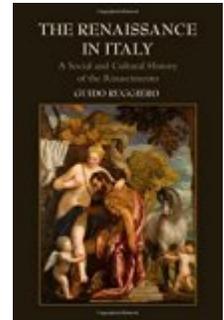


Guido Ruggiero. *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 648 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-89520-0.



Reviewed by Celeste McNamara

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Commissioned by Brian J. Maxson (East Tennessee State University)

Guido Ruggiero's hefty tome *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* is a masterful overview of Italian urban history from 1250 to 1575. Many historians of late have considered the question of whether the label "Renaissance" is still useful or if it is too limiting, misguided, or perhaps even misleading. Ruggiero enters the debate with a resounding yes to the concept, albeit with an argument for new terminology. As he points out, quickly arguing against the main title of the volume, there was no "Italy" in this period, nor would any of the peninsula's inhabitants in these centuries have recognized the validity of a French word applied centuries after their death. While there is no Italy, however, as Ruggiero argues, there was a growing sense of *Italianità*, or "Italian-ness," in the period. We can thus use the terms "Italy" or "Italian," so long as we understand them as early modern Italians did—as a shared culture and language base that nevertheless was trumped by the importance of one's own city or state.

As for the term "Renaissance," Ruggiero suggests we swap it for a term that might be recognized by figures like Francesco Petrarca or Niccolò Machiavelli. As he clearly argues throughout the book, early modern Italians considered things that were "new" to be dangerous, and thus categorized everything that was "new" in their society as a return, reform, renewal, or occasionally rebirth of some earlier ideal, real or imagined. Thus the concept exists; we simply must find the right word. He muses on the suitability of both "renewal" (*rinnovazione*) and "reform" (*riformazione*), but rejects both; renewal carries connotations of fixing something, which is problematic from a historiographical perspective, while reform would too easily be confused with the reformations of religion. Thus we are left with "rebirth" (*rinascita*), a term that his subjects used infrequently, but would at least have recognized. For these reasons, then Ruggiero argues we should be calling this period the Italian Rinascimento, not the Renaissance in Italy. This discussion, while on its surface simply an argument for a semantic

shift for historians of the period, underlies Ruggiero's larger argument.

The Italian Rinascimento, in his estimation, is a worthwhile designation that allows early modern historians to understand the mid-thirteenth through sixteenth centuries as a time when something new and distinct happened in the Italian Peninsula. This Rinascimento is a period in which urban civilization flourished, and in which society was reformulated in terms of new values and definitions of virtue, new economic situations, new elites, new social hierarchies, and new expressions of culture. And yet, in spite of the fact that historians can see these changes as "new," those who lived through them consistently classified them as "old," as a return to an idealized past, which made change safe and secure rather than risky and dangerous. In this way, Ruggiero argues that we should keep both the term and the periodization, but see it differently than traditional "Renaissance" scholarship would; for us, the changes pushed Italian cities and states into uncharted territory that would eventually spread to Europe and other parts of the world, but early modern Italians experienced this as (or convinced themselves that it was) a comfortable return to better times.

Ruggiero's book is divided into two parts, each representing a different Rinascimento "civilization." The first civilization (referring to the word's early modern meaning and Latin roots in city/state or civic concerns, rather than the more problematic modern connotation) was centered in northern and parts of central Italy from 1250 to 1450, during which an urban culture arose that centered around the *popolo grosso* or new urban elite who gradually overtook the medieval feudal aristocracy. The second civilization expanded to include more of central and southern Italy, and focused on the changing of the first civilization's urban elite into a progressively more aristocratic and courtly society from 1450 to 1575. Each of the eleven chapters examines a particular issue that

