

# III

## CHANGING TRADITIONS

**The Three Orders**

**Changing Cultural Traditions**

**Confrontation of Cultures**



# CHANGING TRADITIONS

**W**E have seen how, by the ninth century, large parts of Asia and America witnessed the growth and expansion of great empires – some nomadic, some based on well-developed cities and trading networks that centred on them. The difference between the Macedonian, Roman and Arab empires and the ones that preceded them (the Egyptian, Assyrian, Chinese, Mauryan) was that they covered greater areas of territory, and were continental or transcontinental in nature. The Mongol empire was similar.

Different cultural encounters were crucial to what took place. The arrival of empires was almost always sudden, but they were almost always the result of changes that had been taking place over a long time in the core of what would become an empire.

Traditions in world history could change in different ways. In western Europe during the period from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries, much that we connect with modern times evolved slowly – the development of scientific knowledge based on experiment rather than religious belief, serious thought about the organisation of government, with attention to the creation of civil services, parliaments and different codes of law, improvements in technology that was used in industry and agriculture. The consequences of these changes could be felt with great force outside Europe.

As we have seen, by the fifth century CE, the Roman Empire in the west had disintegrated. In western and central Europe, the remains of the Roman Empire were slowly adapted to the administrative requirements and needs of tribes that had established kingdoms there. However, urban centres were smaller in western Europe than further east.

By the ninth century, the commercial and urban centres – Aix, London, Rome, Sienna – though small, could not be dismissed. From the ninth to the eleventh centuries, there were major developments in the countryside in western Europe. The Church and royal government developed a combination of Roman institutions with the customary

rules of tribes. The finest example was the empire of Charlemagne in western and central Europe at the beginning of the ninth century. Even after its rapid collapse, urban centres and trading networks persisted, albeit under heavy attack from Hungarians, Vikings and others.

What happened was called 'feudalism'. Feudalism was marked by agricultural production around castles and 'manor houses', where lords of the manor possessed land that was cultivated by peasants (serfs) who pledged them loyalty, goods and services. These lords in turn pledged their loyalty to greater lords who were 'vassals' of kings. The Catholic Church (centred on the papacy) supported this state of affairs and itself possessed land. In a world where uncertainties of life, poor sense of medicine and low life expectancy were common, the Church showed people how to behave so that life after death at least would be tolerable. Monasteries were created where God-fearing people could devote themselves to the service of God in the way Catholic churchmen thought fit. Equally, churches were part of a network of scholarship that ran from the Muslim states of Spain to Byzantium, and they provided the petty kings of Europe with a sense of the opulence of the eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

The influence of commerce and towns in the feudal order came to evolve and change encouraged by Mediterranean entrepreneurs in Venice and Genoa (from the twelfth century). Their ships carried on a growing trade with Muslim states and the remains of the Roman Empire in the east. Attracted by the lure of wealth in these areas, and inspired by the idea of freeing 'holy places' associated with Christ from Muslims, European kings reinforced links across the Mediterranean during the 'crusades'. Trade within Europe improved (centred on fairs and the port cities of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea and stimulated by a growing population).



*The Palace of the Popes, in Avignon, a fourteenth-century town in south France.*





*The Palace of the Doge, in Venice, fifteenth century.*

Opportunities for commercial expansion coincided with changing attitudes concerning the value of life. Respect for human beings and living things that marked much of Islamic art and literature, and the example of Greek art and ideas that came to Europe from Byzantine trade encouraged Europeans to take a new look at the world. And from the fourteenth century (in what is called the 'Renaissance'), especially in north Italian towns, the wealthy became less concerned with life after death and more with the wonders of life itself. Sculptors, painters and writers became interested in humanity and the discovery of the world.

By the end of the fifteenth century, this state of affairs encouraged travel and discovery as never before. Voyages of discovery took place. Spaniards and Portuguese, who had traded with northern Africa, pushed further down the coast of western Africa, finally leading to journeys around the Cape of Good Hope to India – which had a great reputation in Europe as a source of spices that were in great demand. Columbus attempted to find a western route to India and in 1492 reached the islands which the Europeans called the West Indies. Other explorers tried to find a northern route to India and China via the Arctic.

European travellers encountered a range of different peoples in the course of their journeys. In part, they were interested in learning from them. The papacy encouraged the work of the North African geographer and traveller Hasan al-Wazzan (later known in Europe as Leo Africanus), who wrote the first geography of Africa in the early sixteenth century for Pope Leo X. Jesuit churchmen observed and wrote on Japan in the sixteenth century. An Englishman, Will Adams, became a friend and

counsellor of the Japanese Shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, in the early seventeenth century. As in the case of Hasan al-Wazzan, peoples that the Europeans encountered in the Americas often took a great interest in them and sometimes worked for them. For example an Aztec woman – later known as Dona Marina – befriended the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Cortes, and interpreted and negotiated for him.

In their encounters, Europeans were sometimes cautious, self-effacing and observant, even as they frequently attempted to establish trade monopolies and enforce their authority by force of arms as the Portuguese attempted to do in the Indian Ocean after Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut (present-day Kozhikode) in 1498. In other cases, they were overbearing, aggressive and cruel and adopted an attitude of superiority to those they met, considering such people ignorant. The Catholic Church encouraged both attitudes. The Church was the centre for the study of other cultures and languages, but encouraged attacks on people it saw as 'un-Christian'.

From the point of view of non-Europeans, the encounter with Europe varied. For much of the Islamic lands and India and China, though, Europeans remained a curiosity until the end of the seventeenth century. They were perceived as hardy traders and seamen who had little to contribute to their sense of the larger world. The Japanese learnt some of the advantages of European technology quickly – for instance, they had begun large-scale production of muskets by the late sixteenth century. In the Americas, enemies of the Aztec empire sometimes used Europeans to challenge the power of the Aztecs. At the same time the diseases the Europeans brought devastated the populations, leading to the death of over 90 per cent of the people in some areas by the end of the sixteenth century.

# TIMELINE III



## (C. 1300 TO 1700)

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The period under consideration witnessed several major developments in Europe, including changes in agriculture and the lives of peasants. It was also marked by a range of cultural developments. This timeline draws attention to contacts between continents, stimulated in many instances by the growth of trade. The impact of these contacts was varied – while ideas, inventions and goods were shared across continents, there was also constant warfare between kingdoms to control land, resources and access to trade routes. As a result, men and women were often displaced and enslaved, if not exterminated. In many ways, the lives of people were transformed beyond recognition.

DATES	AFRICA	EUROPE
1300-25		Alhambra and Granada emerge as important cultural centres in Spain
1325-50	Plague* in Egypt (1348-55)	Hundred Years War between England and France (1337-1453); Black Death (a form of plague) spreads throughout Europe (1348)
1350-75	Ibn Batuta explores the Sahara	French peasants protest against high taxes (1358)
1375-1400		Peasant revolt in Britain (1381); Geoffrey Chaucer writes <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> , one of the earliest compositions in English (1388)
1400-25		
1425-50	Portuguese begin slave trading (1442)	
1450-75	Songhai empire in West Africa established based on trading networks across the Sahara; Portuguese expeditions and settlements along the west coast of Africa (1471 onwards)	First printed book appears in Europe; Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), painter, architect, inventor in Italy
1475-1500	Portuguese convert the king of Bokongo to Christianity	Establishment of the Tudor dynasty in England (1485)
1500-25	African slaves taken to work on sugar plantations in America (1510); Ottoman Turks conquer Egypt (1517)	Coffee from South America is drunk in Europe for the first time (1517) and tobacco, chocolate, tomatoes and turkey are also introduced; Martin Luther attempts to reform the Catholic Church (1517)
1525-50		Copernicus propounds theory about solar system (1543)
1550-75		William Shakespeare (1564-1616), dramatist in England
1575-1600		Zacharias Janssen invents the microscope (1590s)
1600-25	Oyo kingdom of Nigeria at the height of its power, centres for metal-working*	One of the first novels, <i>Don Quixote</i> , written in Spanish (1605)
1625-50		William Harvey demonstrates that blood is pumped through the body by the heart (1628)
1650-75	Portuguese destroy the Kongo kingdom (1662)	Louis XIV, king of France (1638-1715)
1675-1700		Peter the Great (1682-1725) attempts to modernise Russia

DATES	ASIA	SOUTH ASIA
1300-25		
1325-1350		Establishment of the Vijayanagara empire* (1336)
1350-75	Ming dynasty* in China (1368 onwards)	
1375-1400		
1400-25		Emergence of regional sultanates
1425-50		
1450-75		Ottoman Turks capture Constantinople (1453)
1475-1500		Vasco da Gama reaches India (1498)
1500-25	Portuguese entry into China opposed, driven out to Macao (1522)	
1525-50		Babur establishes Mughal control over north India, first battle of Panipat (1526)
1550-75		Akbar (1556-1605) consolidates Mughal rule
1575-1600	First Kabuki play staged in Japan (1586); Shah Abbas (1587-1629) of Persia introduces European methods of military training	
1600-25	Tokugawa Shogunate established in Japan (1603)	Establishment of the British East India Company (1600)
1625-50	All European traders with the exception of the Dutch forbidden to trade with Japan (1637); Manchu rule in China, (1644 onwards) which lasts for nearly 300 years; growing demand in Europe for Chinese tea and silk	Construction of the Taj Mahal ( 1632-53)
1650-75		
1675-1700		



DATES	AMERICAS	AUSTRALIA/PACIFIC ISLANDS
1300-25	Aztec capital at Tenochtitlan, Mexico (1325), building temples, development of irrigation systems and accounting system (quipu)*	
1325-50		
1350-75		
1375-1400		
1400-25		
1425-50		
1450-75	Incas establish control over Peru (1465)	
1475-1500	Columbus reaches the West Indies (1492)	
1500-25	Spanish conquest of Mexico (1521)	Magellan, a Spanish navigator, reaches the Pacific Ocean (1519)
1525-50	French explorers reach Canada (1534)	
1550-75	Spanish conquest of Peru (1572)	
1575-1600		Dutch sailors reach Australia by accident
1600-25	England sets up its first colonies in North America (1607); the first slaves are brought from West Africa to Virginia (1619)	Spanish sailors reach Tahiti (1606)
1625-50	Dutch found New Amsterdam, now called New York (1626); first printing press is set up in Massachusetts (1635)	Dutch navigator Abel Tasman sails around Australia without realising it. He then lands on Van Diemen's land, later called Tasmania. He also reaches New Zealand, but thinks it is part of a huge landmass!
1650-75	First sugar plantations are established in the West Indies (1654)	
1675-1700	French colonise the Mississippi basin, naming it Louisiana after King Louis XIV (1682)	

## ACTIVITY

You may have noticed that the column on Australia/Pacific Islands has very few recorded dates. This is because the peoples in these areas often used other forms of recording, including paintings such as the one shown above\*. List at least one event/process from each of the preceding five columns which an Australian painter may have found worth recording. List another five which may have seemed irrelevant to her/him.

