One European’s Story

Ermentrude gathered up a chicken and five eggs and went to see the steward. He was the man who managed the land where she lived for its owners. Ermentrude and her husband, Bodo, were farmers who worked on a small piece of a large estate owned by someone else.

Ermentrude gave the chicken and eggs to the steward as part of her rent. Then she hurried home to weave cloth and cook supper.

Ermentrude lived in the early 800s, but her life was typical of the way many Europeans lived for centuries. This section explains that way of life and how it had changed by 1500.

Feudalism in Europe

Ermentrude lived in the European Middle Ages, which lasted from the late 400s, when the Western Roman Empire ended, to about the 1300s. (In some parts of Europe, the Middle Ages lasted to the 1400s.) The Romans used written laws and a mighty army to keep order. But over time, the empire grew weak. Germanic tribes from the east and north invaded the empire and contributed to its fall. The rough, uneducated Germanic tribes destroyed the strong Roman government and trade networks, and the tribes set up small kingdoms. With no trade, people stopped using money. They paid in goods, such as chickens and eggs.

Other groups also disrupted Europe. During the 800s to 1000s, Vikings swept down from the north. From their warships, they carried out lightning raids, looting villages and then racing back out to sea. To survive such difficult times, Europeans turned to feudalism. Feudalism is a political system in which a king allows nobles, or lords, to use lands that belong to him. In return, the lords owe the king military service and protection for the people living on the land.

Along with feudalism, Europeans developed the manor system. In this system, lords divided their lands into manors, or large estates, that
were farmed mostly by serfs. Serfs were landless peasants who weren’t allowed to leave the manor. In return for the serfs’ work, the lord promised to protect them.

The Roman Catholic Church also gained power during these uncertain times. Taking on the roles once filled by government officials, the Church collected taxes, aided the sick, and punished criminals. It became a powerful, unifying force throughout Europe.

**Revival of Trade and Towns**

By the 1000s, feudalism had brought more stability to society. As strong lords gained more control over their lands, long periods of peace and security followed. Merchants once again felt safe to travel. New farming methods, such as better ways to plant and plow fields, led to a food surplus. With more to eat, the population increased. More people meant more demand for goods, which spurred trade. Old towns near busy trade routes revived, and new towns grew up near manor houses and churches. Money came back into use.

As the economy grew, many serfs ran away to towns. Some became craftspeople who practiced such trades as shoemaking. Others became merchants who sold the goods that craftspeople made. Merchants and craftspeople formed a new social class, the middle class. They had fewer riches, rights, and privileges than lords, but far more freedom than they had known as serfs.

**Trade with the East**

Trade increased, not only within Europe, but also with places outside Europe. Located on the Mediterranean, Italy had an advantage in this trade. Italian cities such as Venice traded with other port cities, such as Constantinople, located in what is now Turkey.

War also spurred trade. Many European Christians were angry that Muslims held the Holy Land, where Jesus had lived. In 1096, European Christians launched the **Crusades**, a series of wars to capture the Holy Land. They ultimately failed to keep the Holy Land, but the Crusades changed European life. Italians supplied the ships that carried Crusaders to the Middle East. On the return trip, the ships brought Asian goods to Europe. These goods had traveled across the Indian Ocean and then overland to the Mediterranean. After the Crusades, Italians continued to trade with Muslims in other Mediterranean cities.

An Italian merchant named Marco Polo also stirred European curiosity about distant lands. Polo had spent 24 years traveling in China and...
central Asia. A book written about Polo’s travels described China’s riches and wonders. It increased European interest in Asia.

The Decline of Feudalism

The growth of trade and towns weakened feudalism because so many serfs left the manors for town life. The power of the lords shrank because they had fewer people under their control. Beginning in 1347, a deadly disease also weakened feudalism. The bubonic plague swept across Europe, killing about one-fourth of the population and reducing the number of workers. Lords competed for the laborers who survived, so they began to pay wages to peasants.

As feudal lords lost power, kings grew stronger. They won the support of townspeople because they could raise large armies to enforce order. In return, townspeople agreed to support their kings by paying taxes. The armies enforced order and imposed the king’s authority over lesser lords. As countries became safer, trade flourished even more.

