



CHAPTER 12 | THE SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE AND THE EARLY EXPLORERS

INTRODUCTION

This week begins a journey into the Age of Exploration, starting with early explorers and their journeys before the late 1400's. Many of them were trying to find routes to sources of spice in the East. The spice trade had already been important to Europeans for a long time; since at the days of the Romans, spices were imported from the Far East and the Middle East. However, as Europeans returned from the Crusades, they brought back not only books written by ancient Greeks and Romans that sparked a new interest in reading, but also new spices such as cumin, coriander, cardamom, saffron, and sumac.

Spices were prized for their ability to flavor or preserve food, heal diseases or reduce bodily inflammations, and display personal wealth or prestige. Spices were imported to medieval Europe together with other luxury goods: silk (as well as cotton and wool) porcelain, gemstones, and more medicines: rhubarb, frankincense, myrrh, and camphor.

As we learned when we studied Marco Polo, most of these products came to Europe via a long overland route called the Silk Road from China and India, via Constantinople, and then by ship to all the rest of Europe. When Constantinople fell to the Muslims in 1453, that changed. The Italian traders of Florence, Venice, and Genoa developed exclusive trading relationships with the new Muslim rulers that kept out everyone else. That was a problem for all the other merchants from lands farther away like Spain and Portugal. They wanted to continue importing the riches of the Orient, too, but its gates were barred to them.

It was simply unthinkable to the European nations that they should be cut off from the East and its staggeringly valuable markets. Besides, Europe had new energy and enthusiasm. The long internal struggles that had dragged on for so long in France and England and Spain were over. The Hundred Years War was over; the Wars of the Roses were over; the Reconquista had driven the Moors out of Spain. The kings and queens of western Europe were ready to sponsor voyages of discovery.

Long before Columbus sailed west, the Crusades introduced the idea of “holy wars” and “holy conquest” into Europe. Popes and princes fired the imaginations of the European people, declaring that “God willed” them to reconquer the Holy Land. In Spain, for example, Christians learned to be especially warlike by fighting the Moors (another term for Muslims) who threatened their very existence. When at last they succeeded in 1492, their attention turned naturally from crusading for God’s glory in Spain and the Middle East to crusading for God’s glory in new lands beyond the sea.

Spain was not alone in this desire. Monarchs of the Age of Exploration wanted to extend their own realms and wealth without much practical regard for consequences to the people they were conquering. At the same time, they assumed that they were furthering the kingdom of God by adding to the lands ruled by “Christian” monarchs. Viewing Christianity primarily as a kind of state religion, it made sense to them to extend Christendom by force.

Besides, they reasoned, were there not Christians in the East with whom they could ally? Throughout the Middle Ages, “Prester John” figured as a legendary Christian prince (rumored to be the descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba) who was identified at times with Kublai Khan or with the Negus of Abyssinia.



Part of the purpose for European exploration was to discover this mythical Christian ally in the East, who was said to rule over a mystical and fabulously wealthy land. Prince Henry, “The Navigator,” of Portugal was especially eager to find Prester John. Two explorers, Pero de Covilhão and Afonso de Paiva, traveled overland in search Prester John, and a famous explorer named Bartholomeu Dias also sought him by sea. None ever found the fabled eastern Christian ruler, but the dream remained.

While some responded to the lure of finding Prester John, others found inspiration in the Renaissance and its new ideas about what was possible. New books offered new knowledge and perspectives. More men considered new answers to old problems. Renaissance ingenuity also contributed to the magnetic compass, the ship called the caravel, the powerful new weapon called a cannon, and other key advances that made such bold seafaring possible. For example, caravals and cannons gave Portugal the advantage over the native peoples whom they encountered on their voyages.

Renaissance trade also helped to bring in the wealth necessary for financing risky voyages. Most importantly, the Renaissance encouraged a spirit of inquiry. People wanted to know about lands beyond their familiar world. With a growing spirit of adventure, they wanted to explore the uttermost ends of the earth. The Renaissance set the stage for brave voyagers by encouraging and enabling grand discoveries—the idea that man could and should strive to achieve great acts in the here and now, not just wait passively for the world to come.

The Age of Exploration was on, to be sure—but we mustn't forget that the Renaissance was still in full swing! Columbus, Leonardo da Vinci, Ferdinand and Isabella, and Michelangelo were all living around the same time—an absolutely amazing period of history.

RECONQUISTA OF SPAIN

Let's pick up this thread of history during the Age of Discovery with Spain and Portugal. We focused quite a bit on England and France during the Middle Ages because it was so easy to see how those lands changed from a patchwork of tribes into unified nation-states. We've paid attention to Germany and Italy, too, so that we could see just why they failed to unite. We haven't spent that much time on yet on Spain or Portugal.

As you may remember from our descriptions of Mohammad and the rise of Islam earlier, the Muslim armies had conquered their way across northern Africa and across into Spain. It only took them a few years to conquer the whole of Spain and Portugal, and then they were marching over the Pyrenees Mountains to invade France. The grandfather of Charlemagne, Charles Martel (which means Hammer), stopped them at the Battle of Tours in 732 A.D. Meanwhile the Christian nobles of Spain were forced back up into a tiny strip of territory in the northern mountains. This last Christian kingdom was called Asturias.

