

# III

## CHANGING TRADITIONS

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The Three Orders

Changing Cultural Traditions

Confrontation of Cultures



## CHANGING TRADITIONS

WE 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 trans-continental 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 century, 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 the 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
1325-1350	Plague* in Egypt (1348-55)	The Hundred Years' War between England and France (1337-1453) The 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)
1400-1425		
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)	The 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)
1500-1525	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)—tobacco, chocolate, tomatoes and turkey are also introduced. Martin Luther attempts to reform the Catholic Church (1521)
1525-1550		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	The Ming dynasty* in China (1368 onwards)	
1375-1400		
1400-1425		Emergence of regional sultanates
1425-50		
1450-75	Ottoman Turks capture Constantinople (1453)	
1475-1500		Vasco da Gama reaches India (1498)
1500-1525	Portuguese entry into China opposed, driven out to Macao (1522)	
1525-1550		Babur establishes Mughal control over North India, first battle of Panipat (1526)
1550-75		Akbar (1556-1605) consolidates Mughal rule
1575-1600	The 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)	The 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), build temples, develop irrigation systems and accounting system (quipu)*	
1325-1350		
1350-75		
1375-1400		
1400-1425		
1425-50		
1450-75	Incas establish control over Peru ( 1465)	
1475-1500	Columbus reaches the West Indies (1492)	
1500-1525	Spanish conquest of Mexico (1521)	Magellan, a Spanish navigator, reaches the Pacific Ocean (1519)
1525-1550	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	The 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 land mass!
1650-75	The first sugar plantations are established in the West Indies (1654)	
1675-1700	The French colonise the Mississippi, naming it Louisiana after King Louis XIV (1682)	

## ACTIVITY

You may have noticed that column 6 (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 5 columns which an Australian painter may have found worth recording. List another five which may have seemed irrelevant to her/him.

## THEME

# 6

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

## 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

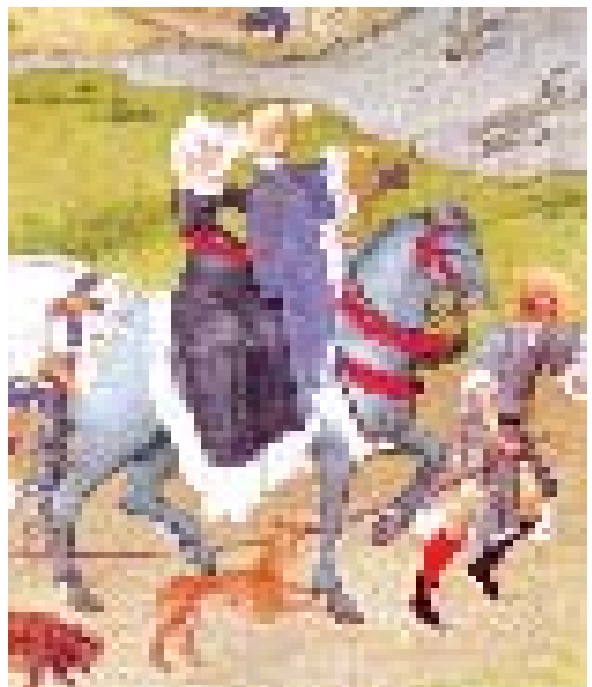
Priests placed themselves in the first order, and nobles in the second. The nobility had, in reality, a central role in social processes. This is because they controlled land. This control was the outcome of a practice called 'vassalage'.

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; painting, fifteenth century.*



## 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 'tithe'. 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.

## 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.

### 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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*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 quotation 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 ploughman, 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 'Angleland'. 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.

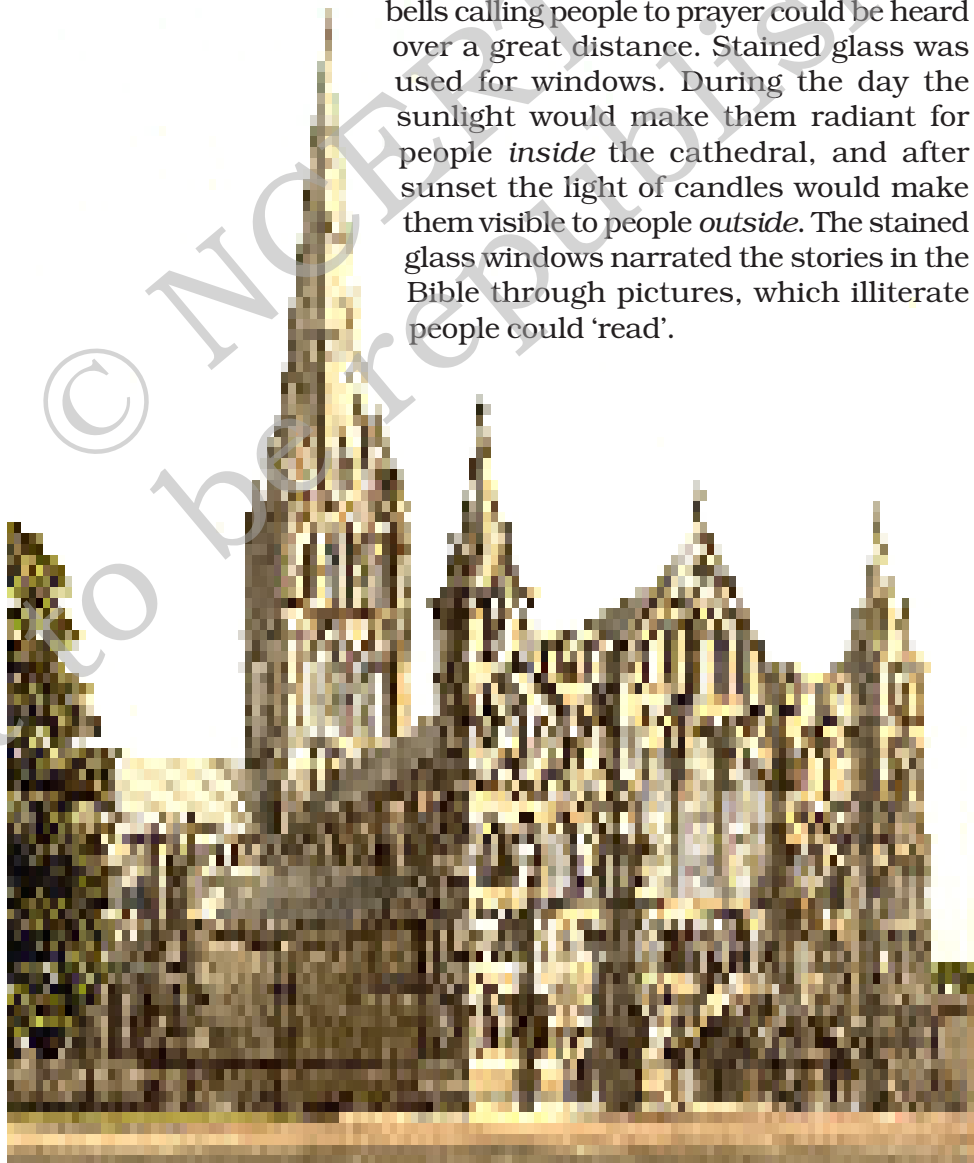
## Cathedral-towns

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.

