



# Order of Medieval Women: Women of Consequence

## Medieval Musings

*"We cannot live in a world that is interpreted for us by others... use our own voice, see our own light." St. Hildegard von Bingen, 1098 - 1179*

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

"There Is No Deity But God" ..... 2

711 AD, Muslim Conquest of Iberia ..... 2

"Purple is the Noblest Shroud" ..... 4

Readers Corner: *Matilda of Tuscany* ..... 5

An Independent Woman, Æthelflaed,  
Lady of the Mercians ..... 5

Bordeaux Wine, A 2000 Year Old History ..... 6

A New Word: *Witenagemot* ..... 7

Isabelline Gothic Architecture ..... 7

Italian Renaissance: Lucrezia Tournabuoni,  
Catherine Sforza, Isabella d'Este ..... 8

Did You Know? ..... 8

Medieval Bookmarks ..... 11

Quote by Isabella I of Castile ..... 11

"Hold Your Tongue" ..... 12

"Eureka" ..... 12



[www.medievalwomen.org](http://www.medievalwomen.org)

## “THERE IS NO DIETY BUT GOD”

This well preserved Hispano-Arabic pillow was discovered inside Queen Berengaria’s tomb, made from a tightly woven crimson silk brocade with horizontal bands and medallions woven in threads of gold and green. Four symmetrically placed stars surround the large center polychrome silk medallion featuring two dancing figures flanking a tree of life; one playing a musical instrument, probably a tambourine, the other holding a cup. The medallion is encircled with a band of Arabic cursive script repeating the words “*There is no deity but God*”. The upper and lower bands bear Arabic inscriptions “*The Perfect Blessing*.” The unadorned pillow back is of the same crimson silk with the two shorter sides edged in yellow cording, ending in small tassels. Berengaria was the daughter of Alfonso VIII of Castile and Eleanor of England, founders of the Monasterio de Santa Maria la Real de Huelgas in Burgos which became Queen Berengaria’s final resting place, joining her parents and other family members.



Berengaria of Castile's Sepulcher Pillow Cover, ca 1180-1246, 33 7/8" x 19 5/8", Patrimonio Nacional, Museo de Telas Medievales, Monasterio de Santa Maria la Real de Huelgas, Burgos.

## 711 AD, MUSLIM CONQUEST OF IBERIA

In the 8th century the Visigothic kingdom of Iberia was conquered by a nearby Muslim empire that reached its peak in the 10th century under the Umayyad caliphate of Cordova, becoming one of the world’s great Muslim civilizations. This invasion and the ensuing conquest of the region, known as Al-Andalus, was only a small part of a more aggressive Islamic plan to move through Hispania towards the western Mediterranean and its ultimate goal of Constantinople.

The Visigothic kingdom under Roderic had become splintered with civil conflict and was vulnerable for absorption into the thriving Muslim empire. A rare surviving Christian document, known as the Chronicle 754, blamed the almost instantaneous disintegration of the Visigothic state on internal tension, leaving the kingdom unable to mobilize in the face of an outside threat. Whether the Muslim invasion was a result of the oppressed Christian chief Julian asking North Africa’s governor Musa ibn Nusair for help against Roderic’s tyrannical rule or simply the right opportunity for a Muslim drive to enlarge their territory, the conquest was easily won.

In April 711 a young Muslim commander Tarik bin Ziyad with an army of 7,000, comprised chiefly of Berbers and slaves, landed at *Jabel-al-Tarik*, a narrow rocky peninsula we know as Gibraltar. The Berbers had been inhabitants of North Africa since the days of the Phoenicians until it was conquered in 702 by the Arabs. Since this campaign occurred in the farthest western reaches of the Muslim empire it is thought the Berbers were probably the only troops available for the Muslim invasion which quickly became an asset since their tribal society was based around a military structure that proved very effective against the chaotic Visigothic kingdom; within twelve years most of the Iberian peninsula was under Islamic rule.