## THE THREE ORDERS

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*IN this chapter, we shall learn about the socio-economic and political changes which occurred in western Europe between the ninth and sixteenth centuries. After the fall of the Roman Empire, many groups of Germanic people from eastern and central Europe occupied regions of Italy, Spain and France.*

*In the absence of any unifying political force, military conflict was frequent, and the need to gather resources to protect one's land became very important. Social organisation was therefore centred on the control of land. Its features were derived from both imperial Roman traditions and German customs. Christianity, the official religion of the Roman Empire from the fourth century, survived the collapse of Rome, and gradually spread to central and northern Europe. The Church also became a major landholder and political power in Europe.*

*The 'three orders', the focus of this chapter, are three social categories: Christian priests, landowning nobles and peasants. The changing relationships between these three groups was an important factor in shaping European history for several centuries.*

Over the last 100 years, European historians have done detailed work on the histories of regions, even of individual villages. This was possible because, from the medieval period, there is a lot of material in the form of documents, details of landownership, prices and legal cases: for example, churches kept records of births, marriages and deaths, which have made it possible to understand the structure of families and of population. The inscriptions in churches give information about traders' associations, and songs and stories give a sense of festivals and community activities.

All these can be used by historians to understand economic and social life, and changes over a long period (like increase in population) or over a short period (like peasant revolts).

Of the many scholars in France who have worked on feudalism, one of the earliest was Bloch. Marc Bloch (1886–1944) was one of a group of scholars who argued that history consisted of much more than just political history, international relations and the lives of great people. He emphasised the importance of geography in shaping human

history, and the need to understand the collective behaviour or attitudes of groups of people.

Bloch's *Feudal Society* is about European, particularly French, society between 900 and 1300, describing in remarkable detail social relations and hierarchies, land management and the popular culture of the period.

His career was cut short tragically when he was shot by the Nazis in the Second World War.

## An Introduction to Feudalism

The term 'feudalism' has been used by historians to describe the economic, legal, political and social relationships that existed in Europe in the medieval era. Derived from the German word 'feud', which

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*The term 'medieval era' refers to the period in European history between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries.*

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MAP 1: Western Europe

means ‘a piece of land’, it refers to the kind of society that developed in medieval France, and later in England and in southern Italy.

In an economic sense, feudalism refers to a kind of agricultural production which is based on the relationship between lords and peasants. The latter cultivated their own land as well as that of the lord. The peasants performed labour services for the lords, who in exchange provided military protection. They also had extensive judicial control over peasants. Thus, feudalism went beyond the economic to cover the social and political aspects of life as well.

Although its roots have been traced to practices that existed in the Roman Empire and during the age of the French king Charlemagne (742-814), feudalism as an established way of life in large parts of Europe may be said to have emerged later, in the eleventh century.

## France and England

Gaul, a province of the Roman Empire, had two extensive coastlines, mountain ranges, long rivers, forests and large tracts of plains suited to agriculture.

The Franks, a Germanic tribe, gave their name to Gaul, making it ‘France’. From the sixth century, this region was a kingdom ruled by Frankish/French kings, who were Christian. The French had very strong links with the Church, which were further strengthened when in 800 the Pope gave King Charlemagne the title of ‘Holy Roman Emperor’, to ensure his support\*.

Across a narrow channel lay the island of England–Scotland, which in the eleventh century was conquered by a duke from the French province of Normandy.

\*The head of the Eastern Church, in Constantinople, had a similar relationship with the Byzantine emperor.

### Early History of France

481	<i>Clovis becomes king of the Franks</i>
486	<i>Clovis and the Franks begin the conquest of northern Gaul</i>
496	<i>Clovis and the Franks convert to Christianity</i>
714	<i>Charles Martel becomes mayor of the palace</i>
751	<i>Martel's son Pepin deposes the Frankish ruler, becomes king and establishes a dynasty. Wars of conquest double the size of his kingdom</i>
768	<i>Pepin succeeded by his son Charlemagne/Charles the Great</i>
800	<i>Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor</i>
840 ONWARDS	<i>Raids by Vikings from Norway</i>



## The Three Orders

French priests believed in the concept that people were members of one of the three 'orders', depending on their work. A bishop stated, 'Here below, some pray, others fight, still others work...' Thus, the three orders of society were broadly the clergy, the nobility and the peasantry.

*In the twelfth century, Abbess Hildegard of Bingen wrote: 'Who would think of herding his entire cattle in one stable – cows, donkeys, sheep, goats, without difference? Therefore it is necessary to establish difference among human beings, so that they do not destroy each other ... God makes distinctions among his flock, in heaven as on earth. All are loved by him, yet there is no equality among them.'*

*'Abbey' is derived from the Syriac abba, meaning father. An abbey was governed by an abbot or an abbess.*

## The Second Order: The Nobility

Priests placed themselves in the first order, and nobles in the second. The nobility had, in reality, a central role in social processes. This is because they controlled land. This control was the outcome of a practice called 'vassalage'.

The kings of France were linked to the people by 'vassalage', similar to the practice among the Germanic peoples, of whom the Franks were one. The big landowners – the nobles – were vassals of the king, and peasants were vassals of the landowners. A nobleman accepted the king as his *seigneur* (senior) and they made a mutual promise: the *seigneur*/lord ('lord' was derived from a word meaning one who provided bread) would protect the vassal, who would be loyal to him. This relationship involved elaborate rituals and exchange of vows taken on the Bible in a church. At this ceremony, the vassal received a written charter or a staff or even a clod of earth as a symbol of the land that was being given to him by his master.

The noble enjoyed a privileged status. He had absolute control over his property, in perpetuity. He could raise troops called 'feudal levies'. The lord held his own courts of justice and could even coin his own money.

He was the lord of all the people settled on his land. He owned vast tracts of land which contained his own dwellings, his private fields and pastures and the homes and fields of his tenant-peasants. His house was called a manor. His private lands were cultivated by peasants, who were also expected to act as foot-soldiers in battle when required, in addition to working on their own farms.

*French nobles starting for a hunt, fifteenth-century painting.*



## The Manorial Estate

A lord had his own manor-house. He also controlled villages – some lords controlled hundreds of villages – where peasants lived. A small manorial estate could contain a dozen families, while larger estates might include fifty or sixty. Almost everything needed for daily life was found on the estate: grain was grown in the fields, blacksmiths and carpenters maintained the lord's implements and repaired his weapons, while stonemasons looked after his buildings. Women spun and wove fabric, and children worked in the lord's wine-presses. The estate had extensive woodlands and forests where the lords hunted. They contained

*A manorial estate, England, thirteenth century.*





pastures where his cattle and his horses grazed. There was a church on the estate and a castle for defence.

From the thirteenth century, some castles were made bigger for use as a residence for a knight's family. In fact, in England castles were practically unknown before the Norman Conquest, and developed as centres of political administration and military power under the feudal system.

The manor could not be completely self-sufficient because salt, millstones and metalware had to be obtained from outside sources. Those lords who wanted a luxurious lifestyle and were keen to buy rich furnishings, musical instruments and ornaments not locally produced, had to get these from other places.

## The Knights

From the ninth century, there were frequent localised wars in Europe. The amateur peasant-soldiers were not sufficient, and good cavalry was needed. This led to the growing importance of a new section of people – the knights. They were linked to the lords, just as the latter were linked to the king. The lord gave the knight a piece of land (called 'fief') and promised to protect it. The fief could be inherited. It extended to anything between 1,000 and 2,000 acres or more, including a house for the knight and his family, a church and other establishments to house his dependants, besides a watermill and a wine-press. As in the feudal manor, the land of the fief was cultivated by peasants. In exchange, the knight paid his lord a regular fee and promised to fight for him in war. To keep up their skills, knights spent time each day fencing and practising tactics with dummies. A knight might serve more than one lord, but his foremost loyalty was to his own lord.

In France, from the twelfth century, minstrels travelled from manor to manor, singing songs which told stories – partly historical, partly invented – about brave kings and knights. In an age when not too many people could read and manuscripts were few, these travelling bards were very popular. Many manors had a narrow balcony above the large hall where the people of the manor gathered for meals. This was the minstrels' gallery, from where singers entertained nobles while they feasted.

## The First Order: The Clergy

The Catholic Church had its own laws, owned lands given to it by rulers, and could levy taxes. It was thus a very powerful institution which did not depend on the king. At the head of the western Church was the Pope. He lived in Rome. The Christians in Europe were guided by bishops and clerics – who constituted the first 'order'. Most villages had their own church, where people assembled every Sunday to listen to the sermon by the priest and to pray together.

### ACTIVITY 1

Discuss social hierarchies based on different criteria: occupation, language, wealth, education. Compare medieval France with Mesopotamia and the Roman Empire.