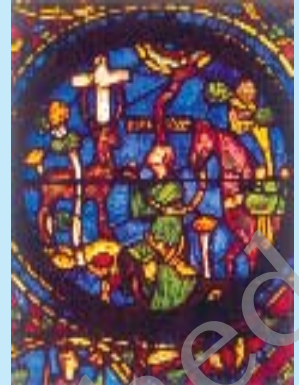




'Because of the inadequacy which we often felt on feast days, for the narrowness of the place forced the women to run towards the altar upon the heads of the men with much anguish and noisy confusion, [we decided] to enlarge and amplify the noble church...

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

#### 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.

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

Nemours Castle,  
France, fifteenth  
century.



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.



## 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

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.’



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.



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

## 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

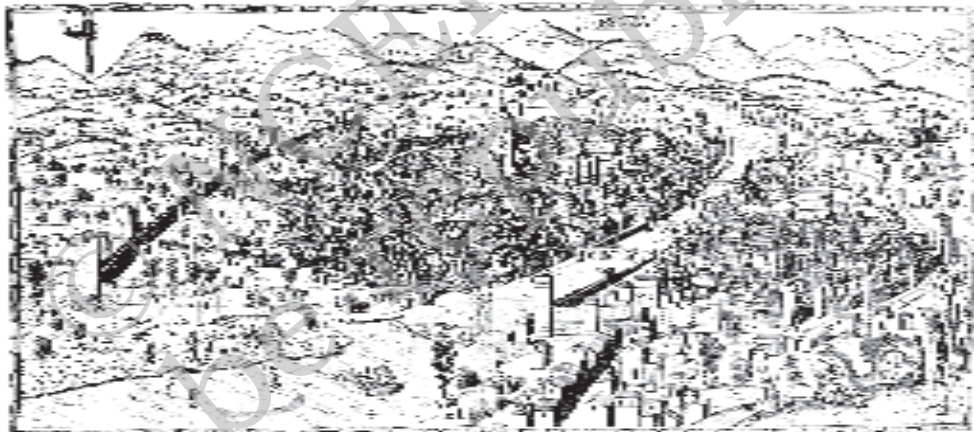
Locate Venice on the map of Italy, and look carefully at the painting on p. 154. How would you describe the city, and in what ways was it different from a cathedral-town?

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.*



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



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.

## 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

5th–9th century

9th–11th century

11th–14th century

#### 15th century onwards

#### The Middle Ages

The Dark Ages

The Early Middle Ages

The Late Middle Ages

#### 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 Aflaton, 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.

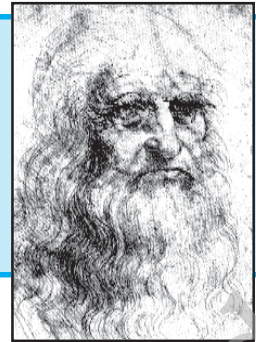
Artists’ concern to be accurate was helped by the work of scientists. To study bone structures, artists went to the laboratories of medical schools. Andreas Vesalius (1514-64), a Belgian and a professor of medicine at the University of Padua, was the first to dissect the human body. This was the beginning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

#### ACTIVITY 2

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

## 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.



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.

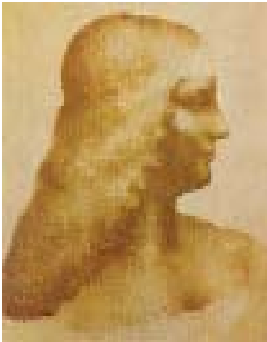
## The Aspirations of Women

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

### 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.



## CONFRONTATION OF CULTURES

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*THIS chapter will examine some aspects of the encounters between Europeans and the people of the Americas between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Some Europeans ventured out on unknown oceans in order to find trading routes to areas where spices and silver were to be obtained. The first to do this were the Spanish and the Portuguese. They persuaded the Pope to give them the exclusive right to rule over any new regions they might locate. Christopher Columbus, an Italian, sponsored by the rulers of Spain, sailed west in 1492, and thought that the lands he had reached were 'the Indies' (India and countries east of India about which he had read in the Travels of Marco Polo).*

*Later exploration indicated that the 'Indians' of the 'New World' actually belonged to different cultural groups and were not part of Asia. Two types of culture were to be found in the Americas. There were small subsistence economies in the Caribbean region and in Brazil. There were also powerful monarchical systems based on well-developed agriculture and mining. These, like the Aztecs and Mayas of central America and the Incas of Peru, also had monumental architecture.*

*The exploration and later the settlement of South America were to have disastrous consequences for the native people and their cultures. It also marked the beginning of the slave trade, with Europeans selling slaves from Africa to work in plantations and mines in the Americas.*

*European conquest of the people of America was accompanied by the ruthless destruction of their manuscripts and monuments. It was only in the late nineteenth century that anthropologists began to study these cultures. Still later, archaeologists found the ruins of these civilisations. The Inca city of Machu Picchu was rediscovered in 1911. Recently, photographs taken from the air have shown traces of many cities now covered by forest.*

*By contrast, we know the European side of the encounters in great detail. The Europeans who went to the Americas kept log-books and diaries of their journeys. There are records left by officials and Jesuit missionaries (see Theme 7). Europeans wrote about their 'discovery' of the Americas, and when histories of the countries of America were written, these were in terms of *European* settlements, with little reference to the local people.*



People have been living in North and South America and nearby islands for thousands of years, and many migrations from Asia and from the South Sea Islands have taken place over time. South America was (and still is, in parts) densely forested and mountainous, and the Amazon, the world's largest river, flows through miles of dense forest. In Mexico in central America, there were densely settled areas of habitation along the coast and in the plains, while elsewhere villages were scattered over forested areas.

