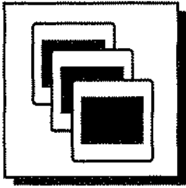
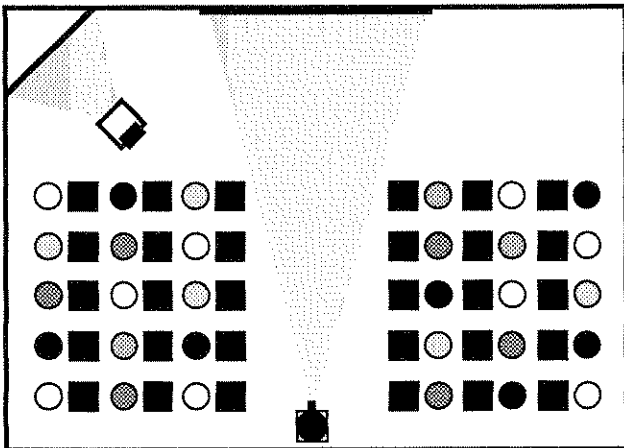


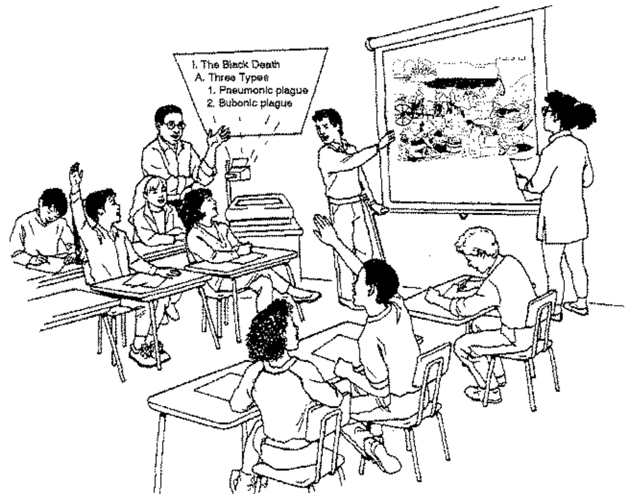
# Europe's Transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

**Interactive Slide Lecture**

## Overview

This **Interactive Slide Lecture** introduces students to some of the major events that shaped western Europe's transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Students view and discuss a series of five slides that depict the Black Death, Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years' War, the rise of trade and commerce, the growth of Italian city-states, and the spirit of the Renaissance. Students respond to a series of critical-thinking questions about each slide and then record notes on a handout that helps themgraphically organize the information.






## Procedures at a Glance

Begin Activity 1.2 by showing students a classroom map on the overhead (A) and having them assemble their desks into two groups facing each other. Pass out **Student Handout 1.2A** to each student. Tell students they will be studying some of the major events that shaped Europe's transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Project slides on the front screen (B), and ask the series of questions recommended in the **Teacher's Guide**. As you discuss each slide with students, write notes on the overhead. Students should be taking careful notes on **Student Handout 1.2A**. Encourage them to come to the slide and point out important details. For some slides it will be appropriate to ask a group of students to come forward and create a brief act-it-out dramatizing what they think is happening in the slide.

# Procedures in Detail

1. Prepare an overhead transparency that shows students how to set up their desks in two groups facing each other. Project the overhead and ask students to move into their correct places. Each student should be able to see both the slide screen and the overhead projection screen. If you do not have two screens, the overhead projector may also be shone on the slide screen.

2. Pass out **Student Handout 1.2A,** a five-page handout for student notes. Tell students they will now see a series of slides that will introduce them to Europe's transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Students will be expected to view each slide carefully and be prepared to answer a series of questions you will ask.

3. Project Slide 1.2A. Prompt students to discover information from the image by asking the questions, which spiral from the basic to critical-thinking level, that appear in the **Teacher's Guide**. As you discuss the slide, write notes on the transparency outlining the main ideas of the discussion. Consult the **Teacher's Guide** to make sure you cover all the salient points about the plague's origins and effects. Then have students transpose the notes onto the appropriate section of the first page of **Student Handout 1.2A**. In the **Teacher's Guide** you will find facsimiles of **Student Handout 1.2A** with completed notes. Use these as a reference as you guide students' notetaking. Because this is a new format of notetaking, circulate around the room to check that students are recording their notes correctly on their handout. (**Option:** You may want to make **Student Handout 1.2A** into an overhead transparency and record the notes directly on it with your students.)

# Teacher's Guide

## 1.2A. The Black Death

**What do you see? Describe the landscape. What kinds of things are people doing? What elements of the picture seem unrealistic? Realistic? What feelings does this painting evoke? What kind of story do you think the artist is trying to tell?**

❑ **In this slide** we see Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting "*Triumph of Death.*" This work by the Flemish master allegorically depicts the Black Death's many devastating effects on life in Europe.

- The Black Death was a catastrophic plague that spread across Europe from A.D. 1346 to 1352. The plague occurred in three forms, each caused by the bacterium *Pasteurella pestis:* pneumonic plague attacked the lungs, causing fierce coughing and sneezing fits; septicemic plague—the rarest and most deadly form—traveled in the bloodstream, causing black spots beneath the skin and eventually causing the victim to choke on his or her own blood; bubonic plague, the most common, first appeared as egg-sized swellings, called *buboes*, in the neck, armpits, and groin, before causing fever and delirium. The process that spread this deathly, painful disease started in the East and came to Europe.

