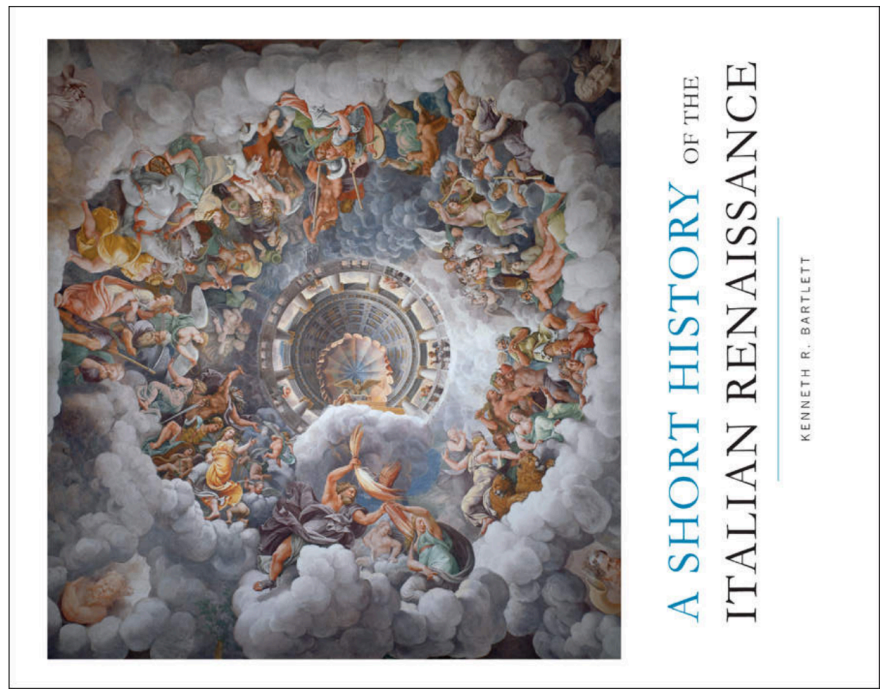


# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE



## A TIMELINE OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

YEAR	EVENT
800	Charlemagne crowned as the first Holy Roman Emperor
1016	Pisa and Genoa together drive the Saracens from Sardinia
1052	Genoa organized as a self-governing commune
1077	Pisa given authority over Corsica
1095	Preaching of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II at Clermont
1137	Pisa shatters its maritime rival, Amalfi
1167	Siena establishes an independent communal government of nobles
1190	Death of Frederick II Barbarossa, under whom division between Guelph and Ghibelline was crystallized
1195	Pisa officially organized as a free, self-governing commune
1204	Europeans in the Fourth Crusade establish the Latin empire at Constantinople
1241	Pisa defeats the Genoese fleet
1260	The Siennese defeat Florence at the Battle of Montaperti

1264	Obizzo d'Este seizes control of Ferrara
1266	Charles of Anjou establishes the French Angevin dynasty in Naples
1282	The Sicilian Vespers: Sicily revolts against the crown of Naples and attaches itself to the royal house of Aragon
1284	Genoa conclusively defeats Pisa at Meloria
1287	Siena institutes a communal government called <i>The Nine</i>
1293	Florentine Ordinances of Justice promulgated
1297	Closing of the Great Council in Venice ( <i>Serrata</i> )
1298	Genoa, under Admiral Doria, defeats the Venetians at sea at Curzola
1309	Pope Clement V takes up residence in Avignon: Beginning of the Babylonian Captivity
1311	The Peace of Constance, a treaty between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Lombard cities
1311	The Visconti establish hereditary control of Milan as <i>signori</i>
1315	Council of Ten established in Venice
1327	Emperor Louis IV captures Pisa
1328	Luigi Gonzaga seizes control of Mantua
1339	Simon Boccanegra elected as first doge of Genoa
1343	Walter of Brienne expelled from Florence; the Monte is established

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1345 Bankruptcy of Bardi and Peruzzi banks

1348 The Black Death appears in Italy, killing huge portions of the population

1355 Beheading of Venetian Doge Marin Falier for treason

1355 Fall of *The Nine* in Siena

1371 Revolt of the Sienese woolworkers

1377 The Papacy returns to Rome from Avignon

1378 The Great Schism begins

1378 Ciompi revolt in Florence

1380–81 War of Chioggia: Venice defeats Genoa and begins a policy of expansion onto the mainland.

1382 Joanna I of Anjou dies without heir, resulting in competing French and papal interests in the throne of Naples

1385 Giangaleazzo Visconti consolidates power in Milan

1402 Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, dies, removing the threat to Florence for control of all north-central Italy

1405 Venice conquers Padua

1406 Florence conquers Pisa

1408 Creation of the Bank of St. George in Genoa

1409 Council of Pisa

1412 Galeazzo Maria Visconti murdered

1414 Council of Constance: Pope Martin V elected to end the Great Schism

1420 Martin V officially returns to Rome

1425 *Monte delle doti* (state dower fund) established in Florence

1434 Cosimo de' Medici returns from exile to take control of Florence

1442 Naples falls to an Aragonese siege under Alfonso, King of Aragon and Sicily

1444 Federigo da Montefeltro becomes Duke of Urbino

1447 Francesco Sforza assumes control in Milan

1453 Fall of Constantinople to the Turks

1454 The Peace of Lodi

1455 Formation of the Italian League by Francesco Sforza and Cosimo de' Medici

1474 Ercole I of Ferrara marries Eleonora of Aragon, daughter of Alfonso the Magnanimous

1475 Fall of Genoese outpost of Caffa to the Turks

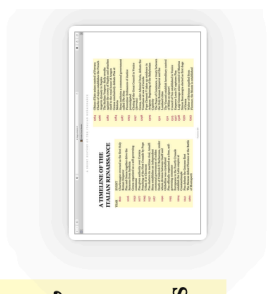
1478 Pazzi Conspiracy: Death of Giuliano de' Medici

1479 Dynastic union of Spain under Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile

1480 Turks capture the Italian city of Otranto, holding it for a year

1488 Guidobaldo da Montefeltro of Urbino marries Elisabetta Gonzaga of Mantua

1490 Francesco II Gonzaga of Mantua marries Isabella d'Este



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1491 Lodovico il Moro of Milan marries Beatrice d'Este

1494 Charles VIII of France invades Italy

1494 The Medici are driven from Florence

1495 Savonarola's constitution proclaimed in Florence

1495 Charles VIII captures Naples

1495 League of Venice created

1496 Restoration of the Aragonese dynasty in Naples under Frederick III

1497-98 Vasco da Gama circumnavigates the Cape of Good Hope

1498 Savonarola is executed

1499 France, under Louis XII, captures Milan

1500 Pandolfo Petrucci consolidates his power as Il Magnifico, tyrant of Siena

1503 Naples under the Spanish Viceroy

1505 The Treaty of Blois establishes Spanish sovereignty in Naples

1509 Florentines starve Pisa into submission

1509 League of Cambrai defeats Venice at Agnadello

1511 Holy League formed by Pope Julius II

1512 The Medici resume power in Florence

1512 France defeats the combined papal/Spanish powers at Ravenna

1515 Francis I of France wins Battle of Marignano

1516 The Treaty of Noyon acknowledges French sovereignty over Milan

1516 Charles V becomes King of Spain

1517 Martin Luther initiates the Protestant revolts

1517 Turks consolidate control of Persia, Syria, and Egypt

1519 Charles V elected Holy Roman Emperor

1521 Pope Leo X excommunicates Martin Luther

1521 Sultan Suleiman of Turkey captures Belgrade and Rhodes

1522 Spaniards sack Genoa

1524 France captures Milan

1525 Battle of Pavia: Frances I of France imprisoned by the emperor's forces

1527 Sack of Rome

1527 Medici expelled from Florence

1527 Habsburgs driven from Genoa by Andrea Doria

1529 Charles V crowned Holy Roman Emperor at Bologna

1529 Treaty of Cambrai: France renounces all claims to Italian territories

1530 End of the Florentine Republic

1537 Cosimo I de' Medici (later, Grand Duke of Tuscany) assumes control in Florence

1545 Council of Trent called by Paul III

1552 Spaniards expelled from Siena

1555 Siena capitulates to Florence





**1559** Treaty of Cateau-Cambresis, establishing the shape of the European state system under the victorious Habsburgs

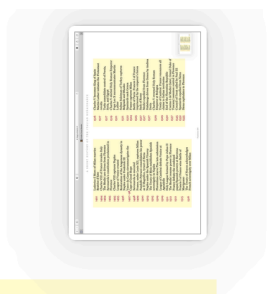
**1569** Cosimo I elevated as Grand Duke of Tuscany

**1570** Ottoman conquest of Cyprus

**1571** Christians defeat the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto, halting Turkish expansion in the West

