

Unit 1: Renaissance and Exploration

Unit 1 covers the cultural revival that began in 14th-century Italy, the spread of humanist ideas north, the technology of the printing press, the rise of centralizing New Monarchs, European exploration and colonization, the Atlantic slave trade, and the Commercial Revolution that reshaped the European economy.

AP European History

Renaissance and Exploration

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the topics build on each other. The wealth of the Italian city-states funds the Renaissance, Renaissance ideas travel north and meet the printing press, New Monarchs consolidate the states that sponsor exploration, and exploration sets off the colonial expansion and Commercial Revolution that feed everything after it. Exam questions often ask you to connect one development to the next, so watch for the causal links as you read.

After the first read, use the trap boxes to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Renaissance and Exploration is about 10 to 15 percent of the AP European History exam. It sets up the world that every later unit lives in. The state-building, colonialism, and economic changes here keep showing up through Unit 9.

1.2 The Italian Renaissance

The **Renaissance** was a cultural movement beginning in 14th-century Italy, marked by a revival of classical Greek and Roman learning and art. It did not start in Italy by accident. The **Italian city-states** were independent urban polities whose trade wealth created a class of rich merchant elites, and those elites had both the money and the motive to fund art and learning. Economic growth in the city-states fueled the revival.

Humanism was the intellectual movement at the center of it. Humanists studied classical texts and argued for the value of human potential and achievement, and that outlook shaped Renaissance art, education, and thought. In Florence this took a political form called **civic humanism**, the idea that citizens should participate actively in civic life rather than withdrawing from politics.

Renaissance art needed money, and that came from **patrons of the arts**. These were wealthy individuals and families, as well as civic and Church authorities, who commissioned works of art and learning and spread Renaissance ideas and values with them. The Medici family in Florence is the textbook example. Two artists whose work exemplifies Renaissance ideals are **Leonardo da Vinci**, artist and inventor, and **Michelangelo**, sculptor and painter.

Trap. Humanism was not a rejection of religion. Many humanists worked comfortably inside Christianity, and the next topic shows northern humanists applying humanist methods directly to the Church. If an exam question treats humanism as automatically secular or anti-religious, that framing is wrong.

1.3 The Northern Renaissance

The **Northern Renaissance** was the spread of Renaissance ideas and artistic techniques to northern Europe, where they took on a more religious character than the Italian movement. Northern scholars known as **Christian humanists** applied humanist methods of textual study to Christianity itself. They criticized Church corruption and translated religious texts into languages ordinary people could read.

Two figures anchor this topic. **Desiderius Erasmus** was a Dutch Christian humanist whose writings criticized Church abuses, and his *In Praise of Folly* satirized clerical corruption. **Thomas More** was an English humanist and the author of *Utopia*, a work of political commentary written in the humanist tradition. Both are illustrative examples of Northern Renaissance thought.

Trap. The Northern Renaissance was not a copy of the Italian one. If a question contrasts the two, the expected difference is the northern emphasis on religion and reform of the Church, while the Italian movement centered more on classical art, politics, and civic life.

1.4 The Printing Press

The **printing press**, invented in the 1450s, revolutionized communication. It spread literacy and new ideas and helped disseminate Reformation thought in the next century. The key innovation behind it was **movable type**, reusable individual letter blocks that made printing fast and economical. Without movable type, printing stays slow and expensive. With it, a pamphlet can reach thousands of readers in days.

Trap. The printing press amplified ideas, it did not invent the debates it spread. It helped disseminate Reformation thought because reformers used it to reach wide audiences, not because printing alone caused the Reformation. Watch for answer choices that give the press too much causal weight.

1.5 New Monarchies

The **New Monarchs** were centralizing rulers of the late 15th century in France, England, and Spain. They built **standing armies**, permanent professional armies that enforced royal authority instead of relying on noble levies, and professional **bureaucracies**, administrative staffs through which they centralized government, collected taxes, and enforced laws. The defining move of the New Monarchs was reducing noble and Church independence and pulling power into the crown.

Three rulers serve as illustrative examples. **Ferdinand and Isabella**, the Catholic Monarchs, unified Spain and sponsored overseas exploration. **Henry VII** was the first Tudor king of England and consolidated royal power after the Wars of the Roses. **Louis XI** of France expanded royal authority at the expense of the great nobles.

Trap. "New" does not mean democratic or modern. The New Monarchs concentrated power in themselves. An answer choice that credits a New Monarch with sharing power with representative bodies or expanding rights gets the concept backwards.

1.6 The Age of Exploration

The **Age of Exploration** was the 15th- and 16th-century period of European overseas exploration, driven by new maritime technology and the search for trade routes and wealth. One piece of that technology was the **caravel**, a small, maneuverable ship developed for long ocean voyages. Lateen sails let caravels sail closer to the wind, which mattered for returning from voyages down the African coast.

Two figures anchor the topic. **Prince Henry the Navigator** of Portugal sponsored voyages that pushed exploration down the coast of Africa. **Christopher Columbus**, a Genoese navigator sailing for Spain, made voyages that opened sustained European contact with the Americas. His expeditions were funded by Ferdinand and Isabella, the same New Monarchs consolidating Spain at home.