- The Black Death spread to Europe through trade with the East. The plague originated in Mongolia's Gobi desert, quickly moving along the Silk Road (the Mongol Empire's trans-Asian trade route) to the shores of the Black Sea. The bacteria was carried by fleas, which lived on black rats that accompanied trade caravans across Asia. In the bustling ports of the Black Sea, Italian merchant ships took on loads of silk, porcelain, spices, and plague-infested rats, unwittingly shipping the disease to the Mediterranean. The new, broad scope of European trade facilitated the spread of the dread disease, as flea-ridden rats jumped ship in each of Europe's ports. From commercial centers, such as Marseille and Pisa, the Black Death accompanied goods to inland cities and rural towns. When the host rats died, the fleas carrying the plague found new homes on other mammals, including humans. Beginning in Sicily in A.D. 1347, the disease made a circular trip of death around Europe, reaching England in late 1348, and culminating with its arrival in Russia 6 years later. Nothing appeared to be capable of stopping its spread.

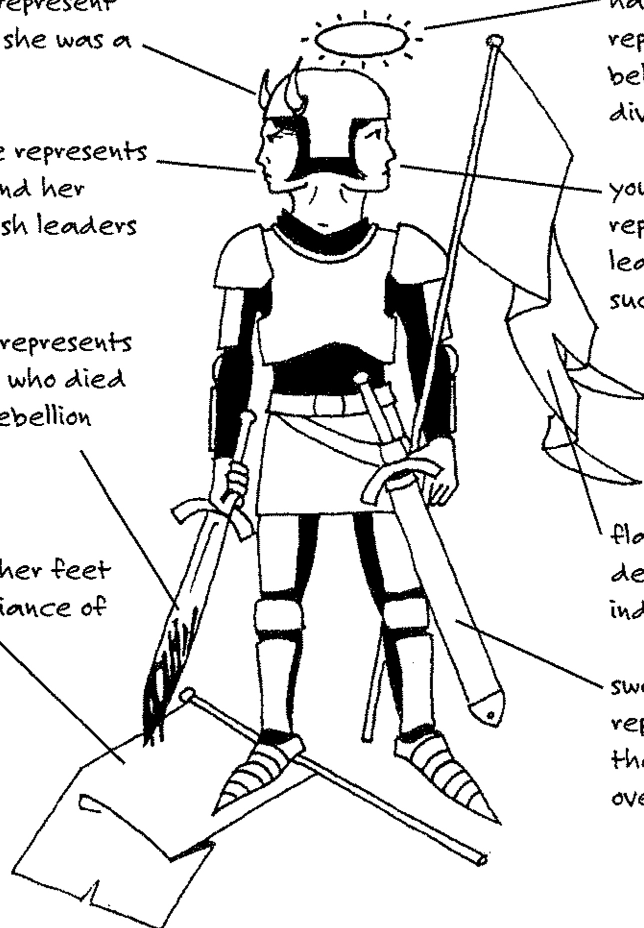
- An important factor in the spread of the Black Death was the ignorance surrounding its cause and cure. As the magnitude of the Black Death became apparent, frantic Europeans searched for its cause, falsely blaming the plague on such things as the alignment of the planets, infected clothing, God's wrath aimed at sinful humans, and Jews. To avoid the horrors of the disease, people sought out medical remedies, such as *pomanders*—oranges

stuck with cloves—or a mixture of aged molasses and chopped snake. Others thought repentance for sins would end the plague, and joined groups of religious fanatics called Flagellants, who *flagellated*, or whipped, themselves publicly with iron spikes to earn God's forgiveness. Many Flagellants and their followers massacred Jews because they believed Jews had poisoned wells in order to spread the disease. None of these actions succeeded in stemming the tide of death.

- The Black Death killed one third of Europe's population, which amounted to nearly 25 million people. Some cities, which lost more than half their citizens, were forced to bury the dead in mass graves, as Agnolo di Tura of Siena described: "Trenches were dug, very broad and deep, and into these the bodies were thrown, and covered with a little earth; and thus layer after layer until the trench was full; and then another trench begun. And I . . . with my own hands buried five of my children in a single trench; . . .And no bells rang, and nobody wept no matter what his loss, because almost everyone expected death." Fear of the disease caused people to turn against the unfortunate who became infected. In Milan, civic leaders walled up houses at the first sign of infection, enclosing sick and healthy alike. Europeans became so numb to death and hardship that the Florentine writer Boccacio wrote: ". . . rather it was come to this, that a dead man then was of no more account than a dead goat would be today." Though the initial outbreak of the Black Death subsided after the 1350s, the plague continued to flare up in periodic waves for the next 300 years.

- The Black Death's carnage severely affected Europe's economic and social life. Initially, the massive death caused by the plague reduced demand for European goods. Farmers found no markets for wheat and other grains and were forced to diversify their crops. In place of grains, farmers produced fruit, meat, and dairy products like cheese. When Europe slowly began to recover from the plague, fewer workers were available, allowing serfs, peasants, and urban workers to demand more freedom or higher wages for their labor. When nobles and merchants attempted to return to old standards, resentment built among the working classes. In many cases the result of this rivalry was violent, culminating in peasant revolts across Europe between 1378 and 1382, in which workers rose up against the upper classes and demanded new rights. In the end, many working-class people succeeded in improving their situation. Some serfs escaped to cities, which led to the growth and importance of towns, the weakening of the manorial system, and the reduction of the power of feudal lords.

