

# SECTION 1

# The Renaissance

## Guide to Reading

### Main Ideas

- Between 1350 and 1550, Italian intellectuals believed they had entered a new age of human achievement.
- City-states were the centers of political, economic, and social life in Renaissance Italy.

### Key Terms

urban society, secular, mercenary, dowry

### People to Identify

Leonardo da Vinci, Francesco Sforza, Cosimo de' Medici, Lorenzo de' Medici, Niccolò Machiavelli

### Places to Locate

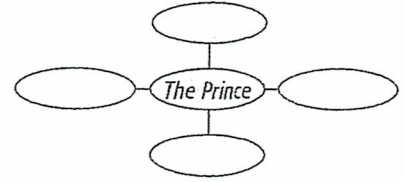
Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome

### Preview Questions

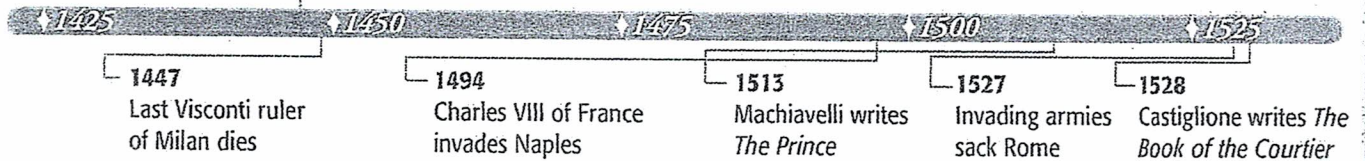
1. What was the Renaissance?
2. Describe the political world that existed in the Italian states.

### Reading Strategy

**Categorizing Information** Use a web diagram like the one below to identify the major principles of Machiavelli's work, *The Prince*.



### Preview of Events



## Voices from the Past



Cesare Borgia

Inspired by Cesare Borgia, who conquered central Italy and set up a state, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, a short work on political power. He said:

“Everyone realizes how praiseworthy it is for a prince to honor his word and to be straightforward rather than crafty in his dealings; nonetheless experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles. . . . A prince, therefore, need not necessarily have all the good qualities I mentioned above, but he should certainly appear to have them. . . . He should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary.”

