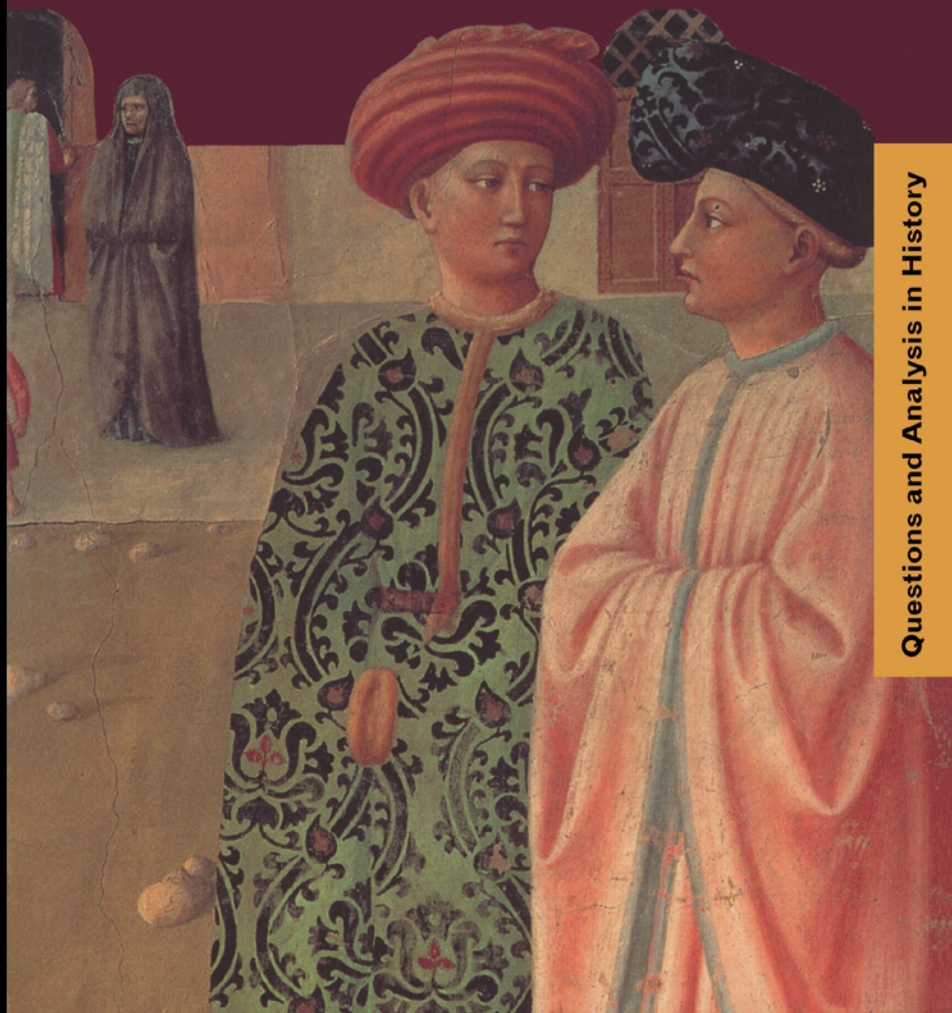


The Renaissance



Questions and Analysis in History

JOCELYN HUNT

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SERIES PREFACE

Most history textbooks now aim to provide the student with interpretation, and many also cover the historiography of a topic. Some include a selection of sources.

So far, however, there have been few attempts to combine *all* the skills needed by the history student. Interpretation is usually found within an overall narrative framework and it is often difficult to separate out the two for essay purposes. Where sources are included, there is rarely any guidance as to how to answer the questions on them.

The Questions and Analysis series is therefore based on the belief that another approach should be added to those which already exist. It has two main aims.

The first is to separate narrative from interpretation so that the latter is no longer diluted by the former. Most chapters start with a background narrative section containing essential information. This material is then used in a section focusing on analysis through a specific question. The main purpose of this is to help to tighten up essay technique.

The second aim is to provide a comprehensive range of sources for each of the issues covered. The questions are of the type which appear on examination papers, and some have worked answers to demonstrate the techniques required.

The chapters may be approached in different ways. The background narratives can be read first to provide an overall perspective, followed by the analyses and then the sources. The alternative method is to work through all the components of each chapter before going on to the next.

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INTRODUCTION

In the study of 'early modern' history, there is an assumption made that students will know about the Renaissance, even if they are not intending to answer specific examination questions about it. The term is frequently used as an adjective, or linked with other topics of the period: Renaissance government, Renaissance literature, Renaissance science and so on; students are presumed to understand the various implications of the word used as this kind of shorthand. As with many periods and issues of history, views and interpretations established in the nineteenth century are subject to detailed revision.

The problem with the Renaissance is that it is seldom a topic of study in schools before the sixth form. Thus, while many people use the word, there is very little certainty about precisely what it means or to what period it refers. The term is most commonly used when discussing fine art, and it is in this sense that most of us are familiar with it. Yet revisionist historians argue that art was its least important aspect, and the one which was least discussed by contemporaries. The emphasis on art dates back only to the mid-nineteenth century and the writings of Jacob Burckhardt, and we should instead focus on the development of humanism and the classical studies of the universities. The assumption that Florence was pre-eminent is similarly Burckhardtian, since, it is argued, the scholars of the Renaissance were based in Rome, and in the other universities. On the other hand, the names most clearly associated with the Renaissance remain those of artists, and indeed, artists from Florence.