*'If my dear lord  
is slain, his fate  
I'll share,  
If he is hanged,  
then hang me  
by his side.  
If to the stake he  
goes, with him  
I'll burn;  
And if he's  
drowned, then  
let me drown  
with him.'*

*– Doon de Mayence,  
a thirteenth-century  
French poem  
(to be sung)  
recounting the  
adventures of  
knights.*

Everyone could not become a priest. Serfs were banned, as were the physically challenged. Women could not become priests. Men who became priests could not marry. Bishops were the religious nobility. Like lords who owned vast landed estates, the bishops also had the use of vast estates, and lived in grand palaces. The Church was entitled to a tenth share of whatever the peasants produced from their land over the course of the year, called a 'tithes'. Money also came in the form of endowments made by the rich for their own welfare and the welfare of their deceased relatives in the afterlife.

Some of the important ceremonies conducted by the Church copied formal customs of the feudal elite. The act of kneeling while praying, with hands clasped and head bowed, was an exact replica of the way in which a knight conducted himself while taking vows of loyalty to his lord. Similarly, the use of the term 'lord' for God was another example of feudal culture that found its way into the practices of the Church. Thus, the religious and the lay worlds of feudalism shared many customs and symbols.

#### ACTIVITY 2

Discuss examples of expected patterns of behaviour between people of different social levels, in a medieval manor, a palace and in a place of worship.

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*The word 'monastery' is derived from the Greek word 'monos', meaning someone who lives alone.*

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### Monks

Apart from the Church, devout Christians had another kind of organisation. Some deeply religious people chose to live isolated lives, in contrast to clerics who lived amongst people in towns and villages. They lived in religious communities called abbeys or monasteries, often in places very far from human habitation. Two of the more well-known monasteries were those established by St Benedict in Italy in 529 and of Cluny in Burgundy in 910.

Monks took vows to remain in the abbey for the rest of their lives and to spend their time in prayer, study and manual labour, like farming. Unlike priesthood, this life was open to both men and women – men became monks and women nuns. Except in a few cases, all abbeys were single-sex communities, that is, there were separate abbeys for men and women. Like priests, monks and nuns did not marry.

From small communities of 10 or 20 men/women, monasteries grew to communities often of several hundred, with large buildings and landed estates, with attached schools or colleges and hospitals. They contributed to the development of the arts. Abbess Hildegard (see p.135) was a gifted musician, and did much to develop the practice of community singing of prayers in church. From the thirteenth century, some groups of monks – called friars – chose not to be based in a monastery but to move from place to place, preaching to the people and living on charity.





*St Michael's Benedictine abbey in Farnborough, England.*

*In Benedictine monasteries, there was a manuscript with 73 chapters of rules which were followed by monks for many centuries. Here are some of the rules they had to follow:*

*Chapter 6: Permission to speak should rarely be granted to monks.*

*Chapter 7: Humility means obedience.*

*Chapter 33: No monk should own private property.*

*Chapter 47: Idleness is the enemy of the soul, so friars and sisters should be occupied at certain times in manual labour, and at fixed hours in sacred reading.*

*Chapter 48: The monastery should be laid out in such a way that all necessities be found within its bounds: water, mill, garden, workshops.*



*A Benedictine monk working on a manuscript, woodcut.*

By the fourteenth century, there was a growing uncertainty about the value and purpose of monasticism. In England, Langland's poem, *Piers Plowman* (c.1360-70), contrasted the ease and luxury of the lives of some monks with the 'pure faith' of 'simple ploughmen and shepherds and poor common labourers.' Also in England, Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales* (see box below) which had comic portraits of a nun, a monk and a friar.

## The Church and Society

Though Europeans became Christian, they still held on to some of their old beliefs in magic and folk traditions. Christmas and Easter became important dates from the fourth century. Christ's birth, celebrated on 25 December, replaced an old pre-Roman festival, the date of which was calculated by the solar calendar. Easter marked the crucifixion of Christ and his rising from the dead. But its date was not a fixed one, because it replaced an older festival to celebrate the coming of spring after a long winter, dated by the lunar calendar. Traditionally, on that day, people of each village used to make a tour of their village lands. With the coming of Christianity, they continued to do this, but they called the village the 'parish' (the area under the supervision of one priest). Overworked peasants welcomed 'holy days'/holidays because they were not expected to work then. These days were meant for prayer, but people usually spent a good part of them having fun and feasting.

Pilgrimage was an important part of a Christian's life, and many people went on long journeys to shrines of martyrs or to big churches.

*'When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root  
And the small birds are making melody  
That sleep away the night with open eye...  
(So Nature pricks them and their heart engages);  
Then people long to go on pilgrimages,  
And palmers\* long to seek the foreign shrines  
Of far-off saints, revered in various lands.  
And especially from every shire  
Of England, to Canterbury they make their journey.'*

– Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400), *The Canterbury Tales*. This was written in Middle English, and the verse is a translation in modern English.

\*A monk who travels to distant shrines.

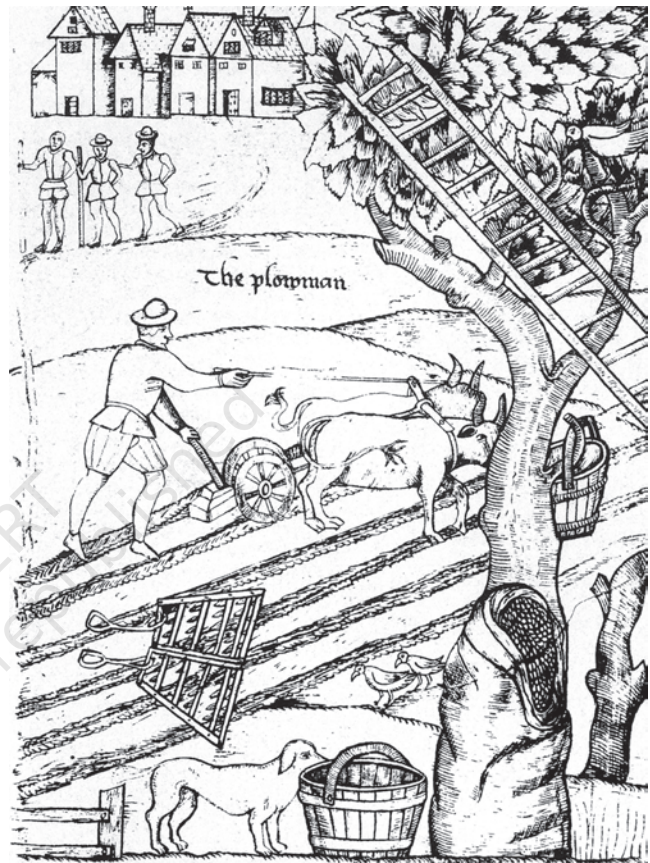


## The Third Order: Peasants, Free and Unfree

Let us now turn to the vast majority of people, namely, those who sustained the first two orders. Cultivators were of two kinds: free peasants and serfs (from the verb 'to serve').

Free peasants held their farms as tenants of the lord. The men had to render military service (at least forty days every year). Peasant families had to set aside certain days of the week, usually three but often more, when they would go to the lord's estate and work there. The output from such labour, called labour-rent, would go directly to the lord. In addition, they could be required to do other unpaid labour services, like digging ditches, gathering firewood, building fences and repairing roads and buildings. Besides helping in the fields, women and children had to do other tasks. They spun thread, wove cloth, made candles and pressed grapes to prepare wine for the lord's use. There was one direct tax called 'taille' that kings sometimes imposed on peasants (the clergy and nobles were exempted from paying this).

Serfs cultivated plots of land, but these belonged to the lord. Much of the produce from this had to be given to the lord. They also had to work on the land which belonged *exclusively* to the lord. They received no wages and could not leave the estate without the lord's permission. The lord claimed a number of monopolies at the expense of his serfs. Serfs could use only their lord's mill to grind their flour, his oven to bake their bread, and his wine-presses to distil wine and beer. The lord could decide whom a serf should marry, or might give his blessing to the serf's choice, but on payment of a fee.



*An English plowman, sixteenth-century sketch.*

## England

Feudalism developed in England from the eleventh century.

The Angles and Saxons, from central Europe, had settled in England in the sixth century. The country's name, England, is a variant of 'Angle-land'. In the eleventh century, William, the Duke of Normandy\*, crossed the English Channel with an army and defeated the Saxon king of England. From this time, France and England were often at war because of disputes over territory and trade.

\*The present Queen of England is descended from William I.



*Hever Castle,  
England, thirteenth  
century.*

William I had the land mapped, and distributed it in sections to 180 Norman nobles who had migrated with him. The lords became the chief tenants of the king, and were expected to give him military help. They were obliged to supply a certain number of knights to the king. They soon began to gift some of their own lands to knights who would serve them just as they in turn served the king. They could not, however, use their knights for private warfare, which was forbidden in England. Anglo-Saxon peasants became tenants of various levels of landholders.

## Factors Affecting Social and Economic Relations

While members of the first two orders saw the social system as stable and unchanging, there were several processes which were transforming the system. Some of these, such as changes in the environment, were gradual and almost imperceptible. Others were more dramatic, like the changes in agricultural technology and land use. These in turn were shaped by and had an effect on the social and economic ties between lords and vassals. Let us examine these processes one by one.

### The Environment

From the fifth to the tenth centuries, most of Europe was covered with vast forests. Thus the land available for agriculture was limited. Also, peasants dissatisfied with their conditions could flee from oppression and take refuge in the forest. Europe was undergoing an intensely cold climatic spell in this period. This led to severe and prolonged winters, a shortened growing season for crops, and reduced yields from agriculture.

From the eleventh century, Europe entered a warm phase. Average temperatures increased, which had a profound effect on agriculture. Peasants now had a longer growing season and the soil, now less subjected to frost, could be more easily ploughed. Environmental historians have noted that there was a significant receding of the forest line in many parts of Europe. This made expansion of the area under cultivation possible.

### Land Use

Initially, agricultural technology was very primitive. The only mechanical aid available to the peasant was the wooden plough, drawn by a team of oxen. This plough could at best scratch the surface of the earth and was unable to fully draw out the natural productivity of the soil. Agriculture was therefore very labour intensive. Fields had to be



dug by hand, often once in four years, and enormous manual labour was required.

