

# The Italian Renaissance



Edited by Paula Findlen

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5018, USA  
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia  
Kurfürstendamm 57, 10707 Berlin, Germany

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**Part I**

**Introduction**



## Introduction to Part I

The Italian Renaissance is an interesting and complex moment in the history of politics, society and culture. This volume contains thirteen essays designed to introduce readers to some of the most fundamental aspects of the period in question. I have organized these readings thematically because I still agree with the Swiss German historian Jacob Burckhardt, whose *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) remains the classic study of this subject, that the Renaissance was not an event that unfolded in a series of neat chronological steps but a subject that emerged episodically. Part I offers an introductory overview to the Italian Renaissance and extensive, though by no means comprehensive, bibliography of some of the important work on this period in English. Part II examines politics and the Renaissance city-state. Part III introduces readers to crucial aspects of behavior in the cities, the physical location in which many activities that define the Renaissance occurred. Part IV examines the nature of marriage and motherhood and attitudes towards sexuality. Part V discusses the intellectual life of Renaissance Italy, offering three different perspectives on humanism. Finally, Part VI turns to the problem of patronage in relationship to the production of art and culture in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

These different themes by no means exhaust the variety of subjects that an introductory volume on Renaissance Italy might cover. But they are all essential for a better understanding of why this society continues to fascinate us. Each of the essays in this volume demonstrates some of the best work in political, social, and cultural history done in the past few decades. I have supplemented them with introductory essays, designed to raise general questions about the theme as a whole, and with images that reflect directly the themes of each section. Looking at art is a fundamental aspect of understanding Italian Renaissance history, not simply for the pleasure it affords but because it offers us crucial pieces of evidence about how this society envisioned itself.

Historical inquiry should be a process that yields multiple interpretations of a single subject. This volume is not designed to describe Renaissance Italy in any definitive sense, because there are many aspects of this world that a single book cannot cover in adequate detail. Rather its goal is to inform readers about key attributes of this world and to invite you to participate in the process of understanding and imagining this particular past. Since the modern idea of history – understanding the past in its own terms – was, in part, a creation of Renaissance humanism, this makes it all the more fitting that historians continue to exercise their skills on grappling with the problems and pleasures of a society that truly appreciated the value of a historical perspective.

# 1

## Understanding the Italian Renaissance

*Paula Findlen*

*No enterprise, no matter how small, can begin or end without these three things: power, knowledge, and love. Fourteenth-century Tuscan saying<sup>1</sup>*

### I How Petrarch Rediscovered Italy

In 1337, the son of a Florentine merchant who had spent most of his life in the papal city of Avignon in southern France, made his first trip to Rome. Gazing upon the city that had once been the center of the Roman Empire and the heart of Christendom until the papacy moved to Avignon in 1309, Francesco Petrarca (1304–74) lamented the sorry condition of “the remains of a broken city.” Already in his writings he anticipated a moment when future generations would emerge from “this slumber of forgetfulness into the pure radiance of the past.”<sup>2</sup>

Petrarch’s profound sense of displacement from his own times and his fierce desire to recapture the glories of a neglected past lay at the heart of the cultural movement we know as the Renaissance. He belonged to the earliest generations of humanists who had begun to re-examine the ancient

1 Vittore Branca, ed., *Merchant Writers of the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Murtha Baca (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1999), p. ix. Readers wishing to consult other surveys of Renaissance Italy might start with Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Vintage, 1980, 1979), Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986; 1972); and Lisa Jardine, *Wordly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1996). The most fundamental account remains Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin, 1990).

2 Petrarch, *Rerum familiarium libri I–VIII*, p. 294 (*Fam.* VI, 2): “Et euntibus per menia fracte urbis et illic sedentibus, ruinarum fragmenta sub oculis erant.” In Petrarca, *Opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1975), p. 484; and Petrarch, *Africa* (1336), in John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: Laurence King, 1997), p. 26.

past in the study of law and literature and, in Petrarch's case, use the lessons he learned from antiquity to examine the spiritual malaise of the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup> By the end of his life, he surrounded himself with the artifacts that evoked the world he wished to inhabit: manuscripts written by ancient Romans such as his beloved Cicero, to whom Petrarch composed imaginary letters in an effort to converse with the dead; ancient coins and medals; books of modern authors such as Dante Alighieri (1265–1322) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) who transformed Tuscan prose into a celebrated literary style; a painting by Giotto that was among his dearest possessions; and Greek manuscripts that he found himself unable to read because there was no one fully capable of unlocking their ancient grammar.

A Tuscan who spent most of his life outside of Italy, Petrarch exhibited a passionate craving for the best things that his society could offer him, ancient as well as modern. He attempted to perfect his Latin in imitation of Cicero in his letters, dialogues, and treatises, and celebrated the resurgence of his native Tuscan by writing poetry in this vernacular. He wrote dialogues between himself and Augustine, his favorite Christian writer, in order to explore the problems of a moral existence in a world rife with temptations, among them, the pleasure of knowledge itself. After numerous trips to Italy during which he collected manuscripts and met admirers such as Boccaccio, Petrarch finally returned to his native land. He initially settled in Milan in 1353, later moving to the small town of Arquà, south of Padua, in 1370 to enjoy his final years in proximity to one of the great centers of learning.

In retrospect, it might seem obvious to us that such cities as Florence, Venice, and Rome should be the centerpiece of the Italian Renaissance, because their leading historians and artists engaged so actively in their myth-making in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but this was not immediately evident to contemporary observers. The Italy to which Petrarch returned was not Tuscany, but Milan, center of a thriving court culture, Verona, home of rich monastic libraries, Padua, a great center for law and scholarship, and of course Rome, a ghost of the past. His friend Boccaccio, another Tuscan who spent years away from Florence working for his family's business in Naples, felt a similar ambivalence towards Florence, though he returned there in 1341. Angevin Naples, he wrote with great nostalgia, had been "happy, peaceful, abounding in good things, magnificent, and ruled by a single king." Instead he found Florence filled with "as many opinions as there are men, and always under arms, and at war as much at home as abroad." Boccaccio eventually retreated to his

3 Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Charles Trinkhaus, *The Poet as Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

birthplace of Certaldo in 1361, where he celebrated “the absence of the ambitions and the unpleasantness and annoyances of our town-dwellers.”<sup>4</sup> He had no special love for fourteenth-century Florence nor any particular allegiance to its politics.

