REBIRTH PANGS:
THE CRISES OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY AND THE RENAISSANCE

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In his classic work, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burkhardt described the birth and development of the Italian Renaissance in terms of politics and religion (often inseparable), a return to the classical sources, individuality and humanism, and social life. In his analysis, the medieval understanding humans had of themselves as members of a particular race, class, organization, or family "melted away" as humans reconsidered their relationship to the state, to religion, and to society, as "all the things of this world became possible."[1] However pleasant the words "melted away" might sound, the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern era was anything but gentle. While the Renaissance was, in some ways, a continuation of the social and political changes already underway during the Later Middle Ages, it was also something new, born out of the great crises of the fourteenth century. Demographic collapse, political instability, and religious conflict unraveled many of the gains Europe made during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Some people believed that the end of the world was at hand, while others blamed the established secular and ecclesiastical authorities for failing to maintain order and for self-aggrandizement. Famine and disease, endemic warfare, the changing way of life brought about by long-distance trade, the increasing secularization of ecclesiastical power, and other key factors made many Europeans question their place in the existing social, political, and religious order. Many Europeans emerged from this long period of crisis with a skepticism of the existing establishment, a heightened appreciation for humanity's potential, and a desire to look back to the classical past for inspiration and guidance on how to move forward. The result was an era many historians associate with a "rebirth" in Europe, the Renaissance.

The prosperity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries fueled a period of commercial, scientific, technological, scholarly, and artistic flowering throughout Europe. The Christian

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[1] Jacob Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 98.

Church, which established itself as the glue that held Europe together following the collapse of the Roman Empire, was at the height of its power and influence thanks to its learned and powerful clergy. Likewise, capable monarchs built ever-larger empires and contributed economically to great works of art, architecture, and literature. Merchants made incredible fortunes, transforming European cities and shifting the balance of power among the "three estates." This began a long process of creating a new form of wealthy citizenry that had great power and great amounts of money to spend on various social projects.[2] However, the path from Marco Polo to Lorenzo de' Medici would first have to pass through the tumultuous fourteenth century.

Europe's prosperity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries may have created the conditions that led to a number of crises that struck during the fourteenth century. The transition from the Medieval Warm Period to the Little Ice Age may have sparked dramatic climactic events.[3] The Great Famine (1315-1317), perhaps caused by flooding summer rains, dramatically decreased food supplies and increased prices, creating great hardships for commoners across the continent. Adding to the famine's severity, grain that was harvested during this period may have had limited nutritional value due to the extreme meteorological conditions, harming those who could afford to buy bread.[4] While the Great Famine was the most infamous famine to strike fourteenth-century Europe, it was merely one of many that weakened Europe's population both physically and psychologically.

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[2] George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed., Interdisciplinary Studies in History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 42.

[3] E. J. Kendall et al., "Mobility, Mortality, and the Middle Ages: Identification of Migrant Individuals in a 14th Century Black Death Cemetery Population," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 150, no. 2 (2013): 211, *MEDLINE Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed March 23, 2016), 211.

[4] Johannes de Trokelowe, *Annates*, ed. H. T. Riley, *Rolls Series* 28 (London, 1866): 92-95, in "Famine of 1315," Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/famin1315a.asp (accessed March 23, 2016).

Further weakening European society, the Black Death (1347-1351) entered Europe via the Silk Road. *Yersinia pestis* and other diseases traveled via fleas through rat colonies on the steppes, hitchhiking on the many caravans and ships that entered Europe.[5] Italy's advanced long-distance trade network placed it on the frontline as the plague entered Europe. With no real understanding of what the Black Death was, where it originated, or how it spread, Europeans suffered as the disease wiped out entire towns in some cases and threatened Europe's political, social, and economic structure. Some regions suffered worse than others, and some members of society actually reaped long-term benefits in the plague's aftermath. Nevertheless, the Black Death's impact was widespread and long-lasting.