But the Christians never gave up their fight. Instead, for the next 760 years, they fought a long series of wars against the Muslim rulers of Spain. Slowly, mile by mile, generation by generation, they drove out the Moors (this was the Spanish name for Muslims). Throughout this period, kingdoms rose and fell and were slowly joined together by various treaties and marriage alliances.

Asturias became Galicia, Leon, Castille, and Navarre. An Asturian knight reconquered the northern half of Portugal, establishing a Christian kingdom on the western coast. Helped by the Franks, the northeastern Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Catalan also won their independence. By 1468, Portugal was its own nation, and there were only two major Spanish Christian kingdoms left: Aragon and Castile.



The country we call Spain was created in 1469 A.D, when King Ferdinand II of Aragon married Queen Isabella I of Castile. Though their marriage began for political reasons rather than any romantic feelings, the couple seems to have been reasonably happy. They had five children, and Ferdinand arranged to be buried next to Isabella (who predeceased him) rather than by his second wife (a French lady—Germaine of Foix).

Both husband and wife wielded real power because each was a ruler accepted by the people in his or her respective countries, and the union of these two smaller kingdoms made it possible to drive the last of the Muslims out of Spain in January of 1492, and it created the first unified Spain. Centuries of warfare were finally at an end! Of course, the new nation was still young and fragile, but now it was unified.

INQUISITION

In the days of Ferdinand and Isabella, heretics were believed to be both politically dangerous and an affront to God, and some Christian monarchs saw it as their duty to rid the country of heretical influences. Therefore, the Spanish crown instituted a sort of official state-approved hunt for human beings—the Spanish Inquisition—in 1478. Its goal was the religious purification of Spain. Officials of the Inquisition were given broad powers to find heretics, and would even torture those who were suspected of heresy.

Tomas de Torquemada (1420-1498), for example, was appointed as the first Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition in 1483. His mission was to root out heresy and enforce religious orthodoxy in Spain. Under his leadership, the Spanish Inquisition targeted *conversos* (Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity) suspected of secretly practicing their former faiths.

After Ferdinand and Isabella drove the Muslims out of Spain in 1492, things got much worse for the Muslims and Jews who were left. For example, more than 200,000 Jews had been living in the Muslim-controlled areas that had just been added to the Spain. Also, while some Muslims and Spanish Jews (such as Azarias Chinillo, Luis de Santángel's grandfather) chose to be baptized, these were not all truly *converso* (converted) to the new faith. Some pretended to be Roman Catholics, but they continued to practice their own religions in secret.

In 1492, during his tenure as Grand Inquisitor, Torquemada played a key role in the issuance of the Alhambra Decree, also known as the Edict of Expulsion. This decree ordered the expulsion of Jews who refused to convert to Christianity from Spain. Thousands of Jews were forced to leave the country, and their properties were confiscated. Sadly, sometimes property-owning men and women were handed over to the Inquisition simply so that jealous officials could steal their land.

This fact calls into question the motives of the monarchs, who were in great need of money after their lengthy and costly wars. Were Ferdinand and Isabella acting more out of greed for the heretics' property and hatred for the Jews and Muslims than from any desire to do right? Or were they well-intentioned but misguided by church leaders such as Tomas de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitioner? Or was Isabella guided by a true desire for Christian purity, but badly and weakly led in merciless directions by the zealotry of Torquemada and the greed of Ferdinand?

These are all questions for historical interpretation—the facts are, simply, that Isabella and Ferdinand jointly agreed to enact the Inquisition throughout Spain in 1478, that they appointed Torquemada in 1483, that they issued the Alhambra Decree in 1492, and that the last action in particular targeted Muslims and Jews, even *conversos* like Luis de Santángel (c. 1431-1498), Their Majesties' royal accountant. His grandfather, Azarias Chinillo, was a Jew who had converted to Roman Catholicism.



Luis de Santángel's family and successors were exempt from the Expulsion of the Jews and the Inquisition by the favor of their majesties (as Ferdinand would specifically decree on May 30, 1497). The fact that Isabella and Ferdinand allowed Luis de Santángel to remain in his position of trust as their financier seems to suggest that they did not universally hate and distrust Jews. On the other hand, it may simply tell us that they didn't mind bending their own rules for a useful servant whose important skills benefited the Crown.

Isabella of Aragon was renowned for her deep piety and strong devotion to the Catholic faith, which played an important role in her life and had a profound impact on the history of Spain. Isabella was a devout Catholic throughout her life. She believed in the importance of faith, religious principles, and moral values. Her commitment to the Catholic Church was unwavering.

Isabella's support for Christopher Columbus's voyages was driven partly by her faith. She believed that Columbus's mission to find a westward route to Asia had the potential to spread the Christian faith, which is partly why she gave financial and moral support to his endeavors.

Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand II saw the Reconquista, the Christian reconquest of Spain from the Moors, as a holy mission to reclaim the Iberian Peninsula for Christianity. In Isabella's day, heretics were believed to be both politically dangerous and an affront to God. It is possible to see how she supported these beliefs biblically. For instance, Leviticus 24:13-16 says,

“Then the LORD said to Moses: “Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him. Say to the Israelites: ‘If anyone curses his God, he will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death.’”