most preoccupied the period. In the first civilization, these were questions of legitimacy, both social and political (chapter 1), urban values and concepts of civic virtue (*civiltà*) (chapter 2), the threat and effects of the plague (chapter 3), violence and war (chapter 4), and the imagination and culture of the new elite (chapter 5). The concerns of the second civilization shift to the development of courts and aristocratic culture (chapter 6), self-fashioning or the development of a sense of self (chapter 7), the ways in which thinkers in this second period dealt with the increasingly obvious fact that they were in new, uncharted territory (chapter 8), the ways in which those thinkers dealt with increasing invasions from powers to the north (chapter 9), the attempts at re-founding the Rinascimento in a Catholic context by religious reformers (chapter 10), and finally political reform and retreat as the Rinascimento became increasingly untenable and shifted toward a broader European Renaissance (chapter 11). The book ends with an epilogue on the diaspora of Rinascimento culture, particularly on the role of both Italians (especially women and artisans) and Italian cultural output in the spread of the Renaissance around Europe and European colonies.

Throughout the book, Ruggiero's writing is clear, accessible, and engaging, and he keeps the thread of reform, renewal, and rebirth going, demonstrating that this concept not only touches intellectual and artistic shifts but also was at the core of early modern urban Italian culture. The book is built on a wealth of information that Ruggiero synthesizes beautifully, combining several generations worth of excellent scholarship on early modern Italy, including his own. As the book proclaims, it is a social and cultural history, which gives Ruggiero the opportunity to integrate histories of women, sexuality, gender, economics, disease and death, religion, and a host of other topics often excluded from traditional Renaissance historiography. His inclusion of women's history is particularly noteworthy, as Rinascimento women are thoroughly integrated, rather than relegated

to a single chapter or set aside as different. In spite of the impressive breadth of this work, however, readers might be disappointed by two elements not thoroughly discussed. Music is largely absent from the discussion of art and cultural output, and the book retains an almost entirely urban framework, leaving one to wonder if we should see this phenomenon of the Rinascimento as solely urban, or if there is also a Rinascimento of the countryside.

Although some may wish Ruggiero had also addressed these elements, no historian can hope to include everything and please everyone. The book is already substantial, clocking in at nearly six hundred pages in a relatively large format with small print; the inclusion of any more topics might send our students running for the hills, or at least signing up for another course. The book's heft is both a strength and potentially a weakness of the volume. It is a boon for early modern historians (or anyone wishing for a thorough distillation of a massive amount of scholarship on early modern Italy), but this book may well scare off the more casual lay reader or undergraduate. The volume's other weakness, from a scholarly perspective, is the complete lack of footnotes in the entire book. On many occasions, Ruggiero notes the source of particular arguments or interventions, pointing the interested reader to the best scholarship on some issues (and scholars in the field will recognize many more), but consistent notation throughout would have been welcome and could have been particularly useful for those hoping to pursue further research on a topic discussed by Ruggiero. The "Short List of Works Used" at the end of the book provides about nine pages of major works consulted, but presumably (both from the wealth of information Ruggiero includes and the designation of the list as "short"), it is not an exhaustive list. The inclusion of footnotes and a more extensive bibliographies would also have made an already hefty volume even longer, but perhaps Cambridge would consider a compromise and create an online companion for

the text that would provide bibliographies for each chapter.

As a book for use in an advanced undergraduate course, it is both promising and a bit challenging. The writing is clear and approachable, with plenty of examples and without assumptions of much prior knowledge. Paired with a discussion of major historiographical debates to contextualize Ruggiero's argument and with some of the primary sources he weaves into his narrative, this could be the foundation for a very successful course on the Italian Rinascimento, organized around themes that concerned our historical subjects themselves. For those able to devote a semester to the Rinascimento of the Italian Peninsula and, most likely, reframe their own thinking and division of the subject, this would be an excellent core text. For those teaching the more broadly defined European Renaissance, the book is invaluable for personal reading, if less feasible to assign. Beyond use as an undergraduate textbook or source for teaching, this book should be read by any early modern historian with interest in the Renaissance or the debate about the terminology and should be required reading for graduate students in early modern history.

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