Unit 1 Reading Guide: Political forms and ideas

In this unit, we will explore the origins and character of the political forms of the Renaissance. We will begin with the history of communal government and the rise of signorie (principalities). We will then look at how Petrarch, an early humanist, characterized the task of the ruler. Finally, we will examine the organization of Renaissance republics, focusing on Florence, and the associated republican ideology of the early fifteenth century.

Essential questions for this unit

- Who held political authority?
- What legitimated political authority?
- What was the realm of public authority? Where did the state’s ambit cease?
- In whose interest was it believed that authority should operate? In whose interest did it actually operate?
- How were conflicts regulated?
- What duties were connected with political authority?
- What parallels were drawn between political authority and other aspects of life?

Paper topics for this unit

The following paper topics are suggestions; if you would like to define a different paper topic, you are welcome to do so. See the paper guideline handout for more details.

1. Write about the humanists’ relation to political power, as reflected in the works of Petrarch, Bruni, and Poliziano. What did humanists think about political authority, and what ties did they have to politically powerful men? Do their political works simply legitimate the existing political order? If not, what else do they do?

2. Discuss the changing locus of political power in Italy from the thirteenth through the fifteenth century, focusing on the relationship between collectivities (families, guilds, parties, etc.) and communal authority.

3. Analyze the role of classical models in Renaissance writers’ historical narrative and political thought.

Tues. 9/17: The political background to the Renaissance

Read: Martines, 7-129 (ch. 1-8). Read ch. 1-4 quickly, to get the big picture; read ch. 5-8 more carefully.

1. Chapters 1-4 narrate the rise and transformation of the commune from the late eleventh to the late thirteenth centuries: first the emergence of the commune as an association of nobles governed by consuls; then the development of family blocs (consorterie) and the institution of government by podestà; then the rise of the non-noble popolo and its struggle to gain political power. What roles did status, economic power, and family ties play in this process?

2. Why did the popolo fail to establish a broadly based government in the northern Italian city-states? What role did group cohesiveness and identity play in its failure?

3. Read Martines, 72-93 (ch. 6). What effect did the small scale of Italian urban life have on its character? How did the rising importance of mercantile wealth conflict with traditional religious values?

4. What factors account for the rise of signorial government in many city-states? Why is the case of Milan (101-2) a particularly significant test case for theories about the rise of signori?
5. According to Martines, what was the origin of secular political feeling in thirteenth-century Italy?

6. What institutions does Martines mention in these chapters? Include political, social, and religious institutions. You don’t need a comprehensive list, but you should think about what institutions were important to late medieval Italians.

**Thurs. 9/19: Petrarch on good government**


1. In pp. 35-39, Petrarch introduces his letter and praises Francesco “il Vecchio” da Carrara. What is Petrarch’s relationship with Francesco? What are Francesco’s good qualities, according to Petrarch? How objective is Petrarch’s account of Francesco’s virtues?

2. Read the passage on pp. 40-41 about Cicero. According to Cicero, what is the connection between the state and justice? Why does Petrarch, a Christian writer, cite the pagan Cicero about what is pleasing to God?

3. Should a ruler prefer to be loved or feared by his subjects? (see p. 42ff.) Why? What about being hated by them? What classical examples does Petrarch use?

4. Was Caesar’s fate merited (p. 44)? What does Petrarch’s attitude toward Caesar imply about his view of secular power in the fourteenth century? How is a ruler like a father (p. 45ff.)?

5. The main duties of a ruler are justice (48-49), generosity (49-55), and thrift (55-59). How can a ruler be both generous and thrifty? In whose interests should he act? Why does Petrarch then turn to a discussion of greed?

6. “Nothing can be useful that is not at the same time just and honorable” (63). Is this a postulate or a conclusion?

7. How should the ruler treat his courtiers (64-66)? His friends (66-68)? Could a ruler like Francesco da Carrara have any real friends, as Petrarch defines them?

8. Why should a ruler be a patron to famous men, especially learned men (74-77)?

**Tues. 9/24: Republican oligarchies**

Read: *Martines*, 130-161 (ch. 9); *Brucker*, 74-94 (§§35-45).

1. Read Martines, 130-132. How did the Venetian and Genoese nobility manage to sap the strength of the popular movements in their city-states?

2. Read Martines, 133-137, on the lower-class revolts of the late fourteenth century in Perugia, Siena, and Florence. What do they imply about the men who normally held power in those city-states? How does the failure of these revolts compare with the failure of the popular commune a century earlier? What were the consequences of their failure for fifteenth-century political life (p. 139ff.)?

3. Finish reading Martines, ch. 9. How was power shared in oligarchies? What role did the scrutiny play in allotting power among the leading families of a republic?

4. In Florence, why would the pouches with names for office be kept in a church and the keys held by members of religious orders (155)? Why were two orders, Franciscans and Dominicans, often involved?
5. Read Brucker, 74-81 (§§35-36). Who participated in the St. John’s Day celebrations, and who was a spectator? How does the solidarity expressed on that occasion compare with the turmoil of January 1382 described in document 36?

6. Read Brucker, 81-83. How did Florentine citizens feel about their obligations to the commune (including taxes)?

7. Based on the documents in Brucker, which corporate bodies were important to Renaissance Florentines? How did the corporations define their identity?

**Thurs. 9/26: Florence: the ideal and the reality**


1. Why does Bruni begin his panegyric with a praise of Florence’s magnificence and power?

2. Read Bruni, 150-154. Why is it so important to Bruni that Florence was founded under the Roman Republic? What does Bruni think of Julius Caesar and the Roman emperors? How does his view compare with Petrarch’s view of Caesar?

3. Read Bruni, 159-160. How does he describe Florentine foreign policy and the motives behind it? Are there other motives that you could attribute to Florentine support for foreign exiles and its intervention in the affairs of other cities?

4. Read Bruni, 166-168. How does Bruni characterize Florence’s struggle with Giangaleazzo Visconti, the duke of Milan? How does his account of this struggle compare with his earlier remarks on Roman liberty and its loss under the Caesars?

5. Read Bruni, 168-175, and note his earlier remark, “While in other cities the majority often overturns the better part, in Florence it has always happened that the majority view has been identical with the best citizens” (158). Now read Brucker, 236-239 (§116), on the revolt of the Ciompi. Do you think that Bruni was ignorant of the Ciompi revolt? If not, why did he write what he did? Were the Ciompi part of “the majority”? What does Bruni say or imply about the consequences of civic strife and disorder? How does Bruni’s view compare with what Machiavelli writes on civic hatred (Machiavelli, 559-560)?

6. Read Machiavelli, 559-571. How did Cosimo de’ Medici gain and keep power? Could he be called the *signore* of Florence?

7. Read Machiavelli, 571-574, and Poliziano on the Pazzi Conspiracy. How do these writers characterize Lorenzo de’ Medici and his enemies? What connections did Poliziano and Machiavelli have with the Medici when they wrote their respective works? Why did the Pazzi conspirators try to assassinate Giuliano and Lorenzo?

8. Why, according to Poliziano, did the common people exhume, rebury, re-exhume, and desecrate the corpse of Jacopo Pazzi (320-321)?