Following his death in 1374, Petrarch’s home and tomb in Arquà became pilgrimage sites for his admirers who saw him as the embodiment of the cultural movement that another Tuscan, the painter and historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), would describe in 1550 as a *rinascita* – a rebirth. Boccaccio, too, would be celebrated as the embodiment of all that was great about Florence. However, Vasari did not have either writer in mind when he wrote these words. He referred specifically to the transformation of the arts between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, beginning with Cimabue (ca. 1240–1302) and Giotto (1266/67–1337) and culminating in Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) who was still alive when Vasari completed his first edition. Sixteenth-century French humanists translated *rinascita* into *renaissance* to describe the general revival of learning and culture that they had witnessed. As French culture extended its influence throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this foreign word stuck. In 1764 no less a figure than the great English historian Edward Gibbon described himself as seeing the “renaissance” of art as he gazed at the paintings in the Uffizi galleries and contemplated writing a history of the Medici. By the mid-nineteenth century historians such as Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt used this concept to define the period as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Burckhardt, in particular, insisted that it was not simply the revival of antiquity that constituted the Renaissance. If Petrarch wished to think and write like a Roman, it was a reflection of a much more fundamental transformation of his society.

In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Burckhardt famously remarked: “The Renaissance would not have been the process of world-wide significance which it is, if its elements could be so easily separated from one

4 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Fiametta*, as quoted in Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man and His Works*, trans. Richard Monges and Dennis J. McAuliffe (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 58; idem, *Epistola consolatoria a Pino de’ Rossi*, in Branca, *Boccaccio*, p. 129. For a fine account of why Naples was appealing, see Jerry H. Bentley, *Politics and Culture in Renaissance Naples* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

5 Vasari alluded to the “progress of art’s rebirth” in the preface to his *Lives of the Most Eminent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors from Cimabue to Our Times*, first published in 1550 and reissued with important modifications in 1568. See Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, ed. and trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 6. On the idea of the Renaissance, see especially Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1948); and Paula Findlen, *A Fragmentary Past: The Making of Museums and the Making of the Renaissance* (forthcoming).



another.”<sup>6</sup> While we may no longer agree with Burckhardt on the precise meaning of the Italian Renaissance, which he defined as the birth of the modern western world and modern man, his idea of the interconnectedness of Italian Renaissance society still stands. If today most of us primarily experience the Italian Renaissance through viewing its great works of art in museums and in countless reproductions of paintings such as Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485) and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1503–6), and by reading a handful of its most important books such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1513), we need to remember that these things are not timeless and isolated artifacts but were products of a specific historical moment. Understanding the Italian Renaissance allows us to appreciate how the cultural traces of the Renaissance that have survived emerged from its social, political, economic, and religious fabric. This context is well worth studying because Italy played a fundamental role in shaping the politics and culture of western Europe from antiquity through the seventeenth century.

Just as Petrarch’s vision of the past is part of a more complicated story about the growth of humanist learning, which looked to ancient Greece and Rome for models of good politics and culture, the emergence of Florence, Venice, and Rome as Renaissance cities filled with great artists and generous patrons cannot be told in isolation from developments throughout the Italian peninsula in this crucial period of its history. No single individual or city gave birth to the Italian Renaissance or fully contained its achievements. Instead we might think of the Italian Renaissance as a Shakespearean drama in which the minor characters and the settings themselves were often the hinge of the entire story. In the past two decades, social and cultural history has given us a richer portrait of Renaissance Italy than we previously enjoyed. Many of the articles in this volume reflect this new understanding of the Renaissance. We now have a much better comprehension of how such issues as family and sexuality, friendship and patronage, knowledge and faith defined the parameters of behavior in this world in relationship to our continued appreciation of the great politics, art, and literature of the time. The chapters in this volume invite readers to explore the dynamic among these different dimensions of the Italian Renaissance.

## 2 The Italy that Petrarch Saw

But let us return to the beginning of the Italian Renaissance – the moment of Petrarch’s great nostalgia. The world that Petrarch inhabited was a study in contrasts, and this was surely part of his disaffection from it. The poverty

6 Burckhardt, *Civilization*, p. 120.

of Rome, the only major city of this period whose walls were not constantly being rebuilt to accommodate a population bursting at the seams, appeared all the more incongruous in a landscape defined by urban growth and prosperity. Florence, already a city of over 100,000 inhabitants before the great plague pandemic of 1348 killed somewhere between one-third to one-half its population, typified this other face of Italy that Petrarch certainly knew well. It was a thriving commercial society that expressed its pride through great civic commissions such as the building of the Duomo, initiated in 1296 and halfway towards completion when Petrarch visited Florence, and the decoration of the south Baptistery doors that Andrea Pisano completed in 1336. To the south of Florence, the government of Siena commissioned Ambrogio Lorenzetti to paint his *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* (1338–40), a subtle account of the many forces that shaped a city, on the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico (Plate 1). To the north, noble families such as the d'Este in Ferrara, the Gonzaga in Mantua, and the Visconti in Milan had just begun to establish their rule over their respective cities. In Venice, artisans laid the foundation stones of the Doge's Palace in 1340. The growth of many Italian towns in the face of the papacy's abandonment of Italy, and despite the intermittent struggles between ruling families who used their allegiance to the pope or the emperor as a pretext for attacking their enemies, was one of the many paradoxes that troubled witnesses to Italy's fourteenth century.