# POPE FOLLOING THE GREAT SCHISM

PAPAL NAME	BAPTISMAL NAME
Martin V (1417-31)	Oddone Colonna
Eugene IV (1431-47)	Gabriello Condulmaro
Nicholas V (1447-55)	Tommaso Parentucelli
Calixtus III (1455-58)	Alfonso Borgia
Pius II (1458-64)	Enea Silvio Piccolomini
Paul II (1464-71)	Pietro Barbo
Sixtus IV (1471-84)	Francesco della Rovere
Innocent VIII (1484-92)	Giovanni Battista Cibò



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Alexander VI (1492–1503)      Rodrigo Borgia

Pius III (1503)      Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini

Julius II (1503–13)      Giuliano della Rovere

Leo X (1513–21)      Giovanni de' Medici

Adrian VI (1522–23)      Adrian Dedel

Clement VII (1523–34)      Giulio de' Medici

Paul III (1534–49)      Alessandro Farnese

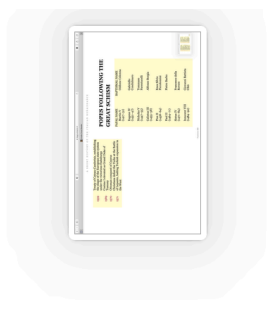
Julius III (1550–55)      Giammaria Ciocchi del Monte

Marcellus II (1555)      Marcello Cervini

Paul IV (1555–59)      Giovanni Pietro Carafa

Pius IV (1559–65)      Giovanni Angelo Medici

St Pius V (1566–72)      Michele Ghislieri



# ONE DEFINING THE RENAISSANCE

BEFORE WE CAN DISCUSS the Renaissance as an historical phenomenon, we must determine exactly what we mean by the term. We all have certain visions of what defines the Renaissance, but, upon examination, those visions will probably be seen to arise from great figures of the arts: Giotto, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Brunelleschi, or Palladio. What, however, do these different figures from different times have in common, besides a conveniently intimate juxtaposition in the same chapter of some general art-history textbook, or a wickedly sensual coffee-table book on the Renaissance? In short, why is something—or someone—*Renaissance* in character; or, more generally, what is the nature of the thing itself—what do we mean by *Renaissance*?

The Renaissance is usually defined as a particular

“period.” The old theory of periodization was based on an irrational faith in self-contained subdivisions that allowed for the fragmentation of human experience into scaled units. Although no longer fashionable in academic circles, this old concept of historical periods has some validity and some practical usefulness. The Rome of Augustus was obviously a world apart from the Rome of the year AD 700, when cattle grazed among the ruins of the Roman forum and the city had shrunk to a village perched on a malarial swamp. Similarly, the scientific, “progressive” nineteenth century differed from the classical rationalism and order of the eighteenth. Furthermore, periods such as the “Age of Louis XIV” can be accurately and easily determined by two dates (the year of Louis’s accession in 1643 to the year of his death in 1715) and, to a lesser degree, by geography: Louis XIV was King of France and, although the effects on other countries should be noted, too, any study of his epoch must be focused on France itself. Historical periods, then, do exist in a very real way.

Furthermore, this periodization is useful: it allows for a careful study in complex ways of a unit of time with particular characteristics, helping to define the essential spirit of that time through identification of its





most important and visible elements. For example, referring to the "Age of Faith" or the "Age of Revolution" has validity since it contributes to an understanding of the period by investigating it in the context of a single, obvious, overwhelming principle as a means of access to a complex historical reality.

That said, historical periods are always difficult to define, largely because each period can be characterized by different things, each of which is itself a variable: for example, the technology of one age may be behind or in advance of its art or social organization, economics or politics. Consequently, the opposing concept to periodization breaks down the barriers between periods and stresses instead continuity, emphasizing the inexorable progression —not progress—of cause and effect. The significant similarities of all men and women at all times are strongly remarked, and the special claims of individual groups and events discounted. Linkage, continuity, and movement make history valuable and most meaningful according to this theory: for example, the Rome of AD 700 was linked to Augustan Rome through language, institutions, laws, and the "idea" or memory of Rome.

The Renaissance as an historical phenomenon

exemplifies these divergent views and opposing methodologies perhaps better than any other significant period. Consider that the concept of the Renaissance is different in English studies compared to Italian. Why? Because in Italy the Renaissance can be seen to begin in the fourteenth century, while in England it had to wait until well into the sixteenth century. So we must accept that the Renaissance is a fluid idea in time and place and therefore not a straightforward category like the Age of Louis XIV.

Despite this debate, Renaissance writers themselves were champions of periodization. They believed that the desire of newly converted Christians to wipe away all vestiges of idolatry and the violent visitations of barbarian invaders led to the destruction of the classical style; and Europe lay in a gloomy half-life until Giotto escaped from the Gothic tomb, as Paolo Giovio, the sixteenth-century bishop and historian, described it, and restored the relationship between art and nature. This belief in the dawning of a new age in art and letters—began by Giotto in the former discipline and Dante or Petrarch in the latter—found its ultimate statement and development in the celebrated *Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), written in the middle of the sixteenth





century. It was Vasari who popularized the idea of rebirth (*rinascita*) and most vilified the Gothic style. If the Renaissance is to be defined as an historical period, when did it really begin and end? Where did it begin and why? Who invented it, if it is an invention, and why? What circumstances characterize it and distinguish it from other historical periods? How did it manifest itself in Italy, and how did it reflect its core principles in different parts of that still-fragmented peninsula over time?

To a large extent, that is what this book is about, and that is what we will be discussing. There are some points that will help us to begin and also that will help explicate the shape of the course of our investigation of Renaissance Italy. First, we must begin in the Renaissance itself because the Renaissance was, in many ways, the first self-conscious creation in historiography. By this I mean that writers in Italy, beginning in the fourteenth century, defined themselves and their world as something new, something special, something dramatically different from what preceded them. Indeed, it was the Renaissance that created the idea of the Middle Ages, that is, a period of decline between the high cultures of classical antiquity and fourteenth- and fifteenth-

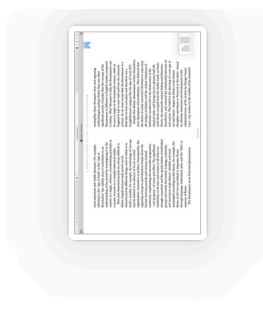
century Italy. This medieval period was barbarous, as exemplified by its art, which was known as “Gothic”—after the Goths who invaded the late Roman Empire—savage and brutal and lacking all grace.

To illustrate this self-conscious recognition of changing times, let us rehearse some early Italian definitions of this belief. First, from Giovanni Boccaccio’s biography of the poet Dante, written in the early 1350s:

This was the Dante who was first to open the way for the return of the Muses, banished from Italy. “Twas he that revealed the glory of the Florentine idiom. ’Twas he that brought under the rule of due numbers every beauty of the vernacular speech. ’Twas he who may be truly said to have brought back dead poesy to life.”

In his *Treatise on the Civil Life*, written c. 1435, Matteo Palmieri developed a similar theme:

Thus the noble achievements of our far-off ancestors (the men of ancient Rome) had been forgotten, and had become impossible to modern men. Where was the painter’s art till Giotto tardily restored it? A caricature of the art of human delineation! Sculpture and architecture, for long years sunk to the merest travesty of art, are only today in process of rescue from obscurity, only now are they being brought to a new pitch of perfection by men of genius and erudition. Of letters and liberal studies at large it is best to be silent altogether. For these, the real guides to distinction in all the arts, the solid foundation of all civilization, have been lost to



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mankind for 800 years and more. It is but in our own day that men dare boast that they see the dawn of better things. For example, we owe it to our Leonardo Bruni that Latin, so long a by-word for its uncouthness, has begun to shine forth in its ancient purity, its beauty, its majestic rhythm. Now, indeed, may every thoughtful spirit thank God that it has been permitted to him to be born in this new age, so full of hope and promise, which already rejoices in a greater array of nobly-gifted souls than the world has seen in the thousand years that have preceded it. If only our distressed land enjoys assured peace, most certainly shall we garner the fruits of the seed now being sown. Then shall we see these errors, deep-seated and long reputed, which have perverted every branch of knowledge, surely rooted out. For the books which an age of darkness puts forth into the world are themselves—how otherwise?—dark and obscure, and in their turn darken all learning by their subtleties and confusion . . . But I see the day coming when all philosophy and wisdom and all arts shall be drunk from the pure fountain head—the great intelligences of old . . . .<sup>2</sup>

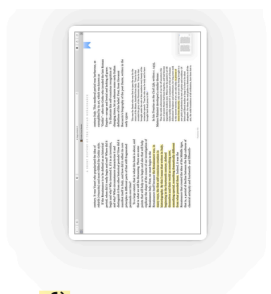
Finally, there are the words of Giorgio Vasari, from his *Lives of the Artists*, written in 1550:

As the men of the age were not accustomed to see any excellence or greater perfection than the things thus produced, they greatly admired them, and considered them to be the type of perfection, barbarous as they were. Yet some rising spirits, aided by some quality in the air of certain places, so far purged themselves of this crude style that in 1250 Heaven took compassion on the fine minds that the Tuscan soil was producing every day, and directed them to the original forms. For although the preceding generations

had before them the remains of arches, colossi, statues, pillars, or carved stone columns which were left after the plunder, ruin, and fire which Rome had passed through, yet they could never make use of them or derive any profit from them until the period named. Up to the present, I have discoursed upon the origin of sculpture and painting, perhaps more at length than was necessary at this stage. I have done so, not so much because I have been carried away by my love for the arts, as because I wish to be of service to the artists of our own day, by showing them how a small beginning leads to the highest elevation, and how from so noble a situation it is possible to fall to utterest ruin, and consequently, how these arts resemble nature as shown in our human bodies; and how we more easily recognize the progress of the renaissance of the arts, and the perfection to which they have attained in our own time.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, then, writers and thinkers in the Renaissance itself saw themselves as special, different, and having more in common with the style and content of the classical age of Rome than with the intervening “Middle Age,” a period that to them was a deep valley between two heights.