However, the New Testament would teach us to love our enemies, do good to those of hostile faiths, and win unbelievers through loving words and deeds. Isabella and Ferdinand do not seem to have considered this when they established the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, which aimed to maintain religious purity and the strength of the Roman Catholic church in Spain.

Isabella and Ferdinand supported religious orders, including the Franciscans and Dominicans, who helped to convert South Americans to Christianity. Isabella also started various social and economic reforms in her kingdom, often guided by the goals of charity and compassion. She also encouraged charitable activities.

Isabella was also known for her regular prayer, steady attendance of Roman Catholic masses, and acts of penance. She maintained a simple and modest lifestyle consistent with her faith.

Isabella's piety and devotion to the Catholic faith were woven into her reign and greatly influenced the course of Spanish history during the late 15th century. Her commitment to the Church, her support for exploration and missionary efforts, and her desire to uphold religious orthodoxy, left a lasting legacy in Spain and beyond.



Muslims had been Spain's enemies and conquerors for centuries, and the Jews, as I explained in Chapter 9, had come under even greater suspicion in Spain because of their practice of Kabbalah (or Cabala), which was understood by many Christians as a form of black magic. Remembering these things, it is a bit easier to understand why Isabella and Ferdinand did not want Muslims and Jews to live in Spain. The attack on Muslim and Jewish *conversos* is harder to explain. These people were often intelligent and skilled; they were doctors, bankers, merchants, and scholars; they even seemed to be practicing Roman Catholicism! Why would any rulers want to get rid of them?

It would be nice to say that Ferdinand and Isabella were unusual in their attitude towards the Jews, but sadly, they were not. At the time of Inquisition, persecution of Jews in his land was Ferdinand's special project, but he was not alone in his hatred of the Jewish people. That was a common feeling in Europe because Jews were hated as "Christ-killers", and had been since the Middle Ages. In fact, Anti-Semitism ("Semite" was another word for Jew) was a feeling that always lurked just beneath the surface of European culture—one that famously motivated Adolph Hitler in the twentieth century.

The long-term effect of ungodly behavior on the part of national leaders is the destruction of their nation (Prov. 14:34; Exodus 22:21; 2 Chronicles 24:20; Jeremiah 5:28; and Micah 2:2), and Spain's treatment of the Jewish people can be understood as an example of this. As Spanish Jews fled from Spain and Portugal, those countries lost an enormous amount of human capital—which means people with brains, skills, and ideas—because of their leaders' choice to set up the Inquisition.

GREAT EXPLORERS

Henry the Navigator of Portugal

Prince Henry of Portugal is credited with beginning the Age of Discovery in the early 1400's. He had many possible reasons for such a grand enterprise: honor, fame, the enrichment of his nation, and the spread of his faith (if necessary through force and military conquest) were those he shared in common with other monarchs and explorers.

Henry organized and sponsored many voyages of exploration in search of a sea route to the East, though he never went on any himself. His expeditions and ships explored much of the west coast of Africa, but Henry's main objective from the 1430's onwards were the Canary Islands. The rounding of Cape Bojador in 1434 A.D. was a breakthrough that gave Henry a popular reputation.

Before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World in 1492 A.D., the Portuguese had led the world in voyages of discovery. They had invented a whole new kind of ship called a caravel (the one we mentioned in the introduction), which used a combination of European square sails and the triangular lateen sails that Muslims favored to enable them to sail against the wind. The old square-riggers had to wait until the winds were right to go anywhere, but a caravel could tack its way upwind.

Several other inventions helped Portuguese and other European sailors on their voyages of discovery: the compass, astrolabe, quadrant, and sextant. The compass, as you may know, shows which direction is north. Because they knew exactly where north was, sailors could then sail in any direction in a more or less straight line. The astrolabe, quadrant, and sextant were tools that helped sailors know how far south or north they were. This measurement of north-south is called latitude. Once they were on the right latitude, it was easy to use a compass to sail east or west until they reached their destination.



Before Columbus came to Portugal in 1476 to seek money for his famous voyage, the Portuguese had used their navigation tools and sturdy little caravals armed with cannons to sail towards the southern tip of Africa. They were trying to reach Asia, trying to get around the Muslim blockades to India and the Far East, the lands of spices . . . and they were going to get there even if they had to sail all the way to the South Pole!

Bartolomeu Dias

In 1488, a Portuguese expedition led by Bartolomeu Dias sailed around the bottom of Africa. Dias was Portuguese by birth—a sea captain and explorer who hoped to find a sea route to Asia. In August of 1487, Dias sailed his fleet of three ships south from Portugal. In 1488, a fierce storm blew him off course and sent him around the southern tip of Africa, which he named the Cape of Storms as a result.

Dias didn't at first realize what an important discovery he had made, but his expedition proved that there was indeed a way to sail from Europe to India! Dias displayed great bravery in venturing much further than anyone else, to round the tip of Africa despite uncertainty and fear of the venture. He wanted to go all the way to India but was unable to convince his crew, so eventually the expedition returned home.

Delighted by Dias's discovery, John II of Portugal (we are now several generations removed from Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal) renamed the southernmost tip of Africa "The Cape of Good Hope." It would only be a few years until they were able to sail directly to India and trade for spices there.