In contrast to the nation-states that emerged in Spain, France, and England during the Renaissance, Italy would not become a nation until 1860, the year Burckhardt completed his great study of Renaissance Italy, and this new Italy did not include the Papal States until 1869. Although Renaissance Italy lacked any prospect for unified political leadership and seemed to have temporarily ceded its religious primacy to the French, it surpassed all other parts of Europe, with the possible exception of Flanders, in its commercial economy. "Money is the vital heat of a city," observed the Franciscan preacher Bernardino da Siena (1380–1444). A steady stream of transactions involving florins, ducats, and bills of exchange, all neatly recorded in account books that survive from this period, defined the world in which the majority of city-dwellers lived. Boccaccio vividly captured this world in his tales of greedy and gullible merchants who betrayed and were betrayed by their wives while engaging in commerce far from home. He had direct experience of such things working as a banker's apprentice in Naples. "Make me this calculation," a fourteenth-century Venetian merchant wrote repeatedly in his notebook.<sup>7</sup> The connections among cities – linked by trade, immigration, and politics – made Italian society thrive.

7 John E. Dotson, ed. and trans., *Merchant Culture in Fourteenth Century Venice: The Zibaldone da Canal* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), p. 29 and *passim*.



**Plate 1** Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Good City-Republic* (1338–40). Source: Sala dei Nove, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena (partial view of east wall).

This panel is part of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's (ca. 1295–1348) famous fresco cycle, most commonly known as the *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. Commissioned by the Nine who ruled Siena from 1287 to 1355, it offers an idealized portrait of the virtues of republican government. Lorenzetti's fresco transforms details of an Italian city-state into a utopian image of a harmonious and prosperous society. The fact that Lorenzetti's fresco cycle was located in the Room of the Nine in the Palazzo Pubblico, the seat of government in Siena, suggests its importance as a work of public art. City officials and visitors who entered the room were first confronted with an image of a violent and chaotic city ruled by Fear, "The City-State Under Tyranny" (west wall). Looking at the north wall, they saw "The Virtues of Good Government," a fresco depicting how communal government dispensed justice, maintained peace, and preserved the common good. Finally they turned to the image of "The Good City-Republic," where Security maintains peace by guarding the city gates that open into the countryside. Inside the walls, the social and economic life of the city thrives. Note the depiction of Siena's Duomo in the upper-left corner as well as the presence of aristocratic family towers that suggest the kind of oligarchical power that controlled the city. Building projects, a lively market, and a marriage procession (lower-left corner) offer a snapshot of an Italian city on the eve of the Black Death.

The merchant community in Avignon, for example, was filled with all manner of Italians, trading goods, opening branches of their banks, and offering services to an international clientele. When Francesco Datini (ca. 1335–1410) decided to become a merchant, he opened his first shop in Avignon, followed by branches in Pisa, Genoa, Valencia, and Majorca. But he also made sure to become a Florentine citizen after returning to Italy in 1382, and eventually left all of his wealth to his native city of Prato upon his death.<sup>8</sup> Like Petrarch, he could not spend his entire life outside Italy without eventually seeking recognition at home.

More often than not, citizenship in the Italian Renaissance cities was defined by long absences for its male members, who stayed away from home so that their family businesses might prosper and, at times, because the vicissitudes of politics had forced them into exile. In July 1449, for instance, Alessandra Strozzi lamented the fact that her youngest son, thirteen-year-old Matteo, was about to depart for Naples to learn his trade, following his two elder brothers who also had left Florence in pursuit of honor and profit.<sup>9</sup> The mobility of Italian merchants and patricians brought the values and practices of the Italian cities into contact with many parts of the world. For all these reasons, Petrarch could experience Italy even from the distance of Avignon, because so much of Italy had migrated to southern France with the papacy's abandonment of Rome.

The commercial economy of northern and central Italy produced forms of governance that reflected the emergence of a wealthy urban elite and a society in need of revenue to fund the costs of intermittent warfare. Communal government shaped the politics of many Italian city-states as early as the twelfth century, though there were other cities ruled by hereditary princes with feudal land holdings. The cities of Tuscany, principally Florence, Siena, and Pisa, were ruled by an elected citizen elite who levied public taxes to support the enterprise of the state. Machiavelli would later observe with pride that Tuscany contained three republics and “no baronial castles.”<sup>10</sup> Their merchants and bankers traveled all over the Mediterranean, Levant, and northern Europe. The maritime republics of Genoa and Venice, both as large as Florence, rested their prosperity on trading empires

8 Bernardino da Siena's sermons are quoted in Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 24. On Datini, see Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Daily Life in a Medieval City* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986; 1957).

9 Alessandra Strozzi, *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, ed. and trans. Heather Gregory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 45.

10 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker, S. J. and Brian Richardson (London: Penguin, 1983; 1970), p. 243. This work seems to have been written between 1516 and 1519, though it was already in gestation when Machiavelli completed *The Prince*.

that competed with each other for control of transport and commerce between East and West. *Januensis ergo mercator*, “Genoese therefore a merchant,” went a saying of the time. Venice’s fifteenth-century chroniclers noted with pride that Venetian patricians “continue to trade.” They praised their elected head of government, the doge, for having the appearance of a prince, the virtues of a citizen, and the temperament of a merchant.<sup>11</sup>

City-states increasingly were territorial states whose geography reflected the ambitions of their leading citizens. In Petrarch’s time, the expansion of various states had just begun and would be completed in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The Florentines, for example, annexed Pisa in 1406 and Livorno in 1421 with the specific goal of acquiring access to the sea, as the culmination of a territorial state that had begun with the submission of Prato to Florentine rule in 1350. The Venetians declared their primacy over the Genoese by establishing an overseas empire in the Eastern Mediterranean that included much of Istria, Dalmatia, Crete, and colonies scattered between Venice and Constantinople. The size of their territorial state within Italy, beginning with the capture of Treviso in 1389 and culminating in the acquisition of Bergamo by 1428, deeply alarmed neighboring states such as Milan and Ferrara (see Map 1). Pope Pius II would write of the Venetians in 1459 that “they aim at the dominion of Italy and all but dare to aspire to the mastery of the world.” But he was quick to add that if the Florentine state grew as strong, “they would also have an equal ambition for empire.”<sup>12</sup> To a certain extent, the logic of the city-state reflected the dynamics of trade in which the wealthiest cities and rulers had the resources to secure their position within a region. Subject cities might occasionally rebel when they sensed weakness at the center, or when external threats from other rulers forced them to reconsider their allegiances, but they came to accept the idea that Italy would be a land of many would-be princes but few actual rulers.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the Renaissance, Italy was a crossroads between northern Europe and the Levant.<sup>14</sup> Tuscan gradually emerged as a com-

11 Steven Epstein, *Genoa and the Genoese, 958–1528* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. xvi; and Marin Sanudo, *Praise of the City of Venice* (1493), in *Venice: A Documentary History 1450–1630*, ed. David Chambers and Brian Pullan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 11. It was said of the Venetian doge: “He has the bearing of a prince, but in the Senate he is a senator, and in the marketplace a citizen.” In Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

12 Aenius Sylvius Piccolomini, *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: The Commentaries of Pius II (An Abridgment)*, ed. Leona C. Gabel, trans. Florence A. Gragg (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962; 1959), p. 352.