Also from these fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century examples, certain elements emerge that we still identify today with the popular idea of the Renaissance: the return to a classical style of Latin prose, the growing importance of the vernacular, and the return of naturalism in art. All of these elements

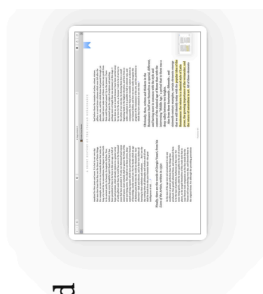


we shall investigate at length in their contexts; but for now it is important to emphasize that these characteristics were recognized by observers in the Renaissance itself and were not imported by retrospective historians seeking to define a portion of the past. Thus, to repeat: the Renaissance defined itself and identified its own contribution by distinguishing itself from the past. In this way, we can see the development of the modern discipline of history, a Renaissance art. Unless the past is seen as something distinct and remote, the perspective to study it with objectivity is obscured. The Middle Ages saw the past as an unbroken continuum beginning with the Creation, because the purpose of its study was to trace and understand as far as possible the working out of God's plan for mankind. The great moments were theological: the Creation, the events of the Bible, the Incarnation, the establishment of a Holy Roman Empire, the spread of the Faith. The world was theocentric (God-centered), not anthropocentric (man-centered); and man was never in control of his world, because human causality always yielded to the divine.

Also, from this attitude to the past, the scholars of the Renaissance who sought to transcend the period of

the Middle Ages and return as much as possible to the world of classical antiquity invented the modern disciplines of archaeology, numismatics, philology, and textual editing: they wanted to know what the past was really like before the Middle Ages. The learning of the classical world had to be recovered, and consequently scholars of the Renaissance—in order to define themselves more exactly in the vocabulary of antiquity—developed the tools to do it.

The next question is, of course, why the sensitive and learned scholars and statesmen of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy believed the Middle Ages to be barbarous and unsympathetic: why was there a need to return to classical antiquity? Again, much of the first part of this book will discuss this issue because the concept of self-definition is so central to an appreciation of the Renaissance in all its manifestations, including those psychological and abstract elements, like self-confidence, ideals of beauty and art, styles of architecture, modes of learning and education, and much more. But, as a narrative hook, let me say that Italians of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries believed that they had much more in common with the civilization of the ancient world than with the period immediately preceding



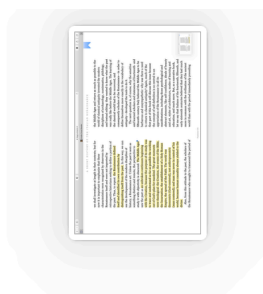
their own, the Middle Ages.

This can be well represented in a study of Florence. The city exemplified so many Renaissance values and structures that it is often called, somewhat romantically, the cradle of the Italian Renaissance. Florence was a republican city-state ruled by merchant patricians dependent on long-distance trade, manufacturing, and banking for its wealth and power. Obviously, Rome in the age of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) had much more in common with such a place ruled by such men than with the aristocratic, agrarian, feudal subsistence world of the earlier Middle Ages. When the rulers of Florence needed a model, an ideology on which to build their lives and their state, the ancient world provided one that was ready-made—accessible, understandable, sympathetic, relevant, and self-supportive, especially since those fourteenth-century Italians were also able to identify themselves clearly as the true heirs of the greatness of Rome, which they sought to re-animate. To reiterate, then, the Renaissance in Italy was a self-conscious age eager to define itself based on principles borrowed and re-applied from the ancient world.

Thus, by 1550, the traditional view of the Renaissance as a time distinct from—indeed opposed

to—the style and fabric of the preceding age, or Middle Ages, was well established and canonized by the most celebrated writers and thinkers of fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century Italy. The Italian Renaissance was therefore a self-conscious age, aware of itself, interested in its own definitions, and determined to re-make the world on its own terms, according to the principles generally accepted as superior: that is, the cultural model of ancient Greece and Rome that the urban, cosmopolitan, often republican scholars and statesmen of the Italian communes thought much more relevant to their own experiences and tastes than the rural, feudal, usually monarchical values of Medieval Europe.

This view survived the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Reason. For example, in the eighteenth century, Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, 1694–1778) developed Vasari's attacks on religion and praised the Renaissance as a great moment in human happiness in which freedom and human values challenged an obscurantist church and aristocratic privilege. He, too, idealized the glory that was Greece and Rome and detested the obfuscation caused by barbarians and religious disputes, as he called them. Edward Gibbon (1737–94), the great eighteenth-





century historian of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, also echoed these themes, infinitely preferring the ancient to the medieval, also seeing Christianity as the lubricant in the slide of western Europe into darkness and ignorance, at least as eighteenth-century rationalists defined it.

The nineteenth century saw a return to a worship of the Middle Ages and the Gothic in the Romantic movement. "Gothic" novels and Gothic-revival buildings and style became very fashionable from the end of the eighteenth until the last decades of the nineteenth century. (This was the world of Sir Walter Scott, Augustus Welby Pugin, and William Beckford.) The Renaissance declined in aesthetic opinion, with Prince Albert purchasing Tuscan *trecento* primitives, avoiding the high art of the later painters; Pre-Raphaelites celebrating the style of an earlier time; and John Ruskin praising the medieval at the expense of the subsequent age.

Nevertheless, certain ideas remained strong, which were defined as "modern" in the progressive, "scientific" Victorian manner, principles that were applied not to true discussions of the past but rather to the contemporary disputes of the age of liberalism and "progress." Concepts such as individuality, secularism,

free trade, republicanism, and divergent views of high culture all made their appearance in the struggle between cultural and social conservatives and liberal progressives among the European intellectual elites. Indeed, it was a French liberal, anti-clerical historian who reinforced these "modern" ideals that he saw evident in the civilization of the Renaissance in his monumental 1855 *History of France*. It is because of Jules Michelet (1798–1874) that the French word *Renaissance* is used, rather than the Italian *Rinascita* of Vasari.

## JACOB BURCKHARDT

When we think of the Renaissance, we have certain images and ideas in mind, ideas determined by over a century of scholarship, a tradition largely exemplified by one man—Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97). Burckhardt wrote a book, published in 1860, called the *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. It was not a history, but one of the greatest and one of the first of a whole new discipline of studies of the past, an original methodology that synthesized many aspects of the intellectual, social, and cultural elements of a society



into a singular, unified vision to create a study of a mentality, a point of view that one identifies immediately as “Renaissance.” The German word for this discipline is *Kulturgeschichte*; the English is *cultural history*. Seldom can any historical movement be traced to so significant a single source as can the Renaissance. The relationship between Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (*Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*) and the historiography of what we now call the Renaissance is so profound that most studies of the period for the next century consisted of footnotes to Burckhardt. What is so remarkable about the great historian is not his discovery of new terms or new ideas, but his totally original and convincing manner of synthesizing material that had been known and perceived for about five centuries to create an integrated vision of a particular “Renaissance” point of view, an analysis of the underlying principles of the age and a composite of a complex civilization. It was Burckhardt who gave us our conception of the Renaissance.

Jacob Burckhardt himself was an interesting man and one whose affinity for the Renaissance was, like the period he studied, born of a desire to return to what he believed to be a more sympathetic age, feeling,

as he did, somewhat estranged from the industrial, bourgeois society of mid-nineteenth-century Europe. Burckhardt was born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1818 and descended from a wealthy and highly cultivated Protestant patrician family. Despite his studies in Berlin in the 1830s, when Romanticism was the ideology of the student elite, Burckhardt rejected this unfocused perspective in favor of a more disciplined classicism, an attitude strongly reinforced by visits to Italy. His books, such as *The Age of Constantine the Great* (1853), which records how the high culture of ancient Rome slid into something less compelling, and his *Cicerone* (1855), which is in effect a guidebook to Italy and its art, served as background work for his great “essay” of 1860, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. This work was initially planned as an introduction to a monumental history of Italian art, but Burckhardt never completed the work, retreating from his high ambitions and aesthetic ideals as a consequence of the events of the Paris Commune and the militarism that had led to the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71).