**Idea for Student Response:** On the left side of their notebooks, have students create a Janus figure—a drawing based on the Roman god portrayed with two opposite faces—to represent the English and French perspectives of Joan of Arc. Have students label each part of the figure and explain its symbolism. A completed Janus figure might look like this:



To the merchant: **Who are you? What are you doing? What kinds of goods do you sell? Where do the goods come from? Why are some of the goods—spices and silk, for example—so expensive? Why are merchants respected?**

To two customers: **Who are you? What are you doing? Why have you come to this shop? Why are you willing to pay a great deal for products such as spices, silk, and ivory? How can you be sure of the quality of the goods you are buying?**

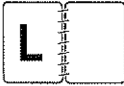
## Slide 1.2C: Trade and Commerce Change Town Life

### Trade and Commerce: The Foundations of Town Life

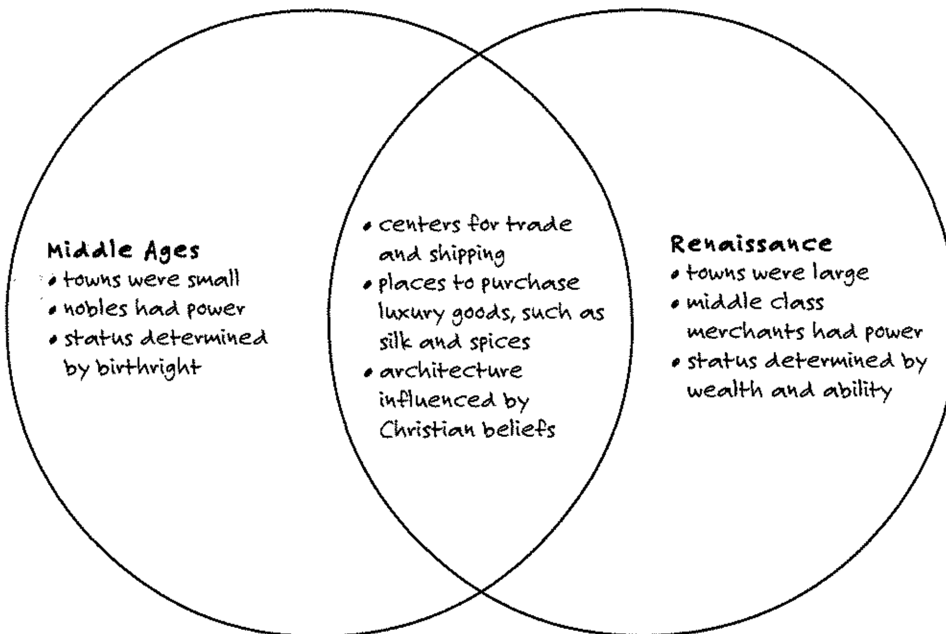
- towns were centers for trade and shipping
- luxury goods such as silk, spices, ivory, and porcelain could be bought in towns
- guilds dominated social and civic life of towns
- guilds reflected importance of Christianity in towns
  - a.) contributed to building of cathedrals
  - b.) adopted patron saints and sponsored parades in their honor

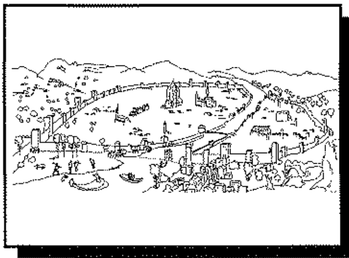
A.D. 500 — 1400 — 1650

| Town Life During the *Middle Ages* | | Town Life During the *Renaissance* |
|---|---|---|
| • towns were small because society was based on agriculture and most people lived in the countryside | **Society** | • towns grew because society began to be based on commerce and more people started to live in cities |
| • nobles had most of the power<br>a.) lords owned the land where most towns were located<br>b.) towns needed protection from knights that lords could provide | **Power** | • middle class had most of the power<br>a.) limited the power of feudal lords by forcing them to grant charters<br>b.) gained control of great sums of money by organizing banks |
| • status was determined by birthright | **Status** | • status was determined by wealth and ability |



**Idea for Student Response:** On the left side of their notebooks, have students create a Venn diagram that compares towns in the Middle Ages with towns during the Renaissance. A completed Venn diagram might look like this:



## 1.2D. The Growth of Italian City-States

**What do you see here? Describe the geographic features that surround the city. How is the city protected? What visual clues indicate that this is a prosperous city? Why might this city be an exciting and interesting place to live?**

❑ **In this slide** we see a late fifteenth-century map showing the city of Florence. The artist has depicted himself on a hill in the bottom right-hand corner of the work.

- Changing ideals brought Europe to the brink of a new era, called the *Renaissance*, a French word meaning "rebirth" that referred to the revival of contemporary arts and letters that took place in the cities of northern Italy in the 1300s. Several factors made this region the cradle of the Renaissance. Italian cities were independent from feudal monarchs and lords because of a long struggle between the popes and the Holy Roman Emperors. Both popes and emperors exhausted funds and soldiers by battling

unsuccessfully for control in northern Italy. As unceasing wars drained strength from these traditional feudal powers, cities like Florence, Siena, and Venice established supremacy over the countryside surrounding their municipalities. These cities that ruled their surrounding region became known as *city-states*.