13 Two exemplary studies of subject cities are Judith C. Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence: Provincial Society in Renaissance Pescia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); and James S. Grubb, *Firstborn of Venice: Vicenza in the Early Renaissance State*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

14 The classic study of this subject remains Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the*



**Map 1** Renaissance Italy.

mercial language across the Mediterranean before becoming the literary language of educated Italians in the sixteenth century. Genoese and Venetian dialects helped to create the international language of seafarers. Societies in proximity to Italy also shaped its culture. In parts of northern Italy, French and German were the lingua franca, just as Arabic and Greek continued to be spoken in parts of southern Italy – vestiges of centuries of foreign rule and a reflection of the constantly shifting boundaries between Italy, France, and the Holy Roman Empire. The economic opportunities in Italy also attracted foreigners. When the French diplomat Philippe de Commines visited Venice in 1495, he alluded to the prominence of Greek, German, and Turkish colonies in the city, when he remarked that “most of the people are foreigners.”<sup>15</sup> Slaves, mostly of Slavic and eastern European origin, were yet another foreign population who entered the households of wealthy patricians as servants – the ultimate example of how a commercial society connected different peoples.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, Italy seemed utterly lacking in a single unifying identity – an entrepôt more than a state – save for a lingering sense that all parts of the Italian peninsula had inherited a legacy and a language from the Roman empire and had vested interests that loosely bound them together.

The emphasis on local interests shaped Italy as a region of multiple identities, roughly unified by language, customs, and culture. If the idea of communal government distinguished Italy from the rest of Europe, it was by no means uniform or evident in every part of Italy. The Florentines, Venetians, and Genoese, for example, all considered themselves citizens of great republics. But the nature of republican rule expressed itself differently in each instance. While all cities restricted active citizenship to the population of adult males who paid taxes, some cities such as Florence made membership in a guild (organizations which regulated entry into the major professions within a city) a crucial factor. Other cities made the question of lineage a primary criterion for political participation. The most famous case is Venice, whose “Golden Book” (*Libro d'oro*) recorded the names of all descendants of the city's ruling families since 1297, defining for the next five hundred years who could hold office. In 1377 the Visconti rulers of Milan created a similar book to distinguish their nobility, though it did not

*Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1972–3), 2 vols. See also David Abulafia, *The Two Italies: Economic Relations between the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and the Northern Communes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

15 John Martin and Dennis Romano, ed., *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State 1297–1797* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 20.

16 This important subject is only just beginning to receive more attention. See Iris Origo, “The Domestic Enemy: Eastern Slaves in Tuscany in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Speculum* 30 (1955): 321–66; and Robert C. Davis, “Slave Redemption in Venice, 1585–1797,” in Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*, pp. 454–87.

have the same sort of lasting impact on the city's politics.<sup>17</sup> Both in the northern and southern-most parts of Italy, lineage mattered in ways that seemed less apparent in Tuscany.

The Florentines were suspicious of their city's nobility. They excluded magnates from holding office in 1293, out of fear that they would abuse their power. Their towers, that defined the political divisions of the medieval city, were slowly being toppled to make way for new civic buildings and, with them, a new style of politics.<sup>18</sup> "I am not a prince," Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) explained to pope Pius II (1458–64), carefully underscoring the distinction between the basis of his unofficial control of Florentine politics and hereditary rule. Cosimo also distinguished the legitimacy of his position, as unofficial ruler of Florence (1434–69), from rule by force. "A republic cannot be run in the same way as a despotic regime," he told Francesco Sforza, who had wrested the duchy of Milan from the hands of the Visconti in 1450.<sup>19</sup> He was acutely sensitive to the political differences within the Italian city-states and to the importance of communal traditions in his own city, as were the Venetians who declared that because they were a republic "everything must be done by ballot."<sup>20</sup> The Venetian doge, elected as head of state for life in a process as complex and embattled as the election of a new pope by a cardinals' conclave, was decidedly not a prince who could act without the consent of the Great Council.<sup>21</sup> Rather, he was their first citizen, a prince when the republic needed a princely figurehead but always a citizen constrained by the rules of citizenship in a Renaissance republic.

17 The best starting point for understanding Venetian history is still Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). For a recent reassessment, see Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*; and Gary Wills, *Venice, Lion City: The Religion of Empire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001). The Venetian and Milanese registers are discussed in Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 30 and *passim*. The most accessible study of Milanese court culture is Gregory Lubkin, *A Renaissance Court: Milan under Galeazzo Maria Sforza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

18 Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; 1969), p. 133; and Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Around 1200, Florence had more than 150 towers, and even today cities such as Bologna and San Gimignano contain a few of the aristocratic family towers. "Magnate" is a term for the older ruling families of Florence, in contrast to newer families such as the Medici who came to rule the city.

19 Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 348.

20 Lunardo Emo to doge Andrea Gritti, ca. 1528–29, in Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*, p. 170.

21 The Great Council of Venice consisted of all the adult males of patrician families (approximately 3,000). The real decision-making bodies were the Senate and the Council of Ten. See Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1980).