Burckhardt was in truth an aesthete who saw the Italian Renaissance as the antithesis of the industrial, grasping, and increasingly vulgar age he believed was

emerging in Europe. Like the early Renaissance humanist Petrarch (1304–74), he thought that he had been born outside his time: he was an art historian and connoisseur and consequently saw the world very much from the point of view of art and culture. Just as important, he arranged his book topically so that he was looking at the Renaissance not as a developing period of time unfolding chronologically, but as a series of different facets of the same experience in order to discover the mentality of the age. This is still the way in which the Renaissance is usually studied today, and we are all in many ways still Burckhardtians. Ideas such as the recovery of antiquity, the dignity of man, the state as a work of art, unbridled egoism, and naturalism all animate his book, not because he imposed this vision on the past but, as we have already seen, because these were the elements that observers in the Renaissance itself saw as important. In so doing, he added another dimension to political history, then dominant academically, because he emphasized the importance of what was willed, thought, and desired as well as what was actually done. The result was thus not a reference book of dates and events, not even a history—Burckhardt called it an essay, reflecting his attempt to achieve

something new and different. We must therefore spend some time on Burckhardt because the ideas and methodology he developed are still the basic assumptions of Renaissance studies. His book is divided into six parts, each viewing the civilization of Italy from the beginning of the fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century from different points of view. Part I gives a general political background, a summary that is highly simplified in the sense that it reduces the peculiarity of the Italian scene to the conflict between emperors and popes. In it, though, is the idea of the “state as a work of art,” an elaboration of the idea that the state is the conscious creation of human beings and designed to achieve certain clear goals. As a result, states and individuals were freed from the traditional restraints assumed to exist if states were the creation of God. It is because of this that the illegitimate despotisms of the *signori* play so important a role in Burckhardt’s thesis: they were the creation of strong leaders, great, egotistical individuals who grasped power for themselves and did what they pleased.

Part II, “The Development of the Individual,” develops the most important single idea in Burckhardt’s book. In it he argues that a new kind of individual



came about because the new social and political organizations required more personal responsibility, the result of which was the cult of the *virtuoso*, a man of *virtù* (not in the modern sense of “virtue” but, rather, of “dynamic resourcefulness” or “prowess”) able to develop his potential to the fullest in all areas of human ambition and able to overcome any external restraints. Part III is “The Revival of Antiquity.” Burckhardt contends, significantly, that the rebirth of classical studies was a *result*—not a cause—of the Renaissance mindset. In this chapter, Burckhardt also introduces the important figures of the humanists, a class with certain characteristics central to his argument: secularism and individualism. Like the *condottiere* (mercenary) princes he so admired, Burckhardt identifies the rising group of humanist practitioners as heroic individuals. Part IV, “The Discovery of the World of Man,” illustrates how these principles operated in Renaissance Italy. He introduces the notions of the rediscovery of natural beauty and naturalism in art, the growing interest in exploration, and the primary place of man and human values in the literature, art, and thought of the age.

Part V, “Society and Festivals,” places these heroic individuals in a social context, emphasizing, again

significantly, the intermingling of classes in Italian towns and the importance of individual qualities rather than status based on birth alone. Part VI, “Morality and Religion,” rehearses the familiar, accepted opinions on the personalities of the age. Unbridled egoism and passion had deplorable results, such as a decline in Christianity; and the lack of moral restraints eventually caused an ethical crisis for a sixteenth-century Italy where “vice” had become a manifestation of excessive individualism. However, by Part VI, Burckhardt—in his conflicted way, since he could not escape his Swiss Calvinism—comes almost to resent his Renaissance heroes who escaped this restrictive moral conditioning. Nevertheless, he still acknowledges that this “amorality” was an important precondition for the modern world.

Individualism and modernity: these two themes constantly arise in Burckhardt’s essay, and, indeed, his argument is often blurred by his obsessive return to these two ideas, reducing overly complex concepts to these simple denominators. Also, there is little sense of historical change. Burckhardt’s vision of Renaissance Italy is just as anachronistic as those Renaissance paintings that show biblical scenes populated by contemporary figures with a wide and curious mixture





of costume and setting. To illustrate his argument, Burckhardt draws examples from all Italy over a period of two hundred years, and clearly the results are often simply wrong. And, of course, there are unavoidable lacunae in his analysis, ideas that were not important in 1860, such as economics and the more sophisticated structures of social history. Still, what is critical is that Burckhardt established the intellectual and methodological structure that still to a large extent determines our approach to the civilization of the Renaissance in Italy.

## BURCKHARDT'S LEGACY

Burckhardt had no worthy successors, except for John Addington Symonds (1840–93), whose huge *The Renaissance in Italy* appeared in seven volumes between 1875 and 1886 and made the Italian Renaissance and its literature generally available to Victorian English readers. Like Burckhardt, Symonds was not an historian, but a man of letters. He used only secondary sources and literary works and engaged in unbalanced judgments: for example, unlike his contemporary John Ruskin, he knew nothing of

and disliked the Middle Ages. His book is also characterized by his English liberal belief in progress and political liberty, evidence of which he searched for everywhere, whether it was there or not. Clearly, Symonds was heavily influenced by Burckhardt (as well as by Voltaire and Michelet) in both content and organization. Most significantly, like Burckhardt he devised a “cultural history,” not a political, chronological narrative of events.

It is only with the career and scholarship of Hans Baron (1900–88) that the historiography of the Renaissance would find a scholar whose contributions merit comparison with Burckhardt's. Baron's attention was directed toward a complex analysis of the relationship between humanism and civic life in Florence. In a career that began in Germany in the 1920s and ended only a little more than a year before his death in the United States, Baron's many publications offered brilliant insights into the mentality of Renaissance Florence, reflecting a lifetime of study that found its conclusion in his *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955). In this seminal book, Baron argues that the war between Florence and Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, which ended in 1402 with Visconti's death, created the ideal of civic



humanism by focusing humanist attention on Florence's particular republican freedom, seeing the war with Milan as the struggle between republican liberty and princely despotism.

Burckhardt, then, during the century following the publication of his book, had many continuators and disciples, the most important of whom were those, like Hans Baron, who identified the central role of humanism in the creation of the Renaissance mentality. Humanism will be discussed in all of its manifestations in subsequent chapters, but for our purposes in this brief introduction, let us define it as both the method of teaching and studying classical texts so as to understand their essential meaning, and the application of the lessons learned from this study to a world ruled by leisured, wealthy laymen whose access to power was as much through their talents and accomplishments as through their births.

The connection between humanism and the definition of the Renaissance is critical. In part this is because the Middle Ages were not as dark as fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italians thought. Also an historical period like the Renaissance that is not bound by time or geography must be reducible to some common variables; otherwise, discussion is

pointless. The great contributions made in this area were offered by later scholars writing in the middle of the twentieth century: an art historian, Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968; *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, 1960), and an intellectual historian, Federico Chabod (1901–60). What Panofsky and Chabod saw as the critical element in defining the Renaissance was what was called the “energizing myth,” that is, a belief—whether true or false—held by Italians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that they were indeed different and separated from the values and styles of the Middle Ages. And, although the styles and themes employed in Renaissance art and literature were not new but were borrowed from antiquity and used during the Middle Ages—often skillfully—the Renaissance used these ideas differently. What is significant is that more than the form (classical genres, architectural styles, for example) was reproduced: the vital, dynamic spirit behind the form was recaptured. This was that “energizing myth,” a self-perpetuating, self-defining belief that Italians of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were practicing skills or creating art and ideas that brought them close to the classical past and provided a guide to life and letters, education and



politics, morals and ethics, art and learning. These ideals could be shaped into a functional code of behavior, a structure of belief—an ideology—to animate a ruling elite: the well-educated, independent, urban, mercantile, bourgeois inhabitants of the city-state republics, or the courtiers and clients of the petty despotisms of the Italian peninsula.

This identification of humanism as an “energizing myth” or ideology is critical because it answers many questions and allows us to view the Renaissance as something other than a block of time. It is a vital concept that can be traced through republics such as Florence—where it had special importance and application—to small warrior principalities such as Urbino, to the majesty of theocratic papal Rome, and ultimately to the great feudal dynastic monarchies of northern Europe, whose traditions were different but whose ruling elite fell prey to a modified version of this “energizing myth” because such an ideology also met so many of their social, cultural, educational, and psychological needs.

