

Was the European Renaissance the only Renaissance?

Many scholars of Western Civilization maintain that modern world history begins in Italy in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Their argument is centered upon the idea that Renaissance means “rebirth” and that translators began to rediscover the works of Romans and Greeks. These more secular and “worldly” ideas were then disseminated within a growing merchant class in Italy and were later transmitted through trade networks and universities throughout Europe, especially northern Europe. The idea of “civitas,” or the idea that one should assume the responsibility for modeling and encouraging contributions to the public welfare of a city-state, or a republic was perhaps the key element in the new world view that became popular by the mid fifteenth century in Italy. Wealthy princes patronized the arts and sponsored competitions for commissions in towns and cities where trade created wealth. These scholars culminate their argument with the idea that the Renaissance created a new worldview that fostered modern ideas: the secular worldview of the Renaissance inspired the scientific revolution, the curiosity that fueled the age of exploration, the idea of the modern secular nation-state and statecraft (*The Prince*), modern perspectives in the arts, and eventually the Enlightenment that popularized widespread republican and democratic ideals and aspirations.

During the last twenty years or so, however, many scholars have called this idea into question. These scholars begin by asking questions about cultural autonomy of Italian city-states and the idea of a separate Europe. They contend that the world was a much more complicated place in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than scholars of Western Civilization have recognized. They tend to put processes of cultural influence under the microscope to examine minute forms of cultural interaction and connection that linked Near Eastern, Central Asian, East Asian, South Asian, and African influences. The result of their studies has shifted a History course that was once called “Western Civilization” toward a more subtle focus on global interactions and a synergy of cultural innovation that cannot be relegated to the descriptive box of any one civilization.

Some Western historians, on the other hand, insist on maintaining their embrace of the traditional teleology of the idea that the “modern world” and “modernism” have exclusive origins in Greece and Rome that were rediscovered by Italian classicists during the Renaissance and that these *exclusively* European ideas have shaped the world in the modern period.

Please read what the historians below have to say about these issues:

Consider these questions before you read:

1) What are the basic arguments made by each historian?

2) How are these arguments similar?

3) How do these arguments differ?

4) Which historian do you believe presents the best argument? Why?

5) As an historian, how would you go about making a case in support of your response to question four above?

6) Use your responses and the documents below and additional research to write a five paragraph, single spaced essay in response to the question: Was there one Renaissance, or many?

Document A

But not only is Islam often excluded from the European account of the Renaissance, but so too are China and India, some of whose achievements reached Europe through an Islam that stretched from southern Spain to the Far East. And their achievements were very considerable. In the latter case Joseph Needham has argued that until the sixteenth century, Chinese science was in many cases in advance of Europe. And in the economic sphere, anthropologist Francesca Bray has described the country as the major exporter of manufactured goods in the world before the nineteenth century and only then, according to sinologist Kenneth Pomeranz, did the Great Divergence occur. India too was ahead of Europe in some respects, for example in the use and production of cotton before the industrial revolution and intellectually with its use of 'Arabic' numerals and mathematics. These cultures were not just sitting back, waiting to be overtaken by a renascent Europe. They made their own contributions to the European Renaissance in the process....

...Europe revived itself again economically after contact with the Levant which had never lost its urban culture, its Asian trade....

...the Mediterranean itself was clearly not self-enclosed. There was no boundary with the Near East, with Iraq and Persia. And the Islamic religion stretched across central Asia to China, just as China traded to the Near East and established

settlement along the way. So too of course Christian (Nestorian) and Jewish communities existed all along the Silk Road, which was later used by Italian traders. So Chinese culture touched upon the Mediterranean in a variety of ways. Muslims themselves recognized the importance of this link for knowledge as well as for trade.

...The notion of a purely European Renaissance has recently been criticized by Brotton, in *Renaissance Bazaar*, where he writes 'once we begin to understand the impact of eastern cultures on mainland Europe (1400-1600), then this traditional understanding of the European Renaissance collapses.

