

How Did the Growth of Cities Contribute to a Changing Worldview?

Trade

By the late Middle Ages, Europeans wanted more of the exotic spices and silks that had been brought back by the crusaders. Merchants hired adventurers and sailors to open new trade routes to all parts of their known world, such as North Africa and the Middle East, and across land routes to India and China. These new trade routes began a revival in business and shipping in the Western world that had not existed since the Roman Empire. The increased contact with other societies and cultures, initially to obtain rare foods, fabrics, and other products, also introduced Europeans to different intellectual ideas and knowledge from other societies. Most came from contact with traders in Islamic societies who were located geographically between Europe and the Far East societies of China and Japan and the tropical areas of Africa to the south.

In Europe, the numbers of merchants and traders grew and so did their wealth. They became a powerful new class outside the hierarchy of the feudal system. Their wealth brought them power to influence leaders and led to a change in worldview. A person's role in the rigid structure of the feudal system might be able to change. People began to see that it was possible to move out of the class into which they had been born.

Because of increased trading, cities began to grow. By the middle of the 14th century, Paris, Florence, Venice, and Genoa were the largest cities in Europe, each with populations of at least 100 000. These larger urban populations increased the demand for foods and other products and led to changes in the way people lived:

- Some people established businesses to provide goods for city residents, and a new, wealthy merchant class began to grow.
- Industries began to specialize in goods for trade, such as textiles, furniture, and handicrafts, and more people moved to the cities to work in these industries.
- Workers began to find and create jobs that were not part of the feudal system and, thus, became less dependent on the nobles.
- Some communities became so prosperous and powerful from trade, industry, and banking that they became **city-states**.
- Individuals began to feel a sense of belonging to their larger communities, not just to their local lord.

city-state: a city that governs itself and the countryside surrounding it

Major Italian City-States



The Renaissance began in the major Italian city-states of Florence, Genoa, Venice, and Milan. These centres became wealthy and powerful because they were located on important trade routes within Italy, either old Roman roads or rivers. They were also located on trade routes linking the Eastern Mediterranean to the rest of Europe.

Urbanization

urbanization: the movement of population away from the countryside and into cities

value judgment: an opinion based on a person's individual values and beliefs



Effects of Good Government, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1338, showing city gate of Siena

After the first bubonic plague epidemic in 1350, Europe experienced more turmoil. There were too few peasants left alive to seed and harvest the land. Peasants decided they might be able to find better lives for themselves if they moved to the cities, especially the Italian cities on the Mediterranean. Many of the surviving nobles, who could no longer find labourers to work their lands, also moved to these

cities. There were more opportunities for work in the Italian cities because of their established trade with other parts of the Mediterranean and because they had already built a successful shipping industry.

Within 50 years of the first bubonic plague, cities in Italy became very powerful, especially Florence, Genoa, Venice, and Milan. These cities became the most successful commercial centres of banking, trade, commerce, and industry in western Europe.

There are no exact dates when one era ends and another begins. The Renaissance did not start on a certain date, nor did it have a sudden ending. It evolved gradually out of the Middle Ages and, in fact, had much in common with the Middle Ages. There are some historians who view the Renaissance as starting much earlier than the mid-14th century and others who believe it ended earlier than the 1600s. These different views of history are not just descriptions of the time, they are often **value judgments** used to explain the relationship of the past to the present.

The societies in what is now Italy, more than any other part of western Europe, maintained ties to ancient Roman ways of life after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The ancient ruins of buildings, such as the Roman coliseum shown here, aqueducts, roads, cities, statues, and artifacts were constant reminders of the power and glory of the ancient Roman Empire.