It is a mistake to think of the Italian republics and their claims to reinvent Roman traditions of liberty as the dominant approach to Renaissance politics, when it was one of several viable alternatives. Numerous other Italian states were ruled by dukes, marquises, and aristocratic lords who built fortresses and castles to dominate the lands they held. Giovanni Antonio di Blazo Orsini, prince of Otranto, duke of Bari, and count of Lecce and Conversano reputedly commanded four hundred castles, according to one chronicler in 1444, and could ride from Naples to Taranto entirely on his own lands.<sup>22</sup> Other states thrived under the leadership of mercenary soldiers (*condottieri*), who commanded powerful armies and maintained strategic allegiances with neighboring city-states. The Sforza in Milan, the Montefeltro in Urbino, the Malatesta in Rimini, Cesare Borgia in Romagna, and many lesser-known princes of this period were cut from this cloth. Such changes led pope Pius II to declare famously that in Italy “a servant can easily become a king.”<sup>23</sup> As a Siennese aristocrat, Pius II disliked the ease with which merchants and soldiers could become heads of state. And yet Machiavelli would complain what a socially closed world a city like Florence could be for the son of a poor country gentleman, rendering it difficult for a man without status, money, and connections to get a decent post in government. So we must not take Pius’s assessment to mean that anyone could aspire to rule.

Italy, in other words, was a region of many different kinds of governments, elective and hereditary, communal and despotic, secular and religious, local and foreign. At the beginning of the thirteenth century there were over two hundred city-states in the Italian peninsula, perhaps as many as three hundred. The majority of them were in northern and central Italy, where approximately one-third of the population lived in towns or cities.<sup>24</sup> Southern Italy was more rural, often ruled by foreign monarchs (both French and Spanish), and dominated by aristocratic, land-holding families whose castles still mark the terrain of such regions as Lazio, Campania, Calabria, and Puglia.<sup>25</sup> The number of city-states was considerably diminished

22 Denys Hay and John Law, *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1380–1530* (New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 186–7.

23 Burckhardt, *Civilization*, p. 33.

24 Burke, *Italian Renaissance*, p. 209; and Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith, *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1995), p. 56. See Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

25 The feudal aspects of Renaissance Italy were not confined to the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily, however, but could also be found in parts of northern Italy such as the regions surrounding cities such as Ferrara and Mantua, and the Friuli region north of Venice. See Trevor Dean, *Land and Power in Late Medieval Ferrara: The Rule of the Este, 1350–1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in*

by Petrarch's time and would decline further in the next two centuries, as powerful rulers and cities absorbed smaller communes into their territorial states. To take one example, Siena, the great medieval banking center, had become a shadow of its former self by the fifteenth century, a small town of about fifteen thousand depopulated by plague, besieged by mercenary companies, and coveted by ambitious rulers who hoped to acquire it, as the Medici finally did in 1557.<sup>26</sup>

Machiavelli would later complain that the problem with Italy was that everyone aspired to be a prince and, as result, each one impeded the other from ever realizing this goal. But he did not cease to dream of Italy as a cultural ideal that might be realized from its Roman inheritance. The last lines of *The Prince* came from a poem by Petrarch: "the ancient valor is not yet dead in Italian hearts."<sup>27</sup> Almost two hundred years after Petrarch lamented the condition of Rome, Machiavelli continued to see Italy as a region whose antiquity might inspire a new modernity. He had experienced the cultural transformation of Italy that occurred in the fifteenth century as well as the political turbulence of the period between 1492 and 1527, when internal quarrels among Italian rulers and foreign invasions had thrown the Italian peninsula into chaos, once again. Yet he still believed in the greatness of Italy's cities and the innovations they produced, because he had lived in an age in which they had been the marvel of Europe. Florence, "the heart of Italy," Venice, "a terrestrial paradise," Rome, "the head of the world" (*caput mundi*).<sup>28</sup> This was the Italy that emerged in the century following Petrarch's return home.

### 3 Cities of Wood Become Marble

Even as the vitality of the late medieval cities gave way to the emergence of a smaller number of territorial states, dominated by the largest cities (Florence, Venice, Milan, Rome, and Naples), what remained was a thriving urban culture. The population of the Italian cities, though greatly dimin-

*Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Tommaso Astarita, *The Continuity of Feudal Power: The Carracciolo di Brienza in Naples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

26 William Caferro, *Mercenary Companies and the Decline of Siena* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

27 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 138. The full stanza in Petrarch is: "Virtù contro a furore/Prenderà l'arme, e fia el combatter corto;/ Che l'antico valor/Nell'italici cor non è ancor morto."

28 Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (New York: Norton, 1984; 1965), p. 30; Finlay, *Politics*, p. 17; and Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*.

ished after the arrival of plague, gradually increased during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to the levels prior to 1348. Such a demographically challenged age offered great scope for moralists who argued that marriage, as one fifteenth-century humanist put it, was “the fundamental union, which by its multiplication makes the city.”<sup>29</sup> For cities to thrive, families had to flourish. Public dowry funds (*Monte delle doti*), established in many cities in the fifteenth century, offered a good example of intersections between public and private interests. Citizens provided the government with income to spend on maintaining the state in war and peace. In return, a modest investment at the time of birth was supposed to yield a healthy dowry by the time a daughter was of marriageable age, though the expenditures of state often exceeded the promised returns (Plate 2).<sup>30</sup>

The size of the population not only influenced the marriage market and economic opportunities for urban residents but also played a role in determining the power of different groups. A city, after all, was a microcosm of human ambition. Nobles, patricians, scholars, clerics, artists, and artisans lived and worked cheek to jowl in the streets and piazzas, while the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside routinely traveled through the city gates, bringing the fruits of the countryside into the marketplace and exporting aspects of urban life into their own world. A large portion of the population did not enjoy the benefits of citizenship as part of living in the city. Yet each sector of Renaissance society found a means to turn the dynamic between patricians and *popolani* (ordinary city-dwellers), and the city and the countryside, to his or her own advantage. “Never trust anyone to the point where he can unmake you,” wrote one merchant in a diary written for his heirs. “Try to stay close to whoever is in power.”<sup>31</sup> Such advice about how to survive life in a Renaissance city indicates how the politics of the Italian city-states left urban inhabitants calculating to what degree their relationships with each other furthered their own interests.