Jack Goody, *Renaissances: The One or the Many?* (Cambridge, 2010), 38-41.

Document B

It was the Muslims (especially the Mutazilites) who propagated the idea that man was a free rational agent—supposedly one of the leitmotifs of modern European thinking. Such an idea emerged not long after Muhammad's death signifying a move towards 'rational' Islamic theology....Known as *ijtihad*, it involved the exercise of Independent judgement, and, above all, the notion that God could only be comprehended through unaided and individualistic human reason. This idea was incorporated into the works of scholars such as al-Kindi (800-873), al-Razi (865-925), al-Fatabi (873-950), Ibn Sina (980-1037), Ibn Rushd (1126-98), and last, but not least, al-Zahrawi (936-1013). These ideas were strikingly similar to those that inspired Martin Luther and the Reformation. Al-Razi's crucial claim was that all 'truth' (religious and scientific) can be attained directly by the individual human mind through rational contemplation or reason. In turn, this can only be achieved when the mind is set free from irrational emotions: in short 'objectivity' is vital. Likewise, Ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroes) insisted that scientific enquiry can only be achieved by breaking with religious dogma, and that God's existence could only be proved on rational grounds.

In short, these and other Islamic philosophers and scientists had a profound impact in changing European thinking. Their ideas, when assimilated by the West, enabled European thinkers to move beyond the extant Catholic belief in the authority of the divine towards the centrality of the individual. The Muslims began to embrace objectivity and the process of scientific experiment, which later influence the European scientific revolution.

John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge, 2004), 177-78.

Document C

The Pre-Columbian frontiers indicate just how energetically Europeans had sought release from what has been portrayed as their encircled continent (Mackinder 1962: 48). Europe had to its south, the desert; to its west, the ocean, with steady offshore winds down the African coast making a passage almost impossible for ships that could not sail close hauled; to its north, the ice; and to the northeast, a boundless forest of pines through which the rivers flowed only to the Arctic or down to the Caspian Sea. To the east lay a vast desert and mountain emptiness of 35,000,000 square kilometers whose nomadic inhabitants were capable of keeping the civilizations of China, India, and the Near East and Europe at arm's length from each other (Chanunu 1979:53). Only its south-east were routes between Europe and the old Asian civilizations over which, the nomads of the steppes permitting, spices, silk, saffron, quicksilver and other luxuries come. Between the seventh and nineteenth centuries the Arabs or the Turks kept these routes closed more often than not. The Fifteenth Century [The Renaissance century in Europe] was a time of closure. In the sixteenth century the rulers of Egypt were willing to let the spice trade pass again, but they did so with every attention to the price that the market would bear and did not undermine the new sea-borne trade.

Eric Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, third edition (Cambridge, 2003), 71.

Document D

Europe always proved extraordinarily receptive, and the enthusiastic curiosity of Marco Polo is evidence of this open-minded attitude. But this is not the whole story. From the twelfth century Europe developed an original inventiveness that manifested itself in a rapid crescendo of new ideas. Spectacles, the mechanical clock, , artillery, new types of sailing ships and new navigational techniques, together with thousands of other innovations, big and small, were the original product of European experimental curiosity and imagination. It must also be noted that when Europe absorbed new ideas from the outside, it did not do so in a purely passive an imitative manner, but often adapted them to local conditions or to new uses of with distinct elements of originality. The Persian windmill was built with a vertical axis. The windmill that spread throughout Europe, the type we know today, with great sails and a horizontal axis, was a much more efficient machine that the original conceived by the Persians. Though the Chinese invented gunpowder, they used it mostly of fireworks. The adoption of gunpowder by the Europeans was accompanied by the manufacture of firearms, the construction of which rapidly improved, so much so that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the Europeans arrived in China aboard their galleons, the Chinese were astounded and terrified by Western guns. Paper was invented in China, and its manufacture spread to the Muslim Empire during the eight century. The Byzantines, typically

conservative, never learned how to manufacture paper. The Europeans learned the technique during the thirteenth century. The appearance of the first paper factories at Xativa and at Fabrino represented the transplanting into Europe of an idea born elsewhere. But while the production of paper outside of Europe remained at manual production, it is typical that, in the West, the pulp was processed by machines driven by watermills. Printing was invented by the Chinese, but the Europeans turned it into an extremely efficient mass production process by the end of the fifteenth century.

Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, second edition (New York, 1976), 180.

Document E

...[I] would stress *buildup*—the accumulation of knowledge and knowhow; and breakthrough—reaching and passing thresholds. We have already noted the interruption of Chinese and Islamic intellectual and technological advance, not only the cessation of improvement, but the institutionalization of stoppage. In Europe: just the other way: we have continuing accumulation. To be sure, in Europe as elsewhere, science and technology had their ups and downs, areas of strength and weakness, centers shifting with accidents of politics and personal genius. But if I had to single out the critical, distinctively European sources of success, I would emphasize three considerations:

- 1) the growing *autonomy* of intellectual inquiry;
- 2) the development of unity in disunity in the form of a common implicitly adversarial *method*, that is, the creation of a language of proof [scientific method] recognized, used, and understood across national and cultural boundaries; and
- 3) the invention of invention, that is, the *routinization* of research and its diffusion

...This powerful combination of perception and measurement, verification, and mathematized deduction—this new method—was the key to knowing. Its practical successes were the assurance that it would be protected and encouraged, whatever the consequences. Nothing like it developed anywhere else.

David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York, 1998), 200-101; 203.

Document F

The eclipse of the Tang and the decline of the Abbassid caliphate after about 1000 were important events but not signs of decay in the general prosperity or creativity of either Chinese or Muslim civilization. They were no the equivalent of the fall of western Rome in the History of Europe. Indeed, for China the eleventh century was to be one of outstanding economic growth, even though Chinese military power under central control declined from levels under the Tang.

...Between the foundation of the Song dynasty in 960 and the conquest of northern China by the Jurchen [Mongolian] nomads in 1127, China passed through a phase of economic growth that was unprecedented in earlier Chinese history, perhaps in world history up to this time. It depended on a combination of commercialization, urbanization, and industrialization that has led some authorities to compare this period in Chinese history with the development of early modern Europe six centuries later. At least for a brief period, China became the leading society in the world in terms of productivity per capita, and behind that achievement was a combination of technical capabilities and political circumstances.

Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), 109.

Document G

...Because much of the Mongol Empire had (1126-1344) been based on Mongol ideas and ways of organizing public life rather than on mere technology, these ideas provoked new thoughts and experiments in Europe. The common principles of the Mongol Empire—such as paper money, primacy of the state over church, freedom of religion, diplomatic immunity, and international law—were ideas that gained new importance.

As early as 1620, the English scientist Francis Bacon recognized the impact that technology had produced in Europe. He designated printing, gunpowder, and the compass as three technological innovations on which the modern world was built. Although they were “unknown to the ancients...these three have changed the appearance and state of the whole world; first in literature, then in warfare, and lastly in navigation.” More important than the innovations themselves, from them “innumerable changes have been thence derived.” In a clear recognition of their importance he wrote “that no empire, sect, or star, appears to have exercised a greater power on human affairs than these mechanical discoveries.” All of them had been spread to the West during the era of the Mongol Empire.

Under the widespread influences from the paper and printing, gunpowder, and firearms, and the spread of the navigational compass and other maritime equipment, Europeans experienced a Renaissance, literally a rebirth, but it was not the ancient

world of Greece and Rome being reborn: It was the Mongol Empire, picked up, transferred, and adapted by the Europeans to their own needs and culture.

Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2004), 236-237.