A Christian chronicler described the invasion as horrific, cities burned to the ground, men crucified, children killed, and looting everywhere. An Arabic historian Ahmad ibn Mohammad al-Maqqari wrote that the events began with 2 vessels of soldiers invading Andalusia, returning home “loaded with spoils” telling of “a country with delightful valleys, fertile lands, rich in all sorts of agricultural productions, watered by many large rivers, and abounding in springs of the sweetest waters.” Realizing this bountiful land was “only but a narrow channel” from North Africa, the invasion was ignited. While Tarik headed towards the Visigothic capital Toledo other Muslim leaders were ordered to attack Córdoba, Málaga, and Elviria. In the surprise attack of Córdoba the Visigothic governor and some of his troops took refuge in a local church which was besieged by the Muslims for



Royal palace Alcázar in Seville, Andalusia, Spain, originally traced to the conquest of Seville in 712 followed by 12th century construction with Islamic artistic features including arabesques, calligraphy, and geometric patterns, reclaimed by Ferdinand and Isabella who added Gothic, Renaissance and Romanesque designs blended to the original Islamic structure, an outstanding example of a style now known as Mudéjar architecture © James Gordon CC BY-SA 2.0.



Jamie W. Cultural Anthropology @ KSU.

was the Battle of Covadonga in 722. In 1085, over 200 years later, the Visigoth's capital city Toledo fell to Alfonso VI. While Reconquista efforts continued, it was not until July 16, 1212 that Christian forces, led by a coalition of Christian princes and foreign crusaders under Alfonso VIII, father to Berengaria and Blanche of Castile, were finally able to break the power of the Almoravid in the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. With this major success most of Al-Andalus became positioned under the control of Catholic Christian supremacy, the only exception being the Nasrid dynastic Emirate of Granada. The final recapture of Muslim territory began in 1482, but it was not until 1492, 10 years later, that the last remaining territory fell to the Catholic Monarchs Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand II in the Battle of Granada. In 1489,

3 months until the refugees were given a final ultimatum, convert to Islam and agree to pay tribute or parish in a fire, they elected to parish. In 732 the Muslim's advance into western Europe was finally halted at the Pyrenees Mountains when Frankish king, Charles Martel, defeated the Arabic forces at Tours.

once Isabella was confident of their success, she commissioned a set of 52 intricately carved walnut panels for the stall seat-backs for the in the most important church in Spain, the Cathedral of Toledo, immortalizing significant battles and individuals of the Reconquista.

Under the Visigoths Spain had become home to a significant Jewish population and as the Jews prospered jealousy and anti-Semitism arose among the Visigoths. Confident this animosity could be used to protect Muslim rule, as areas were taken over by the Muslims they placed the Jews in control. This arrangement allowed for a very rapid conquest as the Arab forces moved quickly through an area, leaving local organizational structures intact. The Visigoths were promised local self-government, civil equality, and protection in return for fealty, tribute and immediate capitulation. Centers of Muslim government were located in some of the larger existing cities with taxing rates often remaining the same which meant, as far as the native population was concerned, the only difference was to whom they paid their taxes. While this approach deviated from the Muslim's general practice it's thought this digression was influenced by the Iberian peninsula being separated by 2,000 miles of rough geography from the Caliph's seat in Damascus.

The union of Queen Isabella I of Castile and Leon with King Ferdinand II of Aragon became the basis for the political unification of Spain, leading to its establishment as a major international power and initiating its Golden Age that lasted until the mid 1700's. Their union and shared goals can best be expressed by a motto crafted to present a unified front to the world upon Isabella's assumption of the Castilian throne, 'Mönta tanto, tanto mönta' "as one is, so is the other."



www.aragonmudejar.com.