Also, an ineffective method of crop rotation was in use. The land was divided in half, one field was planted in autumn with winter wheat, while the other field was left fallow. Rye was planted on this piece of fallow land the next year while the other half was put to fallow. With this system, the soil slowly deteriorated, and famines were not uncommon. Chronic malnutrition alternated with devastating famines and life was difficult for the poor.

Despite these hardships, the lords were anxious to maximise their incomes. Since it was not possible to increase output from the land, the peasants were forced to bring under cultivation all the land in the manorial estate, and spend more time doing this than they were legally bound to do. The peasants did not bow quietly to oppression. Since they could not protest openly, they resorted to passive resistance. They spent more time cultivating their own fields, and kept much of the product of that labour for themselves. They also avoided performing unpaid extra services. They came into conflict with the lords over pasture and forest lands, and saw these lands as resources to be used by the whole community, while the lords treated these as their private property.

## New Agricultural Technology

By the eleventh century, there is evidence of several technological changes.

Instead of the basic wooden ploughs, cultivators began using heavy iron-tipped ploughs and mould-boards. These ploughs could dig much deeper and the mould-boards turned the topsoil properly. With this the nutrients from the soil were better utilised.

The methods of harnessing animals to the plough improved. Instead of the neck-harness, the shoulder-harness came into use. This enabled animals to exert greater power. Horses were now better shod, with iron horseshoes, which prevented foot decay. There was increased use of wind and water energy for agriculture. More water-powered and wind-powered mills were set up all over Europe for purposes like milling corn and pressing grapes.

There were also changes in land use. The most revolutionary one was the switch from a two-field to a three-field system. In this, peasants could use a field two years out of three if they planted it with one crop in autumn and a different crop in spring a year and a half later. That meant that farmers could break their holdings into three fields. They could plant one with wheat or rye in autumn for human consumption. The second could be used in spring to raise peas, beans and lentils for human use, and oats and barley for the horses. The third field lay fallow. Each year they rotated the use among the three fields.

With these improvements, there was an almost immediate increase in the amount of food produced from each unit of land. Food availability

doubled. The greater use of plants like peas and beans meant more vegetable proteins in the diet of the average European and a better source of fodder for their animals. For cultivators, it meant better opportunities. They could now produce more food from less land. The average size of a peasant's farm shrank from about 100 acres to 20 to 30 acres by the thirteenth century. Holdings which were smaller could be more efficiently cultivated and reduced the amount of labour needed. This gave the peasants time for other activities.

Some of these technological changes cost a lot of money. Peasants did not have enough money to set up watermills and windmills. Therefore the initiative was taken by the lords. But peasants were able to take the initiative in many things, such as extending arable land. They also switched to the three-field rotation of crops, and set up small forges and smithies in the villages, where iron-tipped ploughs and horseshoes were made and repaired cheaply.

From the eleventh century, the personal bonds that had been the basis of feudalism were weakening, because economic transactions were becoming more and more money based. Lords found it convenient to ask for rent in cash, not services, and cultivators were selling their crops for money (instead of exchanging them for other goods) to traders, who would then take such goods to be sold in the towns. The increasing use of money began to influence prices, which became higher in times of poor harvests. In England, for instance, agricultural prices doubled between the 1270s and the 1320s.

### **A Fourth Order? New Towns and Townspeople**

Expansion in agriculture was accompanied by growth in three related areas: population, trade and towns. From roughly 42 million in 1000, Europe's population stood at 62 million around 1200 and 73 million in 1300. Better food meant a longer lifespan. By the thirteenth century, an average European could expect to live 10 years longer than in the eighth century. Women and girls had shorter lifespans compared to men because the latter ate better food.

The towns of the Roman Empire had become deserted and ruined after its fall. But from the eleventh century, as agriculture increased and became able to sustain higher levels of population, towns began to grow again. Peasants who had surplus grain to sell needed a place where they could set up a selling centre and where they could buy tools and cloth. This led to the growth of periodic fairs and small marketing centres which gradually developed town-like features – a town square, a church, roads where merchants built shops and homes, an office where those who governed the town could meet. In other places, towns grew around large castles, bishops' estates, or large churches.

In towns, instead of services, people paid a tax to the lords who owned the land on which the town stood. Towns offered the prospect



*Reims, French cathedral-town, seventeenth-century map.*

### ACTIVITY 3

Look carefully at this map and the drawing of a town. What would you notice as special features of medieval European towns? How were they different from towns in other places and other periods of time?

of paid work and freedom from the lord's control, for young people from peasant families.

'Town air makes free' was a popular saying. Many serfs craving to be free ran away and hid in towns. If a serf could stay for one year and one day without his lord discovering him, he would become a free man. Many people in towns were free peasants or escaped serfs who provided unskilled labour. Shopkeepers and merchants were numerous. Later there was need for individuals with specialised skills, like bankers and lawyers. The bigger towns had populations of about 30,000. They could be said to have formed a 'fourth' order.

The basis of economic organisation was the guild. Each craft or industry was organised into a guild, an association which controlled the quality of the product, its price and its sale. The 'guild-hall' was a feature of every town; it was a building for ceremonial functions, and where the heads of all the guilds met formally. Guards patrolled the town walls and musicians were called to play at feasts and in civic processions, and innkeepers looked after travellers.

By the eleventh century, new trade routes with West Asia were developing (see Theme 5). Scandinavian merchants were sailing south from the North Sea to exchange furs and hunting-hawks for cloth; English traders came to sell tin. In France, by the twelfth century, commerce and crafts began to grow. Earlier, craftsmen used to travel from manor to manor; now they found it easier to settle in one place where goods could be produced and traded for food. As the number of towns grew and trade continued to expand, town merchants became rich and powerful, and rivalled the power of the nobility.



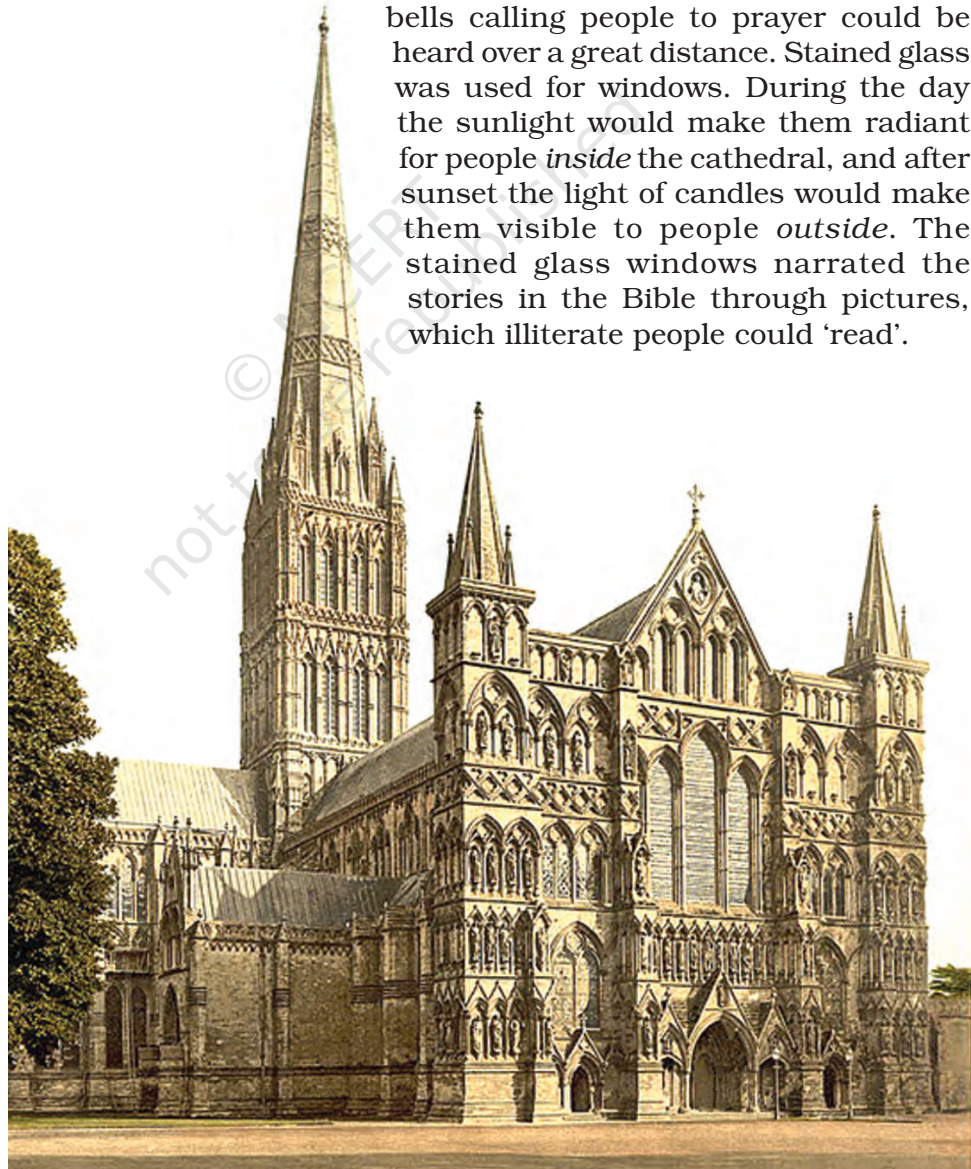
## Cathedral-towns

One of the ways that rich merchants spent their money was by making donations to churches. From the twelfth century, large churches – called cathedrals – were being built in France. These belonged to monasteries, but different groups of people contributed to their construction with their own labour, materials or money. Cathedrals were built of stone, and took many years to complete. As they were being built, the area around the cathedrals became more populated, and when they were completed they became centres of pilgrimage. Thus, small towns developed around them.

Cathedrals were designed so that the priest's voice could be heard clearly within the hall where large numbers of people gathered, and so that the singing by monks could sound beautiful and the chiming

bells calling people to prayer could be heard over a great distance. Stained glass was used for windows. During the day the sunlight would make them radiant for people *inside* the cathedral, and after sunset the light of candles would make them visible to people *outside*. The stained glass windows narrated the stories in the Bible through pictures, which illiterate people could 'read'.

