

# What conditions led to the Renaissance starting in Italy?

## Reading



### Set a Purpose

As you read, look for reasons why the Renaissance first emerged in Italy.

**reason** the ability to think and draw conclusions

**city state** a politically independent city and the rural area around it. City states have their own government and armed forces

Why is the world the way it is? What is the right way to behave? What knowledge is really important? Do you ever think about questions like these? In earlier chapters about the European Middle Ages, you saw that people based their ideas about life on religious beliefs. During the Renaissance, there was a gradual shift in how people thought about the universe and their place in it. Instead of just looking to the Church to find meaning in their lives, many turned to their own powers of observation and **reason**. The Renaissance opened people's eyes to new possibilities of human achievement.

The Renaissance began in the part of Europe that is now Italy, and then spread slowly through the rest of Europe. Renaissance Europe did not look the way Europe looks today. Many countries had very different borders. Others, such as Italy, were not yet countries at all. Italy was a collection of **city states**, republics, and kingdoms.

## What role did Italy's geography play in the birth of the Renaissance?

Geographic features can contribute greatly to the economic success of an area. Think about the large cities of British Columbia. Why did they develop where they did? Why did they prosper?

During the Middle Ages, northern Italy had developed as a collection of independent city states. As trade increased, cities situated near or on good harbours became large and powerful because they served as centres for trade. The two largest Italian port cities were Venice, on the east coast, and Genoa, on the west. Venice became a major centre for both trade and ideas.

### Did You Know?

"Renaissance" is a French word meaning "rebirth."

## TIMELINE

1304 CE  
Francesco Petrarch is born



1450 CE  
Johannes Gutenberg  
begins printing books

1469 CE  
Birth of Niccolò  
Machiavelli

1492 CE  
Lorenzo de Medici dies

# Renaissance Italy



**FIGURE 9-2** This map shows the political geography of Renaissance Italy as well as the major rivers and mountain ranges. How does the physical geography of Italy help to explain where cities were built? Consider landforms and bodies of water.

## Mountains and Rivers

Italy, as we now know it, is a mountainous peninsula, a fact that greatly affected its development. Mountains make communication and travel difficult. Mountainous countries usually have only a few well-established, busy trade routes. In Italy, old Roman roads developed into trade routes. Cities located on these routes, such as Siena and Assisi, grew rich from trade.

## Reading

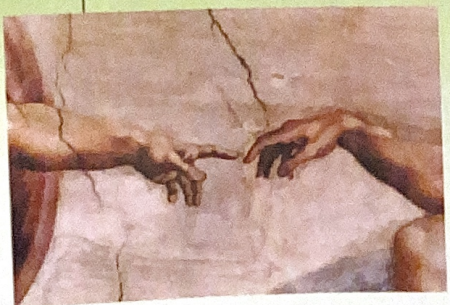
### Ask Meaningful Questions

Effective readers generate questions before and during reading. With a partner, use the timeline information to create some meaningful questions you hope will be answered in this chapter.

1503 CE  
Leonardo da Vinci begins painting the *Mona Lisa*

1508 CE  
Michelangelo begins painting the Sistine Chapel

1513 CE  
Machiavelli writes *The Prince*



1543 CE  
*On the Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies* by Nicholas Copernicus is published

1609 CE  
Galileo Galilei begins to study the heavens

### Did You Know?

This period of European history was not called the "Renaissance" until the nineteenth century.

The city of Florence was located at the hub of a major trade route that ran through mountains to the cities of Rome and Naples in the south, and through other mountains to Genoa and Venice in the north. Partly because of its fortunate location, for a time Florence was the peninsula's most powerful city.

Navigable rivers were also important corridors of trade, but they are not common in mountainous regions. Florence is located on the Arno River, but this river is navigable only between Florence and the sea.

### Climate

The climate of Italy was milder than that of countries north of the Alps. Therefore, the winter weather did not disrupt travel, trade, and commerce as much as it did in Germany and northern France. The long growing season produced such crops as olives and grapes, which were important trade items. Wine made by fermenting grapes was a popular drink across Europe; oil pressed from olives was used for cooking.

### Location

Of all Europe, Italy was closest to the port cities of northern Africa and the eastern Mediterranean Sea. As a result, trade with these lands was easier and cheaper for Italy than for any other European country. With trade came wealth, which funded the artistic boom of the Renaissance. In addition, Muslims had ruled Sicily for a time in the early Middle Ages. This introduced science, medicine, and astronomy from the Arab world, as well as products such as oranges, lemons, coffee, and sugar.



**FIGURE 9-3** This map shows the Mediterranean region. How would you describe Italy's location?

## What role did Italy's history play in the birth of the Renaissance?

The Mediterranean region was the site of two of the world's most influential civilizations: ancient Greece and Rome. These civilizations produced great artists, architects, **philosophers**, dramatists, poets, political thinkers, and historians. Renaissance artists and thinkers admired the Greek and Roman cultures and wanted to revive and renew them.

### Learning from the Past

Most medieval art had a religious theme. The Catholic Church hired artists to create paintings that would teach people about their faith and encourage them to lead good lives. But what is now Italy was the heartland of the old Roman Empire. Ancient Greek and Roman artists had celebrated beauty, especially the beauty of the human form. Renaissance artists and architects were inspired by the Roman ruins, sculptures, and wall paintings they saw around them. They became more interested in portraying the human body and the natural world.