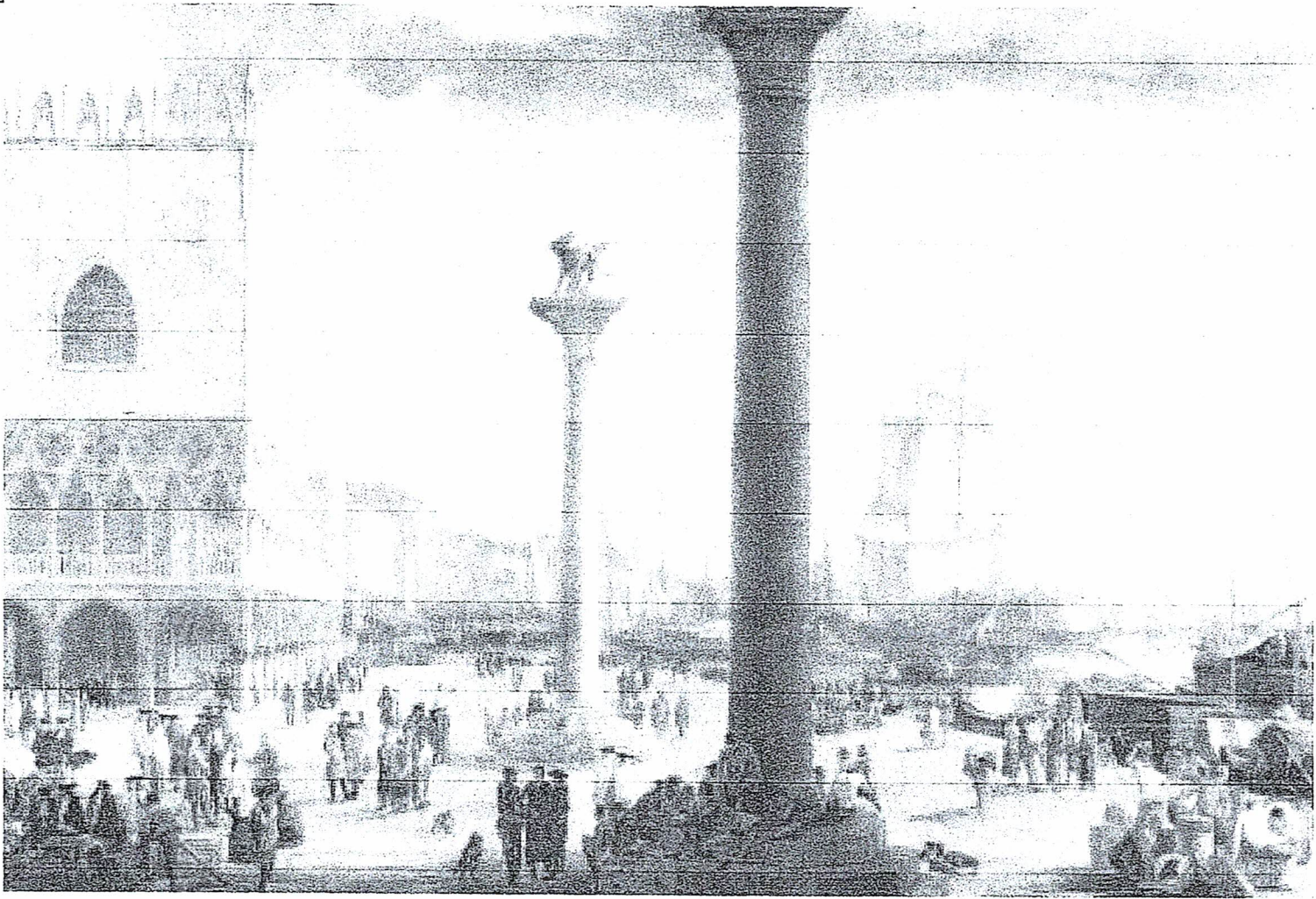
—*The Prince*, George Bull, trans., 1981

*The Prince* reflected the practice of politics in Renaissance Italy.

## The Italian Renaissance

The word *renaissance* means rebirth. A number of people who lived in Italy between 1350 and 1550 believed that they had witnessed a rebirth of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. To them, this rebirth marked a new age. Historians later called this period the Renaissance, or Italian Renaissance—a period of European history that began in Italy and spread to the rest of Europe. What, then, are the most important characteristics of the Italian Renaissance?

First, Renaissance Italy was largely an urban society. As the Middle Ages progressed, powerful city-states became the centers of Italian political, economic, and social life. Within this growing urban society, a secular, or worldly, viewpoint



*This painting by Luca Carlevaris, titled The Pier and the Ducal Palace, shows the wealth associated with Venice.*

emerged as increasing wealth created new possibilities for the enjoyment of material things.

Second, the Renaissance was an age of recovery from the disasters of the fourteenth century such as the plague, political instability, and a decline of Church power. Recovery went hand in hand with a rebirth of interest in ancient culture. Italian thinkers became aware of their own Roman past—the remains of which were to be seen all around them. They also became intensely interested in the culture that had dominated the ancient Mediterranean world. This revival affected both politics and art.

Third, a new view of human beings emerged as people in the Italian Renaissance began to emphasize individual ability. As Leon Battista Alberti, a fifteenth-century Italian, said, “Men can do all things if they will.” A high regard for human worth and a realization of what individuals could achieve created a new social ideal. The well-rounded, universal person was capable of achievements in many areas of life. Leonardo da Vinci (VIHN•chee), for example, was a painter, sculptor, architect, inventor, and mathematician.