There were several reasons why city-states prospered in Italy:

- Mountains to the north helped protect Italy from invaders. This allowed relatively stable development of the city-states.
- Trading cities began to thrive in Italy as early as the 10th century, which meant that life in the Italian Peninsula was already more urban than in northern Europe.
- The feudal system was not strong in Italy due to the urban lifestyle and lack of agricultural land.
- The architectural ruins of the glorious city-states of Ancient Rome reminded the population of how effective that style of government had been.
- The power of the Roman Catholic Church over the Italian city-states weakened when the pope and his **court** (the **papacy**) moved from Rome to Avignon, in southern France. Italian city-states could now govern themselves without much interference from the rulings of the Church. They were entirely independent and, initially, many of them organized themselves as individual **republics**.

Most Italian city-states began as republics. In a republic, a group of citizens, rather than a monarch, governs the state. By the late Middle Ages, the most powerful citizens in these republics were members of the new wealthy merchant class. By the 14th century, though, most of the republican governments had failed and the city-states were usually ruled by **despots** or by **oligarchies**. Later in this chapter, you will learn that the powerful city-states of Florence and Venice were ruled by oligarchies and Genoa by a despot.

Warfare among the city-states over territory and trading routes was common. After decades of fighting, the city-states of Florence, Venice, Milan, and Naples finally signed the Treaty of Lodi in 1454, which brought relative stability to the area for 40 years. In this treaty, Milan and Naples formed an alliance with Florence, and Venice was supported by the papacy. In this agreement, no city-state was allowed to become powerful enough to threaten or overthrow any other city-state. Removing the threat of warfare allowed the city-states to focus on improving their trade and amassing huge wealth.

Italy was originally settled by a number of tribes, and over time, powerful city-states developed in those locations. The name *Italy* came from the name of a tribe that settled in the very southern tip of the peninsula. The ancient Romans later used the term *Italy* to refer to the portion of the Italian Peninsula south of Rome.

court: the families, advisors, and other members of a royal or noble household

papacy: the pope and the government of the Roman Catholic Church

republic: a state in which power is held by the people or their representatives

despot: a leader with unlimited power; a tyrant or oppressor

oligarchy: a form of government in which a few people have the power

The papacy moved from Rome to Avignon because at this time, the pope and many top clerics were French.

Several powerful city-states grew in the area that is now called Italy. How might Florence, Venice, and Genoa have used geographic features to protect themselves from enemies?

I wonder ... what other city-states in other places existed at this time?

sovereignty: supreme power and authority; the freedom of a country or political unit from outside control

Diplomacy became increasingly important to maintain peace among city-states and countries so trade could continue to flourish.

I wonder ... what role does diplomacy play in today's world?

Historical categories and their names are often placed on a period long after it is over. The people living between 1350 and 1600 did not use the word *Renaissance* to describe their time in history.

Around the end of the 15th century, the city-states began to send permanent ambassadors to foreign courts or states. The role of the ambassador was to keep in constant touch with governments that could be either potential allies or enemies. Through diplomacy, relationships and alliances, often through marriages, were maintained to reduce threats to **sovereignty** and trading.

Portrait of Catherine de Medici, unknown French artist, 16th century. To strengthen ties between Florence and France, Catherine de Medici, daughter of the governor of Florence, was married in 1533 to Prince Henri, who became King Henri II of France. Catherine then became the queen of France. Renaissance ideas were spread from royal court to royal court.

Today, many governments establish embassies in other countries. Ambassadors work through diplomacy to promote their own country's economic and policy aims by establishing relationships with the government of the other countries.



SKILLS CENTRE

Turn to **How to Organize Information** in the Skills Centre to review how to use graphic organizers and charts to summarize the information about city-states.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

- In what ways did contact among people increase during this time?
 - What effect did contact have on the lives and worldviews of the people?
- What role did trade play in changing people's worldviews?
- Discuss in groups: How did the governments in Italian city-states change during the Renaissance? How might these changes in government have affected the daily life of the people? How would the changes have affected worldview?
- Canada has gone through rapid urbanization in the last 50 years. How do you think this has affected people's identities? How might having most of the population living in cities affect the worldview of Canadians?