What I have just presented is a definition of the Renaissance in the tradition of cultural history and through the legacy of Burckhardt. In the half-century after Baron, Panofsky, and Chabod developed their

theories, other scholars, each with his or her own disciplinary, ideological, or geographical perspective, added much to this outline and often challenged the model of studying the Renaissance as a cultural or intellectual phenomenon, identifying the deficiencies in the cultural historians’ methods and claiming that their perspective was too “elitist,” as it could only reflect the experience of a small number of Italians during those years. There is much to credit in this elaboration of the traditional approach. Burckhardt was a scholar of the mid-nineteenth century who, as noted, had no interest in such topics as economic history, and his definition of society was indeed largely an analysis of the elite. Recent studies in social history have expanded Burckhardt’s vision greatly by looking at the lives of Italians of all classes and conditions, including women and the poor. Also, economic history has been shown to be hugely important in illustrating how the city states of the peninsula produced the wealth that permitted the efflorescence of culture and encouraged social mobility. There has even been a challenge to the very idea of a Renaissance by medievalists who argue cogently that the break with the past identified by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italians was greatly overstated, that there was in fact a



continuum in European life that should not be cut into sealed sections. They argue for continuity in institutions and ideas, and their contribution reinforces the observation that while some members of the elite attempted to recover the pagan Roman world, the vast majority of the population continued to follow the examples and precepts of St Francis of Assisi and saw saints and Arthurian or Carolingian heroes as the equal or superior to even justified pagans such as Cicero or Seneca.

This so-called Revolt of the Medievalists added another layer of academic complexity to the study of the Renaissance in Italy and reinforced the principle of continuity or gradual change over time as opposed to sharp divisions between historical periods. The most important early book devoted to the restoration of the value of the Middle Ages vis-à-vis the Renaissance was C.H. Haskins's (1870–1937) *The Renaissance of the 12th Century* (1927). Drawing on a study of Latin literature and learning in fields such as law and philosophy, Haskins shows the immense strides taken during the “barbarous” and Gothic twelfth century, advances as important in their own ways as those attributed by Burckhardt to the Renaissance. Equally, Haskins and other scholars question the novelty of the

“revival” of classical culture in fourteenth-century Italy and give powerful illustrations, for example, of the continuation of the “idea of Rome.” Furthermore, although Haskins wrote a book on medieval science as well, it was left to two American scholars, Lynn Thorndike (1882–1965) and George Sarton (1884–1956), to state—at great length—during the late 1920s and 1930s that the Renaissance, far from being an advancement in human civilization, was a retrogression, at least in the field of scientific endeavor: scholars in the Middle Ages were much more interested in discovering new knowledge about the natural world than those in the Renaissance, whose desire was often to reiterate only what the ancients had recorded.

Roman Catholic medievalists, such as Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Etienne Gilson (1884–1978), argued not only that many of the important aspects discussed by Burckhardt were present during the Middle Ages, but also that these aspects were more vital, because ancient authors such as Aristotle were “living” sources in medieval learning, that is, growing and changing to fit a dynamic society rather than becoming ossified as sacred texts. Similarly, other modern historians have filled the gaps





in Burckhardt's study and revealed that some of the subjects he avoided undermined his thesis. Roberto Lopez (1910–86), for example, was an economic historian who, like many of his profession, saw the Renaissance as a decline from the Middle Ages. The great spirit of mercantile and industrial entrepreneurial activity that had made Florence one of the largest and richest cities in Europe declined dramatically as merchant patricians like the Medici put their capital into consumption rather than investment and wasted their efforts on humanism, art, and display when they should have been making money.

It is in the present time that these pro- and anti-Burckhardt traditions can co-exist in some humane interdependence. Burckhardians such as Hans Baron can share publications with anti-Burckhardians such as Roberto Lopez because the old canonization of Burckhardt has evaporated under its critics. Although his method of cultural history and interdisciplinary studies remains indispensable to the Renaissance historian, his insistence on the novel elements of modernity and individualism victorious over medievalism and corporatism has been abandoned. The Renaissance is no longer viewed as a self-

contained, insulated phenomenon, a closed period. Rather, it is now open at both ends and constitutes not a sharp peak in human activity but instead a gentle slope. In part, this more balanced opinion is the result of studies in other areas so stringently ignored by the orthodox Burckhardians, such as social and economic history. The great wealth of material and the enormous number of major studies that have appeared since World War II illustrate how much Burckhardt missed by not exploring the incredible riches of the state archives of Florence, Venice, and Rome—let alone the smaller but richly documented cities—where the publication of records, such as taxation, notarial, and census documents, has become a major growth industry. Scholars since the 1950s have added immeasurably to our knowledge of the Renaissance simply by making the records of that civilization available, illustrating how society, the government, the economy, and the Church actually worked and how the people lived—all of them, not just the great.

All of these elaborations and subsequent studies have filled in the many gaps left by those intellectual and cultural historians who still to some degree see the Renaissance in terms of the model first proposed by Jacob Burckhardt. We are greatly indebted to their



work, and our understanding of the period is much richer indeed. However, I am myself a cultural historian, so my approach in this book will be very much in the established tradition of the Burckhardians. Therefore, when I am asked what the Renaissance was, I answer that it was an historical force characterized by certain principles to which the educated elite conformed and which consequently transformed their entire mentality into a world-view heavily dependent on classical models and values, filtered through the experience of Italians of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries and ultimately grafted to a wide variety of structures that consequently took on identifiable aspects immediately recognizable as "Renaissance." Despite the differences of time, space, and experience, then, Michelangelo would have had much to say to Petrarch, and both would have understood the values of Alberti, because they all conformed to a similar perspective, animated by that "energizing myth" and dependent on the guidance of the ancients.

Therefore, as both a summary of what has been said and a preface to what is to come, we might ask the following: what have historians over the past five centuries recognized as peculiarly Renaissance

characteristics, elements by which this rather abstract period might be identified? First, there was a change in the medieval structures of society that allowed for more secular, individual, and dynamic action. Second, the revival of interest in the classical worlds of Greece and Rome motivated artists, sculptors, architects, and writers to copy the styles of the antique past in their own work. Third, the centers of power, wealth, and culture were concentrated in towns, cultivated by rich laymen who had little interest in the feudal, agrarian immediate past of the Middle Ages but who saw great relevance in the examples of the classical age, especially republican and imperial Rome: like their own city-states, Rome was urbanized, cosmopolitan, educated, secular, and either republican in government or ruled by wise princes, like the good Roman emperors. Finally, these cultivated laymen, imbued with classical ideals, also represented the political classes of the Renaissance. In republics such as Florence or Venice, they were the merchant patricians who actively ruled; in principalities such as Mantua or Milan, or even in papal Rome, they were the secretaries, the courtiers, the high civil servants. Therefore, the cultural and intellectual attitudes and values of these men—these humanists—had concrete



political, social, and economic effects because they had the power to influence policy.

As Burckhardt suggested, the state was a work of art because its fabric might be molded to institutionalize the principles animating these men. Consequently, when the old psychological, economic, and social props of extended kin structure (*consorteria*), class, medieval models of piety, and other, older structures began to deteriorate under the restless power of “unbridled egoism,” new institutions and principles might be erected in their place through the manipulation of the authority of the state, represented by the collective wills of the engaged political classes in republics, or through good counsel to a wise prince or pope in monarchies. There was indeed continuity, but at the same time new forces were at work changing the cultural and intellectual—and hence the political, social, and economic—structures of their world.

Italians of the fifteenth century saw themselves as special, gifted, fortunate, and almost omnipotent. One of the greatest of the universal geniuses, Leon Battista Alberti, remarked that man can do anything if he only has the will; or, in the mystical rhetoric of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, “O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever

he chooses, to be whatever he wills!”<sup>4</sup> How men—and some women—decided to activate this new self-confidence and belief in their own authority varied according to the time, place, and circumstances of the individual’s experience. However, regardless of status, whether bourgeois politician in republican Florence, papal secretary in Rome, or mercenary captain in Milan, what mattered most was *virtù*—a central element in Machiavelli’s thought, as we shall see: that is, resourcefulness or prowess, an ability to command oneself and others. Here, obviously, is a reflection of Burckhardt’s “unbridled egoism” or evidence of a renewed sense of independent human agency on earth. There is no other way to describe defining figures such as Cesare Borgia, Pope Julius II, Francesco Sforza, several different Medici, Michelangelo, Leonardo, or Isabella d’Este. The context of these shared beliefs within fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century Italy depended on the environment in which such individuals lived. Burckhardt recognized this when he stressed the role of the illegitimate, ever-warring, contentious, factious character of the principalities of Italy, and much the same can be said for the many unstable republics of the Renaissance. However, it must be stressed that the very proliferation of states



and constitutions abetted this principle of rugged individualism, as well as cultural and constitutional experimentation, because the large number of states were constantly competing with one another, if not in war then in grandeur and reputation, which can be seen as war by other means. The lack of unity and the very instability and fractiousness of the Italian states must be seen as elements in the development and the diffusion of the dynamic energy of the Renaissance. So it is to the fragmentation of the peninsula that we must first turn.

## NOTES

- 1 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante*, in *The Early Lives of Dante*, trans. P. Wicksteed (London: A. Moring, 1904), 11.
- 2 Matteo Palmieri, *On Civil Life*, trans. W.H. Woodward, in *Studies in Education during the Age of the Renaissance, 1400–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), pp. 66–68.
- 3 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. A.B. Hinds, Everyman's Library Edition (London: Dent, 1963), vol. I, pp. 17–19.
- 4 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, in K. Bartlett, *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 106.