### Communities of the Caribbean and Brazil

The Arawakian Lucayos lived on a cluster of hundreds of small islands in the Caribbean Sea, today known as the Bahamas, and the Greater Antilles. They had been expelled from the Lesser Antilles by the Caribs, a fierce tribe. In contrast to them, the Arawaks were a people who preferred negotiation to conflict. Skilled boat-builders, they sailed the open sea in dugout canoes (canoes made from hollow tree trunks). They lived by hunting, fishing and agriculture, growing corn, sweet potatoes, tubers and cassava.

A central cultural value was the organisation of people to produce food collectively and to feed everyone in the community. They were organised under clan elders. Polygamy was common. The Arawaks were animists. As in many other societies, shamans played an important role as healers and intermediaries between this world and that of the supernatural.

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Animists believe that even objects regarded by modern science as 'inanimate' may have life or a soul.

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MAP 1: Central America and the Caribbean Islands

**ACTIVITY 1**

Discuss the differences between the Arawaks and the Spanish. Which of these differences would you consider most significant and why?

The Arawaks used gold for ornaments, but did not attach the value to the metal that the Europeans did. They were quite happy to exchange gold for glass beads brought by the Europeans, because these seemed so much more beautiful. The art of weaving was highly developed – the hammock was one of their specialities, and one which captured the imagination of the Europeans.

The Arawaks were generous and were happy to collaborate with the Spanish in their search for gold. It was when Spanish policy became brutal that they were forced to resist, but this was to have disastrous consequences for them. Within twenty-five years of contact with the Spanish very little remained of the Arawaks or their way of life.

People called the Tupinamba lived on the east coast of South America, and in villages in the forests (the name 'Brazil' is derived from the brazilwood tree). They could not clear the dense forests for cultivation as they had no access to iron. But they had a healthy and plentiful supply of fruits, vegetables and fish, and so did not have to depend on agriculture. The Europeans who met them envied their happy freedom, with no king, army or church to regulate their lives.

## The State Systems of Central and South America

In contrast to the Caribbean and Brazil, there were some highly organised states in central America. There was a generous surplus of corn, which provided the basis for the urbanised civilisations of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas. The monumental architectural remains of these cities continue to mesmerise visitors today.

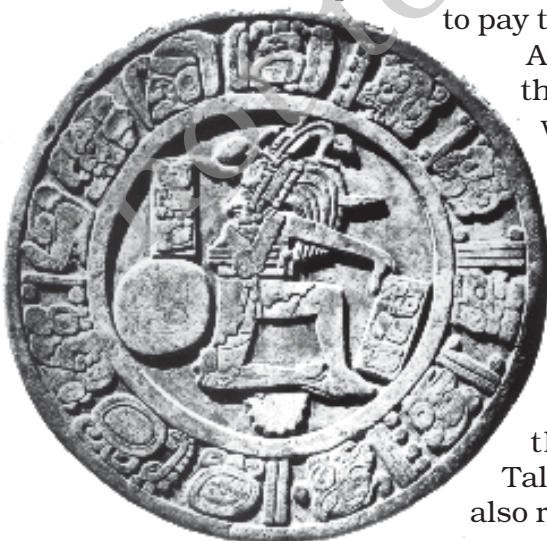
### The Aztecs

In the twelfth century, the Aztecs had migrated from the north into the central valley of Mexico (named after their god Mexitli). They expanded their empire by defeating different tribes, who were forced to pay tribute.

Aztec society was hierarchical. The nobility included those who were nobles by birth, priests, and others who had been awarded the rank. The hereditary nobility were a small minority who occupied the senior positions in the government, the army and the priesthood. The nobles chose from among them a supreme leader who ruled until his death. The king was regarded as the representative of the sun on earth. Warriors, priests and nobles were the most respected groups, but traders also enjoyed many privileges and often served the government as ambassadors and spies.

Talented artisans, physicians and wise teachers were also respected.

*A ball-court marker, with inscribed dates, Maya culture, Chiapas, sixth century.*



Since land was limited, the Aztecs undertook reclamations. They made *chinampas*, artificial islands, in Lake Mexico, by weaving huge reed-mats and covering them with mud and plants. Between these exceptionally fertile islands, canals were constructed on which, in 1325, was built the capital city Tenochtitlan. Its palaces and pyramids rose dramatically out of the lake. Because the Aztecs were frequently engaged in war, the most impressive temples were dedicated to the gods of war and the sun.

The empire rested on a rural base. People cultivated corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, manioc root, potatoes and other crops. Land was owned not by individuals but by clans, which also organised public construction works. Peasants, like European serfs, were attached to lands owned by the nobility and cultivated them in exchange for part of the harvest. The poor would sometimes sell their children as slaves, but this was usually only for a limited period, and slaves could buy back their freedom.

The Aztecs made sure that all children went to school. Children of the nobility attended the *calmecac* and were trained to become military and religious leaders. All others went to the *tepohtcalli* in their neighbourhood, where they learned history, myths, religion and ceremonial songs. Boys received military training as well as training in agriculture and the trades. Girls were trained in domestic skills.

In the early sixteenth century, the Aztec empire was showing signs of strain. This was largely to do with discontent among recently conquered peoples who were looking for opportunities to break free from central control.