Spain under Muslim rule was a succession of rulers lasting from 28 years in the extreme northwest area of Galicia to 781 years in Southern Spain, a secluded area around Granada carved out between the Mediterranean and the Strait of Gibraltar. After the Islamic conquest the first victory by Christian forces

Spain's conquest began a new era in world history with diverse ethnicities, religions and races coexisting in Al-Andalus. Intellectual prosperity was encouraged as Spain became a beacon of knowledge in the European continent. It was Spain, along with southern Italy, that was destined to act as a conduit for learning, playing a central role in the reawakening of Europe for the next two centuries.

## “PURPLE IS THE NOBLEST SHROUD”

Purple, specifically Tyrian purple, has been considered a royal color since the ancient Phoenicians as early as 1500 BC. This reddish purple royal color was mentioned in many early writings including references in the *Iliad* as the color for Ajax’s belt while Trojan warriors horses’ tails were dipped in the color. In the *Odyssey* Odysseus’ wedding bed blankets were purple and in the Book of Exodus God instructed Moses to



Empress Theodora dressed in Tyrian purple, 6th century, Mosaic from Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

have the Israelites bring him an offering including cloth “of blue and purple and scarlet” to be used for the curtains of the Tabernacle and garments of priests. In 950 BC King Solomon is reported to have brought artisans from Tyre to provide purple fabrics to decorate the Temple of Jerusalem and 3rd century BC Alexander the Great, when giving imperial audiences, wore Tyrian purple. Finally, Jesus in the hours leading up to his crucifixion was dressed in purple by the Roman garrison to mock his claim to be ‘King of the Jews’.



Cuneiform tablet, Late Babylonian 600-500 BC, instructions for dyeing wool purple and blue, British Museum, London.

which gave way to the term “born to the purple” continuing the Roman Imperial concept of *Porphyrogenitus*, positioning those children born to reigning emperors with superior rights to the throne over siblings born before their father ascended the imperial throne, invariably separating them from Emperors who had won or seized the title through political intrigue or military force. Girls “born to the purple” were considered highly desired in marriage negotiations throughout Europe as Otto I, Holy Roman Emperor sought for his son and successor Otto II.

Anna Comnena, daughter of Byzantine Emperor Alexios I and his wife Irene Doukaina, born December 1, 1083 recounts in her introduction of her 15 volume book *The Alexiad*, “I have been conversant with dangers ever since my birth ‘in the pur-

ple,’ so to say; and fortune has certainly not been kind to me, unless you were to count it a smile of kind fortune to have given me ‘emperors’ as parents, and allowing me to be born in the purple room,” specifically meaning she was born in the *Porphyra* or purple chamber of the Imperial Palace, a room which Anna Comnena said was “set apart long ago for an Empress’s confinement” decorated with expensive porphyry marble. The maternity bed and baby cradle were decorated with pearl-studded covers and gold-embroidered curtains. A successful delivery was trumpeted from the entrance of the Great Palace with a pearl-embroidered Tyrian colored slipper suspended from the gallery above, the same Tyrian purple color worn by Roman Etruscan kings and Papal shoes of today.

Byzantines also used Tyrian purple for both diplomatic gifts and imperial documents such as the parchment used for princess Theophana’s marriage charter to Otto II. Codex Purpureus were manuscripts written on parchment dyed in Tyrian purple often with gold or silver lettering. Stripes of white and Tyrian purple were worn by Bishops of the Byzantine church while government officials wore squares of the color to mark their rank.

In 532 AD after a week of Nika riots, the most violent in Constantinople’s history, Emperor Justinian’s advisers suggested the rebellion could not be stopped and the only way out was for the imperial couple to flee for safety. Empress Theodora rose from her throne and gave a brief speech persuading her husband to stand firm, ultimately saving his throne.