- City-states were governed by guild members. All guild members had a say in selecting the citizens elected to run city government, though a term on the governing board usually lasted only two months. In Florence, in the early 1300s, 6,000 of the estimated 50,000 people in the city were guild members. The panel of citizens selected by their peers—called the *Signoria*, in Florence—made decisions about security, trade, foreign policy, and city planning. Positions on city councils were supposed to rotate often, but in all Italian city-states, leading merchant families vied for control of the city government. Selection of civic leaders was often shrouded in intrigue and death, as exile and assassination became a regular part of Italian politics.

- The Italian city-states capitalized on the proximity of Italy to the eastern Mediterranean world to establish strong commercial ties with Byzantine and Muslim merchants. Each Italian city-state carved out a niche in the world of trade to become prosperous centers of European commerce. Some cities manufactured a product that was sought after in Europe and the East. For example, Milan concentrated on the production of metal goods and armor. Others, such as Florence, raised capital through a flourishing cloth industry and became important banking centers, in turn using their profits to buy goods in the east to market in the rest of Europe. Still others, like Venice—which was a transit port at the mouth of the transalpine passage that linked Europe and the Byzantine world—established themselves as trade centers, attracting merchants from around Europe to their markets and warehouses, which stocked Asian goods. Italian city-states converted this wealth into political power by expanding their rule to far-flung trade empires. European monarchs and nobles, who needed money to finance wars and programs of expansion, became indebted to Italian merchants from whom they sought loans.

- Florence was the most influential of all Italian city-states. Florentine merchants created a thriving industry in the wool and textile trade by importing wool from England and Flanders. In some 200 workshops located on the banks of the Arno river, artisans dyed and worked the fabric into rich, beautiful woolen cloth. Approximately one third of Florence's citizens worked in the cloth industry, producing close to 70,000 bolts of cloth per year in the mid-fourteenth century. Florentine merchants used profits from the wool trade to purchase luxury items like silk, linen, spices, ivory, and porcelain, which in turn were sold across Europe for high profits. Some Florentine merchants sold insurance to sea traders to protect their overseas investments. Many Florentine merchants used their profits to begin banks. Banking became the most lucrative aspect of Florentine business because of the low costs involved and because the Florentine coin, the florin, became the most respected currency in Europe.

- The most famous Florentine merchant family was the Medici. The Medici grew wealthy after the early thirteenth century, making their money buying and selling cloth and other goods. Eventually, the family rose to prominence through banking, and by the 1300s became the chief bankers for the pope. By 1430, the Medici had branches of their bank in Milan, Venice, Pisa, Rome, Avignon, Geneva, Bruges, and London. In one 5-year period, the Medici banking network profited 290,791 florins, worth more than 4 million dollars by contemporary standards. Because of the Medici clan's vast wealth, family members ruled Florence behind the scenes for three generations, starting with Cosimo de Medici I, in 1434. Even though other wealthy families, such as the Pazzi, constantly vied for power, the Medici's shrewd political tactics helped them maintain control. Despite sitting on the city's governing board for only 6 months during the 30 years he reigned, Cosimo always had great sway over the council. When he passed away, his son Piero and later his son Lorenzo would fill the same role as unnamed ruler of the city-state.

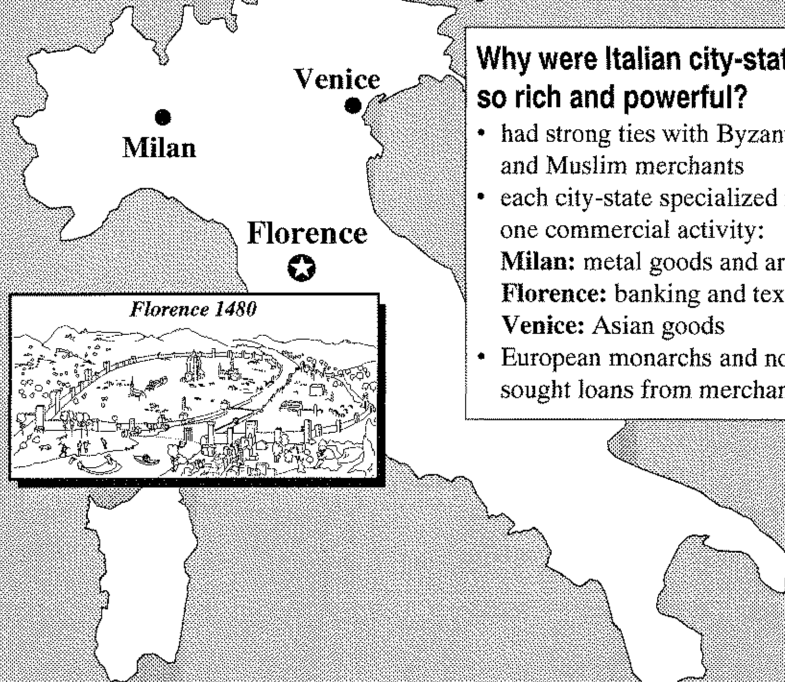
- The Medici ruled Florence during the height of the Italian Renaissance in large part because of their interest in the civic and cultural life of the city. Under their guidance, Florence maintained peace by forging treaties with Milan, Naples, and Venice. Often times, peace or war was achieved by a decision by one of the Medici; both Venice and Naples suffered military defeats after Cosimo denied them loans from the Medici bank. Lorenzo, called "The Magnificent," was an energetic,talented man—the ideal of a well-educated, cultured Renaissance gentleman. Lorenzo was a scholar, poet, composer, banker, philanthropist, patron of many arts, and a politician who was proud of Florence's republican form of government. Lorenzo gave money to the church and threw lavish festivals to which rich and poor alike were invited. Like his grandfather, Cosimo, he raised money to help finance civic projects such as the building of the enormous, beautifully domed Cathedral of St. John.