Christopher Columbus

Although Christopher Columbus is now famous for a discovery that dwarfs the exploits of Bartolomeu Dias, that first Columbus Day didn't come easily. Columbus arrived in the New World *nine years* after he first tried to sell his idea of a westward voyage to the Indies to a king. He didn't start with King Ferdinand of Spain, either—he started with King John II of Portugal.

The overthrow of Constantinople in 1453 put the entire region in the hands of the Muslims. They promptly barred Christians from overland trade routes along the Silk Road, so the Europeans raced to find a water route to the East. Since the time of Prince Henry the Navigator, European monarchs had sponsored significant voyages of discovery. Portugal, being a small country with a large coastline, was at the forefront of that race. Portugal was therefore a natural place for Columbus to go looking for a sponsor.

Of course, it was especially convenient for Columbus to seek a commission from the King of Portugal because he was living in Portugal at the time! Though Italian by birth, Columbus had settled in Lisbon in 1476 after surviving a shipwreck off the coast of Portugal at Cape Saint Vincent. There, he lived with his brother and worked at making maps.

Many Portuguese sailors were trying to reach the Indies by sailing around Africa (and of course, Dias eventually succeeded), but Christopher Columbus believed he could find a short cut to the Indies by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean instead. According to his calculations, one could sail west from Portugal and reach China.

The Portuguese king's council rejected this plan. It wasn't because they thought the world was flat—they didn't. Most educated people in Europe all agreed that the world was round. However, the council thought that Columbus' math was wrong. They felt sure that the voyage was much longer than Columbus thought it was. They were right, Columbus' math was way off—by thousands of miles in fact.



In 1488, after Dias discovered a sea route to India, John II of Portugal was no longer interested in Columbus's idea of sailing *west* to get to the *east*. Columbus had to look elsewhere for royal support. He next took his plan to the court of Spain, Portugal's rival. In 1485, when Columbus arrived, the Spanish monarchs were busy fighting Muslims in southern Spain. He had to wait six or seven *more* before they were willing to sponsor the voyage. First, there were delays in seeing the king and queen. Then, the war with the last Muslims in southern Spain took up all of Ferdinand and Isabella's attention and money.

However, as you know, the Muslims were conquered, and the Jews were expelled from Spain, in 1492. After their exhaustive and expensive efforts to unify Spain and remove the last of the Muslim invaders, Ferdinand and Isabella needed a common enemy or adventure to keep dissatisfied groups in their country (particularly *converso* Muslims and Jews, but also the restless nobility) quiet.

Ferdinand, Isabella, and their Council, were not much more impressed by the scheme of Christopher Columbus than the monarch and Council of Portugal had been. Columbus's approach was nothing like the already-successful methods being used by Portugal. Why risk money the Spanish Crown didn't really have on a wild idea that might very well not work?

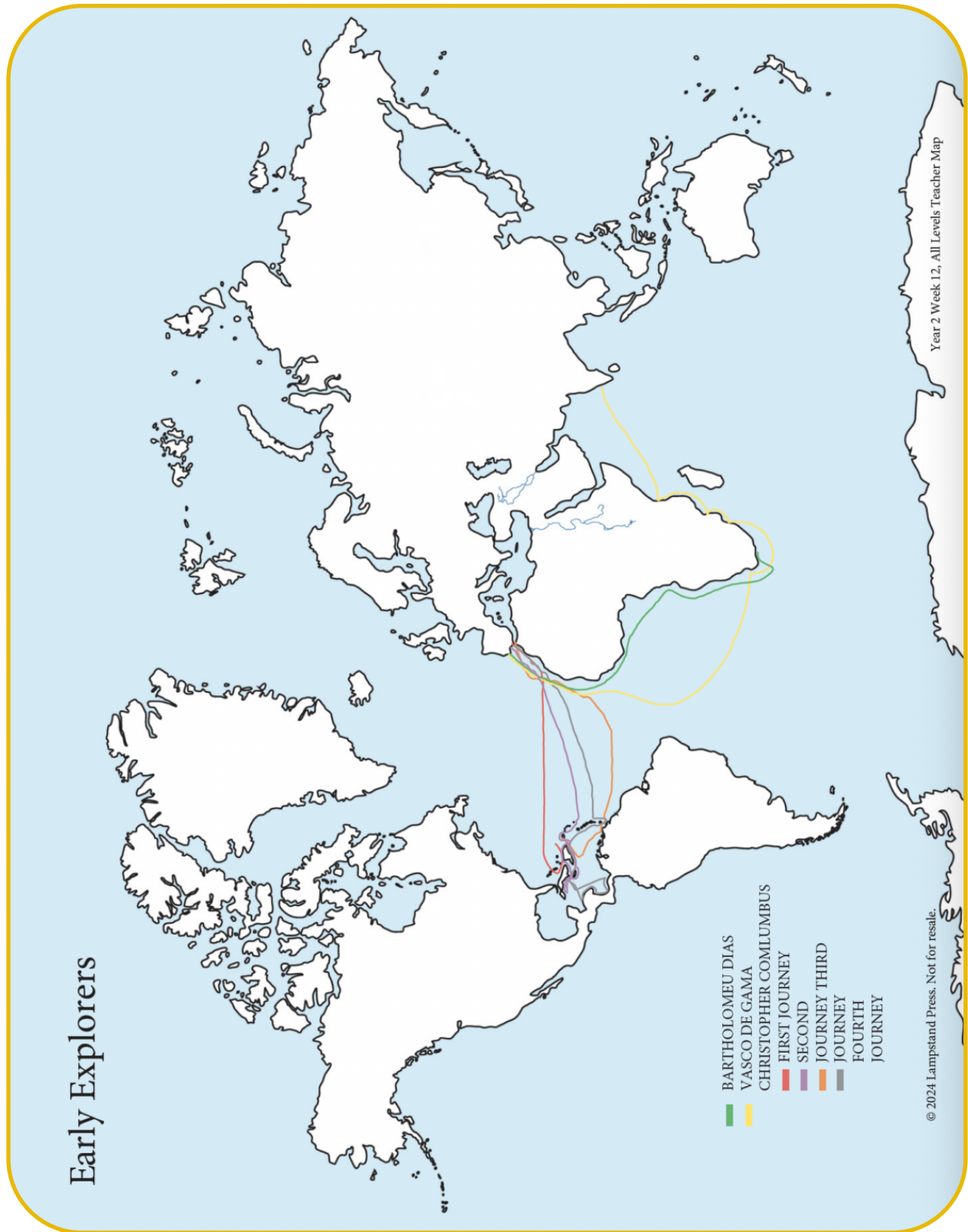
Ironically, it was the Jewish *converso*, Luis de Santángel, who convinced the Spanish rulers to give Columbus a try. He promised to fund the expedition largely out of his own pocket, and for a specific reason: he wanted a safe refuge for Jews who were being pushed out of Europe by Ferdinand and Isabella's Alhambra Decree, the "Expulsion of the Jews" proclamation of 1492.