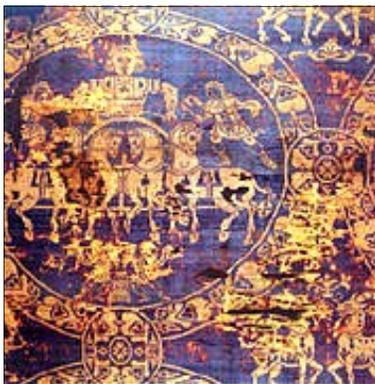
“My lords, the present occasion is too serious to allow me to follow the convention that a woman should not speak in a man’s council. Those whose interests are threatened by extreme danger should think only of the wisest course of action, not of conventions.

In my opinion, flight is not the right course, even if it should bring us to safety. It is impossible for a person, having been born into this world, not to die; but for one who has reigned, it is intolerable to be a fugitive. May I never be deprived of this purple robe, and may I never see the day when those who meet me do not call me Empress. If you wish to save yourself, my lord, there is no difficulty. We are rich; over there is the sea, and yonder are the ships. Yet reflect for a moment whether, when you have once escaped to a place of security, you would not gladly exchange such safety for death. As for me, I agree with the adage that the royal purple is the noblest shroud.”

Tyrian purple was greatly prized in antiquity because its purple hue improved rather than faded as the dyed cloth aged, becoming brighter with weathering and sunlight. Restricted by law, cus-

tom, and expense this reddish-purple royal dye was a natural dye obtained from a secretion produced by several species of sea snails. In ancient times the dye was collected by “milking” the glands in the snails, a very labor-intensive but renewable resource. The “milk” was put in a basin and left to soak in the sunlight which made the juice turn many colors in the following order: white, yellow-green, green, violet, and then a red which turned darker and darker. Stopping the process at exactly the right time to obtain the desired color was critical. It took about 12,000 snails to yield 1.4 grams of pure dye, enough to color the trim of a single garment.

Theopompus, a 4th-century BC Greek historian, reported “purple for dyes fetched its weight in silver at Colophon” an ancient city in Asia Minor indicating not only its value but a

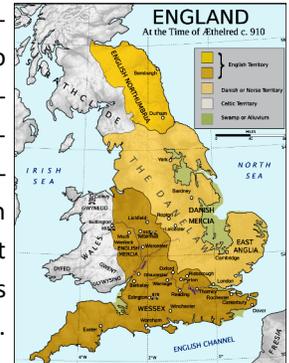


Charlemagne's silk shroud fragment, 814, Tyrian purple fabric from Constantinople, design includes a quadriga (4 horse chariot), Musée National du Moyen, Paris.

status symbol, its use restricted by early sumptuary laws. Byzantium production was subsidized by the imperial court, its use restricted for the coloring of imperial silks. Since antiquity the color-fast, non-fading Tyrian purple, has been revered as a symbol of power, prestige and wealth.

## An Independent Woman: Æthelflaed, Lady of the Mercians

This year marks the 1100th anniversary of the death of Æthelflaed, also known as Lady of the Mercians. During the late 9th century after numerous Viking invasions Æthelflaed's father, King Alfred the Great, made an alliance with Æthelred, Lord of West Mercia finalized with his daughter's Æthelflaed's marriage to Æthelred.



CC BY-SA Philg88.

In 911, after several years of illness, Æthelred died and Æthelflaed became the ruler of the Mercians in her own right. As Lady of the Mercians she expanded her territories, fortified settlements, and led her armies into Wales and North Umbria. Although some of her military exploits were coordinated to help her brother, King Edward the Elder, in others she acted independently.

During the years 904-924 the Mercian Register, discovered embedded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle B: Cotton MS Tiberius A VI, gives a very different account of events from its main text. While the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 916 focuses on Edward building a burh the Mercian Register details causes and results of Æthelflaed's military campaign into Wales. In 918 “This year Ethelfleda, Lady of the Mercians, with the help of God before Laminas, conquered the town called Derby, with all that thereto belonged; and there were also slain four of her thanes, that were most dear to her, within the gates. But very shortly after they had become so, she died at Tamworth, twelve days before mid-

summer, the eighth year of her rule and right lordship over the Mercians; and her body lies at Gloucester, within St. Peters east porch.”