## The Mayas

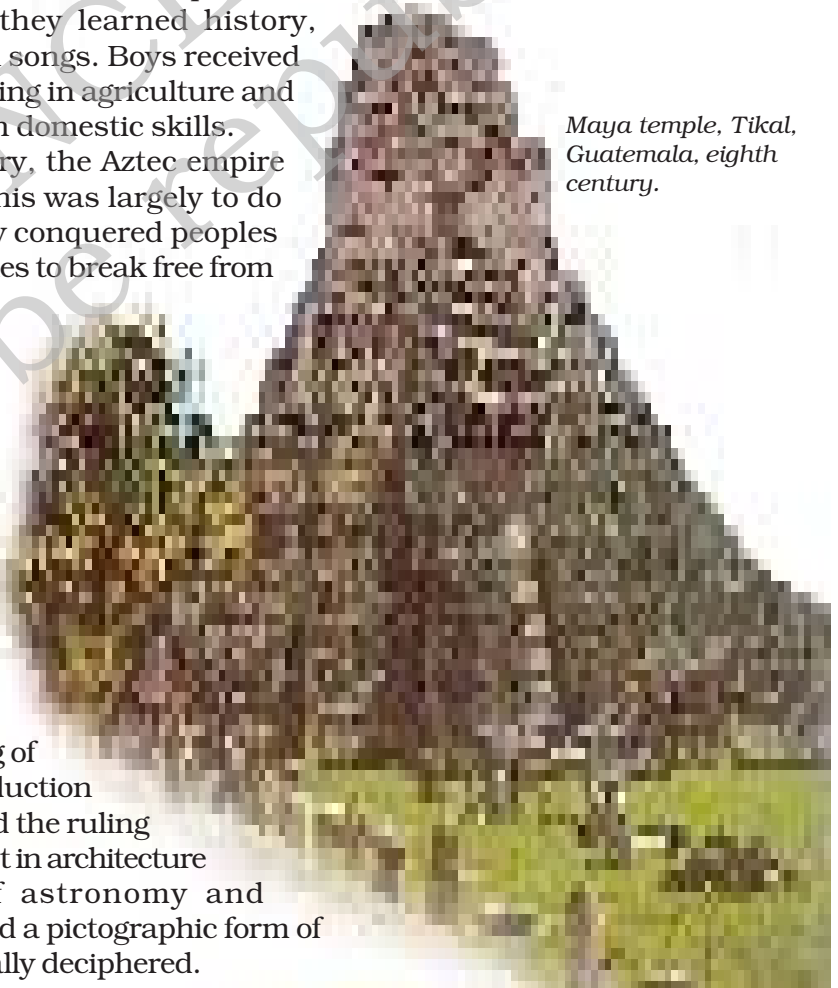
The Mayan culture of Mexico developed remarkably between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, but in the sixteenth century they had less political power than the Aztecs. Corn cultivation was central to their culture, and many religious ceremonies were centred on the planting, growing and harvesting of corn. Efficient agricultural production generated surplus, which helped the ruling classes, priests and chiefs to invest in architecture and in the development of astronomy and mathematics. The Mayas devised a pictographic form of writing that has only been partially deciphered.

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Reclamation is the conversion of wasteland into land suitable for habitation or cultivation.

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Maya temple, Tikal, Guatemala, eighth century.



## The Incas of Peru

The largest of the indigenous civilisations in South America was that of the Quechuas or Incas in Peru. In the twelfth century the first Inca, Manco Capac, established his capital at Cuzco. Expansion began under the ninth Inca and at its maximum extent the Inca empire stretched 3,000 miles from Ecuador to Chile.

The empire was highly centralised, with the king representing the highest source of authority. Newly conquered tribes were absorbed effectively; every subject was required to speak Quechua, the language of the court. Each tribe was ruled independently by a council of elders, but the tribe as a whole owed its allegiance to the ruler. At the same time, local rulers were rewarded for their military co-operation. Thus, like the Aztec empire, the Inca empire resembled a confederacy, with the Incas in control. There are no precise figures of the population, but it would seem that it included over a million people.

MAP 2: South America



Like the Aztecs, the Incas too were magnificent builders. They built roads through mountains from Ecuador to Chile. Their forts were built of stone slabs that were so perfectly cut that they did not require mortar. They used labour-intensive technology to carve and move stones from nearby rock falls. Masons shaped the blocks, using an effective but simple method called flaking. Many stones weighed more than 100 metric tons, but they did not have any wheeled vehicles to transport these. Labour was organised and very tightly managed.

The basis of the Inca civilisation was agriculture. To cope with the infertile soil conditions, they terraced hillsides and developed systems of drainage and irrigation. It has been recently pointed out that in 1500, cultivation in the Andean highlands was much greater than what it is today. The Incas grew corn and potatoes, and reared llamas for food and labour.

Their weaving and pottery were of a high quality. They did not develop a system of writing. However, there was an accounting system in place – the *quipu*, or cords upon which knots were made to indicate specific mathematical units. Some scholars now suggest that the Incas wove a sort of code into these threads.



Most visitors today wonder at the arts and skills of the Incas. However, there are some like the Chilean poet Neruda, who thought of the hours of hard work that thousands of people must have been forced to put in. And all that to achieve such high levels of agricultural output, such remarkable architecture, and such exquisite crafts, in this difficult environment.

'Look at me from the depths of the earth,  
tiller of fields, weaver, reticent shepherd,  
...  
mason high on your treacherous scaffolding,  
iceman of Andean tears,  
jeweler with crushed fingers,  
farmer anxious among his seedlings,  
potter wasted among his clays –  
bring to the cup of this new life  
your ancient buried sorrows.  
Show me your blood and your furrow;  
say to me: here I was scourged  
because a gem was dull or because the earth  
failed to give up in time its tithe of corn or stone.'

– Pablo Neruda (1904-73), *The Heights of Machu Picchu*, 1943.

*The hilltop town of Machu Picchu. It escaped the notice of the Spaniards and was therefore not destroyed.*



The organisation of the Inca empire, with its pyramid-like structure, meant that if the Inca chief was captured, the chain of command could quickly come apart. This was precisely what happened when the Spaniards decided to invade their country.

The cultures of the Aztecs and Incas had certain features in common, and were very different from European culture. Society was hierarchical, but there was no private ownership of resources by a few people, as in Europe. Though priests and shamans were accorded an exalted status, and large temples were built, in which gold was used ritually, there was no great value placed on gold or silver. This was also in marked contrast to contemporary European society.

## Voyages of Exploration by Europeans

The people of South America and the Caribbean got to know of the existence of European people when the latter began to sail across the Atlantic Sea. The magnetic compass, which helped identify the cardinal points accurately, had been known since 1380, but only in the fifteenth century did people use it when they ventured on voyages into unknown areas. By this time many improvements had been made in European sailing ships. Larger ships were built, that could carry a huge quantity of cargo as well as equipment to defend themselves if attacked by enemy ships. The circulation of travel literature and books on cosmography and geography created widespread interest right through the fifteenth century.

### ACTIVITY 2

Examine a detailed physical map of South America. To what extent do you think geography influenced the developments of the Inca empire?

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Cosmography was understood as the science of mapping the universe. It described both heaven and Earth, but was seen as distinct from geography and astronomy.

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In 1477, Ptolemy's *Geography* (written 1,300 years earlier) became available in print (see Theme 7) and thus came to be widely read. According to Ptolemy, an Egyptian, the regions of the world were arranged in terms of latitudes and longitudes. Reading these texts gave Europeans some knowledge of the world, which they understood to have three continents, namely, Europe, Asia and Africa. Ptolemy had suggested that the world was spherical, but he underestimated the width of the oceans. Europeans had no idea of the distance they would have to travel in the Atlantic before they reached land. Since they imagined it would be a short voyage, there were many who were ready to venture forth recklessly beyond the known seas.