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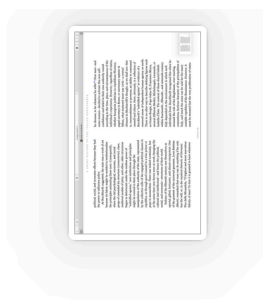
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# TWO

## BEFORE THE RENAISSANCE

THE ITALY OF THE Renaissance was merely a geographical and historical term. It was in no way a united nation, but rather one that had suffered political fragmentation from the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD. Therefore, to understand the nature of the territory that we now identify as Italy we need to look at the development of the peninsula before the Renaissance.

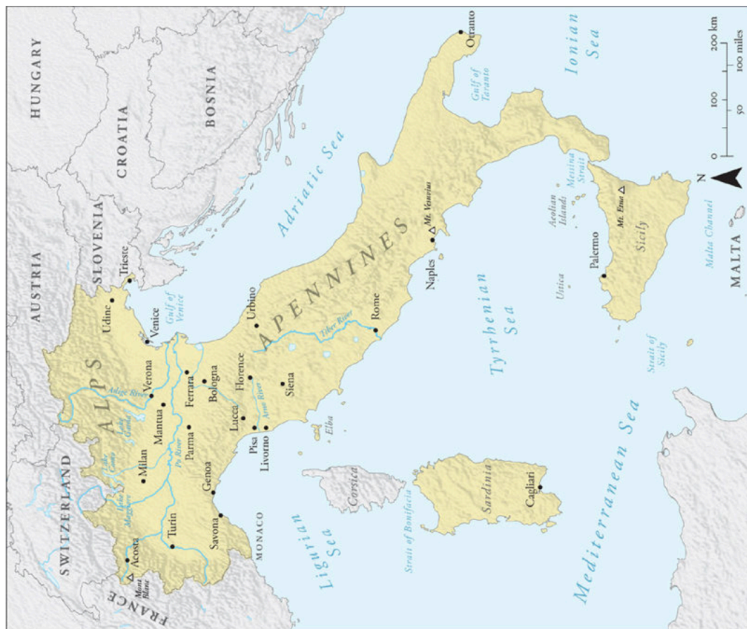
Geographically, Italy is a peninsula surrounded by water on three sides and by the Alps on the fourth. Although this disposition affords some considerable protection and insulation from outside invasion by land, the peninsula is also only very short distances from what were, at various times, other alien, powerful, and often hostile cultures. For example, the island of Sicily is less than one hundred miles of easy sailing from North Africa, with its competing Muslim

culture. The cape of Otranto is only fifty miles from Albania, during the Renaissance a Turkish possession inhabited by fierce pirates who preyed on Christian shipping from the peninsula.

Italy's internal geography divides it into several "natural" regions, that is, territories with defensible borders and often containing similar peoples. The extreme north climbs into the Alps, producing a hardy Alpine nation of self-reliant, proud, and rather xenophobic mountaineers. However, unlike some other regions, the extreme north is ethnically mixed, with a large number of Frenchmen in Savoy, for example, a principality that in the Renaissance period included the southern coast of what is now France, a littoral acquired by France only in the middle of the nineteenth century (Nizza became the modern city of Nice). Equally, the northwestern fringes of the Venetian mainland territories contained several German-speaking lands taken from the Holy Roman Empire by Venice during its mainland expansion. In the extreme south there were still speakers of Greek, survivors of the ancient Greek colonies that constituted Magna Graecia, and even significant numbers of people of North African descent, a reminder of the Muslim domination of Sicily for a



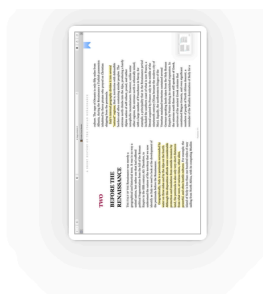
period of almost three centuries. Nevertheless, generally, most of the Italian peninsula was home to people who spoke one dialect of Italian or another.



Map 2.1 The Geography of Italy

If the Alps formed a northern barrier against invasion, the Apennines served as an internal division that ran the length of the peninsula from the Lombard plain to Sicily, cutting the boot down the center and consequently driving settlements to the coasts and river mouths and providing a measure of security for small, independent, usually impoverished states within its rocky fastness. The Apennines complicated communications on the peninsula, and control of the passes through the mountains constituted military goals for ambitious cities wishing to take advantage of what trade there was, especially as internal commerce and long-distance trade increased.

The great Lombard plain, however, is a natural kingdom in every way, dominated by the city of Milan, once a capital of the late Roman Empire, the ancient seat of St. Ambrose, and later the capital of the powerful dynasties of the Visconti and Sforza. The plain is extremely fertile and always provided a superfluity of grain and livestock for the Milanese state, a simple fact that permitted the Duchy of Milan to remain strong and ambitious, despite suffering numerous military defeats as well as incompetent rulers. Also, this blessing of site ensured the integrity of the Duchy of Milan in the face of changes in



dynasty, foreign invasion, and conquest. In other words, of all Italy north of the kingdom of Naples, Milan was the closest thing to a territorial state in the manner of a transalpine monarchy. The Po River, the largest in Italy, provided excellent means of transportation and communication in the modern provinces of Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy and sustained a generous supply of water. Consequently, around this river and its hinterland powerful despotisms such as Ferrara and Mantua arose, able, like Milan, to maintain their independence and wealth throughout our period. These principalities tended in general to be ruled by despots who used their armies as mercenaries rented to the highest bidder; hence these *condottiere* principalities maintained the traditions of medieval chivalric virtue while adopting newer humanist forms, resulting in a rich, idiosyncratic culture in which Arthurian knights mixed with classical heroes. For example, although theoretically dependent on the papacy, the Este lands (Ferrara, Reggio, and Modena, territories ruled by the rich, elegant, luxurious, and disciplined Duchy of Ferrara) operated completely independently, sustaining a fine Renaissance civilization characterized by the luxury of its princes and the talent of its poets,

especially Lodovico Ariosto (1474–1533), author of *Orlando Furioso*, and Torquato Tasso (1544–95), author of *Jerusalem Delivered*. Similarly, the Gonzaga princes of Mantua established one of the most sophisticated and important Renaissance courts in Italy, and the Gonzaga patronage of Mantegna, Alberti, Giulio Romano, and a great many other artists, scholars, and writers gave this small territory a luster and reputation far beyond its military or economic power.

At the heart of the peninsula lies Tuscany, a hilly area of mixed fertile and rocky soil. The area is perfect for the survival and flourishing of small, independent city states—most usually republics—which jealously tried simultaneously to keep their independence and identity while expanding at the expense of their neighbors. Florence began as just one of these Tuscan city-state republics, but by the middle of the sixteenth century it had managed to unite much of the whole territory into a centralized, dynastic principality. This was not a simple or necessary development, however, and the history of Tuscany is one of continual petty warfare. Florence did not capture the republic of Siena until the 1550s; Pisa was captured only at the turn of the fifteenth century, but it was lost again before the



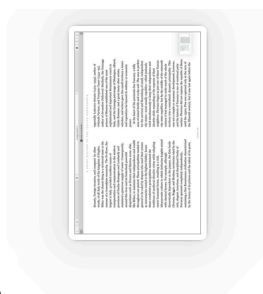
century was out and was not finally incorporated into Florentine dominion until the first decade of the sixteenth century. Lucca, that tough, mercantile republic, was never conquered by Florence. Thus, republican virtue was certainly constitutional and temperamental, but it was also clearly supported by geography.

The states of the Church in the Renaissance fluctuated dramatically in extent. Generally, they cut a wide band across the peninsula running from Ravenna on the eastern Adriatic coast, bulging north to include Bologna, the gateway to the north, across to the west coast south of Tuscany, through to the northern limits of the kingdom of Naples. Parts of this territory, particularly areas of the Romagna and Abruzzo, were inhospitable and rugged and infested with bandits, as they were until late in the nineteenth century. The Church could never—with one or two very remarkable exceptions, such as the period of the Borgias—effectively rule this lawless territory. Thus, *de facto*, the states of the Church were ruled by petty tyrants who claimed *de jure* authority as papal vicars but who in reality were *signori*—professional thugs, mercenary captains, and petty despots who used their states as recruiting areas for their private armies. The attendant

chronic instability of these lands caused the neighboring territories much grief.

Rome itself was, naturally, a unique city and territory. It was at once the see of St Peter and the headquarters of the universal Roman confession, ruled by the successor to St Peter who also claimed the authority of Roman secular rule in the West: the bishop of Rome, the pope. The city was an important ecclesiastical, intellectual, cultural, and banking center, completely dependent on the Holy See. There was very little manufacturing and few occupations outside those serving the needs of the papacy, cardinals, and other high ecclesiastics and the millions of pilgrims and office seekers who thronged to the center of Latin Christendom from all over Europe. In the Renaissance the physical city was a small fraction of the size Rome had reached under the Empire when it had boasted as many as a million inhabitants.

