

# Italian Roots of the Renaissance

**Directions:** Read and annotate the documents and answer the questions.

## Social and Political Upheaval

The Black Death, starvation, and warfare had overtaken Europe about 1300. These catastrophic events and the enormous loss of life may have led to some of the changes of the 1300s. The decrease in population allowed farmers to produce more food than they needed. Food prices declined, allowing people more money to spend on other things. The demand for agricultural goods increased, allowing various areas of Europe to begin to specialize in the products that were best suited to their environment. For example, England began to produce more wool and areas of Germany, more grain. As specialization increased, regions had to trade for the products they did not produce.

Urban areas also began to specialize, particularly in Italy. The territory that today makes up Italy was divided into several large city-states in the north and various kingdoms and the Papal States in the south. The northern city-states of Venice, Milan, and Florence became bustling centers of commerce. In these city-states, the Roman Catholic Church, nobles, merchants, and artisans dominated society. Merchants were usually either bankers or traders. Artisans practiced such crafts as goldsmithing. Knowledge of arts such as painting, sculpture, and architecture increased as nobles and merchants sought to display their new wealth.



**Source:** "The Renaissance: Was it a Thing?," John Green, *Crash Course World History*

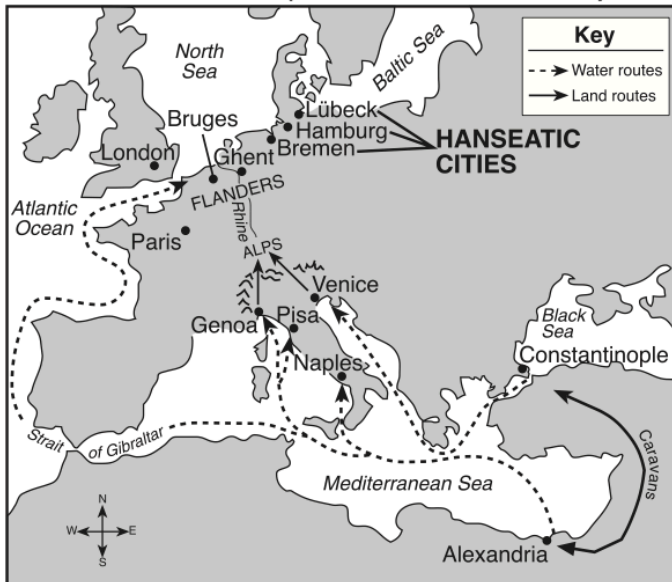
1. How did the Black Death eventually contribute to economic improvement in Europe?
2. What types of people dominated societies in Italy, and why?
3. What caused the increase in artistic expression in Italy?

## Italian Geography and Trade

Venice is [an Italian] city made up of hundreds of islands at the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea, but walking around it, you can't help but feel that the city is essentially a collection of floating buildings tied together by some canals. If ever there was a place where geography was destiny, it was Venice. Venice was literally built for ocean-going trade. As you can imagine, Venice didn't have a lot of natural resources... so if they wanted to grow, they had to rely on trade. First, Venetians became experts in shipbuilding. Remember that when the crusaders needed ships for their crazy Fourth Crusade, they headed to Venice, because the Venetians were famous for their ships... Not only could they build ships; they could also sail them to pleasant locales like Constantinople, [which connected them to the Silk Road, as well as] the Levant [and Egypt, which connected them to the Indian Ocean network]... So the Venetians formed trade treaties... with the Byzantines, and then when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans and became Istanbul, the Venetians were quick to make trade treaties with their new [Ottoman] neighbors, [who later also conquered the Levant and Egypt.]

**Source:** "Venice and the Ottoman Empire," John Green, *Crash Course World History*

## Trade Routes (13th—15th centuries)



## Renaissance Venice



4. Examine the map. Why was Italy geographically well-suited for trade?
5. According to John Green, why did the Italian city-state of Venice in particular become a center of trade? Give as many reasons as you can.

## Cultural Diffusion from Muslims and Byzantines

*[We know that,] without trading with the Islamic world, especially in pepper, Venice couldn't have afforded all those painters [and architects who made the city so beautiful. But another] way contact with Islam helped to create the European Renaissance [was that] the Muslim world was the source of many of the writings that Renaissance scholars studied. For centuries, Muslim scholars had been working their way through ancient Greek writings, especially Ptolemy and Aristotle, who [were] the jumping off point for thinking both in the Christian and Muslim worlds. [The] fall of Constantinople in 1453 helped further spread Greek ideas because Byzantine scholars fled for Italy, taking their books with them. So we have the Ottomans to thank for that, too. And even after it had become a Muslim capital, Istanbul was still, like, the number one destination for book nerds searching for ancient Greek texts. Plus, if we stretch our definition of Renaissance thought to include scientific thought, there is a definite case to be made that Muslim scholars influenced Copernicus, arguably the Renaissance's greatest mind.*

**Source:** "The Renaissance: Was it a Thing?," John Green, *Crash Course World History*

*Along with goods for trade, the ships of Venice carried Greek scholars seeking refuge in Italy from the [conquests of the] Ottomans. These scholars brought works by ancient writers that the Italians had thought to be lost. Suddenly the doors to a new world of ideas opened to Italians who could read. They began looking for more information, reading Arabic translations of original texts and searching the libraries and finding lost texts. As they read, they began to think about art, philosophy, and science in different ways. Along the way they began to think more like the classical thinkers [of Greece and Rome] who had believed in the human capacity to create and achieve.*

**Source:** "Renaissance Ideas," Susan Elizabeth Ramírez, *World History: Human Legacy*, Holt

6. How did the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and trade contacts with the Muslim world contribute to the development of Renaissance thought in Italy?
7. Think about the history of Italy. Why do you think Italians especially would be interested in rediscovering classical knowledge?