Document H

This was, without a doubt, one of the most astonishing episodes in history. Renaissance Italians did not recreate Rome—even in 1500, Western social development was still a full ten points lower than the Roman peak a millennium and a half earlier. More Italians could now read than in the heyday of the Roman Empire, but Europe's biggest city was just one-tenth the size of ancient Rome; Europe's soldiers, despite being armed with guns, would have struggled to better Caesar's legions; and Europe's richest countries remained less productive than Rome's richest provinces. But none of these quantitative differences necessarily matters if Renaissance Italians really did revolutionize Western culture so thoroughly that they set Europe apart from the rest of the world, inspiring Western adventurers to conquer the Americas while conservative Easterners stayed at home.

Chinese intellectuals, I suspect, would have been astonished to hear this idea. Laying down their inkstones and brushes, I can imagine them patiently explaining to the nineteenth-century European historians who dreamed up this theory that twelfth-century Italians were no the first people to feel disappointed with their recent history and to look to antiquity for ways to perfect modernity. Chinese thinkers... did something very similar four hundred years earlier, looking back past Buddhism to find superior wisdom in Han dynasty literature and painting. Italians turned antiquity into a program for social rebirth in the fifteenth century, but the Chinese had already done so in the eleventh century. Florence in 1500 was crowded with geniuses, moving comfortably between art, literature, and politics, but so was Kaifeng in 1100. Was Leonardo's breadth really more astonishing than that of Shen Kuo, who wrote on agriculture, archaeology, cartography, climate change, the classics, ethnography, geology, mathematics, medicine, metallurgy, music, painting, and zoology? As comfortable with the stars as any Florentine inventor, Shen explained the workings of canal locks and printers' moveable type, designed a new kind of water clock, and built pumps that drained a thousand acres of swampland. As versatile as Machiavelli, he served as state director of the Bureau of Astronomy and negotiated treaties with nomads. Leonardo certainly would have been impressed.

The nineteenth-century theory that the Renaissance sent Europe down a unique path seems less compelling if China had had a strikingly similar renaissance of its own four centuries earlier. It perhaps makes more sense that China and Europe both had Renaissances for the same reason that both had first and second waves of Axial thought: because each age gets the thought it needs. Smart, educated people reflect

on the problems facing them, and if they face similar issues they come up with similar ranges of responses, regardless of where and when they live.

Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (New York, 2010), 419-20.

Document I

Today...it is even easier to see the extent to which the Modern Revolution was a product of global processes, even if its full significance first became apparent at the western edge of the Afro-Eurasian world zone.

...at large scales, the size, variety, and intensity of exchange networks could be important determinates of rates of innovation, while at slightly smaller scales, population growth, state activity, and commercial expansion were also significant. All of these factors were influenced considerably by the Malthusian cycles that characterized the history of most agrarian [farming] civilizations. Networks of commercial, political, and information exchanges expanded most vigorously during eras of demographic [population] expansion; they often contracted in period of demographic decline. And during phases of expansion, the increased scope of exchanges, population growth, state activity, and commercial activity all tended to generate innovations. In the millennium preceding the Industrial Revolution, two large Malthusian [ability of a food supply to sustain population growth] cycles were crucial in shaping the history of the entire Afro-Eurasian world zone and, indirectly, that of other zones as well....The first cycle began with a demographic revival in the second half of the first millennium and ended abruptly with the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century. The second, which began after the Black Death, ended in a drastic slowdown during the seventeenth century.

David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, 2005), 366-7.