Furthermore, the city and territory fluctuated with the fortunes of the papacy: Rome declined horribly during the so-called Babylonian Captivity (1305–77), when the papacy was in Avignon and Rome was neglected, and during the Great Schism (1378–1417), when first two and then three popes divided Christendom. Nevertheless, as we shall see, at no time, even during



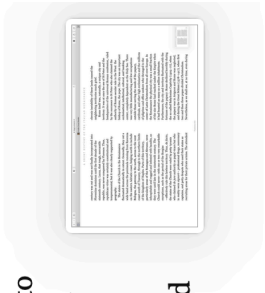


the worst years of the Babylonian Captivity, was there a decline in the memory of Rome as the *caput mundi* (head of the world), as the capital of the Roman empire, as the see of St Peter, and the site of the tombs of the martyred apostles Peter and Paul, or as the holiest place in the West.

The area south of Rome is a strange amalgam of rich fertile farmlands and barren rocky poverty. It was controlled by the kingdom of Naples and was feudal in organization and internally divided among great magnates who, although laws unto themselves, owed loyalty to the monarch in Naples, whether he was a Hohenstaufen, Angevin, or Spaniard. Because of the feudal nature of the kingdom (Naples was often referred to merely as *Il Regno*, the kingdom), the elements defined in Chapter One as “Renaissance” came only superficially to that region. Some moments of Renaissance culture enriched the capital, in particular under rulers such as Alfonso the Magnanimous (1396–1458), but generally the fractious violence of the magnate families, the Church, and the dynastic struggles for the crown resulted in Naples and Sicily (the two kingdoms were occasionally separate and occasionally united) playing only a minor role in the emergence and institutionalization of

Renaissance culture and humanism.

Finally we come to Venice, Queen of the Adriatic, built on millions of wooden poles driven into the shallow waters and sand bars at the top of the Adriatic Sea. Fed by rivers and protected from all invasions, Venice was settled in the fifth and sixth centuries by Romans fleeing the Lombard invasions. In the Renaissance, Venice changed an ancient policy and began expanding onto the Italian mainland to protect its food supply and trade routes, so that by the late fifteenth century, the Venetian *terraferma* empire (that is, the territories controlled by Venice on the Italian mainland) stretched from Lombardy to the coast and south almost to Ferrara. The most serene republic—*La Serenissima*, as Venice was known—expanded north to include the march of Treviso and parts of Friuli, while it continued to enjoy a great maritime empire that extended along the Dalmatian Coast (the eastern shore of the Adriatic) to include the great Dalmatian trading cities of what is now Croatia, such as Zara (Zadar) and Spalato (Split). In addition to this were the many fortified but only lightly colonized territories of the eastern Mediterranean between Venice and Constantinople, places such as Crete, Cyprus, and the Morea (part of mainland Greece); and



there remained the advantageous Venetian privileges in important commercial centers in northern Europe and the Byzantine empire, including Constantinople. The late decision to enter into the territories of northeastern Italy in a substantial way meant that the Renaissance came late to Venice, and both the unusual social and political structure of the republic and the deep Eastern traditions in art and culture resulted in a unique and remarkable Renaissance civilization.

## THE MEMORY OF ROME AND THE PROBLEM OF SOVEREIGNTY

In ancient times, the Romans had imposed unity on the peninsula, a centralization symbolized by the complex network of roads radiating from Rome. Thus, the memory of having been a great people—indeed the conquerors of the world—never left the Italians, even after centuries of invasion, fragmentation, and conflict, both internal and external. However, the collapse of the Empire in the late fifth century and the influx of barbarian invaders changed the face and

character of Italy dramatically. Even place names such as Lombardy (from the barbarian tribe of the Longobardi) attest to the decisive and apparently perpetual fragmentation of the nation. Differences in laws, customs, and dialects among the barbarian invaders separated the fragments even more. For example, the laws and language of the Venetians or the Lombards grew ever more distant from those of the Romans or Neapolitans as contact declined, although the universality of Latin united them all to some extent, as did a singular liturgy and some common obedience to the bishop of Rome.

The same can be said of the southern territories. The island of Sicily and the kingdom of Naples had a cosmopolitan character even under the Romans because of Greek settlements whose language survived. After the collapse of Rome came the Germanic invaders who had passed through the entire peninsula and who would even continue on to North Africa. They were subsequently challenged by the Byzantine Greeks in the sixth and seventh centuries, only to fall prey to the Muslims from North Africa (called, somewhat incorrectly, Arabs) soon after. In the eleventh century, the Normans—Northmen (Vikings, really)—under Robert Guiscard built a kingdom in the



South that became the closest thing Italy had to a deeply embedded, large feudal society, agrarian and manorial. This kingdom of Naples, however, fell again and again through dynastic wars and inheritance to the house of France (Anjou) and later Spain. Here, the memory of Rome was shallow, except in Naples and a very few other centers, and the lure of a central Roman church was complicated by the continuation of Orthodox Christianity, dependent on Constantinople rather than Rome after the schism of 1054 separated the Latin and Orthodox churches forever. Indeed, it was more to ensure that the south of Italy would be subject to the Roman papacy and follow a Latin rite rather than to convert Muslims and Jews that the papacy was motivated to encourage the Norman conquest of Naples and Sicily.

There was, then, a single power in Italy that in theory might have provided the peninsula with some measure of unity, especially since the Roman Catholic Church saw itself as the heir to the Roman Empire. Based in Rome and enjoying primacy over all bishops, the popes ruled a large portion of central Italy from the very early Middle Ages until the final unification of the country in 1870. But, although they tried, especially during the Renaissance under warlike,

ambitious pontiffs such as Alexander VI and Julius II, popes were never able to extend their dominion over the entire peninsula. Why? There were fundamental reasons. There was, for example, the problem of Italian particularism. The discussion above indicates why the peninsula remained subdivided into self-contained, independent territories with allegiance, as well as much economic and political activity, dependent on the locality. This is known culturally as *campanilismo*, the condition of feeling allegiance only to the territory visible from the bell tower, the *campanile*, of one's local church. Regardless of how powerful a pope might be, he could not dislodge that adhesion of an Italian to his or her locality in favor of a grander ideal. All might declare allegiance to Roman Christianity, but the administration and privileges of churchmen and churches were often local rather than universal, dependent as they were on local conditions and centers of authority.

The idea of a universal Church with a universal reach manifested in a united political movement did exist in theory. Several independent states belonging to the papal party supported the authority of the pope in Italy; states such as Ferrara and Naples admitted some vague sovereignty to the pope, but in practice,





little interference was allowed. And there was an alternative, another source of universal sovereignty that challenged the claims of the papacy: the Holy Roman Empire that claimed direct succession from Roman secular rule in the West. This conflict between papacy and empire would characterize much of the Middle Ages in Italy, provide competing sources of sovereignty and authority to *signori* in need of legitimization, and contribute greatly to the inability of popes—or emperors—to unite the peninsula into larger political units.



**Figure 2.1** Rome, Vatican, Apostolic Palace Sala dell'Incendio. Workshop of Raphael: *Coronation of Charlemagne* (Detail, 1516–17). The emperor Charlemagne (c. 742–814) was crowned in old St Peter's by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, AD 800. This image of Charlemagne is actually a portrait of the emperor Charles V (1500–58), and the pope is portrayed as Leo X de' Medici (1483–1520). The use of Raphael's contemporaries as models for historical figures illustrates how the issue of sovereignty in Italy continued throughout the Renaissance.

**In fact the struggle between these two principal sources of sovereignty in the West during the early Middle Ages—the papacy and the empire—ensured**





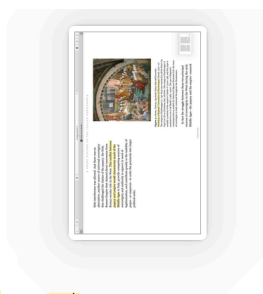


that the Italian peninsula would not be united. The rulers of the mosaic of Italian states realized that they could maintain their independence by assuming authority in the name of the pope or the emperor, claiming to be papal or imperial vicars, ruling in the name of one of these two sovereign powers. These allegiances hardened into two exclusive factions: the Guelfs, or papal supporters, and the Ghibellines, or supporters of the empire. Many factors determined whether a ruler, a nobleman, or a community would belong to one or the other: social class (merchants tended to be Guelf; landed magnates Ghibelline); geography (states within the orbit of Rome were largely Guelf); opportunism (if a powerful noble overthrew an established family that was Ghibelline, he would use the Guelf faction as a power base and claim the alternate source of sovereignty); and history. Inevitably these dual, conflicting sources of power obstructed any attempts to unite the peninsula or even to create larger territorial states.