People from the Iberian peninsula – the Portuguese and the Spanish – were the pioneers in the fifteenth-century voyages of exploration. For a long time these were called 'voyages of discovery'. Later historians, however, argued that these were *not* the first voyages that people of the "Old World" made to lands unknown to them. Arabs, Chinese and Indians had navigated vast stretches of ocean, and sailors from the Pacific Islands (the Polynesians and Micronesians) had made major ocean crossings. The Vikings of Norway had reached North America in the eleventh century.

Why were Spanish and Portuguese rulers in particular so receptive to the idea of funding a maritime quest? What produced such a passion for gold and treasure and for glory and titles? One may find the answers in a combination of three motives: economic, religious and political.

The European economy went through a decline from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries (see Theme 6). Plague and wars led to depopulation in many parts of Europe, trade grew slack, and there was a shortage of gold and silver, used for making European coins. This situation was in stark contrast to the preceding period (from the eleventh to the mid-fourteenth centuries) when growing trade had supported Italian city-states and led to the accumulation of capital. In the late fourteenth century, long-distance trade declined, and then became difficult after the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453. Italians managed to do business with Turks, but were now required to pay higher taxes on trade.

The possibility that many more people could be brought into the fold of Christianity made many devout Christian Europeans ready to face adventure.

As it happened, the 'Crusades' against the Turks (see Theme 4) began as a religious war, but they increased Europe's trade with Asia and created a taste for the products of Asia, especially spices. If trade could be followed by political control, with European countries establishing 'colonies' in regions with a warmer climate, they would benefit further.

When thinking of new regions where gold and spices might be found, one possibility was West Africa, where Europeans had not traded directly so far. Portugal, a small country which had gained independence from



Spain since 1139, and which had developed fishing and sailing skills, took the lead. Prince Henry of Portugal (called the Navigator) organised the coasting of West Africa and attacked Ceuta in 1415. After that, more expeditions were organised, and the Portuguese established a trading station in Cape Bojador in Africa. Africans were captured and enslaved, and gold dust yielded the precious metal.

In Spain, economic reasons encouraged individuals to become knights of the ocean. The memory of the Crusades and the success of the *Reconquista* fanned private ambitions and gave rise to contracts known as *capitulaciones*. Under these contracts the Spanish ruler claimed rights of sovereignty over newly conquered territories and gave rewards to leaders of expeditions in the form of titles and the right to govern the conquered lands.

## The Atlantic Crossing

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was a self-taught man who sought adventure and glory. Believing in prophecies, he was convinced that his destiny lay in discovering a route to the East (the 'Indies') by sailing westwards. He was inspired by reading *Imago Mundi* (a work on astronomy and geography) by Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly written in 1410. He submitted his plans to the Portuguese Crown, only to have them turned down. He had better luck with the Spanish authorities who sanctioned a modest expedition that set sail from the port of Palos on 3 August 1492.

Nothing, however, prepared Columbus and his crew for the long Atlantic crossing that they embarked upon, or for the destination that awaited them. The fleet was small, consisting of a small *nao* called *Santa Maria*, and two caravels (small light ships) named *Pinta* and *Nina*. Columbus himself commanded the *Santa Maria* along with 40 capable sailors. The outward journey enjoyed fair trade winds but was long. For 33 days, the fleet sailed without sight of anything but sea and sky. By this time, the crew became restive and some of them demanded that they turn back.

On 12 October 1492, they sighted land; they had reached what Columbus thought was India, but which was the island of Guanahani in the Bahamas. (It is said that this name was given by Columbus, who described the Islands as surrounded by shallow seas, *baja mar* in Spanish.) They were welcomed by the Arawaks, who were happy to share their food and provisions; in fact, their generosity made a deep impression upon Columbus. As he wrote in his log-book, 'They are so ingenuous and free with all they have, that no one would believe it who has not seen of it, anything they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no, on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it'.

Columbus planted a Spanish flag in Guanahani (which he renamed San Salvador), held a prayer service and, without consulting the local

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Reconquista was the military reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula by Christian kings from the Arabs in 1492.

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*Nao* means a heavy ship in Spanish. It is derived from Arabic, and this is explained by the fact of Arab occupation of the region till 1492.

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*Europeans meet native Americans – a European woodblock print, sixteenth century.*

people, proclaimed himself viceroy. He enlisted their cooperation in pressing forward to the larger islands of Cubanacan (Cuba, which he thought was Japan!) and Kiskeya (renamed Hispaniola, today divided between two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Gold was not immediately available, but the explorers had heard that it could be found in Hispaniola, in the mountain streams in the interior.

But before they could get very far, the expedition was overtaken by accidents and had to face the hostility of the fierce Carib tribes. The men clamoured to get back home. The return voyage proved more difficult as the ships were worm-eaten and the crew tired and homesick. The entire voyage took 32 weeks. Three more voyages followed, in the course of which Columbus completed his explorations in the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles, the South American mainland and its coast. Subsequent voyages revealed that it was not the 'Indies' that the Spaniards had found, but a new continent.

Columbus's achievement had been to discover the boundaries of what seemed like infinite seas and to demonstrate that five weeks' sailing with the trade wind took one to the other side of the globe. Since places are often given the names of individuals, it is curious that Columbus is commemorated only in a small district in the USA and in a country in north-western South America (Columbia), though he did not reach either of these areas. The two continents were named after Amerigo Vespucci, a geographer from Florence who realised how large they might be, and described them as the 'New World'. The name 'America' was first used by a German publisher in 1507.

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'Vice-roy' means in place of the king (in this case the King of Spain).

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Voyages by Europeans	
1492	Columbus claims Bahama Islands and Cuba for Spain
1494	The 'undiscovered world' divided between Portugal and Spain
1497	John Cabot, Englishman, explores North American coast
1498	Vasco da Gama reaches Calicut/Kozhikode
1499	Amerigo Vespucci sights South American coast
1500	Cabral claims Brazil for Portugal
1513	Balboa crosses Panama Isthmus, sights Pacific Ocean
1521	Cortes defeats Aztecs
1522	Magellan circumnavigates the globe
1532	Pizarro conquers Inca kingdom
1571	Spanish conquer the Philippines
1600	British East India Company formed
1602	Dutch East India Company formed

### ACTIVITY 3

What according to you were the reasons for people from different European countries wanting to take the risk of going on a 'voyage of discovery'?

## Spain Establishes an Empire in America

Spanish expansion was based on a display of military strength with the use of gunpowder and of horses. The local people were compelled either to pay tribute or to work in gold and silver mines. The initial discovery was typically followed by establishing a small settlement, peopled by a few Spaniards who supervised the labour of the local inhabitants. Local chieftains were enlisted to explore new lands and, hopefully, more sources of gold. The greed for gold led to violent incidents provoking local resistance. The Spanish friar Bartolome de las Casas, the most severe critic of the Spanish conquerors, observed that the Spanish often tested their swords on the naked flesh of the Arawaks.