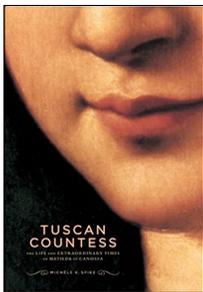


Æthelflaed, 13th century English Kings roundel, Royal MS 14 B V, membrane 2, British Library.

Æthelflaed's successful political career was unusual and did not reflect contemporary attitudes towards women nor pave the way for future Anglo-Saxon female leaders. Asser, her father's biographer stated, the West Saxon court where she grew up was particularly opposed to over-mighty queens: “The West Saxons do not allow a queen to sit beside the king, nor to be called a queen, but only the king's wife [because of] a certain obstinate and malevolent queen, who did everything she could against her lord and whole people” (referring to Eadburh 787-802). It would be several hundred years for another English queen to rule unchallenged in her own right.

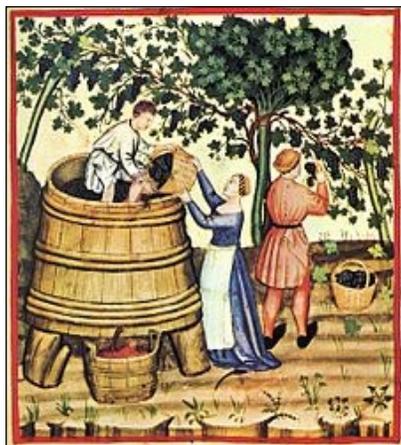
### READERS CORNER:

#### *Tuscan Countess: The Life and Times of Matilda of Canossa* by Michele K. Spike



Spike rediscovers the full story behind one of the most historically significant women of the Middle Ages, Matilda of Canossa (1016-1115). Matilda was a powerful feudal ruler in northern Italy and the chief Italian supporter of Pope Gregory VII during the Investiture Controversy. She was one of the few medieval women to be remembered for her military accomplishments, political alliances, the Norman pillage of Rome and Henry's humbling at Canossa, where for three days he knelt penitential in freezing mountain winds, barefooted in the snow to beg that his excommunication be lifted and save his kingship. She is established as a key political figure in her own right, whose actions directly contributed to the transition from the late medieval era into the early Renaissance.

## BORDEAUX WINE, A 2000 YEAR HISTORY



Land ownership system of compliance promoted planting of uncultivated lands with new vineyards, *acuina sanitatis*, 14th century, 29-utunno, Taccuino Sanitatis, Casanatense 4182.

In 1137 William X, Duke of Aquitaine died unexpectedly leaving his 15 year old daughter Eleanor as Duchess of Aquitaine and the most eligible bride in Europe. Her inheritance included the vast fiefdom of Aquitaine, its lands stretching from the Pyrenees to the Loire, encompassing almost one-third of present-day France.

For over 2,000 years Bordeaux wine and Aquitaine have been intertwined, its major center Bordeaux straddling the Gironde, an estuary where the Dordogne and Garonne rivers meet the Atlantic ocean. The Romans recognized the strategic importance of this location and during the first century established *Burdigala* (Bordeaux), laying out a Roman-style city as the provincial capital *Aquitania Secunda*, soon becoming a major port and seat to one of the largest universities of Gaul of that time.

During the Roman occupation of Gaul the Romans established vineyards to cultivate wine for its soldiers, production began sometime after 43 AD although the first verified evidence of vineyards in Bordeaux was not until 71 AD when Pliny the Elder recorded their existence. It is believed the first vine cuttings the Romans brought to Bordeaux originated in the Rioja region of Spain. The Bordeaux wine industry suffered a number of disruptions following the fall of Rome; the area was occupied by Goths in 406, Vandals in 408, and Visigoths in 414 AD, in addition to repeated encounters with Saxon longboats along the coast. Disruptions continued into the 5th century until the area came under Frankish rule.

