

and by a new type of curriculum: humanism. These Renaissance ideals—and the realities that undergirded them—were extended through the medium of the printing press. By the time the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople was complete, just a year before Gutenberg's Bible, hundreds of refugees from the eastern Roman Empire had been propelled into Italy. Many carried with them precious manuscripts of Greek texts: the epics of Homer, the works of Athenian dramatists, the dialogues of Plato. Prior to the invention of print, such manuscripts could be owned and studied by only a very few, very privileged men. Now printers in Venice and other European cities rushed to produce cheap editions, as well as Greek grammars and glossaries that could facilitate reading them.

In Florence, an informal "Platonic Academy" was convened. There, the work of intellectuals like Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) was fostered by the patronage of the wealthy Cosimo de' Medici. Based on his reading of Plato, Ficino's philosophy moved away from the focus on civic life that had been such a feature of earlier humanist thought. He taught instead that the individual should look to free the immortal soul from its "always miserable" mortal body: a Platonic ideal compatible with much late-medieval piety. Ficino's great achievement was his translation of Plato's works into Latin. His disciple Pico also rejected the everyday world of public affairs, arguing that man (but not woman) can aspire to union with God through the exercise of his unique talents.

The Politics of Italy and the
Philosophy of Machiavelli

Not all Florentine
thought



A T I
O

PORTUGAL

RENAISSANCE IDEALS— AND REALITIES

The intellectual and artistic movement that had begun in Italy during the fourteenth century (Chapter 11) was characterized by an intense interest in the classics

Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457). Born in Rome and active primarily as a secretary to the king of Naples and Sicily, Valla turned his skills to the painstaking analysis of Greek and Latin writings in order to show how the historical study of language could discredit old assumptions and even unmask some texts as forgeries. For example, some propagandists argued that the papacy's claim to secular power in Europe derived from rights granted to the bishop of Rome by the emperor Constantine in the fourth century, enshrined in a document known as "The Donation of Constantine." By analyzing the language of this spurious text, Valla proved that it could not have been written in the time of Constantine because it contained more recent Latin usages and vocabulary.

This demonstration not only discredited more traditional scholarly methods, it made the concept of anachronism (the detection of historical errors) central to all subsequent textual criticism and historical thought. Indeed, Valla even applied his expert knowledge of Greek to elucidating the meaning of Saint Paul's letters, which he believed had been obscured by Jerome's Latin translation (see Chapter 6). This work was to prove an important link between Italian Renaissance scholarship and the subsequent Christian humanism of the north, which in turn fed into the Reformation (see Chapter 13).

imitated the manners of the aristocracy. The Florentine ruling family, the Medici, originally made their fortune in banking and commerce.

These factors help to explain the emergence of the humanist ideals described above. Newly wealthy families were not content to have their sons learn only the skills necessary to becoming successful businessmen; they sought teachers who would impart the knowledge and finesse that would enable them to cut a figure in society, mix with their noble neighbors, and speak with authority on public affairs. Consequently, Italy produced and attracted a large number of independent intellectuals who were not affiliated with monasteries, cathedral schools, or universities—many of whom served as schoolmasters for wealthy young men while acting as cultural consultants and secretaries for their families. These intellectuals advertised their learning by producing political and ethical treatises and works of literature that would attract the attention of patrons or reflect well on the patrons they already had. As a result, Italian schools and private tutors turned out the best-educated laymen in all of Europe, men who also constituted a new generation of wealthy, knowledgeable patrons ready to invest in the cultivation of new ideas and new forms of artistic expression.

A second reason why late-medieval Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance movement has to do with its vexed political situation. Unlike France and England, or the kingdoms of Spain, Scandinavia, and central Europe, Italy had no unifying political institutions. Italians therefore looked to the classical past for their time of glory, dreaming of a day when Rome would be, again, the center of the world. They boasted that ancient Roman monuments were omnipresent in their landscape and that classical Latin literature referred to cities and sites they recognized as their own.

Italians were also intent on reappropriating their classical heritage because they were seeking to establish an independent cultural identity that could counter the intellectual and political supremacy of France. The removal of the papacy to Avignon (Chapter 10) had heightened antagonism between the city-states of Italy and the burgeoning kingdom beyond the Alps. This also explains the Italians' rejection of the scholasticism taught in northern Europe's universities and their embrace of models that could create an artistic alternative to the dominant French school of Gothic architecture.

Finally, this Italian Renaissance could not have occurred without the underpinning of Italian wealth gained through the commercial ventures described in Chapter 10. This wealth meant that talented men seeking employment and patronage were more likely to stay at home, fueling the artistic and intellectual competition

that arose from the intensification of urban pride and the concentration of individual and family wealth in urban areas. Cities themselves became primary patrons of art and learning in this era.

The Renaissance of Civic Ideals

For the intellectuals of Florence, in particular, the goal of classical education was civic enrichment. Humanists such as Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) valued eloquence and classical literature, but they also taught that man's nature should be cultivated for service to the state—ideally a city-state after the Florentine model. Ambition and the quest for glory are noble impulses, but they ought to be encouraged and channeled toward these ends. They also argued that the history of human progress is inseparable from the human dominion of the earth and its resources.

Many of the humanists' civic ideals are expressed in Alberti's treatise *On the Family* (1443), in which the nuclear family is presented as the fundamental unit of the city-state and, as such, is to be governed in such a way as to further the state's political and economic goals. He therefore consigned women—who, in reality, governed the household—to childbearing, child rearing, and subservience to men even within this domestic realm. He asserted, furthermore, that women should play no role whatsoever in the public sphere. Although such dismissals of women's abilities were fiercely resisted by actual women, the humanism of the Renaissance was characterized by a pervasive denigration of women.

The Emergence of Textual Criticism

The humanists' project was aided by a number of Byzantine scholars who emigrated to Italy in the first half of the fifteenth century and who gave instruction in the ancient form of their own native language. Wealthy, well-connected Florentines also increasingly aspired to acquire Greek literary masterpieces for themselves, which often involved journeys back to Constantinople. In 1423, one adventurous bibliophile managed to bring back 238 manuscript books, among them rare works of Sophocles, Euripides, and Thucydides. These were quickly paraphrased in Latin and made accessible to western Europeans for the first time.

This influx of new classical texts spurred a new interest in textual criticism. A pioneer in this activity was