

# Renaissance in 12th century culture and thought



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**How appropriate is the label ‘renaissance’, when applied to twelfth century thought and culture?**

## **Introduction**

During this essay we shall be exploring the period of the Twelfth Century in Europe. We are concerned with the extent to which this period, which was one of extraordinary social, economic, and political change, with profound developments in thought and culture can be considered a Renaissance. First it is necessary to examine the true meaning of the label ‘renaissance’. What are the most important features of a renaissance that mark it out from other periods of time? In the first part of our work we shall attempt to define the parameters of what a ‘renaissance’ is.

The Second part of our work will examine the historic background of the Twelfth Century. We shall briefly examine the most important developments during a period that has done much to shape the modern world, including the rise of humanism, the individual, the reform of the Church, the creation of Universities and the development of legal codes throughout Europe. Why was the Twelfth Century such an important period in medieval history and did these profound changes and developments constitute a renaissance in the manner of the renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century?

In our final Chapter we will present the case that using the term ‘renaissance’ for the Twelfth Century is misleading, unsuitable and inappropriate. Although the twelfth century was extremely important, with profound developments in many fields, this does not necessarily make it a ‘renaissance’. Many historians would also argue that applying such labels is

detrimental to the study of history; in this chapter we will examine some of their arguments. In our conclusion we will conclude on whether it is accurate, useful or appropriate to apply the term 'renaissance' to the Twelfth Century.

The term 'renaissance', or re-birth is usually associated with the Italian Renaissance in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries which later spread throughout Europe. <sup>[1]</sup> This period saw a revival in classical texts and sources of knowledge in a variety of fields, mathematics, law, philosophy, art and education to name but a few. Educational reform spread these ideas throughout Europe, leading to developments in knowledge, technology and agriculture, as well as social changes which saw a population shift to towns and cities. <sup>[2]</sup> In essence renaissance is referring to a revival, in this case the classic texts and teachings of the Ancient Greeks. It is generally accepted by historians today that there were several 'renaissances' in Europe, in the Ninth, Twelfth and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries, where increased access to classical texts and other social factors led to artistic, technological and social developments throughout Society. <sup>[3]</sup> When referring to the Twelfth Century Renaissance most historians mean the period between 1050 and 1250, and unlike the early period of the later Renaissance, developments happened throughout Europe and did not begin in one region or Country. <sup>[4]</sup>

## **Chapter One**

The Twelfth Century was arguably one of the most important in medieval times, if not in the whole of European History. The rediscovery of many Latin and Greek texts following the fall of the Greek Empire and increased contact with Islamic scholars led to an increase in scientific knowledge, and to

developments in all intellectual fields. The Twelfth Century saw great advances in technology, which combined with a warmer climate and greater stability led to an agricultural surplus, an improved quality of life and new opportunities. This more dynamic European Society invented spectacles, paper, developed the use of gunpowder, more accurate clocks and printing methods. <sup>[5]</sup> For a period the Latin and Greek texts were simply re-produced by an increasing number of European Scholars. Gradually once all these works were discovered and thoroughly absorbed, many Scholars began to build upon this knowledge and adapt it for contemporary use, no more so than in the field of law.

Roman law and a revival of jurisprudence spread throughout Twelfth Century Europe, replacing traditional, custom based law and helping create stability. One of the best examples of this was in Henry II of England's legal reforms. Like in many parts of Europe trial by ordeal or battle was still common, and the application of the Kings justice was not uniform throughout his British territories. Henry II established trial by jury and set up magistrate courts so that his representatives could administer legal rulings on his behalf. This was the beginning of the Modern day justice system, it made the legal system fairer and helped establish the authority of the Church and State throughout Europe. <sup>[6]</sup>

The artistic pursuits flourished during the Twelfth Century, the fields of poetry, architecture, music, and literature all developed greatly. This was partly a result of the increased wealth and security in many parts of Europe, but it was also an indication of the self confidence, creativity and curiosity of

a more dynamic European Society eagerly absorbing new sources of knowledge from the Latin and Greek texts, the Islamic and Byzantium worlds. <sup>[7]</sup> This artistic revival also had some links to the more humanist philosophies and teachings from the great Twelfth Century scholars and teachers. Humanist thought also developed in the period around the Twelfth Century, and many academics, such as Morris, believe that the Twelfth Century saw the beginnings of the discovery of the individual and the origins of rational thought. <sup>[8]</sup> The rise of the individual led to a wider interest in self expression, human relations and self discovery, it was a point when man became interested in the position of the individual in relation to Society and its institutions. <sup>[9]</sup> This apparent rise of rational thought however did not coincide with a decline of the powers of the Church. Indeed during this period the Christian Church went through a period of dynamic reform, strengthening its influence and power to a point where the Pope would attempt to exercise power and influence over Monarchies and Empires. It was Innocent III, a proponent of both religious and secular legal codes, who called for a Crusade against the infidels in 1198, and he who made the English King John his vassal. <sup>[10]</sup> The Twelfth Century remained a period of faith where to even question whether there was a God was considered madness.

How then was the knowledge gleaned from the classical Greek and Latin texts disseminated throughout Europe? The establishing of Universities in places such as Paris, Oxford and Bologna was perhaps one of the greatest events of the Twelfth Century. Students from all over Europe travelled to these centres of learning, and helped to spread their new scholastic thought

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and ideas back to their homelands. <sup>[11]</sup> The Universities not only helped to re-introduce classical knowledge back into Europe but helped build upon and adapt the works to better serve the very different European Society that they inhabited, a Society that was rapidly changing and beginning to explore the world outside the European frontiers. We have established then that the period of the Twelfth Century, which for many academics means 1050-1250, was a period of great economic, social, political and religious change. In our next chapter we will argue that the label Renaissance is worthy of such a profoundly important era.