During the Carolingian era in medieval France a new system of land development emerged that became intimately tied with the spread of viticulture (cultivation of grapevines especially for wine-making). Under this system of 'complant,' a farmer could approach a landowner who had uncultivated land with an offer to plant and tend to the area for a contracted amount of time. After the given length of time half of the fully cultivated land would revert back to full control of the original landowner while the remaining half would become the farmer's under the condition that a percentage or "tithing" of each year's crop would be paid to the original landowner. Under this system, many areas

of France were enthusiastically and efficiently planted with little cost to the land-owner.

Land transportation of wine in heavy wooden barrels known as tuns, each with a 252-gallon capacity, was a costly and risky proposition. Bordeaux, with its easily navigable river close to the European Atlantic coast, provided opportunities for a very lucrative trade to other regions outside France.

Twelfth century Aquitaine was at the heart of wine production from the 3 main wine growing regions Cahors, the Pyrenees region, and largest of all Bordeaux, its lands known today as the Right Bank and includes wineries of St. Emilion, Bergerac, Cotes De Bourg, Fronsac and Entre de Mers. During the medieval period the hardy, very dense, rustic black wines of Cahors (a blend



Les Grandes Heures de Rohan, October, ca. 1425-30. Ms. lat 9471, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

of at least 70% Malbec) became the *de facto* royal wines, contrasted to the more refined wines of Loire and Burgundy favored by the French court.

On May 18th, 1152, wine produced by Chateau d'Issan, then known as Lamothe Cantenac, was selected for the wedding of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II of England. Under Eleanor's control and influence her wines from the Bordeaux region and Southwest France became the core of English and Irish wine drinking, a staple of the English wine trade and tastes for the next three centuries.

In 1337 the Gascon capital, Bordeaux, boasted a population of about 30,000, about the same as London, and was a gateway to Gascony's principal export, wine. Huge quantities of Gascon wine were loaded at Bordeaux

each autumn and shipped to England, in 1308-09 alone 102,724 tunnes of wine were dispatched to English shores. To the English, a people who produced no wine but had clearly developed a taste for Gascon claret, this was manna from heaven. Wine production continues today as a major center sporting some of the most famous labels in the industry.



A NEW WORD, *Witenagemot*

King and his witan, 1025-1150, Cotton MS Claudius B IV fol. 59r, British Library, London.

During the 7th—11th centuries in Anglo-Saxon England *Witenagemot*, *Witena gemot* (assembly of wise men), was an assembly of the ruling class whose primary function was to advise the king. Membership was composed of the most important ecclesiastic and secular noblemen in England and thought to mimic the ancient Germanic aristocratic general assemblies, folkmoots. The first recorded act of a *Witenagemot* was advisement in the code of law issued by King Æthelberht of Kent, consort to Bertha of Kent, ca 600.

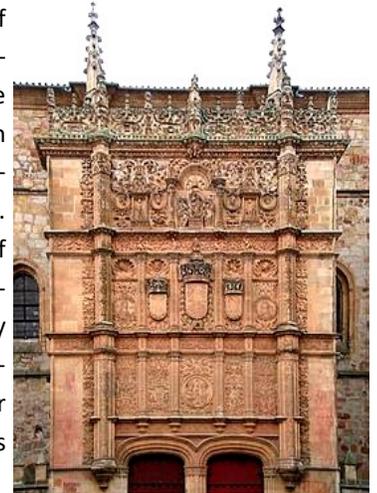
An illustration of the witan's powers: In 1013 King Æthelred II, consort to Emma of Normandy, fled the country after Sweyn Forkbeard had been proclaimed king by the witan. Within a few weeks Sweyn died and the witan called Æthelred back to England. However, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the witan would only receive him back under the condition that he promised to rule better than he had. Æthelred agreed and was reinstated as King of England. His nickname of the 'Unræd' or 'Unready' means ill-advised and is believed to be given this title because of the witan's demands and his reign's failure.