Document J

The word “perspective” (perspectiva in Latin) was commonly used in the Middle Ages by scientists before it was introduced in the field of art in the Renaissance. Then it denoted a visual theory that was Arab in origin; only later, during the sixteenth century, did writers begin using it as a synonym for the term “optics,” which occurs in the scientific texts of classical antiquity. Nowadays it survives as a technical term solely in art history, where perspective refers to the first theory to calculate images to the projections of a viewer. The earlier meaning has fallen into disuse except among historians of science. The fact that two fields share a term

would not mean much, however, if there were no inner connection between the theory of perception and the theory of art. The creators of perspective in art asserted that they were using perception as the standard for their works, but they based this claim on a definition of perception that they had not invented themselves. In fact, they had found it in the legacy of an Arab mathematician that had reached the West. Lorenzo Ghilberti, one of the leading artists of Florence in the early Renaissance, still used the term 'perspective' in a double sense; in his *Commentaries* he quoted long passages from the Italian translation of an Arabic treatise that set forth the scientific theory of vision.

Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 1-2.

Document K

The twentieth century economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter has carefully studied the history of economic theory as far back as Aristotle and argues that Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is without doubt the true father of economic science. In fact, it is worth comparing him with the man whom many economists might regard as the father of economic theory, Adam Smith. For when one considers the sheer number of ideas and contributions across so many areas of economic thought that Ibn Khaldun invented, we are left in absolutely no doubt that his is more than worthy of this title. Ibn Khaldun discovered a number of key economic notions several hundred years before their 'official' births, such as the virtues and necessity of a division of labor (before Smith), the principle of labour value (before David Ricardo), a theory of population (before Thomas Malthus) and the role of the state in the economy (before John Maynard Keynes). He then used these concepts to build a coherent dynamic system of economic theory.

Not only was he the forerunner of European economists, such was his intellect that he is also considered the undisputed founder and father of the field of sociology. His best known work is the *Muqaddima*, which literally means 'Introduction' or 'Prologue'. But neither word really does it justice, and it is more correctly translated as *The Prolegomenon*. The book is a treatise on human civilization in which Ibn Khaldun discusses at length the nature of state and society. It is essentially the first volume of a larger treatise dedicated to the history of the Arabs and those states and peoples that had played, in Ibn Khaldun's view, a historically significant role. The [eminent western] historian Arnold Toynbee said of the *Muqaddima* that it is 'undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place'.

Jim Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance* (New York, 2011), 237-38.

Document L

One of the striking findings of the research was that similarities between trading partners in the thirteenth century far outweighed differences, and wherever differences appeared, the West lagged behind. This seemed to contradict the usual assumptions. Furthermore, in spite of the tendency of western scholars dealing with the "Rise of the West" to stress *unique* characteristics of western capitalism, comparative examination of economic institutions reveals enormous similarities and parallels between Asian, Arab, and Western forms of capitalism.

...the Italian merchants borrow[ed] existing [international currency] mechanisms from their Muslim counterparts in the Middle East who had been using them for centuries.

...In all three culture areas, merchant wealth, independent of the state, was an important factor. Merchants had a certain latitude to accumulate capital, even if in the last analysis at the mercy of the ruling apparatus that often "borrowed" their capital, with no necessary requirement to repay, or imposed heavy forced "contributions" to public coffers when the state faced economic difficulties. The financier [banking] function of major merchants was common to all three regions (The Middle East, China, and Europe).

Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D., 1250-1350* (New York and Oxford, 1989), 15-17.

Document M

Whatever the source [China], the diffusion of papermaking technology via the lands of Islam produced a shift from oral to scribal culture across the rest of Afroeurasia that was rivaled only by the move from scribal to typographic culture....The result was remarkable. As historian Jonathan Bloom informs us, paper encouraged "an efflorescence of books and written culture incomparably more brilliant than was known anywhere in Europe until the invention of printing with moveable type in the fifteenth century. The spread of written knowledge was at least the equal of what it was in China after printing became common there in the tenth century....More so than any previously existing society, Islamic society of the period 1000-1500 was profoundly a culture of books. We can get a rough indication of just how many books were in circulation from the estimate that there are currently 600,000 known Muslim transcripts (from the period 1000-1500), and these are but a small fraction of the total that must have existed then.