You will recall that Luis de Santángel held a position of influence and served as the royal accountant and treasurer. His family and successors were exempt from the Expulsion of the Jews and the Inquisition by the favor of their majesties (as that royal 1497 decree stated), but many of Santángel's fellow-Jews in Spain were about to lose everything.

Santángel and other supporters persuaded Queen Isabella to support Columbus's expedition. Santángel offered his own financial resources so that the Queen would not have to pawn her crown jewels. The funds provided by Santángel and others were used to outfit the three ships (the *Santa Maria*, the *Pinta*, and the *Niña*) and to secure supplies for the journey.

When Columbus was eventually given the island of Jamaica, many Spanish Jews took refuge there and began new lives just as Santángel hoped. In fact, one historian named Edward Kritzer "tells the tale of an unlikely group of swashbuckling Jews who ransacked the high seas in the aftermath of the Spanish Inquisition! . . . In ships bearing names such as the *Prophet Samuel*, *Queen Esther*, and *Shield of Abraham*, they attacked and plundered the Spanish fleet while forming alliances with other European powers to ensure the safety of Jews living in hiding."

Jewish piracy aside, the loss of the Jews didn't appear to matter much to Spain and Portugal over the next century because so much wealth flowed into Spain from the Americas. However, when the treasure galleons stopped coming from the New World, Spain was in trouble. From about 1600 A.D. up to the present day, Spain has been a poorer and less influential European country. The loss of the Jews and Muslims did not *cause* this situation, but Spain is certainly poorer for lack of the talent, intelligence, and work of the Jewish and Muslim people that it drove away.





Besides, since the Portuguese were in control of the route around Africa, Spain needed to find another way to sail to India. Ferdinand worked to convince Isabella that Spain should take a chance on Columbus' plan. Three months later, Columbus had the approval he needed to sail. The Spanish crown also made him several important promises that were outlined in the Capitulations of Santa Fe, a document signed on April 17, 1492.

The Catholic Monarchs pledged to provide the financial backing needed for the voyage, including ships, crew, and supplies. In addition, however, the Capitulations stated that Columbus was granted the prestigious title of "Admiral of the Ocean Sea," making him the supreme sea authority for the territories he might discover. Columbus was also promised the governorship of any lands he might discover, with the right to appoint judges and officials in those territories. Furthermore, he would receive a share of 10% of the profits generated by trade and other activities in the newly discovered lands. Finally, Columbus and his descendants were to be granted noble status, with the ability to pass on this status to their heirs.

It was an offer big enough to tempt most men, and Columbus jumped at it. The expedition left Spain on August 3rd, 1492, searching for a faster route to the spice lands of the Far East. It reached the New World seventy days later. On October, 12, 1492, he thought he had reached the East Indies. However, he actually had discovered the New World, an unknown continent which other explorers would later reach.

Columbus was dead wrong on his math, but lucky beyond all reason. All the experts kept insisting that the globe was a whole lot bigger than he thought, and they were right. If the New World hadn't been here, Columbus would have died somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He didn't have enough food and water to make the long voyage all the way to China. He simply couldn't imagine the vast expanse of the Pacific—that nearly half the globe is covered by that one giant blue ocean.

Columbus never admitted his mistakes. He believed that the Earth was about twenty-five percent smaller than it actually is. His other error was in assuming that the planet was mostly land. He thought he had reached an island off the shores of China when he landed in the Caribbean. In reality, he wasn't even halfway there!