- Each Medici leader encouraged the development of the arts, becoming important patrons of painters, sculptors (such as Michelangelo), architects, and scholars. The Medici set up artsits'workshops, supported young artists, and collected some of the finest works for their palaces. Under the patronage of powerful families like the Medici, the Renaissance became a time of renewed interest in the scholarship, art, and architecture of classical Greece and Rome, and a revival of public life with the participation of citizen bodies. The financial support of Italian city-states and their important families inspired a mighty upsurge in optimism, experimentation, and creativity.

## Slide 1.2D: The Growth of Italian City-States

**How did Florence become the most influential city-state?**

- maintained thriving industry in wool and silk trade
- purchased luxury items from the East and sold them for a large profit
- sold insurance to sea traders to protect their overseas investments
- created numerous banks that made loans or exchanged currencies
- Medici family promoted trade, banking, the arts, scholarship, and civic pride




**Why were Italian city-states so rich and powerful?**

- had strong ties with Byzantine and Muslim merchants
- each city-state specialized in one commercial activity:
  **Milan:** metal goods and armor
  **Florence:** banking and textiles
  **Venice:** Asian goods
- European monarchs and nobles sought loans from merchants

**What was the Renaissance and why did it begin in Italy?**

- *Renaissance* is a French word meaning "rebirth;" refers to revival in arts and learning
- period when scholars became interested in ancient Greek and Roman culture
- Italian city-states displayed their wealth by giving financial support to artists who created works with classical themes

## 1.2E. The Spirit of the Renaissance

**What do you see? Describe the different objects in the room. What do you think this man does for a living? In what ways does this room show influences of ancient Greek and Roman culture? Why do you think the room is decorated the way that it is?**

❑ **In this slide** we see a painting of a humanist in his study, probably the Cardinal Bessarion, a man who was dedicated to both scholarship and public service and was considered by people of the Renaissance to be a model humanist.

- The inspiration that fueled the Renaissance came from a rediscovery of the classical world of ancient Rome and Greece. After the crusades, Greek scholars and monks began visiting Italy to maintain ties that had been developed after crusading Europeans had renewed contact with the eastern Mediterranean world. For some time before the fourteenth century, Greek scholars had been migrating to Italy, often to escape the

expansion of the Muslim world into the Hellenic world. The result of this cultural exchange was a reintroduction of classical Christian and pre-Christian thought to Italy.

- The impact of this "new" knowledge on European thought was tremendous. In the fifteenth century, Italian scholars eagerly studied Greek to be able to access information that for centuries had been "lost" from the Western perspective. Perhaps the most important document translated in the early Renaissance was a first-century treatise on education written by a Roman scholar named Quintilian. Quintilian argued that the goal of education was not simply learning or specialization, but the creation of a well-rounded, moral citizen who would use education to make society a just and better place. His view of a moral education emphasized the potential of an individual. This view became the dominant educational philosophy of the Renaissance.