Of course, not all parts of Italian society were directly affected by these three general characteristics of the Italian Renaissance. The wealthy upper classes, who made up a small percentage of the total population, more actively embraced the new ideas and activities. Indirectly, however, the Italian Renaissance did have some impact on ordinary people. Especially in the cities, many of the intellectual and artistic achievements of the period were highly visible and difficult to ignore. The churches, wealthy homes, and public buildings were decorated with art that celebrated religious and secular themes, the human body, and an appreciation of classical antiquity.

**Reading Check** **Summarizing** What were the characteristics of the Italian Renaissance?

## The Italian States

During the Middle Ages, Italy had failed to develop a centralized monarchical state. The lack of a single strong ruler made it possible for a number of city-states in northern and central Italy to remain independent. Three of them—Milan, Venice, and

Florence—expanded and played crucial roles in Italian politics.

The Italian city-states prospered from a flourishing trade that had expanded in the Middle Ages. Italian cities traded with both the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations to the east. Italian trading ships had also moved into the western Mediterranean and then north along the Atlantic seaboard. These ships exchanged goods with merchants in both England and the Netherlands. Italian merchants had profited from the Crusades as well and were able to set up new trading centers in eastern ports. There, the Italian merchants obtained silks, sugar, and spices, which they carried back to Italy and the West.

**Milan** Milan, located in northern Italy at the crossroads of the main trade routes from Italian coastal cities to the Alpine passes, was one of the richest city-states in Italy. In the fourteenth century, members of the Visconti family established themselves as dukes of Milan and extended their power over all of Lombardy.

The last Visconti ruler of Milan died in 1447. Francesco Sforza then conquered the city and became its new duke. Sforza was the leader of a band of mercenaries—soldiers who sold their services to the highest bidder.

Both the Visconti and Sforza rulers worked to build a strong

centralized state. By creating an efficient tax system, they generated enormous revenues for the government.

**Venice** Another major northern Italian city-state was the republic of Venice. As a link between Asia and western Europe the city drew traders from all over the world. Officially Venice was a republic with an elected leader called a *Doge*. In reality a small group of merchant-aristocrats, who had become wealthy through their trading activities, ran the government of Venice on behalf of their own interests. Venice's trade empire was tremendously profitable and made Venice an international power.

**Florence** The republic of Florence dominated the region of Tuscany. In the course of the fourteenth century, a small but wealthy group of merchants established control of the Florentine government. They led the Florentines in a series of successful wars against their neighbors and established Florence as a major city-state in northern Italy.

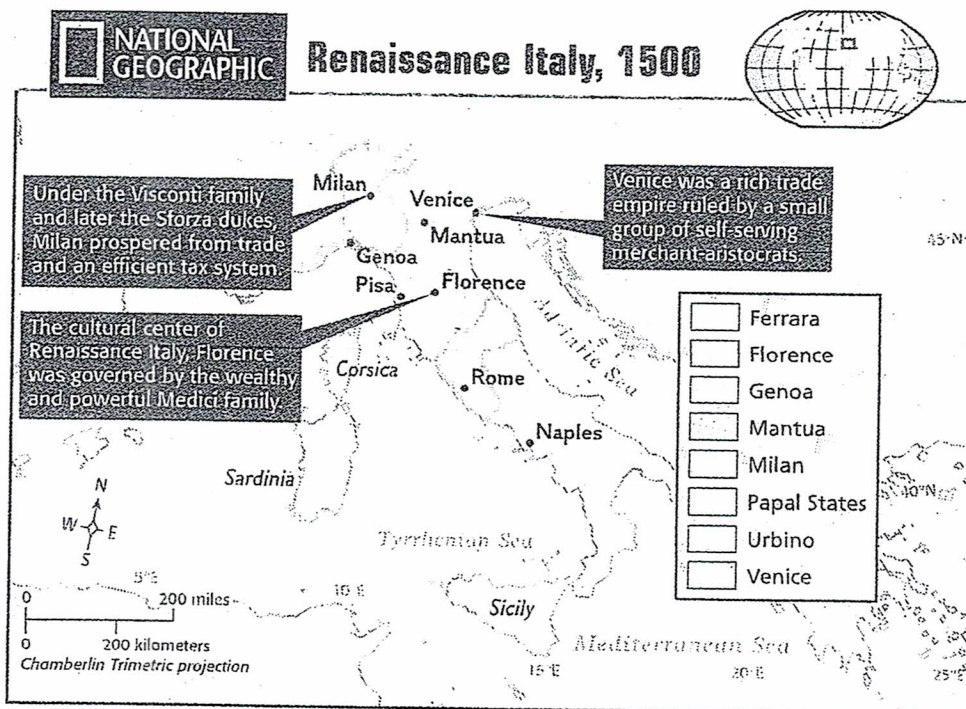
In 1434, Cosimo de' Medici (MEH•duh•chee) took control of the city. The wealthy Medici family controlled the government from behind the scenes. Using their wealth and personal influence, Cosimo and later, Lorenzo de' Medici, his



