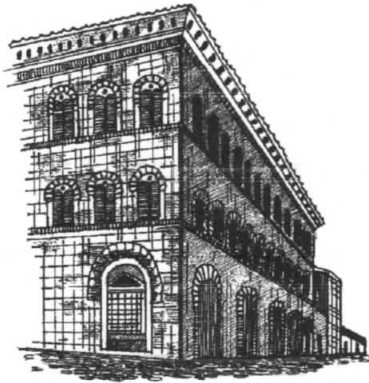
Cosimo ordered the building of the first public library in Europe since the days of the Roman Empire. In time, he and his family spent millions of dollars on rare manuscripts and books for this civic project. Cosimo sent agents to the East to locate manuscripts.

One scholar hunted for and purchased 200 ancient Greek documents. Approximately 80 of them were previously unknown in Europe.

The artists supported by the Medici make up a who's who of Renaissance painters, sculptors, and architects. Donatello, Filippino Lippi, Masaccio, Verrocchio, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, DaVinci, and Michelangelo all produced great works of art under the generous patronage of the Medici.

Such influence created a new world in Florence. Craftsmen produced lavish items of personal use from fine furniture to elaborate pottery. Yet not everyone enjoyed the wealth of the city. Many were poor, barely making a living combing and carding wool for the lucrative textile trade. These common workers, known as *ciompi*, sometimes revolted against their harsh living conditions, as they did several times in the late 1300s.

Florence became a city of such consumption and conspicuous wealth that critics rose up and condemned it. A 15th-century Dominican friar named Girolamo Savonarola convinced many Florentines that wealth was the work of the devil. His preaching brought converts. The result was the burning of many works of Florentine art in what were known as Bonfires of the Vanities.



*Palazzo Medici begun in 1444*

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### *Review and Write*

Describe the influence the Medici family had on Renaissance Florence.