However wary urban residents were of each other, they were not indifferent to the collective effect of their activities on the image of the city itself.

29 David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 230. This statement was made by Leonardo Bruni in 1436.

30 Anthony Molho and Julius Kirshner, “The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Quattrocento Florence,” *Journal of Modern History* 50 (1978): 403–38.

31 Giovanni di Pagolo Moretti, *Ricordi* (early fifteenth century), in Branca, *Merchant Writers*, pp. 68, 71. The dynamics of urban behavior have been especially well explored in Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); and Ronald F. E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982); and Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).



Italian Renaissance cities were celebrated throughout western Europe as marvels of architectural design and urban planning. During the fifteenth century, as the Florentine humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) eloquently observed, cities of wood became cities of marble. If the quintessential building projects of the late Middle Ages had been churches, communal palaces, and merchant halls, Italian Renaissance building was defined by the urban palace. In his *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (1403–4), the humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), who became chancellor of the city in 1427, praised Florence’s “wealth of build-

**Plate 2** Vittore Carpaccio, *Two Venetian Ladies on a Terrace* (ca. 1495). Source: Museo Civico Correr, Venice.

Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1465–1526) was known for his ability to capture the ordinary fabric of everyday life in his adopted city of Venice. His portrait of two Venetian women has sometimes been interpreted as a portrait of high-class courtesans in a city famous for its prostitutes. More likely, it is an image of the forced leisure of Venetian patrician women, increasingly confined to their homes to preserve their family's honor. Such an image brings to mind the crucial advice offered by the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454) in *On Wifely Duties* (1416): "I would have wives be seen in public with their husbands, but when their husbands are away wives should stay at home." The ambiguity of Carpaccio's painting also captures one of the fundamental debates in Renaissance society at this time: how to distinguish between class and wealth. The growth of sumptuary laws in many Italian cities reflected an effort on the part of the urban elite to maintain their place in the order of things by specifying the use of clothing, jewelry, and dowries according to social status, religion, and occupation. The *zoccoli* (platform shoes) the women are wearing made it virtually impossible for them to walk without being attended by servants.



ings," including "the homes of the private citizens."<sup>32</sup> Merchant families, hereditary princes, and despots all contributed to the material transformation of various cities. Private family palaces and chapels became a measure of one's status in the city and often defined the territory that a family controlled. By the late fifteenth century Renaissance Italy was gripped with a building fever that transformed small towns as well as major cities. Duke Federico da Montefeltro (1420–82) took such a personal interest in designing the ducal palace that formed the nucleus of Urbino in the 1460s that many considered him to be its architect. Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92) was sufficiently intrigued by reports of its splendor that he had an architect send him copies of the plans. Under duke Ercole I d'Este's rule in Ferrara (1471–1505), new palaces, streets, and fortresses transformed this small city into one of the greatest Renaissance courts in Europe.<sup>33</sup> The act of building expressed well the competitive spirit of the Italian city-states that looked to each other in establishing their reputations.

32 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building* (written ca. 1450, published 1485), in Alison Cole, *Virtue and Magnificence: Art of the Italian Renaissance Courts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 21; and Leonardo Bruni, *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (1403–4), in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* ed. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt with Elizabeth B. Welles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1978), pp. 139–40.

33 Thomas Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara: Erco d'Este (1471–1505) and the Invention of a Ducal Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Wealthy citizens also expressed their civic pride and piety through sponsorship of monasteries, churches, hospitals, and other buildings that contributed to the public good. The Florentine patrician Giovanni Rucellai, an important patron of Alberti, felt that he had “given myself more honor, and my soul more satisfaction by having spent money than by having earned it.” He was not alone in this belief. Adding up the staggering sums that his predecessors had spend on building, charity and taxes, a youthful Lorenzo de’ Medici observed in 1472 that “although many people might think it would be better to have something in your purse, I think that it brings honor to our State, and I believe the money was well spent, and I am well content with this.”<sup>34</sup> Both understood that public munificence was a direct expression of economic capital and political power.

The effect of this new kind of urban patronage on many cities was quite visible to a new generation of pilgrims and tourists who came to Italy. Rome, a city where cows wandered through the muddy ruins of the Colosseum in the fourteenth century, emerged as a splendid center, thanks to the building projects of various popes from Nicholas V (1446–55) to Sixtus V (1585–90). Only after the papacy returned from Avignon in 1377, and survived the turbulent era of the Great Schism (1378–1417) when different factions recognized different popes, did Rome become the nucleus of the Papal States. In the same era when the Medici controlled Florence and the Sforza ruled Milan, the papacy extended its territorial claims to encompass much of central Italy. Rome emerged as an urban center to rival any of the other Italian cities, as Roman nobles and cardinals rushed to build palaces that incorporated pieces of Roman ruins into the design to cater to the new taste for the antique. By the early sixteenth century artists and humanists flocked to the Eternal City to associate themselves with the papal court under Julius II (1503–13) and Leo X (1513–21), just as they migrated to other cities such as Florence, Ferrara, Mantua, and Urbino where the ruling elite invested in culture.<sup>35</sup> If Renaissance Italy appeared in retrospect to be a cultural unity, it was because so many Italian rulers employed the same individuals at different moments in their careers, due to the reputations they had developed elsewhere.

The building culture of the Italian Renaissance cities demanded a wide array of specialized skills from its ordinary citizens whose labor realized

34 Richard Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 85; Branca, *Merchant Writers*, p. 157 (March 15, 1472).

35 Ingrid D. Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Charles L. Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and Peter Partner, *Renaissance Rome 1500–1559: A Portrait of a Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

dreams of great buildings filled with magnificent art.<sup>36</sup> This raises a fundamental point about our image of the Italian Renaissance: the books, paintings, sculptures, and buildings that give shape to the Italian Renaissance were all products of manual labor, as were the fine clothes, jewelry, wedding chests, mirrors, and furniture which adorned the bodies and homes of Renaissance Italians. Italian cities thrived because of the presence of skilled labor. The increased amount of legislation dealing with sumptuary laws, for instance, not only reflected anxieties about religion and social status – as expressed through attempts to regulate expenditures on clothes, jewelry, and dowries – but also underscored the essential fact that there was a wide variety of goods and services that one could acquire in a city and a population ready to expend their florins and ducats in acts of conspicuous consumption.