Francesco Sforza,  
Duke of Milan

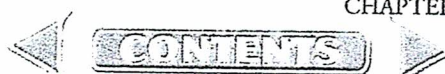


Lorenzo de' Medici



Italian city-states prospered during the Renaissance.

- Interpreting Maps**  
Using your text, identify the three most powerful city-states. What geographic features did they have in common?
- Applying Geography Skills**  
Which city-state was in the best location to trade by land and sea with the Byzantine Empire to the east?





### History through Art

**Entry of Charles VIII into Naples by Eloi Firmin Feron, 1837** Some scholars believe that the Italian wars helped spread Renaissance ideals and practices. How could the wars have had that effect?

grandson, dominated the city at a time when Florence was the cultural center of Italy.

During the late 1400s, Florence experienced an economic decline. Most of its economy was based on the manufacturing of cloth. Increased competition from English and Flemish cloth makers drove down profits.

During this time a Dominican preacher named Girolamo Savonarola began condemning the corruption and excesses of the Medici family. Citizens, tired of Medici rule, and frustrated by economic events, turned to Savonarola. So many people followed him that the Medici family turned Florence over to his followers.

Eventually people tired of Savonarola's strict regulations on gambling, horseracing, swearing, painting, music, and books. Savonarola also attacked the corruption of the Church, which angered the pope. In 1498, Savonarola was accused of heresy and sentenced to death. The Medici family returned to power.

**The Italian Wars** The growth of powerful monarchical states in the rest of Europe eventually led to trouble for the Italian states. Attracted by the riches of Italy, the French king Charles VIII led an army of thirty thousand men into Italy in 1494 and occupied the kingdom of Naples in southern Italy. Northern Italian states turned for help to the Spanish, who gladly agreed to send soldiers to Italy. For the next 30 years, the French and Spanish made Italy their battleground as they fought to dominate the country.

A decisive turning point in their war came in 1527. On May 5, thousands of troops belonging to the Spanish king Charles I arrived at the city of Rome along with mercenaries from different countries. They had not been paid for months. When they yelled, "Money! Money!" their leader responded, "If you have ever dreamed of pillaging a town and laying hold of its treasures, here now is one, the richest of them all, queen of the world." The next day the invading forces smashed down the gates and pushed their way into the city. The troops went berserk in a frenzy of bloodshed and looting. Church officials were sold as slaves, and churches and palaces were sacked while drunken soldiers fought over the spoils. The destruction did not end until the authorities were finally forced to establish some order. The terrible sack of Rome in 1527 by the armies of the Spanish king Charles I ended the Italian wars and left the Spanish a dominant force in Italy.