Witans met at least annually and would advise on the administration and organization of the kingdom, dealing with issues such as taxation, jurisprudence, and both internal and external security. The witan could seek to prevent autocracy and carry on government between two successive reigns but ultimately the *Witenagemot* answered to the king and was only assembled at the king's summons, assembling without his approval could be considered treason. The *Witenagemot* was replaced with the *curia regis* (king's court) with the Norman invasion in 1066 although the *curia regis* continued to be dubbed a "witan" by chroniclers until as late as the 12th century.

In J.K.Roling's *Harry Potter* series the Wizengamot court, a fictional organization, derives its name from the *Witenagemot*.

## ISABELLINE GOTHIC

Plateresque,"in the manner of a silversmith," was an architectural movement unique to the Iberian peninsula that began in the 15th-century and continued for the next two centuries. It was the earliest phase of Spanish Renaissance architecture and was characterized by columns built in the Renaissance neoclassical manner with ornate decorative façades of pinnacles and shields.



Plateresque façade, University of Salamanca, Spain, Beatriz Gallindo, La Latina, Latin professor who taught here and privately to Isabella I of Castile, Englishdictionary.edu.

By 1477 Isabella had become interested in architecture, developing her own style and taste elaborating on the Plateresque style and molding it into what became known as Isabelline, an architectural style representing a transition between late Gothic and early Renaissance. The most obvious characteristic of the Isabelline style was the predominance of heraldic and engraved inscriptions in addition to symbols of the yoke, arrows and the pomegranate which refer to the Catholic Monarchs. Isabelline Gothic architecture, named after Queen Isabella, included decorative influences of the Castilian tradition *Mudéjar*, intricate and elegant decorative patterns used by Moorish artists working in Christian-ruled Spain, coupled with Flanders's flamboyant forms, Lombardy's decorative components and Tuscan elements.

After Spain's 1492 Reconquista success the Catholic Monarchs of imperial Spain began to develop a consciousness of its growing power and wealth, launching a period of major construction. Symbolizing their newfound power grand monuments were built at the command of the Queen. The Isabelline style continued to develop until about 1530 when it began to incorporate Renaissance ideas into its structure and design.



Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes, Toledo, Spain, founded by King Ferdinand II of Aragon & Queen Isabella of Castile, © Burlaki.com.

## THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE:

### LUCREZIA TORUNABUONI, CATHERINE SFROZA AND ISABELLA D-ESTE

The beginning of the Italian Renaissance is tied to May 29, 1453 when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire; the sacking of Rome May 6, 1527 symbolizes its end. With Byzantine's collapse a large number of its scholars and artists fled to Italy which helped stimulate a movement centered on an appreciation of physical beauty coupled with a renewed emphasis on man's own achievements and expression, in turn encouraging the study of ancient texts, art, science, music, literature, religion and architecture.

Florence was a powerful independent city-state, third largest after Constantinople and London, with access to both land and sea. Its accessibility for trade promoted a thriving market with a growing class of merchants and bankers accumulating extraordinary wealth with a strong desire to enjoy the pleasures of life. Many from this growing class of merchants became patrons to the arts which presented opportunities for public visual displays of their nobility, power, and influence.



Lucrezia Tornabuoni (right), fresco by Ghirlandaio, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella church.

Lucrezia Tornabuoni, a child of two powerful Italian families and wife to a third, was certainly aware of the importance of patronage to the arts. Her father-in-law, Cosimo de'Medici, a wealthy and powerful banker, politician, and patron of the arts extended his influence in Florence by choosing subjects and artists to create works that portrayed he and his family in a positive image, a type of propaganda that displayed significance and greatness. Casting himself as a pious man he was also a patron of religious works including Donatello's "David," Fra Angelico's "Virgin of the Annunciation," and "The Adoration of the Magi" one of the world's greatest Florentine paintings.