Thus, the Spanish victory over the Muslims in January made it possible for Columbus to sail in April, with the result that he planted the Spanish flag on the shores of a Caribbean island on October 12, 1492. For Spain, it was a momentous year all round! Columbus's discoveries had a major effect on Europe by helping to inaugurate the Age of Exploration.

Once Columbus had proved that it was possible to sail west without getting lost at sea or devoured by mythic storms, others quickly followed him. The slow realization that Columbus had discovered whole new continents excited people even more. His discoveries also set Spain on the road to becoming an important power due to her overseas empire. European imperialism would go on to shape much of world history.



For centuries, Americans have viewed Columbus as a hero and celebrated Columbus Day. In recent years, it has become popular to treat Columbus as an evil imperialist who destroyed the innocent native peoples. The truth lies perhaps somewhere in the middle. Columbus was a very real man whose journal reveals a mixture of motives.

First, Columbus appears to have been a sincere but inconsistent religious man. On the one hand, he seemed to show a genuine concern for God's glory, believed he was obeying God's will in seeking a new route to the Far East, and expressed a desire to bring Christianity to new shores. During difficult times, he relied on God, recording prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God in his log, and he had planned to use his profits to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

Second, however, his actions showed that he was also driven by personal ambition, greed for wealth, and vainglory (shown in seeking royal titles). Furthermore, he wanted to extend God's kingdom militarily instead of following the biblical model of lovingly presenting the gospel to the lost even at great personal cost.

Columbus's conduct during his expeditions shows both his strengths and weaknesses as a leader. Certainly, he was brave and had great determination. Even during the most difficult times, he never gave up, and he was able to persuade others to follow his dream. It was his willingness to risk everything that set in motion the events that led to the creation of the United States and all the other countries in North and South America.

However, Columbus also displayed a proud inflexibility against which his followers eventually rebelled. He also resorted to deception, falsifying records to keep his crews from knowing how far they had sailed. Though he was a determined leader, he could also be despotic, selfish, and cruel. He hurt and even killed people as punishment for failures to find the gold he wanted.

Columbus openly coveted the title of "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" and wanted to be Viceroy over all the new lands. He also declared the Native Americans "subjects of Spain" and openly allowed Spanish settlers to enslave the native peoples. He kidnapped some of the Native Americans himself and took them back to Spain as slaves. He was eventually recalled to Spain for his misrule.

The evil that occurred in the centuries that followed must be balanced against the good that came of it as well. And it should be remembered that many Native American tribes were full of their own share of evil, abomination, and corruption. No one, no culture, is truly innocent – because the hearts of men and women are full of sin apart from the grace of God. If the New World had never been discovered, would the tribes living there have heard about Jesus?



Line of Demarcation

Columbus wasn't the only one who made a mistake in his calculations. Pope Alexander VI made a similar blunder the next year when he sat down to divide up the New World between Spain and Portugal. The Pope wanted to keep these two Christian nations from fighting over the new territories Columbus had discovered, so he drew a line down the map—called the Line of Demarcation—on June 7, 1494, and gave Portugal everything east of it while Spain got everything to the west as part of the Treaty of Tordesillas.

The problem was, of course, that nobody knew what lands were waiting to be discovered. As it turned out, the Pope's Line of Demarcation hardly even touched South America. Spain and Portugal renegotiated the line the next year, moving it more than a thousand miles west. Portugal still only got a little bit of territory out of the deal—almost all of South America was on the Spanish side of the line. Portugal got what is now the country of Brazil out of the deal. In the end, that proved to be very profitable for them.

Vasco de Gama

The Portuguese still didn't believe that Columbus had found a short-cut to China. Columbus hadn't brought back any spices, silk, tea, or porcelain, and wasn't that the whole point of sailing west? They decided to keep sailing east, around Africa, to see if they could find their own water route. In 1497 A.D., King Manuel of Portugal commissioned Vasco de Gama to sail all the way to Asia.

Like Dias, Vasco da Gama was a Portuguese sea captain and explorer. De Gama reached Calicut, on the southern coast of India and brought back spices to prove he had made it. Four years later, the Portuguese sent a larger fleet of ships that bombarded Calicut, captured it, and set up a permanent Portuguese post.

FLORENCE AT THE TIME OF COLUMBUS

1492 was a big year for the Republic of Florence. For several years, the Medici family had ruled the town. Their leader was Lorenzo the Magnificent, son of Cosimo, who continued his family's lavish patronage of Renaissance arts and ruled Florence in fact, but not in name. He spent so much impressing his neighbors that when he died in 1492, the rest of the family discovered they were out of money. The family bank had to close, and the Medici were suddenly out of power. In just a few years, Florence was invaded by King Charles of France.

Then Florence was taken over by the reforming monk, Savonarola, who urged the people to burn all their worldly amusements in the city square. They held a "bonfire of the vanities"—playing cards, mirrors, cosmetics, pagan books, sculptures, gaming tables, women's hats, works by immoral poets" and more went up in flames. Three years later, the people of Florence changed their minds and burned Savonarola at the stake in the same square.

Leonardo da Vinci

We don't have any clear evidence of what Leonardo da Vinci thought about Columbus. Perhaps he agreed with the Portuguese that Columbus was no big deal. Maybe he was amazed at the reports of the voyage. Or perhaps he was more interested in the Savonarola crisis in Florence than some sailor from the rival republic of Genoa who was now sailing for Spain.