## **Chapter Two**

The Twelfth Century did indeed contain many of the features that defined the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance in Italy. The discovery of Latin and Greek texts allowed for great advances in the scientific, social, political and legal fields as well as other intellectual pursuits. After the long process of absorbing the vast array of texts, Twelfth Century Scholars built upon that knowledge just as some of the great Italian minds in Florence did several hundred years later. The adoption of Roman legal canons and the revival of the arts are two examples of a European re-birth a fundamental change in Society for the better inspired by the classical works. <sup>[12]</sup> If anything the Twelfth Century was perhaps even more open minded than its later Italian Renaissance, adopting and learning from cultures previously regarded as heathens and heretics.

A Renaissance cannot be defined simply as an interest in classic texts or the adoption of some aspects of ancient Intellectual ideas into Society. The

Italian Renaissance was a flowering and development of ideas that were inspired by classical texts and sources. The Twelfth Century saw rapid developments in virtually every intellectual pursuit as a result of the re-discovery of Latin and Greek texts. It helped lead to the rise of new towns and helped spread vernacular literatures. As Haskins demonstrates it was in many ways the early beginnings of the modern world, surpassing the achievements of the authors of those ancient texts.

*' It saw the culmination of Romanesque art and the beginnings of Gothic, the revival of the Latin classics and of Latin poetry and Roman law: the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy: and the origin of the first European universities. '*

Another main feature of the Italian Renaissance is the spread of humanist ideas and philosophy. We have previously demonstrated that Humanist thought and philosophy flourished in the Twelfth Century, and the origins of the Individual, an important Western concept, arose in this period of intense intellectual change and development. The supremacy of the Church was not challenged, but a philosophy of rationality and of valuing the human spirit that so defined the Italian Renaissance and indeed the later Enlightenment flourished in the newly created schools and Universities of Twelfth Century Europe. <sup>[13]</sup> It is irrelevant to compare the relative contributions of each Renaissance in a bid to establish which is more important or which period contributed more to the formation of modern, secular Europe. We are merely concerned with whether the label ' renaissance' is a suitable label for the Twelfth Century. Academics such as Haskins and Brooke do clearly believe it was a Renaissance and have given clear evidence to support their claims.

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[14] In our final chapter we will examine the theories of other academics who argue that it is neither appropriate nor relevant to describe the Twelfth Century as a Renaissance.

### **Chapter Three**

For many historians, such as Panofsky and Chenu, it is inaccurate to describe the Twelfth Century as a true 'renaissance'. [15] There are several different reasons for this approach. Scholars like Panofsky believed that although Latin and Greek works were re-discovered and that this led to a degree of development, the change was limited to a small range of Intellectual pursuits. Although many in the Twelfth Century imitated the texts and borrowed some of their teachings, they failed to truly appreciate the fact that the ancient world was a completely different culture from their own, their understanding of the works and of the time itself was limited and narrow and unlike the scholars, artists and philosophers of the Italian Renaissance they did not seek to return to classical age or change the society in which they lived, merely adapt some classical teachings to suit their environment. [16]

Other historians are not quite so dismissive of the huge range of achievements in the period around the Twelfth Century, and historians like Chenu recognise the importance of the era whilst believing that the label of renaissance does not do the period justice. The engine of artistic, economic and political growth was not the re-discovery of the Latin and Greek texts but the improving economic and social conditions. The true re-birth was the revitalization of the Christian Church, which inspired a new hunger for



learning, discovery, and invention and created an atmosphere in which the ancient texts could be adapted to improve the conditions of a newly invigorated Christian Society which was increasingly placing rationality and reason at the heart of its teachings. The Twelfth Century was a unique, profoundly important era that should be studied in its own right, not as a mere pre- Renaissance but an age that helped usher in the beginnings of Modern Western Society. [17]

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, how appropriate is the term 'renaissance' to describe Twelfth Century thought and culture? This essay has demonstrated that the Twelfth Century was a period of momentous social, economic, political and religious change. Those developments had a major impact in shaping the modern Western World. Increased prosperity and security created new opportunities and a seemingly universal desire for learning and advancement led to new inventions, the formation of new institutions and the adoption of philosophy which facilitated the rise of humanism and the individual as the centre of Western thought. The contribution of classic Latin and Greek texts cannot be underestimated, the knowledge revealed and subsequently built upon spurred developments in medicine, law, philosophy, technology, theology and art. Unlike the Italian Renaissance Twelfth Century men did not hark back to the ancient times, nor did they wish to re-order Society, merely make it better, more Christian and more humane.

It is our conclusion then that using the label 'renaissance' for this period is useful in initially expressing the profound importance of this period both in Medieval history and in the effect it has had on the development of Western

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culture itself. Through its usage we demonstrate that the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissances were not as unique as many historians would have us believe, and that the so called dark ages were not the continuous period of ignorance and backwardness so often imagined. But the Twelfth Century is more than a pale imitation of the Italian Renaissance, it is a period of time worthy of separate study and analysis, in the future it maybe that Society will regard this period as the true Renaissance and the later Italian period a development on the achievements and work of a dynamic, original and inspired Century.

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### Footnotes

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[17] IBID, P. 134