



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Peak Human: Renaissance Italy

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Lesson Overview

In *Peak Human: What We Can Learn from the Rise and Fall of Golden Ages*, Johan Norberg describes the political fragmentation that spurred European innovation during the Renaissance. He says,

In Europe, an opening for eccentrics and experiments appeared as a result of the competition between a multitude of polities and rivalry between the Church and the emperor. In these gaps, princes, universities and republican city-states began to stake a claim to independence. It looked less like the Roman, Abbasid and Chinese empires,



IN *THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS*, A MAGNIFICENT FRESKO IN THE VATICAN, THE PAINTER RAPHAEL DEPICTED SOME OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST PHILOSOPHERS. COMMISSIONED BY THE POPE, THE MASTERPIECE VIVIDLY ILLUSTRATES HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH INCORPORATED HUMANISTIC VALUES TO JUSTIFY ITS POWER.

SOURCE: STITCHED TOGETHER FROM VATICAN.VA

and more like the classical Greek abundance of competing city-states, always fighting, but also constantly learning and trading. . . . In a more fragmented Europe, new ideas could always survive somewhere, and innovators could always find refuge elsewhere.

In this lesson, students will learn about the roots of the Western European competitive state system, in contrast to the more unified empires of Byzantium, the Islamic caliphates, and China, and some of its long-term effects on world history.

Warm-Up

An Italian YouTuber Introduces Florence

Some students may have visited Florence and learned about its most famous landmarks. To build a background about the city, watch this short [video](#) by an Italian YouTuber as she introduces some of its offbeat gems. As you watch, answer these questions:

- Which disease hit European cities throughout the centuries, providing another reason for the wine windows in Florentine palaces?
- The wealthy Medici (pronounced *meh-DEE-chee*) family ruled Florence from the 1400s to the 1700s. Explain the purpose of the famous corridor they used for their daily commute to the office.
- Which architect, painter, and sculptor designed the Medici Chapel?
- When were all but one of Florence's bridges destroyed?
- Identify the most famous painting by Sandro Botticelli briefly shown in the video.

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read pages 227–230, “The Continent Without a Shepherd,” from the book *Peak Human*, then answer the following questions:

- According to Norberg, what was the vital difference between the political system of Europe and those of other civilizational centers of the period?
- What two cultural traditions united a fragmented Europe between 1200 and 1450?
- Rather than a unified empire like China, what ancient political system did Europe most resemble during this period?
- Identify **three** specific ways the Holy Roman Emperor did *not* exercise centralized political control over other states in Europe.
- What was the underlying political conflict between the Holy Roman emperor and the pope illustrated by the Investiture Controversy and the emperor's Walk to Canossa?
- For centuries, neither the emperor nor the pope could establish ultimate authority over Europe. According to Lord Acton, what was the long-term effect of this situation on the people of Europe?

Extension Activities/Homework

INVESTIGATE THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN ART AND POWER

During the Renaissance, rivalry among states also showed itself in competition in art. European elites competed for status by hiring the best artists to create masterpieces to adorn their palaces, tombs, and churches. Art was big business, and famous painters, sculptors, and architects worked for high fees.

Work with a partner. Your task is to investigate how competition among the rich and powerful helped create a famous Renaissance artwork. You will showcase your findings in a short class presentation.

Instructions

- Visit the [Google Arts and Culture website](#) and search for “Renaissance art” or a particular artist, such as Michelangelo. You may also want to visit the online collections of famous museums such as the [Uffizi](#), the [Vatican Museum](#), and the [Louvre](#). Narrow your search to the period 1400–1600.
- With your partner, choose one Renaissance artwork from the period you find compelling. It can be a painting, drawing, sculpture, building, garden, or plaza. Use credible sources to research the artist, the subject of the work, and other information to help you understand its significance, such as its location, its timeline, and the material used in its creation.
- In addition, find key information about the person who commissioned it, including their name, position, and relationship to the artist.
- Create a slideshow in which you showcase your selected artwork and tell the story about its commission.

Include images of the artwork and its name, subject, and date of creation. Write a brief biography of the artist and their relationship with the sponsor of the artwork.

Finally, answer this question: How does this piece illustrate the interplay of political power and art during the Renaissance?

With your partner, present your slideshow to the class.

The first three slides of a sample presentation are below. To include all the necessary information, you will need to create at least 5–7 slides.

Example Presentation



The School of Athens
by Raphael 1509-1511



This fresco is one of the most iconic masterpieces of the Renaissance. The young genius Raphael, who lived from 1483 to 1520, painted it while still in his twenties. The work blends themes of classical philosophy and human reason in a symmetrical, balanced composition.

The use of perspective, a key feature of Renaissance painting, brings your eye to the center, where you see Plato and Aristotle.

Plato, on the left, was modeled on Leonardo da Vinci. He points upward, symbolizing his theory of ideal forms.

To his right is Aristotle, who gestures horizontally, emphasizing the empirical, physical world.



COMPARE A EUROPEAN POLITY IN 1400 TO A MODERN ONE

Norberg writes, "In the fourteenth century, there were probably around a thousand different polities in Europe: principalities, duchies, cities and clerical possessions." Norberg argues that this political diversity contributed to interstate competition and the birth, or rebirth, of ideas.

A polity is an independent, organized society that may include free cities, kingdoms, nation-states, or even empires.

Instructions

- Explore this [map of Europe in 1400](#) from the University of Pennsylvania's Renaissance Europe course. Choose one polity on the map that you would like to investigate. Research its history using credible sources.
- Visit the CIA [World Factbook](#) and research the modern polity that occupies the same geographic region as the polity you researched in task no. 1. Record your findings in the chart below.

Historic name of polity	
Current name	
Regional location in Europe	
Type of government, 1200–1450	
Current type of government	

- Write a paragraph in which you compare the government of the historic polity with that of a current one in the same region. Respond to this prompt:
Describe the similarities and differences between two polities—one from the period 1330–1500 CE and one from the contemporary period—in the same region of Europe. In your paragraph, be sure to include:
 - A topic sentence with a historically defensible claim
 - Specific evidence from credible sources
 - An explanation of how the evidence supports your claim
 - References to your sources

Example Comparison

Historic name of polity	Milan
Current name	Italy
Regional location in Europe	Northern Italian peninsula, south of the Alps
Type of government, 1200–1450	Duchy of Milan, ruled by an autocratic duke appointed by the Holy Roman emperor
Current type of government	Part of the Republic of Italy, a secular, representative democracy

"In the early 1400s, Milan was governed by a hereditary autocracy, whereas today the region is part of the Italian Republic, a parliamentary democracy—reflecting a shift from dynastic power to representative government. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in 1400, the Visconti family held the title of Duke of Milan. The family had purchased the title from the Holy Roman emperor, illustrating the transactional nature of political power at the time. The regime was a typical example of Italy's political structure during the Renaissance, in which wealthy families, rather than the people, held government authority. Today, Milan is the capital of Lombardy, a region governed by elected officials of the Italian Republic. The current Italian Constitution guarantees democratic representation and civil liberties to all Italian citizens. Therefore, the citizens of Milan now choose their leaders in free, open elections. The transformation of Milan from an autocracy to democratic rule shows how the Italian political system has evolved. Despite setbacks during certain periods, most recently under the fascist dictatorship of Mussolini, Milan's government has evolved from dictatorial rule by an elite family to one based on popular participation."