Leonardo was not in Florence when Savonarola took over. He was painting *The Last Supper* in Milan, 150 miles away. If his *Mona Lisa* is the most famous painting in the world, *The Last Supper* is easily the most



famous religious painting. Leonardo was an absolute master as a painter—but he was also interested in almost everything else. These wide-ranging interests are what make Leonardo a prime example of the ideal of the “Renaissance Man”: a man who knew much about many things.

A Renaissance man could turn his hand to any field of knowledge and, by giving himself to study, become master of it. Even today we use the term “Renaissance man” to describe an individual who does many different things well, or is knowledgeable in a number of unrelated fields. Leonardo da Vinci is considered the quintessential Renaissance man.

Trained as a painter, he created *The Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa*. He also studied astronomy, geology, geometry, optics, botany, and anatomy—all fields that required careful, detailed, keen observation of the created world and its inhabitants. He also designed machines and made inventions. He is widely considered a true genius: one of the smartest people who ever lived. A brief timeline of his life shows an astonishing list of accomplishments:

- ❑ 1452 - Birth: Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452, as the illegitimate son of Ser Piero, a notary, and Caterina, a peasant woman, in Vinci, a small town in Tuscany, Italy.
- ❑ 1466 - Apprenticeship: At the age of 14, he became an apprentice in the workshop of the renowned artist Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence.
- ❑ 1472 - Guild of Saint Luke: Leonardo became a member of the Guild of Saint Luke, a painters' guild in Florence.
- ❑ c. 1478 - The Baptism of Christ: Leonardo collaborated with Verrocchio on “The Baptism of Christ,” marking one of his early artistic contributions.
- ❑ c. 1478-1482 - Artistic Works: During this period, he created works such as “Annunciation” and “Ginevra de’ Benci.”
- ❑ 1482 - Move to Milan: Leonardo moved to Milan, where he worked as a painter and engineer for the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza.
- ❑ c. 1485 - “The Vitruvian Man”: He created the iconic drawing “The Vitruvian Man,” illustrating the proportions of the human body.
- ❑ 1495-1498 - “The Last Supper”: During this period, Leonardo completed his iconic mural “The Last Supper” in Milan.
- ❑ 1499-1500 - Engineering Projects: He worked on various engineering projects, including plans for canals, fortifications, and war machines, demonstrating his engineering prowess.
- ❑ c. 1503-1506 - “Mona Lisa”: Leonardo created the world-famous portrait “Mona Lisa.”
- ❑ 1508 - Move to France: He moved to France and entered the service of King Louis XII.
- ❑ 1516 - Death: Leonardo da Vinci passed away on May 2, 1519, in Amboise, France.

Da Vinci was, first of all, a painter, and he carried the realism of earlier painters to new heights. While most pictures in the Renaissance were centered on figures, it was Leonardo who added background landscapes that were realistic and used perspective to give a feeling of space and depth as well. Though landscapes appeared in earlier art, they lacked depth and perspective, and were unrealistic. Da Vinci was the first artist to use realistic landscapes in his paintings.



Leonardo developed techniques for creating the illusion of depth and distance in painting, such as atmospheric perspective, which had a profound impact on the art of the Renaissance. Thus, Leonardo replaced the flat backgrounds of the Middle Ages with blue mountains that faded away into the distance. His *Mona Lisa* is easily the most famous painting in the world, and it is easy to see how da Vinci uses blue color and haze in that painting to fool the eye into thinking the background it is far away. Leonardo invented those techniques, and countless others.

In addition to his paintings, Leonardo was incredibly inventive. He engineered a system of locks for the canals of Milan, designed new machinery for staging plays, and developed weapons for the military. He enjoyed music and studied the human anatomy, making detailed sketches that helped advance knowledge of the human body. He also had ideas ahead of his time, such as helicopters, parachutes, and tanks.

Leonardo spent most of his life in either Florence or Milan. He worked in Rome alongside Michelangelo and Raphael for three years. Then, in the last few years of his life – he died when he was 67 – Leonardo went to France to work for King Francis I. He had a deep friendship with the king, and according to legend Francis himself held Leonardo in his arms while he was dying.

The ideal Renaissance man was skilled in many fields and accomplished the kind of human achievements that humanism celebrated. Leonardo was a universal genius, doing important work in the fields of botany, anatomy, astronomy, engineering, and geometry, in addition to his artistic achievements. His great mind represents the ideal man that southern Renaissance thinkers valued.

Moreover, his ideas—many of which were far ahead of his time—surpassed his predecessors and pointed to the future in a way that fits with the idea of human greatness in the Renaissance. Leonardo's work is characteristic of the southern Renaissance in both style and content (its focus on humanity). His inventions and particularly his art had a great influence on the Renaissance.