**Reading Check** **Describing** How did the Visconti and Sforza rulers become powerful in Milan?

## Machiavelli and the New Statecraft

No one gave better expression to the Italians' love affair with political power than Niccolò Machiavelli (MA•kee•uh•VEH•lee). His book *The Prince* is one of the most influential works on political power in the Western world.



*Machiavelli, as portrayed by Santi di Tito*

Machiavelli's central thesis in *The Prince* concerns how to acquire—and keep—political power. In the Middle Ages, many writers on political power had stressed the ethical side of a prince's activity—how a ruler ought to behave based on Christian principles. Machiavelli rejected this approach.

From Machiavelli's point of view, a prince's attitude toward power must be based on an understanding of human nature, which he believed was basically self-centered. He wrote, "One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit." Political activity, therefore, should not be restricted by moral principles. A prince acts on behalf of the state. For the sake of the state, he must be willing to let his conscience sleep.

Machiavelli was among the first to abandon morality as the basis for analyzing political activity. His views on politics have had a profound influence on political leaders who followed.

**Reading Check Explaining** Why was *The Prince* an important work on political power?

## Renaissance Society

In the Middle Ages, society was divided into three estates, or social classes. Although this social order continued into the Renaissance, some changes became evident. We examine the nobility and the peasants and townspeople here. The clergy are discussed later in the chapter.

**The Nobility** Throughout much of Europe, landholding nobles were faced with declining incomes

during the greater part of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Many members of the old nobility, however, retained their lands and titles; new blood also came into their ranks.

By 1500, nobles, old and new, again dominated society. Although they made up only about 2 to 3 percent of the population in most countries, the nobles held important political posts and served as advisers to the king.

By this time, the noble, or aristocrat, was expected to fulfill certain ideals. These ideals were clearly expressed in *The Book of the Courtier*, written by the Italian Baldassare Castiglione (KAHS•teel•YOH•NAY) in 1528.

In his work, Castiglione described the characteristics of a perfect Renaissance noble. First, a noble was born, not made. He was expected to have character, grace, and talent. Second, the perfect noble had to develop two basic skills. Because the chief aim of a noble was to be a warrior, he had to perform military and physical exercises. Unlike the medieval knight, however, who was primarily concerned with acquiring military skill, the Renaissance noble was also expected to gain a classical education and enrich his life with the arts. Third, the noble needed to follow a certain standard of conduct. Nobles were not supposed to hide their achievements but to show them with grace.



*A portrait of Baldassare Castiglione by Raphael, c. 1516*

## The Impact of Printing

The Renaissance saw the development of printing in Europe. In the fifteenth century, Europeans gradually learned how to print with movable metal type. Johannes Gutenberg of Germany played a crucial role in the process. Gutenberg's Bible, printed about 1455, was the first European book produced from movable type.

By 1500, there were over a thousand printers in Europe. Almost forty thousand titles had been published. More than half of these were religious books, including Bibles in English, French, and German; prayer books; and sermons. Most others were Latin and Greek classics, legal and philosophical works, and romances.

The printing of books encouraged scholarly research and increased the public's desire to gain knowledge, which would eventually have an enormous impact on European society. The new religious ideas of the Reformation would not have spread as rapidly as they did in the sixteenth century without the printing press.

Printing allowed European civilization to compete for the first time with the civilization of China. The Chinese had invented printing much earlier, as well as printing with movable type.

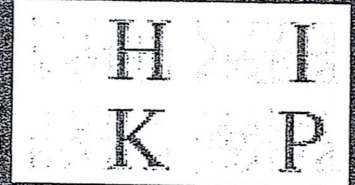
**Analyzing** *Why do you think the printing of books encouraged people's desire to gain knowledge?*



Johannes Gutenberg

Printing press, c. 1450

Fifteenth-century type design



What was the purpose of these standards?