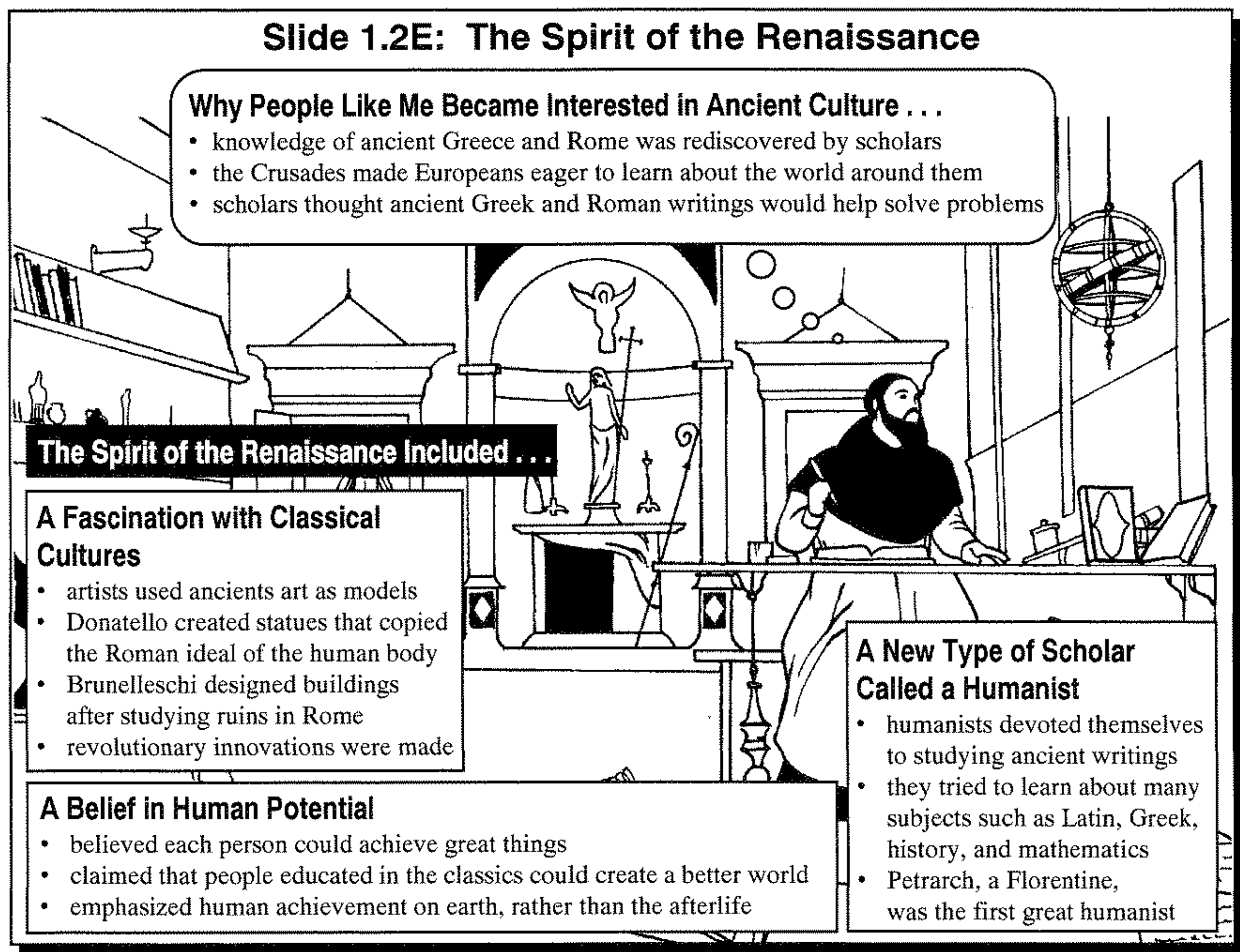
- This spirit of renewal, and the presence of the knowledge and tenets of the ancients, combined to produce a new type of scholar called a *humanist*. Humanists studied the humanities—subjects concerned with humankind and culture, as opposed to science—as Quintilian had outlined them: grammar (meaning Latin and often Greek), history, rhetoric, poetry, and moral philosophy. Traditional medieval scholarship consisted of reading commentaries on ancient writers, oftentimes without ever reading any of the ancient author's works or studying the context in which they were written. Instead, humanists wanted to study the historical works themselves to discover the contextual meaning of the author. Humanists believed this course of study would make them well-rounded individuals, better able to participate in civic government and the new urban society.

- The first great humanist was Petrarch, who was born in Florence in 1304. Petrarch's great love was the discovery of ancient texts, works forgotten during the Middle Ages. He especially prized the works of the Roman statesman Cicero—who wrote about Roman history—and the early Christian writer St. Augustine. Petrarch wrote lengthy letters to the ancient thinkers in which he copied their style and subject matter while presenting his own modern views about their ancient ideas. Petrarch's works, as well as the texts he discovered and translated, became masterpieces of the new spirit of the renaissance.

- Petrarch's work led many other scholars to study the past, which led to an outburst of cultural achievement that lasted to the seventeenth century. Architects and artists traveled to the sites of ancient Roman and Greek ruins to study their style and engineering. In the early 1400s, the Florentine sculptor Donatello began creating statues that copied the Roman ideal of the human body. Likewise, the Florentine architect Brunelleschi designed buildings, like Florence's cathedral, after studying ruins in Rome. As artists, like scholars, looked to ancient Rome and Greece for themes and ideas, and used ancient art as models for paintings and sculptures of many subjuects—stories of Greek mythology, scenes from the Bible, and Church history—innovations developed, within the framework of Christianity, that stepped away from medieval styles and revolutionized painting and sculpture. Artists, scholars, and architects were attracted to the growing workshops and

libraries of northern Italy, sites supported by the new wealthy merchant class of expanding city-states. With a renewed confidence and creativity, they challenged traditional thought and style, leading to innovations—such as the discovery of how to achieve perspective and the technique of oil painting—that spread across Europe in the following centuries.

- In following the example of classical Greece and Rome, the people of the Renaissance gained an intense appreciation of the individual, believing that each person could achieve great things. Like the ancients, Renaissance Italians valued public service and believed that a liberal arts education liberated human beings to lead a rewarding life. They began to view Greece and Rome as models for the kinds of activites that merchants and citizens based in urban environments were engaged in, such as political decision making. As a result, humanists, artists, and members of the upper class developed their talents to the fullest as they strove to reach the Renaissance ideal of a well-rounded person: educated, witty, artistically creative, and skilled in many fields. Becoming wealthy, famous, or learned gained new appeal. The underpinnings of the Renaissance—what some Florentines dubbed "The Age of Gold"— was the modern belief in the importance of individual achievement and ability and an emphasis on human beings in the world in which they lived, rather than the medieval focus on the afterlife.



