LEADING HUMANISTS

1304–1374 Francesco Petrarcha (known as Petrarch), Italian poet and scholar. Attempts to combine ancient Greek and Roman learning with Christianity in order to reinvigorate the faith. His approach provides inspiration for many Renaissance humanists.

1370–1444 Leonardo Bruni, Italian civil servant and amateur academic. Writes a glorifying history of Florence using classical texts as a model. First to describe the new and mainly secular learning and study as “humanism.”

1433–1499 Marsilio Ficino, Italian philosopher and writer. His translations of Plato’s works (1482) are studied throughout Europe for many years after his death.

1446–1519 William Grocyn, English academic. His translation and lecturing work at Oxford University during the 1490s establishes the University as a leading European center for the study of classical Greek texts.

1466–1536 Desiderius Erasmus, Dutch priest and academic. Regarded as the leading humanist scholar. He tries to find common elements in Greek philosophy and Christian thought. His translation of the New Testament into Latin from ancient Greek sources (completed 1516) has a great influence on theology of Protestant reformer Martin Luther. Among his greatest works are Encomium Moriae (The Praise of Folly, 1509) and Colloquia (1519), which are criticisms of the Catholic Church and political injustice.

1467–1540 Guillaume Budé, French academic and librarian to King Francis I. Establishes science of etymology (study of origin of words). By comparing different versions of surviving classical texts he shows how they have become corrupted by inaccurate copying and misinterpretation. His conclusions are presented in his Commentarii Linguae Graecae (Commentaries on Greek Language, 1519).

1469–1527 Niccolò Machiavelli, Italian statesman and political philosopher. His works are renowned for their honesty about political life. Best known, Il Principe (The Prince, 1532), advises prospective statesmen that any means may reasonably be used to acquire and hold onto power. Pragmatism of his political philosophy reflects turbulent political life of Italian city-states during this period.

1478–1535 Thomas More, English statesman and academic. Best known for his Utopia (1516) which criticizes society of his time and describes an ideal state based on reason and justice. He serves as Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII, but is executed when he refuses to support Henry’s break with the Catholic Church. Canonized 1935.

1533–1592 Michel de Montaigne, French scholar and writer. Invents the essay form with his Essais (Essays, 1580–1588), in which he demonstrates an interest in all aspects of human life and behavior, writing with a style full of good humor, inquisitiveness, and tolerance.

1588–1679 Thomas Hobbes, English political philosopher. Best known work, Leviathan (1651), gives a history of the development of government which aims to show that the formation of strong nation states ruled by strong monarchs has saved humanity from barbarism and chaos.

The Renaissance began in Italy during the 14th century. It developed from a revival of interest in classical art and literature. Influenced by classical authors and artists, Renaissance thinkers celebrated human achievements. This intellectual movement became known as humanism. Humanist ideas contrasted with the teachings of medieval scholars, which emphasized the negative aspects of human life. Humanism spread from Italy to much of Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMANISM 14th–16th centuries

- Glorification of humanity and its abilities.
- Optimism about life - regarding it as an opportunity rather than a torment to endure in order to earn a place in heaven (as believed by medieval Christian scholars).
- Critical study of the works of classical Greek and Roman writers.
- Search for new knowledge through close observation of nature.
- Encouragement of education and development of the individual as a fully rounded person with a range of skills, sensitivity to the arts, moral integrity, and courage.
- Search for principles of law and government for the new nation states.