While not as great a demographic crisis as the Great Famine or the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) certainly made matters worse for Europe's population. Deaths mounted amid frequent skirmishes, rebellions, and full-scale battles, such as the battles of Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and Agincourt (1415). Military technology, including the crossbow, longbow, and primitive gunpowder weapons, increased the lethality of the conflicts. In addition to field battles, sieges, such as chronicler Jean Froissart described, kept residents cooped up in their cities for long periods of time.[6] Starvation and disease loomed as the days passed and the food stores dwindled. Sanitation was understandably poor during times of siege, creating large amounts of waste. The food stores and trash piles of besieged cities provided golden opportunities for rats to multiply, helping the Black Death and other diseases flourish. For those fortunate enough to live away from battles and sieges, economic strain due to the high costs of

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[5] John Theilmann and Frances Cate, "A Plague of Plagues: The Problem of Plague Diagnosis in Medieval England," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 37, no. 3 (Winter, 2007): 389, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4139605 (accessed March 23, 2016).
[6] Jean Froissart, *The Chronicles of Froissart*, ed. G. C. Macauly, trans. Lord Berners (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904): 201, in "English Ravages in the 1370s," Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/froissart1.asp (accessed March 23, 2016).

warfare made the balance between life and death very precarious throughout large regions of Europe.

Europeans reacted to these crises in many different ways. Giovanni Boccaccio noted that "practices contrary to the former habits of the citizens could hardly fail to grow up among the survivors."[7] Some Europeans mustered the courage to protest their established political and ecclesiastical authorities for failing to protect them from calamity and, in many cases, for creating additional hardships. Others endured the deleterious effects of the calamities and tried to adapt to the rapid changes. Nobles suffered the negative effects of having to pay higher wages amid declining land values. They enacted various labor ordinances in an effort to maintain their standing, but many nobles had no choice but to morph from militaristic knights into courtiers who made their living off of growing monarchical power. Baldesar Castiglione offered a detailed view of this phenomenon in his *Book of the Courtier*. Castiglione wrote about a courtier who claimed that his business was "fighting," justifying his refusal to dance with one of the ladies at court. She responded to him, "Well then…I should think that since you aren't at war at the moment…it would be a good thing if you were to have yourself well greased and stowed away in a cupboard with all your fighting equipment, so that you avoid getting rustier than you are already."[8] In many ways, certainly depending on location and other factors, nobles struggled to maintain their status amid the crises of the fourteenth century.

Peasants discovered that they had fewer comrades working the fields with them, so many of them banded together and fought for higher wages and greater autonomy. The subsequent "Ordinance of Laborers" (1349) and the "Statue of Laborers" (1351) showed the backlash

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[7] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. M. Rigg (London: David Campbell, 1921), vol. 1, 5-11, in Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/boccacio2.asp (accessed March 24, 2016).
[8] Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Group, 2003), 58.

against the peasants' efforts to upset the feudal order. The 1349 ordinance was a futile effort by England's Edward III to freeze labor wages at pre-Black Death levels. In it, he ordered every able-bodied man and woman to cease the begging and idleness that accompanied cries for higher wages and to return to their work at the accustomed wages.[9] Such labor ordinances and unpopular tax levies sparked a flurry of peasant rebellions in Flanders, France, England, and elsewhere. The Jacquerie in France (1358) and Wat Tyler's revolt in England (1381) were the most severe. In Jean Froissart's account of the Jacquerie, he wrote that rebellious peasants "slew a knight and after did put him on a broach and roasted him at the fire in the sight of the lady his wife and his children; and after the lady had been enforced and ravished with a ten or twelve, they made her perforce to eat of her husband and after made her to die an evil death and all her children."[10] Whether true or an exaggeration, Froissart's account provides evidence that the balance of power between nobles and commoners changed substantially.

The Church was not immune to the crises that plagued the fourteenth century. Many members of the clergy died from famine along with their parishioners. Others fell as the result of contact with plague victims through anointings of the sick and from contact with infected family members at funerals. Such sacrifices merited admiration for the clergy, while other clerical actions generated scorn and contempt. According to George Huppert, priests were often viewed as "outsiders" who had the most imposing house in the village, and maintained it with detested tithes.[11] Bishops were further removed from the lives of commoners because they lived in larger towns and cities, and their luxurious accommodations and princely power failed to exemplify the

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[9] Albert Beede White and Wallace Notestein, eds., *Source Problems in English History* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1915), in "Ordinance of Laborers, 1349," Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall. http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/seth/ordinance-labourers.asp (accessed March 24, 2016).
[10] Froissart, 136-137, "Jean Froissart on the Jacquerie, 1358," http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/froissart2.asp (accessed March 23, 2016).
[11] Huppert, 4.

modest life of Christ. The status of a bishop paled in comparison, however, with that of the fourteenth-century popes.