Knowledge in a Renaissance city also had its artisanal component. Prior to the advent of the printing press, which first appeared in Europe around 1450 and arrived in Italy in 1465, making books was a physical act that required skilled copyists. One of the most knowledgeable men in fifteenth-century Italy was a Florentine bookseller, Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421–98), who thoroughly disdained the printed book as a poor substitute for a hand-made copy. Famed throughout northern Italy for his work, he knew everyone in power because he provided the labor that made Renaissance libraries come into existence, just as the Venetian printer Aldus Manutius (ca. 1449–1515) would do for the next generation that sat in his printing house to assist him in the task of creating the ideal Renaissance library in print. When Cosimo de' Medici requested a library of 200 books, Vespasiano employed forty-five scribes for twenty-two months to fill this order.<sup>37</sup> The ability of booksellers to mediate between literate patrons and the artisanal world of book production gave them unique insights into the place of knowledge in Renaissance society. In this respect, Vespasiano was not unlike a younger Tuscan, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), whose success with a number of his patrons rested on his ability to translate his skills into practical expertise in architecture, engineering, and armaments in addition to his abilities as a painter. Thus, on many levels, Renaissance Italy was a world of skilled artisans who worked in cities, served princes at court and on the battlefield, and found ways to enrich their families by making their particular expertise essential to their society.<sup>38</sup>

36 Goldthwaite, *Building of Renaissance Florence*.

37 Brian Richardson, *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 3. By contrast, Alberti claimed in 1466 that the same number of books could be printed in one hundred days.

38 On Italian artisans, see Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); and Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

Written words were among the most valuable commodities in Renaissance society. The inhabitants of the Italian cities were unusually literate because writing, like counting, was a practical skill. Approximately one-third of urban males and a smaller percentage of women were literate.<sup>39</sup> One of the most important figures in an Italian city was the notary whose ability to read and write allowed him to memorialize a wide variety of ordinary human interactions concerning marriage, dowries, property, business, taxes, and inheritance. The written word was the third party to virtually every transaction of significance that occurred in an Italian city. Those who possessed the ability to read and write had access to an entirely different level of society.

Writing was not simply a skill of the elite but a manifestation of a society that documented all of its activities. The Sienese cloth-cutter Benedetto di Bartolomeo, who transcribed the forty-five sermons that Bernardino da Siena gave in his native city in the summer of 1427, understood well that his literacy was a special gift. He described himself as a man with “a wife and several children, few possessions, and much virtue.”<sup>40</sup> Benedetto might have appreciated the decision of a merchant’s wife, Margherita Datini, to have the family notary, Ser Lapo Mazzei, teach her how to read and write in her thirties. Her husband Francesco worried that some of these skills were not entirely useful. “Do not pay so much heed to reading that you do all other things ill,” he counseled. Datini did not equate literacy with the cultivation of learning but saw it as a necessary part of business. Reading, of the sort Petrarch had in mind when he talked about his desire to know Cicero, was not exactly the kind of literacy that Datini valued. He was not unlike wealthy peasants who, unable to read or write themselves, nonetheless understood the power of words when they asked others to record their important transactions for them.<sup>41</sup>

We should not assume, however, that the two kinds of literacy were mutually exclusive. Just as the busy commercial life of the city produced a new building aesthetic, it also encouraged new attitudes towards learning. One Florentine merchant recorded how he copied favorite passages from Boccaccio in his notebooks “during the plague epidemic of 1449 for my own pleasure.”<sup>42</sup> Copying Petrarch’s vernacular poems was also a favorite

39 Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 77.

40 Franco Mormando, *The Preacher’s Demons: Bernardino of Siena and the Social Underworld of Early Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 43.

41 Origo, *Merchant of Prato*, p. 213. For a fascinating discussion of peasant literacy, see Duccio Balestracci, *The Renaissance in the Fields: Family Memoirs of a Fifteenth-Century Peasant*, trans. Paolo Squatriti and Betsy Merideth (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

42 Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici*, p. 71.



pastime of those who could read and write. Literature, history, advice, and finance appeared together indiscriminately in the merchant diaries and account books of the Italian Renaissance.

The Florentine merchant Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli expressed his own sense of Petrarch's values when he noted that behaving like the Romans was generally not useful in everyday life, "especially in the things with which we have to deal, which are more material than the great events of Rome." But he made an exception for politics as an arena in which one should think and behave like a Roman. "For as we are descended from them in essence we should show this in virtue and substance as well."<sup>43</sup> Such comments, inscribed in notebooks as lessons for sons to learn from their fathers, suggest the ways in which ordinary citizens were able to translate Petrarch's high-minded ideals into practical results. "Books ring with the voices of the wise," observed cardinal Bessarion in 1468 as he donated his great library to the city of Venice. "They are full of the lessons of history, full of life, law, and piety. The live, speak, and debate with us; they teach, advise, and comfort us; they reveal matters which are furthest from our memories, and set them, as it were, before our eyes."<sup>44</sup> The learning of the schools helped to shape the discourse of public life, but reading a tale from Boccaccio could be the consolation of a merchant in an hour of despair.

In the same period in which cities of wood became marble, their citizens found a new voice in the sort of public eloquence that Petrarch hoped to inspire. Humanist learning was primarily the domain of educated patri-cians – lawyers, doctors, theologians, notaries, and scholars who made a living either teaching or working in the service of the state as secretaries – and princes who knew their Cicero, Livy, Virgil, Aristotle, and other ancient writers so well that they could cite them line and verse. They had studied with famous masters like Guarino of Verona (1374–1460), who had skills that Petrarch only dreamed of and provided his pupils with a thorough grounding in the *studia humanitatis*. This term, borrowed from Cicero, encompassed grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Guarino's reputation rested on his association with the famous Greek scholar Manuel Chrysoloras. He traveled with him to Constantinople before 1403 and 1408, returning laden with Greek manuscripts that promised to unlock further the secrets of antiquity. By the 1430s his school was flourishing in Ferrara, as was the school of Vittorino da Feltre (ca. 1378–ca. 1446) in Mantua and many others of this kind in different Italian cities.<sup>45</sup>

43 Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, in Branca, *Merchant Writers*, p. 75.