Da Vinci's interests were so diverse that he seldom finished what he started, but he left behind notebooks with drawings of everything from helicopters to submarines that he wanted to build. In his earlier years, Leonardo da Vinci served dukes; in his last years, he worked at the royal court of France. Whether he was painting or inventing new effects for the French king, he made steady contributions to the study of humanity:

- ❑ **Flying Machine:** Leonardo designed various flying machines, including ornithopters (machines with flapping wings) and parachute-like devices, demonstrating his early interest in human flight.
- ❑ **Anatomical Drawings:** Leonardo's detailed anatomical studies, including drawings of the human body and its systems, are considered groundbreaking. His work greatly contributed to the understanding of human anatomy.
- ❑ **Helical Air Screw:** He designed a precursor to the modern helicopter, the helical air screw, which used a spiral blade design for lift.
- ❑ **Scientific Observations:** He made important observations in diverse scientific fields, such as the flow of water, geology, and paleontology.
- ❑ **Aerial Perspective:** Leonardo developed techniques for creating the illusion of depth and distance in painting, such as atmospheric perspective, which had a profound impact on the art of the Renaissance.
- ❑ **Solar Power:** Leonardo sketched a design for a solar concentrator, a device to harness the power of the Sun for heating water.



- ❑ **Mechanical Inventions:** Leonardo designed various mechanical devices and engineering projects, including concepts for bridges (including a self-supporting bridge), locks, waterwheels, and fortifications. He also worked on designs for military and defensive systems. He designed a variety of war machines and military equipment, including tanks and machine guns (yes, really). Leonardo even designed a mechanical knight, which was essentially a prototype for early automation, with articulated joints and the ability to move its arms and legs.
- ❑ **City Planning:** Leonardo contributed ideas for city planning, including the design of ideal cities. His sketches and writings explored concepts like urban development, water management, and transportation infrastructure.
- ❑ **Ornamental Designs:** He created designs for various ornamental and decorative projects, including costumes and pageants for royal events and parades.
- ❑ **Study of Nature:** Leonardo's extensive studies of nature, including animals, plants, and geological formations, informed his work and provided valuable insights to the court. Leonardo also served as a mentor and teacher to other artists and students in Francis I's court.

Sandro Botticelli

Known as “the little barrel,” as his brother called him, Botticelli was a favorite artist of the wealthy Medici family, and as such, a very popular Florentine painter. He followed a typical pattern of using his patrons' likenesses when painting religious scenes. This was often a form of flattering the wealthy and powerful family. Botticelli's famous “Venus” series highlighted the humanist interests of Renaissance artists and writers because the subject matter is Greco-Roman mythology and the series thus reflects the Renaissance artists' love for the classics (Venus was the Roman goddess of love and beauty) and the human form.

Italian Romance Epics and their Influence

Italian authors had a noteworthy influence on the rest of Europe through the revival of the Italian romance epic. Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441-1494), the first of the three great Italian romance writers, was born in a northern Italian town called Scandiano just a few years before Leonardo da Vinci.

Boiardo served as a courtier and diplomat in various Italian courts during his lifetime. He held positions at the court of the Este family, rulers of Ferrara, and also served in the courts of other Italian states. His career allowed him to travel and work in different regions of Italy. However, he is often associated with the Este court in Ferrara, where he composed *Orlando Innamorato* (*Orlando in Love*) and much of his literary work.

Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* is one of his most famous works; it tells the story of the love affair between Orlando (Roland, the same who is the hero of *The Song of Roland*) and a Muslim princess named Angelica. As you can imagine, the romance between the Christian knight and the Islamic lady does not end well.

Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (Orlando in Love, completed in 1495), Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (Orlando Enraged, completed in 1532), and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Liberated, completed in 1581) set the tone for the Italian romance epics of the Renaissance. One unique quality of these epics was the element of romance that they contained.

Orlando Innamorato is stolen from Carolingian and Arthurian legends, and Ariosto's *Orlando* is the highest expression of these themes. C.S. Lewis describes Ariosto's work as having, “large comic elements”



and “sometimes laughing at the marvels and high-flown sentiments of romance, but then at other times seriously enjoying these very same things” (*Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* 131).

“This blend of parody and true delight,” writes Lewis, “is the secret of the Italian epic” (Lewis, *Allegory of Love* 299). What is more, these “gallant, satiric, chivalrous, farcical, flamboyant” poems did much to create what we now consider the “typical” view of the medieval world. The idea that knights-errant, damsels in distress, and marvelous adventures were the heart of medieval life is a delightful but false picture, based in many ways on the Italian epic.

Blank Verse (*Versi Sciolti*)

Like the sonnet, blank verse sprung out of Renaissance Italy. Attempting to copy the unrhymed heroic verse of ancient Greek and Latin, Italian humanists such as Giovanni Rucellai developed a new line of poetry, between nine and eleven syllables long, which they called *versi sciolti da rima*, “verse free from rhyme.” Some authors used it to translate Latin works, but it became most influential as the meter of Italian drama.

Blank verse is particularly powerful in drama because it is a poetic meter that uniquely imitates the patterns of human speech, which tends to alternate between accented and unaccented syllables, just like the iambic meter. What makes blank verse so powerful is its ability to capture this feeling of the way people talk within the structure of a meter.

CONCLUSION

That’s what life in the Renaissance was like for you. It really did seem like everything was happening at once. Painters and builders and poets and popes and kings and conquerors and explorers were all at work at the same time. We’ve been following different threads through the long ages of history—it seems like all of them come together at once in one burst. We’re turning the corner from the Middle Ages to the modern world, and it shows!