The economic, political, and religious power of the papacy did not mix well with the growing power of European monarchs and the rise of humanism, adding to the fourteenth-century crisis and encouraging Europeans to question the established Church. According to Castiglione, "there is no evil so bad as that which grows from the corrupted seed of good."[12] For many, notably Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), and Marsilius of Padua, the Avignon Papacy (1309-1377) was an example of such evil. Popes had lived in decadent luxury long before the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy began in 1309. However, the Avignon Papacy's political implications made it a lightning rod for criticism against the papacy. Italians lamented the loss of papal power at the Holy See in Rome, while the French enjoyed the benefits of having the pope at its beck and call in Avignon, particularly to use as leverage during the Hundred Years' War and other conflicts.

Dante criticized the Avignon popes in his *Divine Comedy* by stating, "your avarice afflicts the world, trampling the good and lifting the depraved…Ye have made yourselves a god of gold and silver; and from the idolater how differ ye?"[13] Dante's experience with the confrontation between the Guelph and Ghibelline factions of Florence made him acutely aware of the Avignon Papacy's religious and political disturbances. Petrarch likewise railed against the avarice of the Avignon popes by stating, "I am astounded…to see these men loaded with gold and clad in purple, boasting of the spoils of princes and nations."[14] In *Defensor Pacis*, Marsilius

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[12] Castiglione, 10.

[13] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, in "Dante: Divine Comedy: Inferno: Canto 19," Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/dante-infern19.asp (accessed March 24, 2016).

[14] Petrarch, "Letter Criticizing the Avignon Papacy," in *Readings in European History*, ed. J. H. Robinson (Boston, 1904), 502, in Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/14Cpetrarch-pope.asp (accessed March 24, 2016).

of Padua carried criticism beyond papal avarice to the question of the legitimacy of the pope as leader of the Church. He used the logic of Aristotle and the teachings of Christ as evidence to support his position that religious leaders should not be temporal rulers. Commenting on the primacy of the bishop of Rome (the pope), he wrote, "no one of the apostles was given pre-eminence over the other in essential dignity by Christ."[15] Marsilius's boldness in questioning the established Church authority invited papal condemnation, but it also showed how much had changed since the Church-dominated twelfth century. Furthermore, Martin Luther lived nearly two centuries after Marsilius, but the seeds of Luther's message of reform were evident in *Defensor Pacis*, as well as in the criticisms made by Dante and Petrarch.

The Great Famine, the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, the Avignon Papacy, and the numerous other hardships and challenges of the fourteenth century left indelible marks on the European psyche. Demographic collapse caused by famine, plague, and warfare created a "culture of death" that permeated nearly all aspects of society, including the arts. This is evident in the *danse macabre* painting motif and the instructions for Christian dying found in *Ars moriendi*. Recurrences of plague, as well as nearly incessant warfare and rebellion, continually reminded Europeans of the transitory nature of their lives. Europeans looked forward to the afterlife and an end to their earthly suffering. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola wrote that Heaven is the "cosmic dwelling of divinity," while the temporal world is a "fermenting dung-heap."[16] Given the perils of the fourteenth century and Europe's struggle to respond to them, it is hard to disagree with Mirandola.

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[15] Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor Pacis*, in Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/marsiglio4.asp (accessed March 24, 2016).
[16] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Washington, DC: Gateway Editions of Regnery Publishing, 1956), 5.

Despite his apparent contempt for the temporal world, Mirandola also espoused a rather different and almost contrary belief that the human life is worth living. Mirandola followed in the footsteps of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others in reaching back to ancient sources for inspiration and guidance. As Burkhardt noted, Petrarch had served as "a kind of living representative of antiquity," imitating Latin styles of poetry and researching a wide variety of ancient sources.[17] Likewise, Mirandola immersed himself in Greek and Latin texts, Hebrew Scriptures, and Arabic literature.[18] He joined other humanists in returning to the sources, *ad fontes*.