44 Chambers and Pullan, *Venice*, p. 357.

45 Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35, 46–8. See also Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Grendler, *Schooling*.

Young princes and patricians studied Greek and Latin with famous humanist teachers who taught them to see history and the manifest destiny of Italy in new ways.

By the mid-fifteenth century humanist learning far surpassed Petrarch's relatively modest ambitions to converse with Cicero and read an occasional Greek manuscript. Renaissance humanists readily critiqued Petrarch's medieval Latin and wrote in an Italic script that was supposed to simulate how the Romans had written. One particularly apt pupil of Guarino's, Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), became so skilled in the historical evolution of Latin as a language that he wrote a *Declamation on the Forged Donation of Constantine* (1440), using his philological skills to prove that the evidence for the emperor Constantine's donation of political authority to pope Sylvester I rested on an eighth-century forgery purporting to be a fourth-century document. The results of the new learning were not always so controversial. The vast majority of humanists devoted themselves to perfecting the rules of grammar, and to historical projects that celebrated the Roman art of historical narrative as a framework within which to interpret the events of Renaissance Italy. Leonardo Bruni, for instance, famously argued that his research proved that Florence was a city of Roman origin rather than one founded by the emperor Charlemagne. The Renaissance city visibly changed with the diffusion of humanist values in society. Albert's neoclassical buildings in Florence and Mantua, for example, reflected his reading of ancient architectural treatises. What lay inside many new palaces also mattered, for many of them now contained private studies, filled with books, coins, paintings, and other artifacts associated with humanist learning.<sup>46</sup> Buildings specifically made to hold libraries also appeared, most notably, the Vatican Library conceived by pope Nicholas V in 1451 and inaugurated by Sixtus IV in 1475.<sup>47</sup>

Just as learning embellished the inner spaces of the city, it also played a powerful role in its politics. Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), the first humanist to become chancellor of the Florentine republic in 1375, in essence the state's chief bureaucrat, expressed well the social and political aspirations of the new learning when he wrote: "Since it is characteristic of man to be taught and the learned are more human than the unlearned, the

46 Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Findlen, *A Fragmentary Past*. For a discussion of how humanism intersected with art and material culture, see Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

47 Anthony Grafton, ed., *Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library and Renaissance Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress in Association with the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1993).

ancients appropriately referred to learning as *humanitas*.”<sup>48</sup> Learning was implicitly a criterion for active membership in the community. The sense of the past that humanists cultivated not only allowed them to reconstruct gloriously Roman histories of their cities, but also provided them with practical skills in great demand in the Italian city-states. The cities of marble, after all, were also cities of paper. Their bureaucracy generated mountains of documents that recorded the daily activities of state – councils, elections, diplomatic relations, and taxes all required the skills of a good humanist education. Sforza’s Milan, for example, had so much paperwork that it employed several secretaries in the chancery to organize an archive of state papers and the origins of the Uffizi galleries, which we today think of as a great art museum, lay in the urgent need for more offices (*uffizi*) to house the Florentine bureaucracy and its papers. Humanists filled an important need in Renaissance politics. They not only espoused the high-minded ideals of Rome with great eloquence, but they also knew how to put their talents to use in writing letters for their rulers and in representing their state abroad, while at home their scholarly skills made them ideal candidates to organize state archives and to examine and authenticate ancient documents of state.

The public uses of learning, however, never entirely precluded alternative interpretations of the importance of a humanist education. “Even though the study of letters promises and offers no reward for women and no dignity,” declared the Venetian Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558), “every woman ought to seek and embrace these studies.”<sup>49</sup> Fedele was one of a handful of women who pursued a humanist education in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Her literacy vastly exceeded the rudimentary knowledge of letters that Margherita Datini acquired from the family notary. Women such as Fedele implicitly challenged the idea that women could not participate fully in all aspects of humanism learning. Fedele publicly demonstrated her eloquence and her mastery of Greek, Latin, history, and rhetoric by giving orations at the University of Padua, to the Venetian people and even before the Venetian doge. Much like the marchesa of Mantua, Isabella d’Este (1474–1539), who was one of many noblewomen who ruled Renaissance states while their husbands were absent from home, Fedele’s unusual accomplishments bring into relief the general expectations of learning at this time. More typical was a woman like Alessandra Strozzi who complained to her sons about having to send so many letters to elicit

48 Peter Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 29.

49 Cassandra Fedele, “Oration in Praise of Letters,” in *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and about the Woman Humanists of Quattrocento Italy*, ed. Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992; 1983), p. 77.

a response from them because “writing seems like hard work.”<sup>50</sup> The vast majority of humanist secretaries, laboring to produce and organize reams of paper for the expanding apparatus of state, would have agreed wholeheartedly with her assessment.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the ideal citizen of an Italian city-state was an educated male patrician willing to put his learning to public use, not simply to entertain courtiers (though this was surely what many scholars found themselves doing, writing plays, poems, and histories for public occasions) but to enhance the glory and reputation of his city. He had, of course, excellent taste since in his spare time he read works such as Alberti’s *On Painting* (1434/5) and *On the Art of Building* (ca. 1450). He could recite poetry spontaneously in the manner of Petrarch and tell a lusty tale worthy of Boccaccio. He was conversant with the leading artists and artisans of the day. He knew the history of Rome and had connected it to the history of whatever city he considered home. One possible candidate for ideal citizenship was the son of an impoverished scholar who so loved Livy’s *Decades* that he made the index for them for a Florentine publisher and sent his seventeen-year-old son to deliver a barrel of good red wine to seal the agreement.<sup>51</sup> This young son not only imbibed the lessons of Livy in his family library, inheriting his father’s love of history, but coupled it with an unparalleled thirst for politics. He was the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527).

50 Strozzi, *Selected Letters*, p. 59.

51 Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 6.



**Map 2** Italy ca. 1600.