European scholars had studied the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans during the Middle Ages, but had looked at them from a Christian perspective. During the Renaissance, educated people began to read these works in a new way. In **classical** writings they discovered ideas about the dignity and potential of the individual:

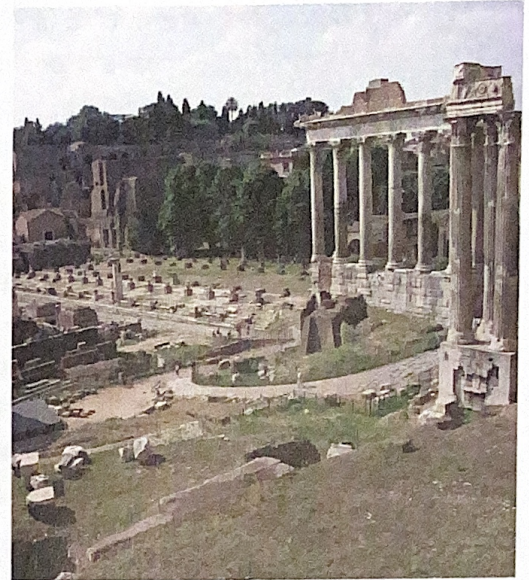
- that people could shape their lives through their own efforts and talents
- that questioning and learning were important
- that human beings should use reason to find truth for themselves



**FIGURE 9-5** *Discobolus*, known in English as *The Discus Thrower*, was created by the Greek sculptor Myron in the 400s BCE. What do you think were the sculptor's goals in creating this work?

**philosopher** someone who seeks wisdom about existence and reality

**classical** referring to the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome



**FIGURE 9-4** You can still see the ruins of beautiful buildings built by the Greeks and Romans in Italy today. How do you think living near ruins thousands of years old would affect your perspective on the past?

# What conditions in the city states promoted the Renaissance?

The Renaissance did not occur because the Italian people had created a great empire. In fact, the opposite is true. The Renaissance flourished in the city states of Italy. Although some of them were relatively small, the city states had become wealthy as a result of trade and business.

Feudalism did not have as strong a hold in Italy as it did in the rest of Europe. In Italy, the nobles tended to live in the towns, where they took their place in the upper classes of urban society. Many of them also became involved in business and politics.

## How did trade contribute to the prosperity of the city states?

The city states all wanted to expand their trade and business. The rivalry among them even led to war. Venice and Genoa, for example, both maritime powers, fought for control of trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea.

The city of Venice was founded in Roman times on a group of islands in a protected harbour. It was a site that was easily defended from invasion. Over hundreds of years, the city became a great trading centre as a result of its dealings with the East. At the height of the city state's power, Venetian merchants had thousands of ships travelling throughout the Mediterranean Sea and eventually along the Atlantic coast to ports in northern Europe. The Venetian Arsenal became the largest shipbuilding centre in Europe. Many thousands of workers were employed there.

### Reading



#### Set a Purpose

As you read, look for various conditions in the city states that contributed to the Renaissance.

#### Did You Know?

Vatican City, Singapore, and Monaco are modern city states.

## EXPLORING SOURCES

### A Successful City State

The Venetian Marino Sanuto described his city as follows in his diary.

#### Thinking IT THROUGH

1. Identify parts of Sanuto's diary entry that reflect the prosperity of Venice.
2. How did trade contribute to Venetians' quality of life?

*In this land, where nothing grows, you will find an abundance of everything; for all manner of things from every corner and country of the earth which had stuff to send, especially food, are brought to this place; and there are plenty to buy, since everyone had money. The Rialto [market] looks like a garden, such a wealth there is of herbs and vegetables from the places nearby, such an endless variety of fruits and all so cheap, that it is wonderful to see.*

## How did commerce contribute to the prosperity of the city states?

Merchants made money by purchasing goods in one place and then selling them for a higher price in another place. As well as dealing with goods that were ready for the marketplace, such as spices and luxury fabrics, merchants also bought and sold resources to be manufactured into goods. For example, they bought raw wool to be made into cloth.

Bankers also brought wealth to their city states. Bankers in Florence established banking houses across Europe. Florence's economy became so powerful that during the course of the Renaissance, its golden "florin" became the most important currency in Europe.

Usury, the practice of charging interest when lending money to someone, played an important part in creating wealth. The Church had forbidden usury during the Middle Ages. However, the growth of international trade required large investments of money. The Church began to allow people to charge interest for loans that involved risk, such as trading voyages where there was danger of shipwreck or pirates.

## Prosperity and the Arts

Wealthy **patrons** played an important role in the artistic flowering of the Renaissance. Merchants, nobles, popes, and monarchs supported the work of hundreds of artists. Wealthy citizens wanted to be known for their generosity. They helped make their cities more beautiful by spending huge sums to fund new buildings. Many also gave to charities.

**patron** a person who provides financial support for the arts



**FIGURE 9-7** This sculpture of Lorenzo de Medici was probably modelled on an original from the 1500s or 1600s. Lorenzo de Medici was both a ruler and a poet. What aspects of his character has the artist emphasized in this sculpture?

## The Medici Family

The Medici family was the richest, most powerful family in Renaissance Italy. The Medicis were an important part of Florence's cultural and political life for more than 300 years. They made a fortune as wool and silk merchants and as bankers. They built alliances with other wealthy families, acquired important positions in the Church, and married into Europe's royal families.

Lorenzo de Medici, who was known as Lorenzo the Magnificent, was a great patron of art and literature. He sponsored Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and other great artists. Poets and philosophers frequently visited the Medici palace at his invitation to share ideas. Artists learned their craft by sketching ancient Roman statues displayed in the Medici gardens. Lorenzo's nephew, Pope Clement VII, built a great library housing many thousands of manuscripts and books that the Medici family donated to Florence.