Both Guelfs and Ghibellines used their authority, as well as war, legal arguments, and propaganda, to further their causes. The alleged Donation of Constantine was purported to be a document in which the emperor Constantine in the 330s ceded rule of the

West to Pope Sylvester in recognition of Constantine's having been cured of leprosy and his decision to move the imperial capital to the city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus, renamed after the emperor as Constantinople. Although a Renaissance humanist scholar, Lorenzo Valla, proved this document to have been a forgery of the late eighth or early ninth century, the belief that the bishop of Rome had absolute authority over the West as a consequence of his apostolic descent from St Peter and his imperial authority as the successor to Constantine remained central to papal claims and continued to be represented in papal patronage, such as the room of Constantine in the apostolic palace in the Vatican, painted by the school of Raphael.

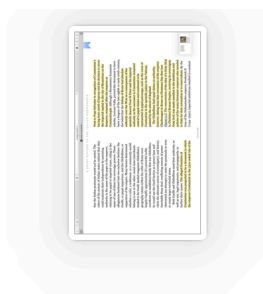
The Ghibellines had equal claims on authority, however, dating from that coronation of the emperor Charlemagne in Rome on Christmas Day 800 (see Figure 2.1). The resurrection of the idea of a Holy (that is, Christian) Roman Empire, receiving its sovereignty from God, was made manifest in the ambitions and policies of the many Germanic emperors who traveled to Italy for their coronation or to exact tribute. By the time of the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II (1194–1250), imperial ambitions resulted in constant



friction with the papacy. With the death of Frederick, the claims of the Holy Roman Empire in Italy declined and the authority of the Holy See increased. But, as both pope and emperor were elected positions, it was difficult to sustain any policy over long periods, and the theoretical power of the empire stretched over vast areas of Europe, making concentration on the peninsula difficult. The result was that neither pope nor emperor was able to consolidate his authority sufficiently to undo the fragmentation caused by the collapse of Rome, and Italy remained a mosaic of states, some recognizing the sovereignty of the pope (Guelfs) and some that of the emperor (Ghibellines). Even when the reality of these allegiances declined, the names remained as ideological and social divisions, again making any attempt at unity impossible. The dream of Italian unity and the memory of Rome remained, but the reality was one of fragmentation and local allegiance.

## THE RISE OF COMMUNES AND LONG-DISTANCE TRADE

The questions of sovereignty in which universal authority was claimed by both pope and emperor might in themselves have provided a significant ideological bifurcation of the political life of the Italian peninsula in the Middle Ages, but it only further complicated an already complex situation. With the collapse of Roman imperial authority, the issue of who ruled the cities of Italy was of considerable importance. Under Roman law, cities were under the authority of the emperor, but the barbarian invasions and the chaos of the early Middle Ages made any such exercise of wide-ranging authority impossible. Who actually ruled on the ground? Who fulfilled the necessary obligation of sustaining urban power in these confused times? There was no single answer. In some cities the only individual powerful enough was the local bishop, who used his ecclesiastical as well as his political dignity to take charge of those functions required for urban life to survive. In other places the authority of the bishop was secondary to that of a powerful secular individual or family who assumed rule of the town and its dependent territory. Some of these individuals had been invested by Germanic emperors with sovereign power to act in their names; others simply filled a vacuum because they had the



military might and wealth to do so. In the first instance, many cities in which bishops ruled became Guelf, with authority coming from the Church; in the latter model, many of these secular signori (lords) were imperial vicars and ruled in the name of an absent, distant emperor: these towns were usually Ghibelline.

There had, however, to be some kind of generally recognized authority in these towns. Walls and defenses had to be maintained or built and money in the form of taxation collected to accomplish these public works. There had to be generally accepted and enforced weights and measures, there had to be an accepted coinage, and there had to be some kind of legal system to settle disputes. In the early Middle Ages, these matters were often established ad hoc, depending on the local conditions of the city or town; however, by the tenth and eleventh centuries, there needed to be more complex structures and clearer lines of authority as a result of dramatic changes in Italy and the rest of Europe.

By the tenth century there was a rapid increase in population, the result of fewer and less virulent plagues and fewer invasions. Also, trade was beginning to expand from the local needs of the community to a

wider marketplace, again as a result of the demographic and economic changes affecting all Europe but Italy in particular. For cities to expand, food was needed, as cities consume rather than produce food; also, as longer-distance trade grew, there was even greater need for stable currencies and enforceable contracts. Add to this the coming of the Crusades, and the nature of Italian life—particularly urban life—changed dramatically.

The calling of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II at Clermont in 1095 was both a cause and an effect of the changes noted above. An increase in population, particularly among the warrior nobility, and the expansion of trade that brought Europe into conflict with Muslim states in the eastern and southern Mediterranean drove Europeans to seek land, wealth, fame, and salvation outside the confines of their continent, an adventure given validity and enthusiasm through the vocabulary of religion. The significance of the Crusades for the Italian peninsula was enormous, as the maritime states of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa benefited immediately and greatly by supplying transport, equipment, logistics, and loans to the hundreds of thousands of northern knights who embarked for the Holy Land from those ports. These

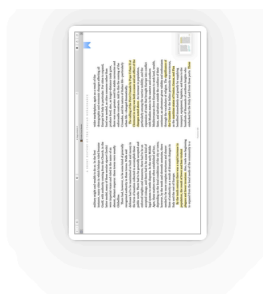




events stimulated urban development everywhere in Italy, and the old arrangements by which a powerful individual or a bishop ruled largely unchecked began to break down under the growing pressures of too many demands, the need for highly professional and sophisticated services, and the influx of large numbers of people from the countryside into cities to service this new economy, changing the social structure and the political dynamic. As early as the tenth century, many cities began to recognize the participation of learned, wealthy, or influential men in the administration of the towns. Eventually these men were recognized as representatives of the general population—at least those with property who paid taxes—and a more broadly based administration emerged. Over time, emperors or the Church admitted these groups into a more collective authority and cities became communes, that is, urban centers with a measure of self-governance on the part of elite, lay citizens whose assent to fundamental policies was required. Taxation, the administration of justice, weights and measures, coinage, and some other aspects of economic and social policy, such as guild membership, fell under the control of these leading citizens. The self-governing commune, whether in the

context of a republic or of a principality, became established, setting the platform on which the city-states of the Renaissance would develop. By the time of the First Crusade at the very end of the eleventh century, many of the major cities and towns of the Italian peninsula enjoyed some form of recognized communal government, and others followed soon after. This independence and the flexibility to take advantage of economic and political opportunities offered by the Crusades helped create the preconditions of the Renaissance.

The Crusades provided both the wealth and the opportunity for the expansion of the cities of Italy. Not only did the carrying trade needed to move huge armies of men and equipment across the Mediterranean enrich the maritime republics, but also Italy was advantaged by payments to the Church in lieu of going on Crusade, the provision of food to the Crusaders, and the need to sustain the communications network across the sea. The immediate profits from servicing the Crusades fell to Venice, Pisa, and Genoa, and the banking and credit structures needed to finance such an enormous undertaking also stimulated trade. Furthermore, the ships returning from the East carried to Europe the





luxury goods that the European elite now saw as necessary to an aristocratic life: spices, silks, oranges, carpets, and other exotic goods. The Crusades helped ensure that the Italian cities would control the financial, logistical, and luxury markets of the Mediterranean. Moreover, Italian cities established trading posts and fortified entrepôts throughout the region, with Italian traders functioning as the necessary brokers in the long-distance luxury trade with the East and, to a lesser extent, across the European continent. The financial structures permitted the foundation of banks throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, with Italian merchants assuming control of the major money markets of the continent. The power and wealth that accrued to Italy were remarkable, as was the level of influence, perhaps best illustrated in the Venetian manipulation of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 to capture Constantinople itself, as we shall see. By the thirteenth century, then, Italy was in a privileged position in Europe and the Mediterranean. It was in this environment that an indigenous, unique Italian culture emerged, reflecting a growing cosmopolitan perspective, a developing Italian vernacular, and a powerful sense of local self-confidence. This was the age of Dante.

## DANTE AND THE LATE-MEDIEVAL ITALIAN WORLD

The role of Dante in the history of Italian cultural development was more a question of debate in the Renaissance than it is now. Dante's posthumous reputation underwent a change between the early Renaissance in the mid-fourteenth century, the age of Petrarch, and the mature Florentine Renaissance of the fifteenth century, the age of Brunni. Petrarch, as we shall see in the next chapter, was one of the most influential of the early Renaissance humanists in Italy. He admired Dante, although he had reservations, seeing him reduced in stature because he wrote the *Divine Comedy* in Italian, the vernacular, rather than in elegant, classical Latin—a tongue that Petrarch believed Dante had mastered only imperfectly because his Latin writings reflect the style of the Middle Ages, a style Petrarch abominated. Also, Dante was different from Petrarch. He was a politician; he married and had legitimate children, and never lost his interest in the things of the world. He was not a pure scholar, on the model of Petrarch, who never married or held