A similar issue arises when the dates of the Renaissance are considered: the most generally accepted period is that of the fifteenth century; but any attempt to consider particular aspects of the Renaissance leads immediately to a 'stretching' of this time scale. The earliest writings in the vernacular in Italy date from the thirteenth century, and the earliest artists to whom the adjective 'Renaissance' is

applied are also thirteenth-century figures. The great artists of the Renaissance were active until the late sixteenth century. As far as literature is concerned, the 'English Renaissance' was only just reaching its peak as the seventeenth century began. The science of the Renaissance, and in particular the developments in astronomy, also takes the focus on to the end of the sixteenth century. Thus the period of the Renaissance appears to stretch with every reference, until it comprises the thirteenth to the seventeenth century.

The purpose of this book is to attempt to put into context what students may already know about the Renaissance. Reading revisionist history on any topic is more difficult if the reader does not know what the ideas are that they are rejecting. It is for this reason that this book begins with the dates of the Renaissance, and with art, and looks at the supposed dominance of the Italian city states: the traditional view of the Renaissance. Further chapters then consider the other topics to which the term Renaissance is often attached.

It is hoped that students of early modern history, who find the term 'Renaissance' cropping up in their other reading, can use the various chapters of this book to consider whether it is an apt link to make. What were the links between Renaissance and Reformation? Is it possible to identify distinctly 'Renaissance' ideas about government? What significant scientific changes are associated with the Renaissance?

1

THE BEGINNING OF THE RENAISSANCE

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

Major changes took place in many aspects of intellectual life in Europe during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These changes, ranging from technology and astronomy to art and music, share the name the 'Renaissance' because they have been described as a rebirth of concepts and values from classical times as well as the development of new ideas. Although the term was not used till the mid-nineteenth century, Italian contemporaries talked about a 'rinascita' and were consciously proud that they were renewing the culture of their classical ancestors. Historians debate and discuss the significance, the scope, the dating and even the existence of the Renaissance; nevertheless, the word is constantly used as a reference, as an adjective and as a definition of the period. It is therefore important to discuss when the movement began, and for how long it lasted.

For many, the key developments of the Renaissance are those in the field of fine arts. Such people define the Renaissance as beginning with Giotto di Bondone (?1266–1337) whose frescoes— for example, in Padua—display the light, colour and realism associated with the whole Renaissance movement. Until recently, Giotto was also thought to have created the frescoes in the Upper Church at Assisi. Modern scholarship now suggests that these are the work of an anonymous contemporary: the Master of the St Francis Legend; nevertheless, the works certainly demonstrate the same early Renaissance attributes. Others consider that the key artistic development was linear or mathematical perspective, as calculated and used by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and by artists ever since.

Similarly, sculpture achieved a recognisably 'Renaissance' style of realism and deep feeling from Donatello (1386?–1466) onwards. The

first clearly Renaissance architecture may be seen in Giotto's campanile for Florence Cathedral, designed at the end of his life, and Brunelleschi's classically inspired dome, completed in 1436. At the same time, the painters most famously associated with the Renaissance, and the works which are best known from the period, are those of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. For example, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* was painted in 1497, and his *Mona Lisa* in 1504. Michelangelo completed his first *Pietà* (now in St Peter's, Rome) between 1498 and 1499 and painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling between 1508 and 1512; his creative work continued right up to his death in 1564. Thus, if we take the visual arts as the defining features of the Renaissance, we have a movement which developed from the early fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century.

Extending the term 'Renaissance' to include key developments in literature and scholarship means these dates need to be extended further. The work of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) may be said to be a mixture of Christian and classical philosophy and imagery. Dante's views about the human and the divine were to be echoed by many writers after him, and therefore many historians would claim him as the first writer of the Italian Renaissance. At the other end of the period, however, there are serious arguments for including William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and his English contemporaries as Renaissance writers also. Their work explores and celebrates all aspects of human life, recognising that individuals can be masters of their own fate and can make their own decisions for good or evil. Although Shakespeare was said, according to Christopher Marlowe, to have had 'little Latin and less Greek', his source materials include classical stories as well as references to the latest events.

Music as a development of the Renaissance also requires an extension of the period beyond the fifteenth century. The Sforza family of Milan hired Josquin des Prez as court musician in 1473, though he soon moved to Rome. However, the name most associated with Renaissance music is that of Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), who developed both church and secular music to a high degree, writing both the first true operas and enduring masses, as well as his *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin* (1610).

Science, too, developed over a lengthy period. The pioneering work in astronomy done by Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543) was to be developed and extended by Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei well into the seventeenth century. At the same time, discoveries and conclusions reached in anatomy and physiology were to culminate in



Plate 1 *The Last Supper* (1495–7) wall painting by Leonardo da Vinci (1451–1519), Milan, Convent S. Maria delle Grazie, Refectory. Photo: AKG Photo



Plate 2 *Pietà*, (1498–9) Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), St Peter's, Rome. The Vatican, photo: AKG

the publication of works such as William Harvey's *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals* (1628).

Historians, since the publication of Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), have debated the precise definition, origins, dating and significance of the movement, and the two analyses in this chapter consider two aspects of this debate: whether the fifteenth century is the key moment of the start of the Renaissance;