The Renaissance and Reformation

Italy, which was thriving because of trade, became the birthplace of the Renaissance—a time of increased interest in art and learning. Renaissance is a French term meaning “rebirth.” Lasting from the 1300s to 1600, the Renaissance spread from Italy throughout Europe.

Several forces led to this rebirth of learning. As feudalism weakened and the plague brought great suffering, Europeans began to question what life meant. In their search for new answers, some people turned to old sources. They read the writings and studied the art of the Greeks and Romans. The classical Greeks and Romans lived from about 750 B.C. to A.D. 476. As a result of these studies, European ideas changed.

1. The Greeks had praised human achievement. European scholars began humanism, the study of human worth, ideas, and potential.
2. Classical education stressed such subjects as history, philosophy, and literature. Europeans spent more time studying those subjects.
3. From classical art, European artists learned to make art more realistic. They created some of the world’s finest paintings and statues.
4. Muslim scholars had saved classical manuscripts about science. Also, Muslim mathematicians had invented algebra. Contact with Muslim societies influenced European science and mathematics.

5. Cartography, or mapmaking, became more scientific. Resulting maps were based more on observations and calculations than on rumor and guesswork. Maps and globes became status symbols in Renaissance Europe. Their popularity encouraged European exploration, but also fostered a sense of superiority over the cultures Europeans encountered in their travels.

A new invention helped spread Renaissance ideas. In about 1455, a German named Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, a machine that mechanically prints pages. People no longer had to copy books by hand. Printers could make hundreds of copies of a book cheaply and accurately. More people read, and ideas spread quickly.

By the early 1500s, Renaissance ideas and other forces weakened the Catholic Church. Many church leaders were corrupt. Some claimed to grant God’s forgiveness for money. Martin Luther, a German monk, publicly posted 95 statements that criticized such practices. This began the Reformation, a movement to correct problems in the Church.

The Reformation split the Church into two groups—Catholics and Protestants. In time, Protestants divided into many different churches. When European colonists came to America, they carried their religious disagreements and hopes for religious freedom with them.

This painting, School of Athens by Raphael, shows many aspects of Renaissance art and culture.

- Like much Renaissance art, it looks more realistic than the art of the Middle Ages. (See page 44 for comparison.)
- It honors the Greek thinkers Aristotle and Plato, who are the two men in the center arch.
- It also honors Renaissance artists. Raphael himself is in the group to the right.

Why might Raphael have wanted to include himself in a painting with famous Greeks?
Changes in Trade

The Renaissance period saw not only changes in learning and religion, but also in trade. As trade grew, Italian merchants needed to improve the way they did business. They began to use more exact ways of keeping track of a business’s income and its costs. By subtracting the costs from the income, the merchants determined the profit.

Increased trade led to the formation of banks to store gold and silver for their owners. Soon bankers realized that they could lend that money to others before the owners needed it back. They charged interest fees on these loans. By collecting interest, bankers gained wealth and power.

Profit became increasingly important in the Renaissance economy. Italian merchants made huge profits by trading in Asian goods. Because Italians had done business with Muslims for centuries, they had a special relationship. In addition to that, the Italians used military strength to control the trade on the Mediterranean—and didn’t allow other Europeans to take part in it.

Merchants in other European countries envied the profits made by Italian merchants. As a result, other Europeans began to want a share of the rich trade in Asian goods. They began to search for a non-Mediterranean water route to Asia, as you will read in Section 5.

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts

What economic activity was the primary cause of exploration?

**CAUSE & EFFECT:** Causes of Exploration

- **CAUSE:** After the Crusades, Europeans want Asian goods.
- **EFFECT:** Italy dominates trade because it developed a network during the Crusades.
- **CAUSE:** Other European nations want a share of Italy’s profits.
- **EFFECT:** Other nations seek water route to Asia.

**Reading History**

D. Making Generalizations

If a country tries to completely dominate trade in a certain area, how will other countries respond?

**Skillbuilder Answer**

Italy dominates trade because it developed a network during the Crusades. Other European nations want a share of Italy’s profits. Other nations seek a water route to Asia.

**Changes to Art and Learning**

- Art
- Learning
- Humanism
- Printing press
- Reformation
- Profit

**TECHNOLOGY**

Design a **Web site** or compose a **song** advertising the great new Renaissance invention—the printing press. (REP1)