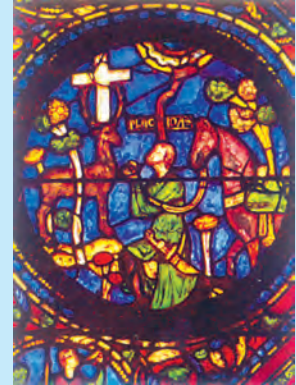
Salisbury Cathedral,  
England.



*'Because of the inadequacy which we often felt on feast days, for the narrowness of the place forced the women to run towards the altar upon the heads of the men with much anguish and noisy confusion, [we decided] to enlarge and amplify the noble church...*

*We also caused to be painted, by the exquisite hands of many masters from different regions, a splendid variety of new windows... Because these windows are very valuable on account of their wonderful execution and the profuse expenditure of painted glass and sapphire glass, we appointed an official master craftsman for their protection, and also a goldsmith...who would receive their allowances, namely, coins from the altar and flour from the common storehouse of the brethren, and who would never neglect their duty, to look after these [works of art].'*

– Abbot Suger (1081-1151) about the Abbey of St Denis, near Paris.



Stained-glass window, Chartres cathedral, France, fifteenth century.

## The Crisis of the Fourteenth Century

By the early fourteenth century, Europe's economic expansion slowed down. This was due to three factors.

In northern Europe, by the end of the thirteenth century the warm summers of the previous 300 years had given way to bitterly cold summers. Seasons for growing crops were reduced by a month and it became difficult to grow crops on higher ground. Storms and oceanic flooding destroyed many farmsteads, which resulted in less income in taxes for governments. The opportunities offered by favourable climatic conditions before the thirteenth century had led to large-scale reclamation of the land of forests and pastures for agriculture. But intensive ploughing had exhausted the soil despite the practice of the three-field rotation of crops, because clearance was not accompanied by proper soil conservation. The shortage of pasturage reduced the number of cattle. Population growth was outstripping resources, and the immediate result was famine. Severe famines hit Europe between 1315 and 1317, followed in the 1320s by massive cattle deaths.

In addition, trade was hit by a severe shortage of metal money because of a shortfall in the output of silver mines in Austria and Serbia. This forced governments to reduce the silver content of the currency, and to mix it with cheaper metals.

The worst was yet to come. As trade expanded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, ships carrying goods from distant countries had started arriving in European ports. Along with the ships came rats – carrying the deadly bubonic plague infection (the 'Black Death'). Western Europe, relatively isolated in earlier centuries, was hit by the epidemic between 1347 and 1350. The modern estimate of mortality in that epidemic is that 20 per cent of the people of the whole of Europe died, with some places losing as much as 40 per cent of the population.

*'How many valiant men, how many fair ladies, (had) breakfast with their kinfolk and the same night supped with their ancestors in the next world! The condition of the people was pitiable to behold. They sickened by the thousands daily, and died unattended and without help. Many died in the open street, others dying in their houses, made it known by the stench of their rotting bodies. Consecrated churchyards did not suffice for the burial of the vast multitude of bodies, which were heaped by the hundreds in vast trenches, like goods in a ships hold and covered with a little earth.'*

– Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75), Italian author.

As trade centres, cities were the hardest hit. In enclosed communities like monasteries and convents, when one individual contracted the plague, it was not long before everyone did. And in almost every case, none survived. The plague took its worst toll among infants, the young and the elderly. There were other relatively minor episodes of plague in the 1360s and 1370s. The population of Europe, 73 million in 1300, stood reduced to 45 million in 1400.

This catastrophe, combined with the economic crisis, caused immense social dislocation. Depopulation resulted in a major shortage of labour. Serious imbalances were created between agriculture and manufacture, because there were not enough people to engage in both equally. Prices of agricultural goods dropped as there were fewer people to buy. Wage rates increased because the demand for labour, particularly agricultural labour, rose in England by as much as 250 per cent in the aftermath of the Black Death. The surviving labour force could now demand twice their earlier wages.

## Social Unrest

The income of lords was thus badly hit. It declined as agricultural prices came down and wages of labourers increased. In desperation, they tried to give up the money-contracts they had entered into and revive labour-services. This was violently opposed by peasants, particularly the better-educated and more prosperous ones. In 1323, peasants revolted in Flanders, in 1358 in France, and in 1381 in England.

Though these rebellions were ruthlessly crushed, it is significant that they occurred with the most violent intensity in those areas which had experienced the prosperity of the economic expansion – a sign that peasants were attempting to protect the gains they had made in previous centuries. Despite the severe repression, the sheer intensity of peasant opposition ensured that the old feudal relations could not be reimposed. The money economy was too far advanced to be reversed. Therefore, though the lords succeeded in crushing the revolts, the peasants ensured that the feudal privileges of earlier days could not be reinvented.



## Eleventh to Fourteenth Centuries

1066	<i>Normans defeat Anglo-Saxons and conquer England</i>
1100 ONWARDS	<i>Cathedrals being built in France</i>
1315–17	<i>Great famine in Europe</i>
1347–50	<i>Black Death</i>
1338–1461	<i>Hundred Years War between England and France</i>
1381	<i>Peasants' revolts</i>

### ACTIVITY 4

Read through the events and processes listed with dates, and connect them into a narrative account.

## Political Changes

Developments in the political sphere paralleled social processes. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, European kings strengthened their military and financial power. The powerful new states they created were as significant for Europe as the economic changes that were occurring. Historians have therefore called these kings 'the new monarchs'. Louis XI in France, Maximilian in Austria, Henry VII in England and Isabelle and Ferdinand in Spain were absolutist rulers, who started the process of organising standing armies, a permanent bureaucracy and national taxation and, in Spain and Portugal, began to play a role in Europe's expansion overseas (see Theme 8).

The most important reason for the triumph of these monarchies was the social changes which had taken place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The dissolution of the feudal system of lordship and vassalage, and the slow rate of economic growth had given the first opportunity to kings to increase their control over their powerful and not-so-powerful subjects. Rulers dispensed with the system of feudal levies for their armies and introduced professionally trained infantry equipped with guns and siege artillery (see Theme 5) directly under their control. The resistance of the aristocracies crumbled in the face of the firepower of the kings.

*Queen Elizabeth I of England at a picnic, late sixteenth century.*



## The New Monarchy

1461–1559 *New monarchs in France*

1474–1556 *New monarchs in Spain*

1485–1547 *New monarchs in England*

By increasing taxes, monarchs got enough revenues to support larger armies and thus defended and expanded their frontiers and overcame internal resistance to royal authority. Centralisation, however, did not occur without resistance from the aristocracy. A common thread running through all types of opposition to the monarchies was the question of taxation. In England, rebellions occurred and were put down in 1497, 1536, 1547, 1549 and 1553. In France, Louis XI (1461-83) had to wage a long struggle against dukes and princes. Lesser nobles, often members of local assemblies, resisted this royal usurpation of their powers. The 'religious' wars in France in the sixteenth century were in part a contest between royal privileges and regional liberties.

*Nemours Castle, France, fifteenth century.*



The nobility managed a tactical shift in order to ensure their survival. From being opponents to the new regimes, they quickly transformed themselves into loyalists. It is for this reason that royal absolutism has been called a modified form of feudalism. Precisely the same class of people who had been rulers in the feudal system – the lords – continued to dominate the political scene. They were given permanent positions in the administrative service. But the new regimes were different in some important ways.

The king was no longer at the apex of a pyramid where loyalty had been a matter of personal dependence and trust. He was now at the centre of an elaborate courtier society and a network of patron–client relationships. All monarchies, weak or powerful, needed the cooperation of those who could command authority. Patronage became the means of ensuring such cooperation. And patronage could be given or obtained by means of money. Therefore money became an important way in which non-aristocratic elements like merchants and bankers could gain access to the court. They lent money to the kings, who used it to pay the wages of soldiers. Rulers thus made space for non-feudal elements in the state system.

The later history of France and England was to be shaped by these changes in the power structures. In the reign of the child-king Louis XIII of France, in 1614, a meeting was held of the French consultative assembly, known as the Estates-General (with three houses to represent the three estates/orders – clergy, nobility, and the rest). After this, it

was not summoned again for nearly two centuries, till 1789, because the kings did not want to share power with the three orders.

What happened in England was very different. Even before the Norman Conquest, the Anglo-Saxons had a Great Council, which the king had to consult before imposing any tax. This developed into what was called the Parliament, which consisted of the House of Lords, the members of which were the lords and the clergy, and the House of Commons, representing towns and rural areas. King Charles I ruled for 11 years (1629–40) without calling Parliament. When he was forced to call it, because he needed money, a section of Parliament decided to go to war against him, and later executed him and established a republic. This did not last long, and monarchy was restored, but on the condition that Parliament would be called regularly.

Today, France has a republican form of government and England has a monarchy. This is because of the different directions that the histories of the two countries took after the seventeenth century.

## Exercises

### ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. Describe two features of early feudal society in France.
2. How did long-term changes in population levels affect economy and society in Europe?
3. Why did knights become a distinct group, and when did they decline?
4. What was the function of medieval monasteries?

### ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. Imagine and describe a day in the life of a craftsman in a medieval French town.
6. Compare the conditions of life for a French serf and a Roman slave.



THEME

7

## CHANGING CULTURAL TRADITIONS

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*FROM the fourteenth to the end of the seventeenth century, towns were growing in many countries of Europe. A distinct 'urban culture' also developed. Townspeople began to think of themselves as more 'civilised' than rural people. Towns – particularly Florence, Venice and Rome – became centres of art and learning. Artists and writers were patronised by the rich and the aristocratic. The invention of printing at the same time made books and prints available to many people, including those living in distant towns or countries. A sense of history also developed in Europe, and people contrasted their 'modern' world with the 'ancient' one of the Greeks and Romans.*

*Religion came to be seen as something which each individual should choose for himself. The church's earth-centric belief was overturned by scientists who began to understand the solar system, and new geographical knowledge overturned the Europe-centric view that the Mediterranean Sea was the centre of the world (see Theme 8).*

There is a vast amount of material on European history from the fourteenth century – documents, printed books, paintings, sculptures, buildings, textiles. Much of this has been carefully preserved in archives, art galleries and museums in Europe and America.