... [The use of] the Hindu-Arabic numerals greatly facilitated commercial transactions....Transactions written on paper involving the extension of credit show up a lot in the Geniza documents (business papers of Jewish merchants in Cairo), so

do wills and inheritances, inventories and accounts of all types. Jewish merchants regularly corresponded on paper with far-flung associates and family....

...In general, it is clear that paper and Hindu-Arabic numerals greatly facilitated economic expansion not just in the lands of Islam, but also of the hemispheric world economy. The use of paper greatly enhanced the political and economic power of the Islamic states.

Edmund Burke III, "Islam at the Center: Technological Complexes and the Roots of Modernity," *Journal of World History* 20 (June 2009), 177-78; 181; 183-84.

Document N

Under the early Abbasids, the land of dar-al-Islam were incomparably more sophisticated, more tolerant, more open, and richer in every conceivable aspect of life than the rude Christian kingdoms of the West. The Islamic world was a world of cities and of commerce, of the urban—and the urbane—cultures that cities inevitably foster. Christian Europe [from 700-1200 c.e.] was a world of villages and fortified hamlets, which the Christians called "towns," and an economy that was largely agrarian. The old Roman world, with all its wealth and its ordered administration, its roads, its great villas, and its sheltering soldiery, had all vanished and crumbled into ruins....

In Spain, too, this was a time of revival. Under Visigothic rulers the Iberian Peninsula had been a frankly chaotic, impoverished, and backward kingdom, far removed from the prosperous Roman province of Hispania, the birthplace of one emperor—Trajan—and of the ancestors of two others—Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius—and the home of some of Rome's greatest writers: Seneca, Columella, Quintilian, Martial. "Of all that she once possessed," wrote an earlier chronicler, "she retained only the name." The Moors [Muslims] had transformed all of this. They had rebuilt the great cities of Malaga, Cordoba, Granada, and Seville, giving them running water, and adorned them with sumptuous palaces and gardens. They introduced scientific irrigation and a number of new crops, including citrus fruits—the famous Seville oranges—cotton, and sugarcane (al-Andalus became the main source of sugar for much of Europe before the final extinction of Muslim Spain in 1492). They had created textile industries in Cordoba, Malaga, and Almeria; pottery in Malaga and Valencia; and arms in Cordoba and, for centuries to come, in Toledo, where dismal simulacra of "Toledan steel," damascened and gilded, is still produced for the tourist market. Leather was made in Cordoba, carpets in Beza and Calcena, and paper...in Javita and Valencia. By the end of the tenth century, when it was at its prime, the Muslim emirate of al-Andalus, with its capital at Cordoba, had become the most prosperous, most stable, wealthiest, and most cultured state in Europe.

Anthony Pagden, *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle Between East and West* (New York, 2008), 196-98.

Document O

It is likely that with an an upsurge in institutional organization, the Gupta period (320-540 CE) coincided with and accelerated a major increase in the use of writing for a variety of purposes. The main written materials used for the study of medicine were steadily augmented and amended versions of compendia, and in addition the momentum of a thriving university environment must have been a major factor in the augmentation of those writings into the form that we now have them. In India at this time the decimal system was in full use, as evidenced by the inscription that occurred in Gujarat dated 595 CE; the earliest certain appearance of a zero in a Hindu treatise is in a fragment of 876 CE, well into the post-Gupta period. From there, the system spread to Indo-China and Japan in and the west was taken up by al-Khwarizmi in the ninth century and eventually came to Europe in the twelfth. According to a Christian monk of the tenth century, the Indians had a very subtle ingenuity and everybody acknowledged their superiority in arithmetic, in geometry, and in other liberal arts. As we have seen, mathematics developed strongly in the Gupta period mainly owing to the fact that they dealt with a more abstract system of numbers ('Arabic' numerals). Some discoveries made in India in the early period were unknown in Europe until the Renaissance or later.

Goody, *Renaissances*, 180.