**Idea for Student Response:** On the left side of their notebooks, have students write an acrostic using the word *Renaissance* that describes the spirit of the Renaissance. The first three lines of the acrostic might look like this:

Rebirth of ancient ideas and learning
Emphasis was now on earthly achievements
Nurtured by the leaders of Italian city-states, like the Medici family

# Slide 1.2A: The Black Death

**What was the Black Death?**

**How did the Black Death spread throughout Europe?**

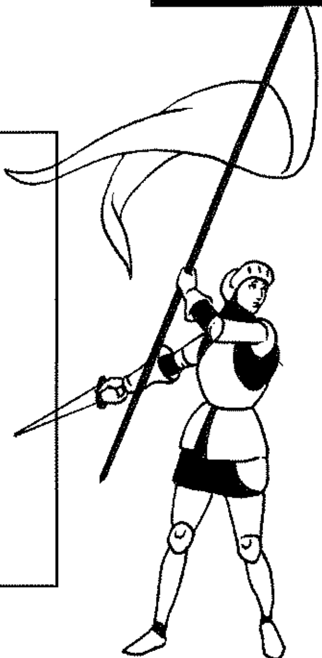
**Why couldn't people stop the spread of the Black Death?**

**How did the Black Death change life in Europe?**

# Slide 1.2B: The Hundred Years' War

**How did the war begin?**

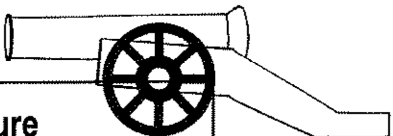
**Who was Joan of Arc and how did she change the course of the war?**



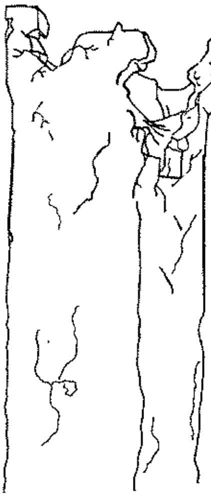
War Begins A.D. 1337

1429

War Ends 1453



**How did the nature of warfare change?**



**How did the war contribute to the end of feudalism in France?**

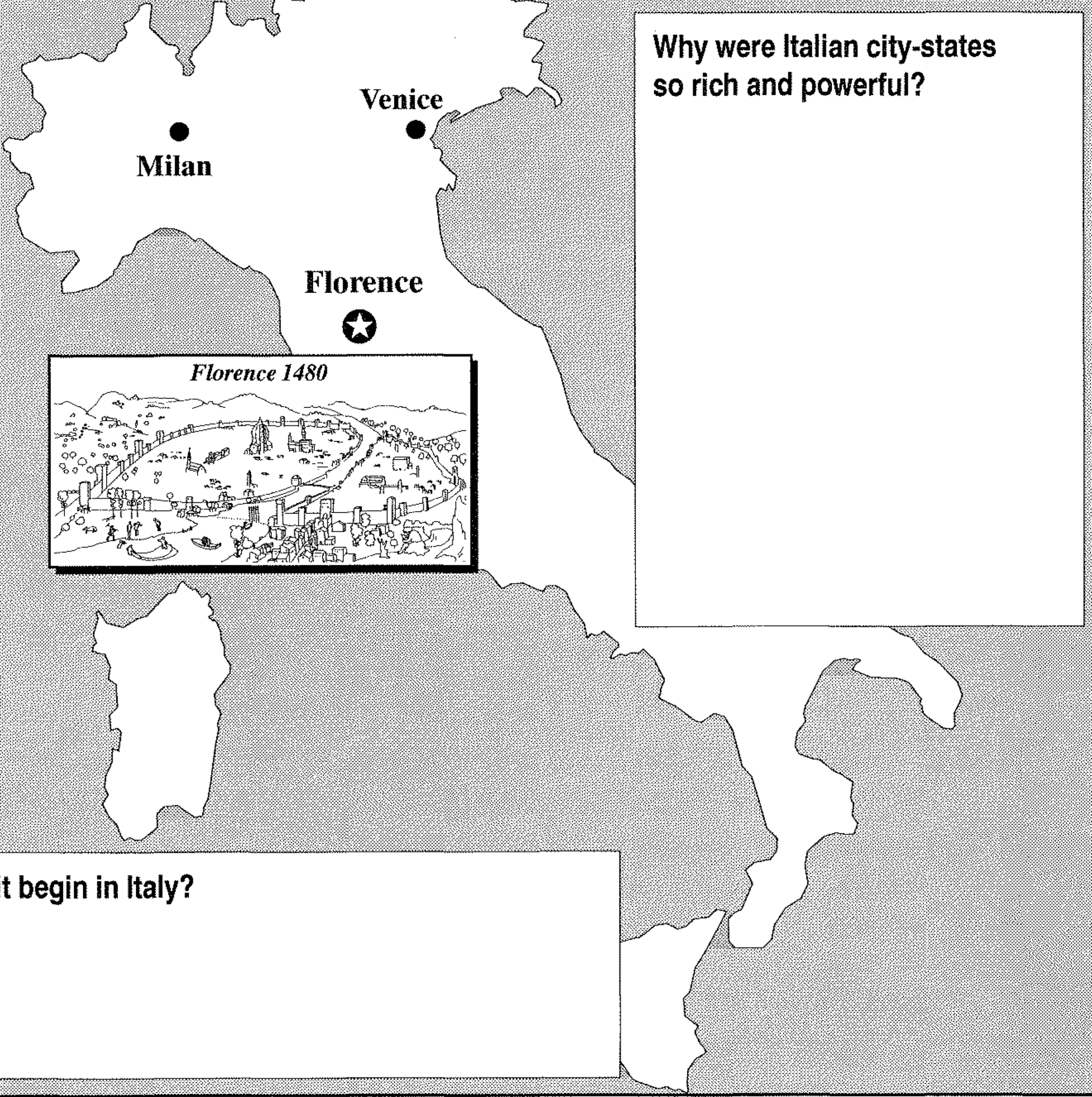
# Slide 1.2C: Trade and Commerce Change Town Life