To military repression and forced labour was added the ravages of disease. The diseases of the Old World, particularly smallpox wreaked havoc on the Arawaks whose lack of immunity resulted in large-scale deaths. The local people imagined these diseases were caused by 'invisible bullets' with which the Spaniards attacked them. The extinction of the Arawaks and all traces of their way of life is a silent reminder of their tragic encounter with Spaniards.

The expeditions of Columbus were followed by a sustained and successful *exploration* of Central and South America. Within half a century, the Spanish had explored and laid claim to a vast area of the western hemisphere, from approximately latitudes 40 degrees north to 40 degrees south, without anyone challenging them.

Before this, the Spanish conquered lands of two great empires of the region. This was largely the work of two individuals: Hernan Cortes (1488-1547) and Francisco Pizarro (1478-1541). Their explorations were financed by members of the landed gentry in Spain, officials of municipal councils and noblemen. Those joining the expeditions supplied their own equipment in exchange for a share of the booty they expected from the conquests.

## Cortes and the Aztecs

Cortes and his soldiers (called *conquistadores*) conquered Mexico swiftly and ruthlessly. In 1519, Cortes set sail from Cuba to Mexico, where he made friends with the Totonacs, a group who wanted to secede from Aztec rule. The Aztec king, Montezuma, sent an official to meet him. He was terrified at the aggressiveness of the Spanish, their gunpowder and their horses. Montezuma himself was convinced that Cortes was the reincarnation of an exiled god who had returned to avenge himself.

### Dona Marina

Bernard Diaz del Castillo (1495-1584) wrote in his *True History of the Conquest of Mexico* that the people of Tabasco gave Cortes a woman attendant called Dona Marina. She was fluent in three local languages, and was able to play a crucial role as interpreter for Cortes. 'This was the great beginning of our conquests, and without Dona Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico.'

Diaz thought she was a princess, but the Mexicans called her 'Malinche', a word meaning 'betrayal'. *Malinchista* means someone who slavishly copies the costumes and language of another people.

Bernard Diaz wrote:

'And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico City, we were astounded. These great towns and buildings rising from the water all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not a dream.'

The Spaniards pressed against the Tlaxcalans, fierce fighters who submitted only after a stiff resistance. The Spaniards proceeded to massacre them cruelly. Then they marched to Tenochtitlan, which they reached on 8 November 1519.

The invading Spaniards were dumbstruck at the sight of Tenochtitlan. It was five times larger than Madrid and had 100,000 inhabitants, twice the population of Seville, Spain's largest city.

Cortes was cordially received by Montezuma. The Aztecs led the Spaniards into the heart of the city, where the Emperor showered them with gifts. His people were apprehensive, having heard of the massacre of the Tlaxcalans. An Aztec account described the situation: 'It was as though Tenochtitlan had given shelter to a monster. The people of Tenochtitlan felt as if everyone had eaten stupefying mushrooms... as if they had seen something astonishing. Terror dominated everyone, as if all the world were being disemboweled... people fell into a fearful slumber.'



The fears of the Aztecs proved to be well founded. Cortes without any explanation placed the Emperor under house arrest and attempted to rule in his name. In an attempt to formalise the Emperor's submission to Spain, Cortes installed Christian images in the Aztec temple. Montezuma, on his part, suggested a compromise and placed both Aztec and Christian images in the temple.

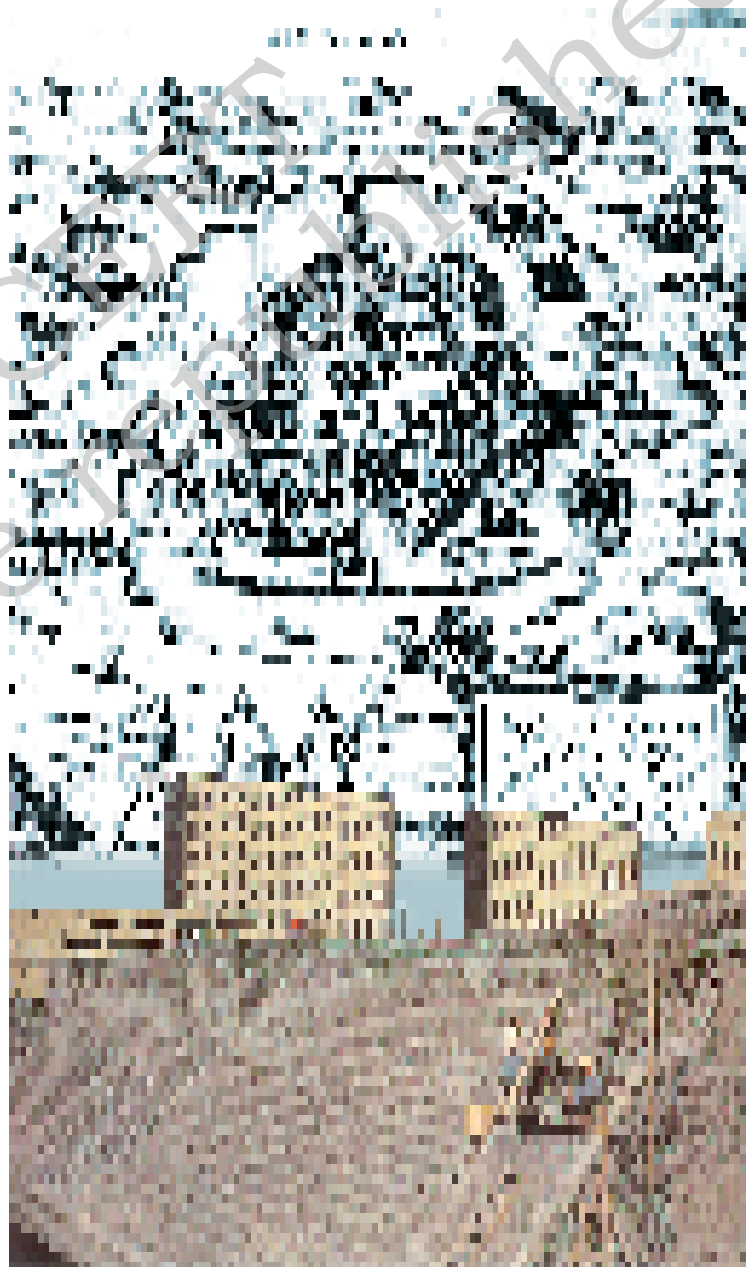
At this point, Cortes had to leave his deputy in charge and hurry back to Cuba. The high-handedness of the Spanish occupation and their incessant demands for gold provoked a general uprising. Alvarado ordered a massacre during the Aztec spring festival of Huizilpochtli. When Cortes returned on 25 June 1520, he had on his hands a full-blown crisis. The causeways were cut, the bridges taken away and the net closed. The Spaniards faced acute shortages of food and drinking water. Cortes was forced to retreat.