Trap. Columbus did not reach lands that were empty. The Americas were already populated by millions of people. The accurate claim, and the one the exam rewards, is that his voyages opened *sustained* European contact with the Americas. "Discovered" without that qualification is the wrong framing.

1.7 Rivals on the World Stage

The **Treaty of Tordesillas** of 1494 was an agreement dividing newly discovered lands outside Europe between Spain and Portugal, reflecting early colonial rivalries. A line drawn west of the Cape Verde islands gave Spain the lands to the west and Portugal the lands to the east, which is why Brazil later became a Portuguese colony in a mostly Spanish-speaking continent.

Trap. The treaty divided the world between Spain and Portugal only. France, England, and the Netherlands were not parties to it and did not respect it, which is why their own colonial ventures followed. An answer choice treating Tordesillas as a settlement among all European powers is wrong.

1.8 Colonial Expansion and the Columbian Exchange

Colonial expansion was the establishment of European colonies and trading empires overseas, motivated by wealth, trade, and imperial competition. Spain and Portugal led first, with France, England, and the Netherlands following. One engine of that expansion was the **encomienda**, a Spanish labor system granting colonists authority over Native labor. It is an illustrative example of colonial exploitation: colonists were owed labor, and in practice the system was coercive and destructive.

The **Columbian Exchange** was the transfer of plants, animals, diseases, and peoples between the Eastern and Western Hemispheres following European colonization of the Americas. Crops like potatoes, maize, and tomatoes moved east and eventually reshaped European diets and population growth. Diseases like smallpox moved west and devastated Native populations that had no immunity, which in turn pushed colonists toward enslaved African labor.

Trap. The Columbian Exchange was not only goods and crops. Diseases and people were part of the transfer, and the disease side of the exchange killed far more people than any battle of the conquest. If a question asks for the exchange's demographic effect, think smallpox and population collapse, not just tomatoes.

1.9 The Atlantic Slave Trade

The **transatlantic slave trade** was the forced transportation of enslaved Africans to the Americas to provide plantation labor, and it became a central part of the Atlantic trading system. Enslaved people crossed the ocean on the **Middle Passage**, the brutal sea voyage that is an illustrative example of the trade's violence. Overcrowding, disease, and deliberate cruelty killed a large share of captives before they ever reached the Americas.

That labor fed **plantation agriculture**, large-scale cash-crop farming in the Americas worked by enslaved labor. Sugar, tobacco, and later cotton plantations were the economic core of the system. The goods and people moved in a pattern called **triangular trade**, the three-way Atlantic trading pattern linking Europe, Africa, and the Americas. European manufactured goods went to Africa, enslaved people went to the Americas, and plantation products went back to Europe.

Trap. Keep the three terms straight. The transatlantic slave trade is the whole system. The Middle Passage is one leg of the journey, the crossing itself. Triangular trade is the trading pattern among the three continents. A question asking about the voyage wants the Middle Passage, not triangular trade.

1.10 The Commercial Revolution

The **Commercial Revolution** was the 16th- and 17th-century expansion of trade, banking, and business practices that laid the foundations for **capitalism**, an economic system based on private ownership and investment for profit. The flood of wealth from the Americas and the growth of overseas trade demanded new ways of organizing business, and European economies changed to supply them.

One effect was the **Price Revolution**, the inflation caused by the influx of New World silver into Europe. More silver chasing the same goods pushed prices up across the century. Another change was in how overseas ventures were financed. **Joint-stock companies** were businesses owned by investors holding shares, which pooled capital for overseas trade and colonization. The Dutch and English East India Companies are the classic examples.

The changes reached the countryside too. **Enclosure** was the fencing of common lands into private farms, which raised productivity but displaced small farmers who had depended on the commons. And **serfdom**, the system binding peasants to land and lords, moved in opposite directions across Europe. It declined in western Europe while intensifying in the east.

Trap. Serfdom did not fade everywhere at once. The split direction, declining in the west and intensifying in the east, is one of the most commonly tested details in this topic. If an answer choice says serfdom simply ended in the 16th century, it is missing half the story.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Humanism vs civic humanism	Humanism is the broad Renaissance movement that valued classical learning and human potential. Civic humanism is its political branch, arguing that educated citizens should take part in public life and serve their city or state.
Italian vs Northern Renaissance	The Italian Renaissance centered on art, architecture, and the revival of classical antiquity. The Northern Renaissance applied humanist ideas to religious and social reform, and it spread faster because of the printing press.
Encomienda vs plantation agriculture	The encomienda granted Spanish colonists control over native labor, while plantation agriculture in the Caribbean and Brazil ran on enslaved African labor producing sugar. Different labor systems, different regions.
Transatlantic slave trade vs Middle Passage vs triangular trade	The Middle Passage is the ocean crossing itself. The transatlantic slave trade is the whole system of buying, transporting, and selling enslaved Africans. Triangular trade is the wider pattern linking Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and slaves were only one of its cargoes.
Western vs eastern serfdom	Serfdom declined in western Europe as markets and monarchies grew, but it intensified in the east, where lords tightened control over peasants to supply grain exports. The directions split, which is exactly what the exam tests.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

