

The rise of the *Commune*

- With the rise of trade in the Italian peninsula a relationship between “burghers” (city-dwellers, citizen merchants of the new social class) and nobles became strained.
- The Italian nobles were low-power vassals, usually of far-distant lords.
- It wasn’t long before the power of leading citizens challenged the hereditary position of the nobles.
- The Church in Italy lacked military influence as well. (The Holy Roman Emperor was seldom willing to bring forces across the Alps merely to assist the Pope.)
- As a result of this power vacuum, the “great men” or “magnates” of the merchant cities bound together, in many locations, and ran things their own way.
- The result was independent city-states with a basically representative (republican) government -- the “Commune.”

Fall of the Republics (an outline):

- One by one, in the latter half of the 14th century, the representative governments of the republics gave way to rule by tyrant or despot.
- Behind this was a military concern: the lord and vassal relationship of the medieval period raised a far more effective army than the citizen militias of the free republics.
- The *Condottieri* were one answer, the mercenary generals who could be hired to fight in behalf of the independent states.
- Frequently, the Italian States had to offer more than money.
- As a result, many *Condottieri* gained political positions of real power in the republics.
- It was not uncommon for these to become the local *signore*, or lord.
- Other republics simply transferred power to a ruling despot or tyrant for the added security of a consolidated government.

Age of Despots and Tyrants

- By 1400 only Venice and Florence retained their true republican character.
- (Florence would, in the elections of 1433, effectively cede authority to its own family of tyrants, the Medici, who would come out of the shadows as the *de facto* monarchs under Lorenzo. Venice remained, more or less, a republic, but with a clear ruling oligarchy.)
- As each territory came under consolidated control they generally turned from warfare to diplomacy, led in this pattern by the Republic of Venice.
- An ambassadorial system was established to create permanent opportunities for diplomacy.
- Milan established the concept of “resident embassies.”
- The warfare continued until the five major states (Milan, Venice, Florence, Naples, and the Papal States) signed the “Peace of Lodi” in 1454. (& Formed the Italian League in 1455.)
- The peace continued until Venice seized an opportunity to bring the King of France down on her rivals, Milan and Naples, as her armies moved on the Papal State of Ferrara (1494).

Niccolo Machiavelli: The Man Who Knew Too Much

- (1469-1427)
- Son of a lawyer in Florence.
- Father did not always fare well under the Medici.
- (The Medici had risen from *popolo* to power under the rules of the Republic, but, once there, had established themselves as the *de facto* princes of Florence.)
- Machiavelli had not had access to the education of the young elite scholars such as Pico, who prospered under the reign of Lorenzo “the Magnificent.” Medici rule fell when the French King, Charles VIII took Florence by force.
- What succeeded the first years of the Medici tyrants was a restoration of the Republic under the reformist religious influence of Girolamo Savonarola.



Machiavelli, Continued:

- Savonarola’s influence lasted four years, until, his austere religious convictions having run afoul of the merchant rulers, he was executed as a heretic.
- What came after was a reorganized republic, in which the young Nicolo Machiavelli rose to significant power. (He became a major player throughout Italy.)
- In 1512 Pope Julius II formed the “Holy League Against France,” a military alliance which drove the French out of Italy.
- One condition of the Pope’s actions was his demand that the Medici must be restored as rulers of Florence.
- As a result, Machiavelli (and many others) lost their positions. Machiavelli was also accused of a plot against the Medici, imprisoned, and tortured.
- After this he retired to a country house to devote himself to scholarship.
- Wrote *The Prince* there.
- He remained a committed proponent of the idea of the Republic, even when courting the Medici, but he believed that political realities were far from anyone’s ideal. (This is one of the key features of the Prince.)

Questions to Guide the Reading of Machiavelli:

- How does Machiavelli treat Christian values and virtues (especially Christian love and compassion)?
- What is the role of God and religion in Machiavelli?
- What qualities are virtuous according to Machiavelli?
- What is “fortune” according to Machiavelli, and why is it important in his discussion?
- How does Machiavelli support his points? What examples does he use? How does he reveal himself as a humanist?
- What role do *appearances* play in Machiavelli’s understanding of *power*?
- Does it affect how you read Machiavelli to know that he personally favored a republic over a monarchy? Why or why not?