From the nineteenth century, historians used the term 'Renaissance' (literally, rebirth) to describe the cultural changes of this period. The historian who emphasised these most was a Swiss scholar – Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) of the University of Basle in Switzerland. He was a student of the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Ranke had taught him that the primary concern of the historian was to write about states and politics using papers and files of government departments. Burckhardt was dissatisfied with these very limited goals that his master had set out for him. To him politics was not the be-all and end-all in history writing. History was as much concerned with culture as with politics.

In 1860, he wrote a book called *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, in which he called his readers' attention to literature, architecture and painting to tell the story of how a new 'humanist' culture had flowered in Italian towns from

the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. This culture, he wrote, was characterised by a new belief – that man, as an individual, was capable of making his own decisions and developing his skills. He was ‘modern’, in contrast to ‘medieval’ man whose thinking had been controlled by the church.

## The Revival of Italian Cities

After the fall of the western Roman Empire, many of the towns that had been political and cultural centres in Italy fell into ruin. There was no unified government, and the Pope in Rome, who was sovereign in his own state, was not a strong political figure.

While western Europe was being reshaped by feudal bonds and unified under the Latin Church, and eastern Europe under the Byzantine Empire, and Islam was creating a common civilisation further west, Italy was weak and fragmented. However, it was these very developments that helped in the revival of Italian culture.

With the expansion of trade between the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic countries, the ports on the Italian coast revived. From the twelfth century, as the Mongols opened up trade with China via the Silk Route (see Theme 5) and as trade with western European countries



MAP 1: The Italian States

also increased, Italian towns played a central role. They no longer saw themselves as part of a powerful empire, but as independent city-states. Two of these – Florence and Venice – were republics, and many others were court-cities, ruled by princes.

One of the most vibrant cities was Venice, another was Genoa. They were different from other parts of Europe – the clergy were not politically dominant here, nor were there powerful feudal lords. Rich merchants and bankers actively participated in governing the city, and this helped the idea of citizenship to strike root. Even when these towns were ruled by military despots, the pride felt by the townspeople in being citizens did not weaken.

### The City-State

Cardinal Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542) writes about the democratic government of his city-state in *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1534).

*'...to come to the institution of our Venetian commonwealth, the whole authority of the city...is in that council, into which all the gentlemen of the City being once past the age of 25 years are admitted...'*

*Now first I am to yield you a reckoning how and with what wisdom it was ordained by our ancestors, that the common people should not be admitted into*



G. Bellini's 'The Recovery of the Relic of the Holy Cross' was painted in 1500, to recall an event of 1370, and is set in fifteenth-century Venice.

*this company of citizens, in whose authority [lies] the whole power of the commonwealth... Because many troubles and popular tumults arise in those cities, whose government is swayed by the common people... many were of contrary opinion, deeming that it would do well, if this manner of governing the commonwealth should rather be defined by ability and abundance of riches. Contrariwise the honest citizens, and those that are liberally brought up, oftentimes fall to poverty... Therefore our wise and prudent ancestors... ordered that this definition of the public rule should go rather by the nobility of*

*lineage, than by the estimation of wealth: yet with that temperature [proviso], that men of chief and supreme nobility should not have this rule alone (for that would rather have been the power of a few than a commonwealth) but also every other citizen whosoever not ignobly born: so that all which were noble by birth, or ennobled by virtue, did...obtain this right of government.'*



## The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

1300	<i>Humanism taught at Padua University in Italy</i>
1341	<i>Petrarch given title of 'Poet Laureate' in Rome</i>
1349	<i>University established in Florence</i>
1390	<i>Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales published</i>
1436	<i>Brunelleschi designs the Duomo in Florence</i>
1453	<i>Ottoman Turks defeat the Byzantine ruler of Constantinople</i>
1454	<i>Gutenberg prints the Bible with movable type</i>
1484	<i>Portuguese mathematicians calculate latitude by observing the sun</i>
1492	<i>Columbus reaches America</i>
1495	<i>Leonardo da Vinci paints The Last Supper</i>
1512	<i>Michelangelo paints the Sistine Chapel ceiling</i>

### Universities and Humanism

The earliest universities in Europe had been set up in Italian towns. The universities of Padua and Bologna had been centres of legal studies from the eleventh century. Commerce being the chief activity in the city, there was an increasing demand for lawyers and notaries (a combination of solicitor and record-keeper) to write and interpret rules and written agreements without which trade on a large scale was not possible. Law was therefore a popular subject of study, but there was now a shift in emphasis. It was studied in the context of earlier Roman culture. Francesco Petrarch (1304-78) represented this change. To Petrarch, antiquity was a distinctive civilisation which could be best understood through the actual words of the ancient Greeks and Romans. He therefore stressed the importance of a close reading of ancient authors.

This educational programme implied that there was much to be learnt which religious teaching alone could not give. This was the culture which historians in the nineteenth century were to label 'humanism'. By the early fifteenth century, the term 'humanist' was used for masters who taught grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. The Latin word *humanitas*, from which 'humanities' was derived, had been used many centuries ago by the Roman lawyer and essayist Cicero (106-43 BCE), a contemporary of Julius Caesar, to mean culture. These subjects were not drawn from or connected with religion, and emphasised skills developed by individuals through discussion and debate.

#### ACTIVITY 1

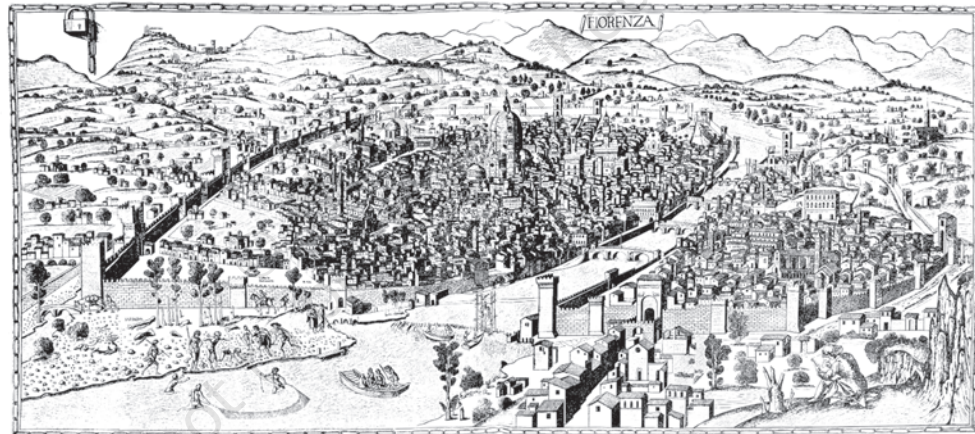
Locate Venice on the map of Italy, and look carefully at the painting on p. 154. How would you describe the city, and in what ways was it different from a cathedral-town?

*Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94), a humanist of Florence, wrote on the importance of debate in *On the Dignity of Man* (1486).*

*'For [Plato and Aristotle] it was certain that, for the attainment of the knowledge of truth they were always seeking for themselves, nothing is better than to attend as often as possible the exercise of debate. For just as bodily energy is strengthened by gymnastic exercise, so beyond doubt in this wrestling-place of letters, as it were, energy of mind becomes far stronger and more vigorous.'*

These revolutionary ideas attracted attention in many other universities, particularly in the newly established university in Petrarch's own home-town of Florence. Till the end of the thirteenth century, this city had not made a mark as a centre of trade or of learning, but things changed dramatically in the fifteenth century. A city is known by its great citizens as much as by its wealth, and Florence had come

*Florence, a sketch made in 1470.*



to be known because of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), a layman who wrote on religious themes, and Giotto (1267-1337), an artist who painted lifelike portraits, very different from the stiff figures done by earlier artists. From then it developed as the most exciting intellectual city in Italy and as a centre of artistic creativity. The term 'Renaissance Man' is often used to describe a person with many interests and skills, because many of the individuals who became well known at this time were people of many parts. They were scholar-diplomat-theologian-artist combined in one.

*Giotto's painting of the child Jesus, Assisi, Italy.*



## The Humanist View of History

Humanists thought that they were restoring 'true civilisation' after centuries of darkness, for they believed that a 'dark age' had set in after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Following them, later scholars unquestioningly assumed that a 'new age' had begun in Europe from the fourteenth century. The term 'Middle Ages'/'medieval period' was

used for the millennium (thousand years) after the fall of Rome. In the 'Middle Ages', they argued, the Church had had such complete control over men's minds that all the learning of the Greeks and Romans had been blotted out. The humanists used the word 'modern' for the period from the fifteenth century.

Periodisation used by humanists and by later scholars

5th–14th century	The Middle Ages
5th–9th century	The Dark Ages
9th–11th century	The Early Middle Ages
11th–14th century	The Late Middle Ages
15th century onwards	The Modern Age

Recently, historians have questioned this division. With more research being done and more being found out about Europe in this period, scholars are increasingly reluctant to make sharp divisions between centuries in terms of being culturally vibrant or otherwise. It seems unfair to label any period as the 'Dark Ages'.

## Science and Philosophy: The Arabs' Contribution

Much of the writings of the Greeks and Romans had been familiar to monks and clergymen through the 'Middle Ages', but they had not made these widely known. In the fourteenth century, many scholars began to read translated works of Greek writers like Plato and Aristotle. For this they were indebted not to their own scholars but to Arab translators who had carefully preserved and translated ancient manuscripts (Plato was Aflatun, and Aristotle Aristu in Arabic).