- 1.** Which of the following best explains why the Renaissance began in the Italian city-states rather than elsewhere in Europe?
 - A. The invention of the printing press in the 1450s
 - B. The wealth of merchant elites and their patronage of art and learning
 - C. The sponsorship of exploration by Ferdinand and Isabella
 - D. The centralization of power by the New Monarchs

- 2.** Which of the following best describes the policies of the New Monarchs?
 - A. They expanded the independence of nobles and the Church
 - B. They built standing armies and bureaucracies to centralize royal authority
 - C. They shared governing power with newly created representative assemblies
 - D. They abolished taxation in order to win the support of the peasantry

- 3.** The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) is best understood as evidence of which of the following?
 - A. A cooperative agreement among all European powers to share colonial territories
 - B. Early colonial rivalry between Spain and Portugal over newly claimed lands
 - C. The papacy's refusal to involve itself in overseas expansion
 - D. England's dominance of Atlantic trade in the late 15th century

- 4.** The Price Revolution of the 16th century was caused primarily by
 - A. the influx of silver from the Americas into Europe
 - B. the invention of joint-stock companies
 - C. government spending on the printing press
 - D. the decline of serfdom in western Europe

Answer Key

- 1. B.** The Italian city-states generated trade wealth, and their merchant elites used that wealth as patrons of art and learning, which funded the Renaissance. A is wrong because the printing press came in the 1450s, a century after the Renaissance began, and it spread Renaissance ideas rather than starting the movement. C is wrong because Ferdinand and Isabella sponsored exploration, which belongs to the Age of Exploration, not the origins of the Renaissance. D is wrong because the New Monarchs were also a late-15th-century development, after the Renaissance was already underway in Italy.
- 2. B.** The New Monarchs centralized power by building standing armies, which replaced noble levies, and professional bureaucracies for taxation and enforcement, while reducing noble and Church independence. A states the exact opposite of their policy. C invents a democratic sharing of power that the New Monarchs never practiced. D invents a tax policy; the New Monarchs needed taxes to fund their armies and administrations, so abolishing taxation makes no sense.
- 3. B.** The treaty divided newly discovered lands outside Europe between Spain and Portugal, which directly reflects their competition for colonial claims. A is wrong because only Spain and Portugal were parties; France, England, and the Netherlands ignored the treaty. C is wrong because the treaty was brokered with papal involvement, not papal refusal. D is wrong because England was not a significant Atlantic colonial power in 1494.
- 4. A.** New World silver flowed into Europe and pushed prices up, which is the definition of the Price Revolution. B is wrong because joint-stock companies were a financing innovation of the Commercial Revolution, not a cause of inflation. C invents a connection; governments did not fund the printing press as a spending program. D is wrong because the decline of serfdom in western Europe was a social and agricultural change, unrelated to the silver-driven inflation.

One-Page Recall Check

- Explain why the Renaissance began in the Italian city-states, naming the economic cause and the role of patrons.
- Define humanism and give one way it shaped Renaissance art or education. Explain civic humanism.
- Name the two Renaissance artists in this unit and what each is known for.
- Explain how the Northern Renaissance differed in character from the Italian Renaissance. Name two Christian humanists.
- Explain what movable type is and why it was the key innovation behind the printing press.
- Name the three New Monarchs in this unit and explain how standing armies and bureaucracies strengthened the crown.
- Name the ship technology that aided exploration and explain what made it useful.
- Explain what Columbus's voyages accomplished, using accurate wording about European contact with the Americas.
- State what the Treaty of Tordesillas divided, between whom, and which powers ignored it.
- Define the Columbian Exchange and name one thing that moved in each direction, including a disease.
- Explain the encomienda and how it functioned as colonial exploitation.
- Distinguish the transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage, and triangular trade.
- Explain what plantation agriculture produced and who worked the plantations.
- Define the Commercial Revolution and explain how it laid the foundations for capitalism.
- Explain the Price Revolution, naming its cause, and how joint-stock companies pooled capital.
- Describe what happened to serfdom in western versus eastern Europe, and what enclosure did to small farmers.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP European History deck and work through the Unit 1 cards. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner so your review sessions pace themselves. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Humanism, Italian city-states, Patrons of the arts, Renaissance, Civic humanism, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Christian humanists, Northern Renaissance, Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas More, Printing press, Movable type, Bureaucracy, New Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, Henry VII, Louis XI, Standing armies, Age of Exploration, Caravel, Christopher Columbus, Prince Henry the Navigator, Treaty of Tordesillas, Colonial expansion, Columbian Exchange, Encomienda, Transatlantic slave trade, Middle Passage, Plantation agriculture, Triangular trade, Capitalism, Commercial Revolution, Price Revolution, Serfdom, Enclosure, Joint-stock companies.

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