## Trade and Commerce: The Foundations of Town Life

A.D. 500 — 1400 — 1650

| Town Life During the *Middle Ages* | | Town Life During the *Renaissance* |
|---|---|---|
| | Society | |
| | Power | |
| | Status | |

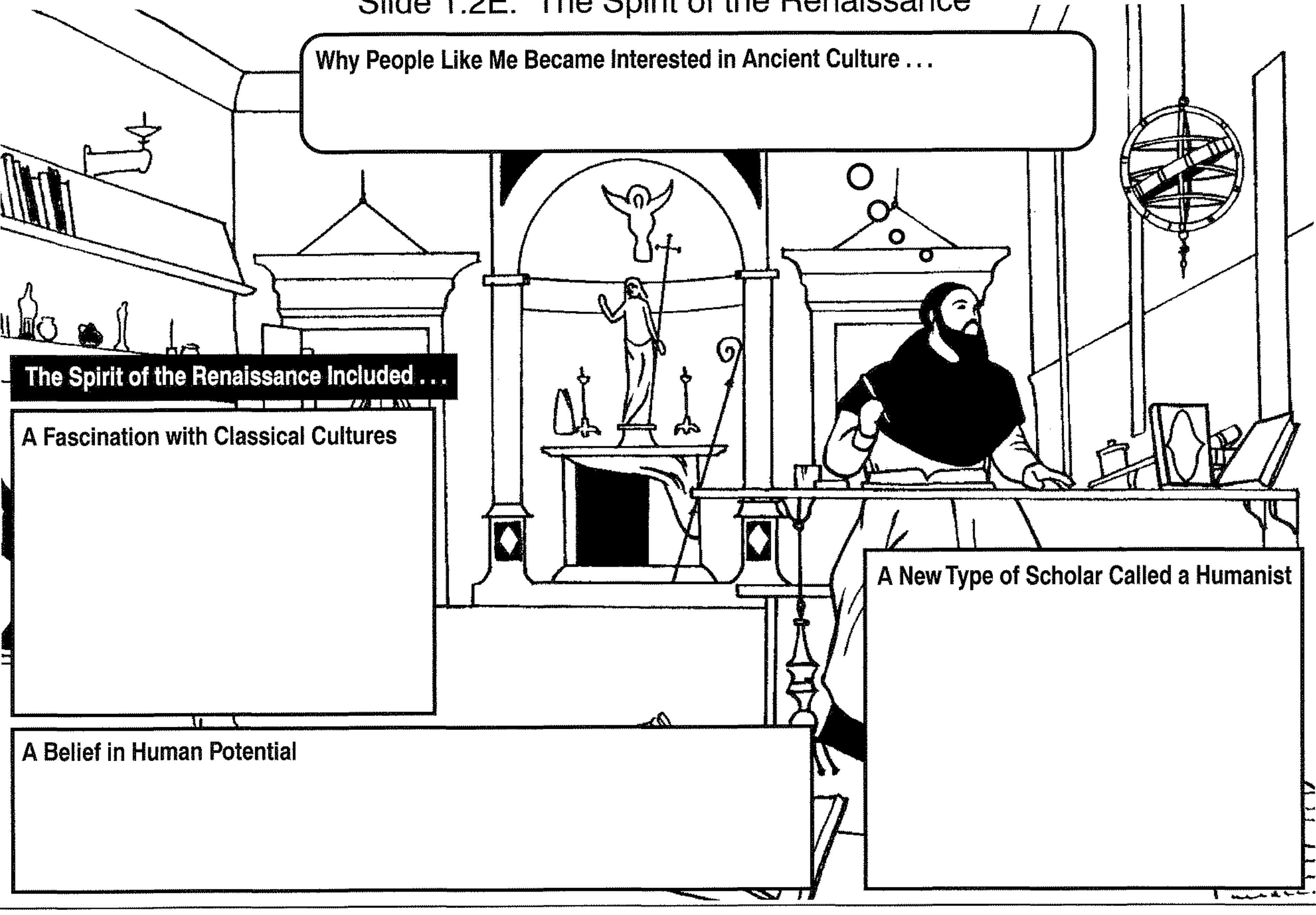
# Slide 1.2D: The Growth of Italian City-States




**How did Florence become the most influential city-state?**

**Why were Italian city-states so rich and powerful?**

**What was the Renaissance and why did it begin in Italy?**


Student Handout 1.2A
Slide 1.2E: The Spirit of the Renaissance
Why People Like Me Became Interested in Ancient Culture . . .
The Spirit of the Renaissance Included . . .
A Fascination with Classical Cultures
A Belief in Human Potential
A New Type of Scholar Called a Humanist