While some European scholars read Greek in Arabic translation, the Greeks translated works of Arabic and Persian scholars for further transmission to other Europeans. These were works on natural science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and chemistry. Ptolemy's *Almagest* (a work on astronomy, written in Greek before 140 CE and later translated into Arabic) carries the Arabic definite article 'al', which brings out the Arabic connection. Among the Muslim writers who were regarded as men of wisdom in the Italian world were Ibn Sina\* ('Avicenna' in Latin, 980-1037), an Arab physician and philosopher of Bukhara in Central Asia, and al-Razi ('Rhazes'), author of a medical encyclopaedia. Ibn Rushd ('Averroes' in Latin, 1126-98), an Arab philosopher of Spain, tried to resolve the tension between philosophical knowledge (*faylasuf*) and religious beliefs. His method was adopted by Christian thinkers.

Humanists reached out to people in a variety of ways. Though the curricula in universities continued to be dominated by law, medicine and theology, humanist subjects slowly began to be introduced in schools, not just in Italy but in other European countries as well.

\*The European spelling of these individuals' names made later generations think they were Europeans!

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*Schools at this time were only for boys.*

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## Artists and Realism

Formal education was not the only way through which humanists shaped the minds of their age. Art, architecture and books were wonderfully effective in transmitting humanist ideas.



*‘ “Art” is embedded in nature; he who can extract it, has it... Moreover, you may demonstrate much of your work by geometry. The more closely your work abides by life in its form, so much the better will it appear...No man shall ever be able to make a beautiful figure out of his own imagination unless he has well stored his mind by much copying from life.’*

– Albrecht Durer (1471-1528)

*This sketch by Durer (Praying Hands) gives us a sense of Italian culture in the sixteenth century, when people were deeply religious, but also had a sense of confidence in man’s ability to achieve near-perfection and to unravel the mysteries of the world and the universe.*

*‘Praying Hands’, brush drawing by Durer, 1508.*

*‘The Pieta’ by Michelangelo depicts Mary holding the body of Jesus.*



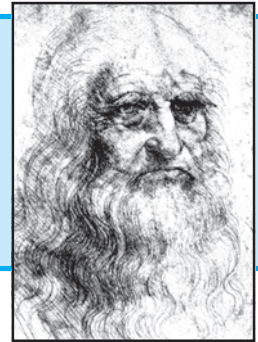
Artists were inspired by studying works of the past. The material remains of Roman culture were sought with as much excitement as ancient texts: a thousand years after the fall of Rome, fragments of art were discovered in the ruins of ancient Rome and other deserted cities. Their admiration for the figures of ‘perfectly’ proportioned men and women sculpted so many centuries ago, made Italian sculptors want to continue that tradition. In 1416, Donatello (1386-1466) broke new ground with his lifelike statues.

Artists’ concern to be accurate was helped by the work of scientists. To study bone structures, artists went to the laboratories of medical schools. Andreas Vesalius (1514-64), a Belgian and a professor of medicine at the University of Padua, was the first to dissect the human body. This was the beginning of modern physiology.

*This self-portrait is by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) who had an amazing range of interests from botany and anatomy to mathematics and art. He painted the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper.*

*One of his dreams was to be able to fly. He spent years observing birds in flight, and designed a flying machine.*

*He signed his name 'Leonardo da Vinci, disciple of experiment'.*



Painters did not have older works to use as a model. But they, like sculptors, painted as realistically as possible. They found that a knowledge of geometry helped them understand perspective, and that by noting the changing quality of light, their pictures acquired a three-dimensional quality. The use of oil as a medium for painting also gave a greater richness of colour to paintings than before. In the colours and designs of costumes in many paintings, there is evidence of the influence of Chinese and Persian art, made available to them by the Mongols. (see Theme 5)

Thus, anatomy, geometry, physics, as well as a strong sense of what was beautiful, gave a new quality to Italian art, which was to be called 'realism' and which continued till the nineteenth century.

## Architecture

The city of Rome revived in a spectacular way in the fifteenth century. From 1417, the popes were politically stronger because the weakness caused by the election of two rival popes since 1378 had ended. They actively encouraged the study of Rome's history. The ruins in Rome were carefully excavated by archaeologists (archaeology was a new skill). This inspired a 'new' style in architecture, which was actually a revival of the imperial Roman style – now called 'classical'. Popes, wealthy merchants and aristocrats employed architects who were familiar with classical architecture. Artists and sculptors were also to decorate buildings with paintings, sculptures and reliefs.

Some individuals were skilled equally as painters, sculptors and architects. The most impressive example is Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) – immortalised by the ceiling he painted for the Pope in the Sistine Chapel, the sculpture called 'The Pieta' and his design of the dome of St Peter's Church, all in Rome. Filippo Brunelleschi (1337-1446), the architect who designed the spectacular Duomo of Florence, had started his career as a sculptor.



*Italian architecture in the sixteenth century copied many features of imperial Roman buildings.*

### ACTIVITY 2

Describe the different scientific elements in the work of sixteenth-century Italian artists.



Another remarkable change was that from this time, artists were known individually, by name, not as members of a group or a guild, as earlier.



*The Duomo, the dome of Florence cathedral designed by Brunelleschi.*

*Leon Batista Alberti (1404-72) wrote on art theory and architecture. 'Him I call an Architect who is able to devise and to compleat all those Works which, by the movement of great Weights, and by the conjunction and amassment of Bodies can, with the greatest Beauty, be adapted to the uses of Mankind.'*

## The First Printed Books

If people in other countries wanted to see paintings, sculptures or buildings of great artists, they had to travel to Italy. But in the case of the written word, what was written in Italy travelled to other countries. This was because of the greatest revolution of the sixteenth century – the mastery of the technology of printing. For this, Europeans were indebted to other peoples – the Chinese, for printing technology, and to Mongol rulers because European traders and diplomats had become familiar with it during visits to their courts. (This was also the case with three other important innovations – firearms, the compass and the abacus.)

Earlier, texts existed in a few hand-written copies. In 1455, 150 copies of the Bible were printed in the workshop of Johannes Gutenberg (1400-1458), the German who made the first printing press. Earlier, a monk would have taken the same amount of time to write out *one* copy of the Bible!

By 1500, many classical texts, nearly all in Latin, had been printed in Italy. As printed books became available, it was possible to buy them, and students did not have to depend solely on lecture-notes. Ideas, opinions and information moved more widely and more rapidly than ever before. A printed book promoting new ideas could quickly reach hundreds of readers. This also made it possible for individuals to read books, since it was possible to buy copies for oneself. This developed the reading habit among people.

The chief reason that the humanist culture of Italy spread more rapidly across the Alps from the end of the fifteenth century is that printed books were circulating. This also explains why earlier intellectual movements had been limited to particular regions.

## A New Concept of Human Beings

One of the features of humanist culture was a slackening of the control of religion over human life. Italians were strongly attracted to material wealth, power and glory, but they were not necessarily irreligious. Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454), a humanist from Venice, wrote a



pamphlet defending acquisition of wealth as a virtue. In *On Pleasure*, Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457), who believed that the study of history leads man to strive for a life of perfection, criticised the Christian injunction against pleasure. There was also a concern at this time with good manners – how one should speak politely and dress correctly, what skills a person of culture should learn.

Humanism also implied that individuals were capable of shaping their own lives through means other than the mere pursuit of power and money. This ideal was closely tied with the belief that human nature was many-sided, which went against the three separate orders that feudal society believed in.

*Niccolo Machiavelli wrote about human nature in the fifteenth chapter of his book, The Prince (1513).*

*'So, leaving aside imaginary things, and referring only to those which truly exist, I say that whenever men are discussed (and especially princes, who are more exposed to view), they are noted for various qualities which earn them either praise or condemnation. Some, for example, are held to be generous, and others miserly. Some are held to be benefactors, others are called grasping; some cruel, some compassionate; one man faithless, another faithful; one man effeminate and cowardly, another fierce and courageous; one man courteous, another proud; one man lascivious, another pure; one guileless, another crafty; one stubborn, another flexible; one grave, another frivolous; one religious, another sceptical; and so forth.'*

*Machiavelli believed that 'all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious nature partly because of the fact that human desires are insatiable'. The most powerful motive Machiavelli saw as the incentive for every human action is self-interest.*

## The Aspirations of Women

The new ideal of individuality and citizenship excluded women. Men from aristocratic families dominated public life and were the decision-makers in their families. They educated their sons to take their place in family businesses or in public life, at times sending their younger sons to join the Church. Although their dowries were invested in the family businesses, women generally had no say in how their husbands should run their business. Often, marriages were intended to strengthen business alliances. If an adequate dowry could not be arranged, daughters were sent to convents to live the life of a nun. Obviously, the public role of women was limited and they were looked upon as keepers of the households.

The position of women in the families of merchants, however, was somewhat different. Shopkeepers were very often assisted by their wives in running the shop. In families of merchants and bankers, wives looked after the businesses when the male members were away on work. The early death of a merchant compelled his widow to perform a larger public role than was the case in aristocratic families.

A few women were intellectually very creative and sensitive about the importance of a humanist education. 'Even though the study of letters promises and offers no reward for women and no dignity', wrote the Venetian Cassandra Fedele (1465-1558), 'every woman ought to seek and embrace these studies.' She was one of a handful of women who questioned the idea that women were incapable of achieving the qualities of a humanist scholar. Fedele was known for her proficiency in Greek and Latin, and was invited to give orations at the University of Padua.

Fedele's writings bring into focus the general regard for education in that age. She was one of many Venetian women writers who criticised the republic 'for creating a highly limited definition of freedom that favoured the desires of men over those of women'. Another remarkable woman was the Marchesa of Mantua, Isabella d'Este (1474-1539). She ruled the state while her husband was absent, and the court of Mantua, a small state, was famed for its intellectual brilliance. Women's writings revealed their conviction that they should have economic power, property and education to achieve an identity in a world dominated by men.



Isabella d'Este.

### ACTIVITY 3

Compare the aspirations for women expressed by a woman (Fedele) and by a man (Castiglione). Did they have only women of a particular class in mind?