Around this time, Montezuma died under mysterious circumstances. The Aztecs continued to fight the Spaniards. 600 conquistadores and many more of their Tlaxcalan allies were killed in what is known as the Night of Tears. Cortes was forced to retreat to Tlaxcala to plan his strategy against the newly elected king, Cuatemoc. By then, the Aztecs were dying from the dreaded smallpox which had come with the Europeans. With just 180 soldiers and 30 horses, Cortes moved into Tenochtitlan as the Aztecs prepared for their final stand. The Aztecs thought they could see omens foretelling that their end was near, and because of this the Emperor chose to give up his life.

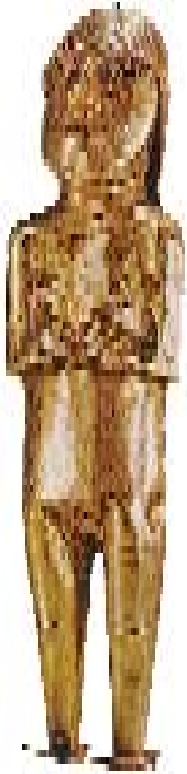
The conquest of Mexico had taken two years. Cortes became Captain-General of New Spain in Mexico and was showered with honours by Charles V. From Mexico, the Spaniards extended their control over Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Honduras.

*Above: a European sketch of Tenochtitlan, sixteenth century.*

*Below: the grand stairway that led to the temples in the centre of Tenochtitlan, now a ruin in Mexico City.*



## Pizarro and the Incas



A gold statuette of a woman, Peru. This was found in a tomb which the Spanish missed, and therefore was not melted down.

Pizarro, in contrast to Cortes, was uneducated and poor when he joined the army and found his way to the Caribbean Islands in 1502. He had heard stories about the Inca kingdom as a land of silver and gold (*El-dor-ado*). He made repeated attempts to reach it from the Pacific. On one of his journeys back home, he was able to meet the Spanish king and show him beautifully designed gold jars of Inca workmanship. The king's greed was aroused, and he promised Pizarro the governorship of the Inca lands if he conquered it. Pizarro planned to follow Cortes' method, but was disconcerted to find that the situation in the Inca empire was different.

In 1532, Atahualpa secured the throne of the Inca empire after a civil war. Pizarro arrived on the scene and captured the king after setting a trap for him. The king offered a roomful of gold as ransom for his release – the most extravagant ransom recorded in history – but Pizarro did not honour his promise. He had the king executed, and his followers went on a looting spree. This was followed by the occupation of the country. The cruelty of the conquerors provoked an uprising in 1534 that continued for two years, during which time thousands died in war and due to epidemics.

In another five years, the Spanish had located the vast silver mines in Potosi (in Upper Peru, modern Bolivia) and to work these they made the Inca people into slaves.

## Cabral and Brazil

The Portuguese occupation of Brazil occurred by accident. In 1500, a grand procession of ships set out from Portugal for India, headed by Pedro Alvares Cabral. To avoid stormy seas, he made a wide loop around West Africa, and found to his surprise that he had reached the coast of present-day Brazil. As it happened, this eastern part of South America was within the section assigned on the map to Portugal by the Pope, so they regarded it as indisputably theirs.

The Portuguese were more eager to increase their trade with western India than with Brazil, which did not promise any gold. But there was one natural resource there which they exploited: timber. The brazilwood tree, after which the Europeans named the region, produced a beautiful red dye. The natives readily agreed to cut the trees and carry the logs to the ships in exchange for iron knives and saws, which they regarded as marvels. ('For one sickle, knife or comb [they] would bring loads of hens, monkeys, parrots, honey, wax, cotton thread and whatever else these poor people had'.)

'Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come from so far away to seek wood? Don't you have wood in your country?' a native asked a French priest. At the end of their discussion, he said 'I can see that you are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience



and work so hard to accumulate riches for your children. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them too? We have fathers, mothers and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death the land that nourished us will also feed them. We therefore rest without further cares.'

This trade in timber led to fierce battles between Portuguese and French traders. The Portuguese won because they decided to 'settle' in/colonise the coast. In 1534, the king of Portugal divided the coast of Brazil into fourteen hereditary 'captaincies'. To the Portuguese who wanted to live there he gave landownership rights, and the right to make the local people into slaves. Many Portuguese settlers were veterans of the wars in Goa, in India, and were brutal to the local people.

In the 1540s, the Portuguese began to grow sugarcane on large plantations and built mills to extract sugar, which was then sold in Europe. In this very hot and humid climate they depended on the natives to work the sugar mills. When the natives refused to do this exhausting and dreary work, the mill-owners resorted to kidnapping them to work as slaves.

The natives kept retreating into the forests to escape the 'slavers' and, as time went on, there were hardly any native villages on the coast; instead, there were large, well-laid-out European towns. Plantation owners were then forced to turn to another source for slaves: West Africa. This was a contrast to the Spanish colonies. A large part of the population in the Aztec and Inca empires had been used to labouring in mines and fields, so the Spanish did not need to *formally* enslave them or to look elsewhere for slaves.

In 1549, a formal government under the Portuguese king was established, with the capital in Bahia/Salvador. From this time, Jesuits started to go out to Brazil. European settlers disliked them because they argued for humane interaction with the natives, ventured into the forests to live in villages, and sought to teach them Christianity as a joyous religion. Above all, the Jesuits strongly criticised slavery.

## Conquest, Colonies and the Slave-Trade

What had begun as uncertain voyages came to have lasting consequences for Europe, the Americas and Africa.

From the fifteenth century, European maritime projects produced knowledge of *continuous sea passages* from ocean to ocean. Before this, most of these passages had been unknown to Europeans. Some were not known to anyone. No ship had penetrated the Caribbean or the Americas. The South Atlantic was wholly unexplored; no sea-going ship had ever entered its waters, much less crossed it, or sailed from it to the Pacific or the Indian Ocean. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, all these feats were accomplished.