Mirandola and the other humanists studied the ancient writings of Galen and Avicenna, as well as the classic texts of Aristotle, Virgil, and Hermes Trismegistus. Dante blended Virgil and other classical characters with various Christian saints and his critique of papal avarice, creating a mixture of Christianity and the pagan classical world. Niccolò Machiavelli, a politically and militarily minded humanist, used his famous works *The Prince* and *Art of War* to develop a blueprint for humans to maintain effective political and military control. Like other humanists, Machiavelli used examples from the classical past, comparing and contrasting them with prominent temporal and ecclesiastical rulers. Even artists, such as Leon Battista Alberti, commented on events of the day by drawing comparisons to ancient and classical events. In *On Painting*, Alberti used the writings of Hermes Trismegistus and other ancient philosophers, mathematicians, rulers, and clerics as inspiration and as points of comparison in discussing the events of his own day.[19] The study of the classics reminded Alberti and other humanists of the great achievements of the past and encouraged them to unlock humanity's potential. Perhaps

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[17] Burkhardt, 137.
[18] Ibid., 134-135.
[19] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 62.

distilling the essence of Renaissance humanism, Mirandola quipped, "there was nothing to be seen more marvelous than man."[20]

Humanity suffered great hardships during the fourteenth century, but humanists found inspiration in the classical sources that pointed to humanity's potential to persevere and accomplish great things. Humanity was indeed marvelous and was not to be encumbered by limitations. In addition to literature, humanism was expressed in Renaissance art. The *danse macabre* of the Black Death era was replaced by Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel paintings and Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. While Christian themes remained quite popular, humanist artists felt comfortable depicting pagan themes and images of average individuals, such as in Raphael's *The School of Athens* and Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. Renaissance artists also felt comfortable depicting the nude human body, returning to the classical view of the body as a thing of beauty to be celebrated.[21] The use of perspective, proper proportion, realism, shading, light, texture, and other technical and stylistic devices set Renaissance art apart from medieval art and the iconographic art of the Byzantines. Alberti examined the use of color, light, and shading in great detail, striving for realism.[22] In addition to technique and style, Renaissance artists also felt comfortable taking credit for their own work. Many medieval artists were members of the clergy or members of a king's court, so either God or the king typically received credit for their art. Not so with the Renaissance humanists.

Humanism was empowering. It allowed humanists to connect with the ancient past and with cultures outside Europe, yet it also had a forward-thinking component. Machiavelli, for example, used the ancients as examples of civic virtue that he felt was lacking in his own time.

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[20] Mirandola, 3.
[21] Theodore K. Rabb, "Why Michelangelo Matters," *Commentary* 122, no. 2 (September, 2006): 58, http://search.proquest.com/docview/195886474?accountid=8289 (accessed March 25, 2016).
[22] Alberti, 37-59.

Humanists, such as Machiavelli, wanted to examine the ancient sources to learn from them. More importantly, however, Renaissance humanists hoped to develop something new from the synthesis. They used what they learned from the past to change their own time. Interestingly, they skipped over the Middle Ages, looking back instead to the classical era for guidance. *Ad fontes* (to the sources) was the motto that caused Petrarch to view the Middle Ages as a "dark age" compared to the classical era. *Ad fontes* was also the motto that encouraged Dante to include Virgil in *The Divine Comedy* and to encourage Michelangelo to sculpt his famous statue of David. One might argue that *ad fontes* led Martin Luther to adopt the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. While not a humanist like Desiderius Erasmus and other contemporaries, Luther's desire to focus on Scripture was certainly a manifestation of *ad fontes*.

Famine and disease, endemic warfare, political maneuverings, ecclesiastical conflicts, and *ad fontes* encouraged Europeans to question their place in the existing social, political, and religious order. The crisis-filled fourteenth century laid the foundations for the Renaissance, yet it also traumatized Europeans to the point that they looked back to the ancient past for inspiration and guidance on how to move forward. Each of the crises of the fourteenth century chipped away at the established order and/or shaped the transformations already underway. Many Europeans emerged from fourteenth-century crises with an altered paradigm that made them skeptical of the existing establishment and bold enough to challenge it. They were optimistic about humanity's potential to create something new.

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