*Balthasar Castiglione, author and diplomat, wrote in his book *The Courtier* (1528):*

*'I hold that a woman should in no way resemble a man as regards her ways, manners, words, gestures and bearing. Thus just as it is very fitting that a man should display a certain robust and sturdy manliness, so it is well for a woman to have a certain soft and delicate tenderness, with an air of feminine sweetness in her every movement, which, in her going and staying and whatsoever she does, always makes her appear a woman, without any resemblance to a man. If this precept be added to the rules that these gentlemen have taught the courtier, then I think that she ought to be able to make use of many of them, and adorn herself with the finest accomplishments... For I consider that many virtues of the mind are as necessary to a woman as to a man; as it is to be of good family; to shun affectation: to be naturally graceful; to be well mannered, clever and prudent; to be neither proud, envious or evil-tongued, nor vain... to perform well and gracefully the sports suitable for women.'*

## Debates within Christianity

Trade and travel, military conquest and diplomatic contacts linked Italian towns and courts with the world beyond. The new culture was admired and imitated by the educated and the wealthy. Very few of the new ideas filtered down to the ordinary man who, after all, could not read or write.

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, many scholars in universities in north Europe were attracted to humanist ideas. Like their Italian colleagues, they too focused on classical Greek and Roman texts along with the holy books of the Christians. But, unlike Italy, where professional scholars dominated the humanist movement, in north Europe humanism attracted many members of the Church. They called on Christians to practise religion in the way laid down in the ancient texts of their religion, discarding unnecessary rituals, which they condemned as later additions to a simple religion. Theirs was a radically new view of human beings as free and rational agents. Later philosophers were to return to this over and over again, inspired by the belief in a distant God who created man but allowed him complete freedom to live his life freely, in pursuit of happiness 'here and now'.

Christian humanists like Thomas More (1478-1535) in England and Erasmus (1466-1536) in Holland felt that the Church had become an institution marked by greed, extorting money at will from ordinary people. One of the favourite methods of the clergy was to sell 'indulgences', documents which apparently freed the buyer from the burden of the sins he had committed. Christians came to realise from printed translations of the Bible in local languages that their religion did not permit such practices.

In almost every part of Europe, peasants began to rebel against the taxes imposed by the Church. While the common folk resented the extortions of churchmen, princes found their interference in the work of the state irritating. They were pleased when the humanists pointed out that the clergy's claim to judicial and fiscal powers originated from a document called the 'Donation of Constantine' supposed to have been issued by Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor. Humanist scholars were able to point out that this was not genuine, and had been forged later.

In 1517, a young German monk called Martin Luther (1483-1546) launched a campaign against the Catholic Church and argued that a person did not need priests to establish contact with God. He asked his followers to have complete faith in God, for faith alone could guide them to the right life and entry into heaven. This movement – called the Protestant Reformation – led to the churches in Germany and Switzerland breaking their connection with the Pope and the Catholic Church. In Switzerland, Luther's ideas were popularised by Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and later by Jean Calvin (1509-64). Backed by merchants, the reformers had greater popular



appeal in towns, while in rural areas the Catholic Church managed to retain its influence. Other German reformers, like the Anabaptists, were even more radical: they blended the idea of salvation with the end of all forms of social oppression. They said that since God had created all people as equal, they were not expected to pay taxes and had the right to choose their priests. This appealed to peasants oppressed by feudalism.

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*The New Testament is the section of the Bible dealing with the life and teachings of Christ and his early followers.*

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*William Tyndale (1494-1536), an English Lutheran who translated the Bible into English in 1506, defended Protestantism thus:*

*'In this they be all agreed, to drive you from the knowledge of the scripture, and that ye shall not have the text thereof in the mother-tongue, and to keep the world still in darkness, to the intent they might sit in the consciences of the people, through vain superstition and false doctrine, to satisfy their proud ambition, and insatiable covetousness, and to exalt their own honour above king and emperor, yea, and above God himself... Which thing only moved me to translate the New Testament. Because I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay-people in any truth, except the scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother-tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text.'*

Luther did not support radicalism. He called upon German rulers to suppress the peasants' rebellion, which they did in 1525. But radicalism survived, and merged with the resistance of Protestants in France, who, persecuted by the Catholic rulers, started claiming the right of a people to remove an oppressive ruler and to choose someone of their own liking. Eventually, in France, as in many other parts of Europe, the Catholic Church allowed Protestants to worship as they chose. In England, the rulers ended the connection with the Pope. The king/queen was from then onwards the head of the Church.

The Catholic Church itself did not escape the impact of these ideas, and began to reform itself from within. In Spain and in Italy, churchmen emphasised the need for a simple life and service to the poor. In Spain, Ignatius Loyola, in an attempt to combat Protestantism, set up the Society of Jesus in 1540. His followers were called Jesuits, whose mission was to serve the poor and to widen their knowledge of other cultures.

#### ACTIVITY 4

What were the issues on which the Protestants criticised the Catholic Church?

## The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

1516	<i>Thomas More's Utopia published</i>
1517	<i>Martin Luther writes the Ninety-Five Theses</i>
1522	<i>Luther translates the Bible into German</i>
1525	<i>Peasant uprising in Germany</i>
1543	<i>Andreas Vesalius writes On Anatomy</i>
1559	<i>Anglican Church established in England, with the king/queen as its head</i>
1569	<i>Gerhardus Mercator prepares cylindrical map of the earth</i>
1582	<i>Gregorian calendar introduced by Pope Gregory XIII</i>
1628	<i>William Harvey links the heart with blood circulation</i>
1673	<i>Academy of Sciences set up in Paris</i>
1687	<i>Isaac Newton's Principia Mathematica published</i>

### The Copernican Revolution

The Christian notion of man as a sinner was questioned from an entirely different angle – by scientists. The turning point in European science came with the work of Copernicus (1473-1543), a contemporary of Martin Luther. Christians had believed that the earth was a sinful place and the heavy burden of sin made it immobile. The earth stood at the centre of the universe around which moved the celestial planets.

Copernicus asserted that the planets, including the earth, rotate around the sun. A devout Christian, Copernicus was afraid of the possible reaction to his theory by traditionalist clergymen. For this reason, he did not want his manuscript, *De revolutionibus* (The Rotation) to be printed. On his deathbed, he gave it to his follower, Joachim Rheticus. It took time for people to accept this idea. It was much later – more than half a century later, in fact – that the difference between 'heaven' and earth was bridged through the writings of astronomers like Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). The theory of the earth as part of a sun-centred system was made popular by Kepler's *Cosmographical Mystery*, which demonstrated that the planets move around the sun not in circles but in ellipses. Galileo confirmed the notion of the dynamic world in his work *The Motion*. This revolution in science reached its climax with Isaac Newton's theory of gravitation.

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*Celestial means divine or heavenly, while terrestrial implies having a worldly quality.*

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*Self-portrait by Copernicus.*

## Reading the Universe

Galileo once remarked that the Bible that lights the road to heaven does not say much on how the heavens work. The work of these thinkers showed that *knowledge*, as distinct from *belief*, was based on observation and experiments. Once these scientists had shown the way, experiments and investigations into what came to be called physics, chemistry and biology expanded rapidly. Historians were to label this new approach to the knowledge of man and nature the Scientific Revolution.

Consequently, in the minds of sceptics and non-believers, God began to be replaced by Nature as the source of creation. Even those who retained their faith in God started talking about a distant God who does not directly regulate the act of living in the material world. Such ideas were popularised through scientific societies that established a new scientific culture in the public domain. The Paris Academy, established in 1670 and the Royal Society in London for the promotion of natural knowledge, formed in 1662, held lectures and conducted experiments for public viewing.

## Was there a European 'Renaissance' in the Fourteenth Century?

Let us now reconsider the concept of the 'Renaissance'. Can we see this period as marking a sharp break with the past and the rebirth of ideas from Greek and Roman traditions? Was the earlier period (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) a time of darkness?

Recent writers, like Peter Burke of England, have suggested that Burckhardt was exaggerating the sharp difference between this period and the one that preceded it, by using the term 'Renaissance', which implies that the Greek and Roman civilisations were *reborn* at this time, and that scholars and artists of this period substituted the pre-Christian world-view for the Christian one. Both arguments were exaggerated. Scholars in earlier centuries had been familiar with Greek and Roman cultures, and religion continued to be a very important part of people's lives.

To contrast the Renaissance as a period of dynamism and artistic creativity, and the Middle Ages as a period of gloom and lack of development is an over-simplification. Many elements associated with the Renaissance in Italy can be traced back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It has been suggested by some historians that in the ninth century in France, there had been similar literary and artistic blossoming.

The cultural changes in Europe at this time were not shaped only by the 'classical' civilisation of Rome and Greece. The archaeological and literary recovery of Roman culture did create a great admiration of that civilisation. But technologies and skills in Asia had moved far



ahead of what the Greeks and Romans had known. Much more of the world had become connected, and the new techniques of navigation (see Theme 8) enabled people to sail much further than had been possible earlier. The expansion of Islam and the Mongol conquests had linked Asia and North Africa with Europe, not politically but in terms of trade and of learning skills. The Europeans learned not just from the Greeks and Romans, but from India, from Arabia, from Iran, from Central Asia and China. These debts were not acknowledged for a long time because when the history of this period started to be written, historians saw it from a Europe-centred viewpoint.

An important change that did happen in this period was that gradually the 'private' and the 'public' spheres of life began to become separate: the 'public' sphere meant the area of government and of formal religion; the 'private' sphere included the family and personal religion. The individual had a private as well as a public role. He was not simply a member of one of the 'three orders'; he was also a person in his own right. An artist was not just a member of a guild, he was known for himself. In the eighteenth century, this sense of the individual would be expressed in a political form, in the belief that all individuals had equal political rights.

Another development was that the different regions of Europe started to have their separate sense of identity, based on language. Europe, earlier united partly by the Roman Empire and later by Latin and Christianity, was now dissolving into states, each united by a common language.

## Exercises

### ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. Which elements of Greek and Roman culture were revived in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?
2. Compare details of Italian architecture of this period with Islamic architecture.
3. Why were Italian towns the first to experience the ideas of humanism?
4. Compare the Venetian idea of good government with those in contemporary France.

### ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. What were the features of humanist thought?
6. Write a careful account of how the world appeared different to seventeenth-century Europeans.