“I think that the aim of the perfect Courtier is so to win for himself the favor and mind of the prince whom he serves that he may be able to tell him, and always will tell him, the truth about everything he needs to know, without fear or risk of displeasing him; and that when he sees the mind of his prince inclined to a wrong action, he may dare to oppose him . . . so as to dissuade him of every evil intent and bring him to the path of virtue.”

The aim, then, of the perfect noble was to serve his prince in an effective and honest way. Nobles would adhere to Castiglione's principles for hundreds of years while they continued to dominate European life socially and politically.

**Peasants and Townspeople** In the Middle Ages, peasants had made up the overwhelming mass of the

third estate. In the Renaissance, they still constituted 85 to 90 percent of the total European population, except in the highly urban areas of northern Italy and Flanders.

Serfdom continued to decrease with the decline of the manorial system. Increasingly, throughout the late Middle Ages, the labor owed by a peasant to a lord was converted into rent on land paid in money. By 1500, especially in western Europe, more and more peasants became legally free.

Townspeople made up the rest of the third estate. In the Middle Ages, townspeople were mostly merchants and artisans. The Renaissance town or city of the fifteenth century, however, was more diverse.

At the top of urban society were the patricians. Their wealth from trade, industry, and banking enabled them to dominate their communities economically, socially, and politically. Below them were the burghers—the shopkeepers, artisans, guild

masters, and guild members who provided the goods and services for their fellow townspeople.

Below the patricians and the burghers were the workers, who earned pitiful wages, and the unemployed. Both groups lived miserable lives. These people made up perhaps 30 or 40 percent of the urban population.

During the late 1300s and the 1400s, urban poverty increased dramatically throughout Europe. One rich merchant of Florence, who had little sympathy for the poor, wrote:

☞ Those that are lazy in a way that does harm to the city, and who can offer no just reason for their condition, should either be forced to work or expelled from the city. The city would thus rid itself of that most harmful part of the poorest class. ☞

**Family and Marriage** The family bond was a source of great security in the dangerous urban world of Renaissance Italy. To maintain the family, parents carefully arranged marriages, often to strengthen business or family ties. Details were worked out well in advance, sometimes when children were only two or three years old. The most important aspect of the marriage contract was the size of the dowry, a sum of money given by the wife's family to the husband upon marriage.

The father-husband was the center of the Italian family. He gave it his name, managed all finances (his wife had no share in his wealth), and made the deci-

sions that determined his children's lives. The mother's chief role was to supervise the household.

A father's authority over his children was absolute until he died or formally freed his children. In Renaissance Italy, children did not become adults on reaching a certain age. Instead, adulthood came to children when their fathers went before a judge and formally freed them. The age of adulthood varied from the early teens to the late twenties.

**Reading Check** **Contrasting** How was the Renaissance noble different from the medieval knight?



**History through Art**

**Celebration of a Marriage by Ghirlandaio Domenico** During the Renaissance, a marriage was more of a business arrangement than a matter of love. How does this painting support or contradict that statement?

**SECTION ASSESSMENT**

**Checking for Understanding**

1. **Define** urban society, secular, mercenary, dowry.
2. **Identify** Leonardo da Vinci, Francesco Sforza, Cosimo de' Medici, Lorenzo de' Medici, Niccolò Machiavelli.
3. **Locate** Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome.
4. **Explain** how the Spanish became involved in the Italian wars.
5. **Summarize** the characteristics of Castiglione's perfect noble.

**Critical Thinking**

6. **Explain** Why was a strong family bond so important in Renaissance Italy?
7. **Contrasting Information** Use a table like the one below to describe the differences between the social structure of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

	Middle Ages	Renaissance
Nobility		
Peasants		
Townspeople		

**Analyzing Visuals**

8. **Identify** details in the painting of Venice on page 158 that show it is a major city-state with a profitable trade empire. Find other images of Venice in your school library and compare them to this painting.

**Writing About History**

9. **Expository Writing** Read a few passages from *The Prince*. Write a brief essay explaining whether or not you agree with Machiavelli's theory of politics.