### ACTIVITY 4

Analyse the effects of contact with the Europeans on the native people of South America. Describe their reactions to the settlers and the Jesuits.

'There is no greater curse on a home or family than to be unjustly supported by the sweat of others!'

'Any man who deprives others of their freedom, and being able to restore that freedom, does not do so, is condemned!'

– Antonio Vieira, Jesuit priest in Brazil, 1640s

For Europe, the 'discovery' of the Americas had consequences for others besides the initial voyagers. The influx of gold and silver helped further expansion of international trade and industrialisation. Between 1560 and 1600, a hundred ships *each year* carried silver from South

American mines to Spain. But it was not Spain and Portugal that benefited. They did not invest their huge income in further trade, or in building up a merchant navy. Instead, it was the countries bordering the Atlantic, particularly England, France, Belgium and Holland, that took advantage of the 'discoveries'. Their merchants formed joint-stock companies and sent out trading expeditions, established colonies and introduced Europeans to the products of the New World, including tobacco, potatoes, cane-sugar, cacao and rubber.

Europe also became familiar with new crops from America, notably potatoes and chillies. These were then taken by Europeans to other countries like India.

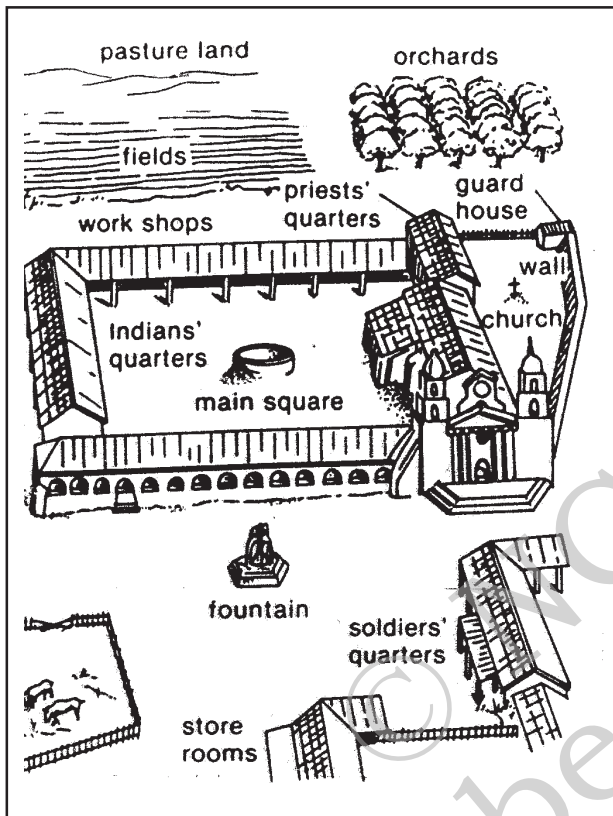
For the native people of the Americas, the immediate consequences were the physical decimation of local populations, the destruction of their way of life and their enslavement in mines, plantations and mills.

Estimates indicate that pre-conquest Mexico had a population of between 30 and 37.5 million, the Andean region a similar number while Central America had between

10 and 13 million. The natives on the eve of the arrival of the Europeans totalled 70 million. A century and a half later, they had reduced to 3.5 million. Warfare and disease were primarily responsible for this.

The sudden destruction of the two major civilisations – those of the Aztecs and the Incas – in America highlights the contrasts between the two cultures in combat. Both with the Aztecs and the Incas, the nature of warfare played a crucial role in terrorising local inhabitants psychologically and physically. The contest also revealed a fundamental difference in values. The Spanish avarice for gold and silver was incomprehensible to the natives.

The enslavement of the population was a sharp reminder of the brutality of the encounter. Slavery was not a new idea, but the South American experience was new in that it accompanied the emerging capitalist system of production. Working conditions were horrific, but the Spanish regarded the exploitation as essential to their economic gain.



Sketch of a typical Spanish township in South America.

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The capitalist system of production is one in which the means of production and distribution are owned by individuals or corporates and where competitors participate in a free market.

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The silver mines in Peru began to function in the 1550s, and the monk Dominigo de Santo Tomas reported to the Council of the Indies that the Potosi was a mouth of hell which swallowed Indians by the thousands every year and that greedy mine owners treated them like stray animals.

In 1601, Philip II of Spain publicly banned forced labour, but made arrangements by a secret decree for its continuation. Things came to a head with the law of 1609, which gave full freedom to the local people, Christian and non-Christian alike. The European settlers were enraged, and within two years they had forced the king to revoke this law and to permit enslavement once again.

As new economic activities began – cattle farming on lands cleared of forests, and mining after the discovery of gold in 1700 – the demand for cheap labour continued. It was clear that the local people would resist enslavement. The alternative was to turn to Africa. Between the 1550s and 1880s (when slavery was abolished in Brazil) over 3,600,000 African slaves were imported into Brazil. This was almost half the total number of African slaves imported into the Americas. In 1750, there were individuals who owned as many as a thousand slaves.

From the early debates in the 1780s on abolishing slavery, there were those who argued that slavery existed in Africa prior to the entry of the Europeans, indeed slaves formed the bulk of the labour-force in the states being formed in Africa from the fifteenth century. They also pointed out that European traders were helped by Africans who helped capture young men and women to be sold as slaves, in return for crops imported from South America (maize, manioc and cassava, which became their staple foods). In his autobiography (1789), the freed slave Olaudah Equiano replied to these arguments by saying that slaves in Africa were treated as part of the family. In the 1940s, in his book *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams was one of the first modern historians to initiate a reassessment of the suffering experienced by African slaves.

MAP 3: Africa, indicating regions from where slaves were captured



## Epilogue

In the early nineteenth century, European settlers in the South American colonies were to rebel against Spain and Portugal and become independent countries, just as in 1776 the thirteen North American colonies rebelled against Britain and formed the United States of America.

South America today is also called 'Latin America'. This is because Spanish and Portuguese, two of the main languages of the continent, are part of the Latin family of languages. The inhabitants are mostly native European (called Creole), European, and African by origin. Most of them are Catholics. Their culture has many elements of native traditions mixed with European ones.

## Exercises

### ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. Compare the civilisation of the Aztecs with that of the Mesopotamians.
2. What were the new developments helping European navigation in the fifteenth century?
3. Give reasons for Spain and Portugal being the first in the fifteenth century to venture across the Atlantic.
4. What new food items were transmitted from South America to the rest of the world?

### ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. Write an account of the journey of an African boy of seventeen captured and taken to Brazil as a slave.
6. How did the 'discovery' of South America lead to the development of European colonialism?