Lucrezia was also a patron of the arts in her own right, both as a literary patron and a writer. She wrote sonnets, hymns set to popular music, and several long religious narrative poems about biblical figures. A friend to poets, artists and philosophers of the Medici Academy she was one of the most famous 15th century patrons to such artists as Fra Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio, and even adopting Andrea Botticelli as her own son, providing him residence in the Palazzo Medici and inviting him to join their family summer trips. She gifted the Cathedral, churches, abbeys, monasteries, and hospitals within Florence's territory with items ranging from bread and wine to great art and architecture. Lucrezia invested her own money in building projects, founding not only the *Bagno a Morbo* thermal baths but supporting hospitals in Florence, Pistoia, Pisa and San Paolo. In the over 120 extant letters in her own hand she wielded authority over building projects, dowries of poor unwed women, positions within the clergy, marriage arrangements, political alliances, and artistic endeavors.

After her husband Cosimo's untimely death their twenty-on year old son, Lorenzo de'Medici, 'the Magnificent,' became ruler of Florence taking over the Medici Academy, considered the most brilliant and talented of the Medici clan. Lorenzo, himself a poet,

### DID YOU KNOW?

Francis I King of France was a direct descendant of both Joanna of Flanders and Beatrix de Clisson. He was a devoted patron to the arts with a fascination for the Italian Renaissance. In 1515 da Vinci, at the invitation of Francis, spent his last years in Paris, about the same time Francis had requested Isabella d'Este to send dolls with her latest fashions for his ladies at court to see. The ties between France and Italy were strong, in 1513 Pope Leo X, wanting to show his friendship to the king directed da Vinci to construct a mechanical lion that as it walked forward his chest would open to reveal a fleur-de-lis instead of a heart.

When da Vinci traveled to France he brought the Mona Lisa with him, continuing to add details until his death in 1519. Da Vinci's assistant Salaì inherited the painting, selling it to king Francis for 4,000 gold coins and the property of France. It was placed in the Palace of Fontainebleau until Louis XIV moved the Mona Lisa to the Palace of Versailles; after the French Revolution it was moved to the Louvre where it remains against Italy's multiple efforts to reclaim it.

supported such artists as Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Michelangelo Buonarroti who also actually lived with Lorenzo's his family for 5 years. Noble-men and women were often used as models for the artists as portrayed in Botticelli's "Madonna of the Magnificat" 1483, with Lucrezia as the Madonna is surrounded by her children, Lorenzo holding a pot of ink and the previously mentioned "The Adoration of the Magi" which included several generations of the Medici family including 16-year-old Lorenzo.



Botticelli, *Madona of the Magnificat*, 1483, Uffizi, Florence, Italy.

The Sforza's were another powerful family based in Milan who became patrons in a very different way. In the early 1480's thirty-year-old Leonardo da Vinci approached his friend Lorenzo de'Medici to help him find a new patron as he felt he had outgrown Florence. Lorenzo referred him to his friend Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, Catherine Sforza's uncle. Da Vinci wrote Ludovico a letter listing 10 engineering feats he could offer the Duke along with an interesting closing statement. After reading the letter Ludovico told his secretary, "Call for this man and have him come here, I want to speak to him." (see excerpts of the letter below).

"1. I have plans ...very light, strong ...easily portable bridges sturdy and indestructible either by fire or in battle....  
 2. I know how in ... siege ... to remove water from the moats and make bridges, mantlets and scaling ladders ....  
 3. ...methods for destroying every fortress ... unless on rock  
 5. ... means of arriving at designated spot through mines and secret winding passages ...without noise, underneath moats or rivers.  
 10. ...give as complete satisfaction ...in the field of architecture...construction ... conducting water from one place to another.  
 Also ... can execute sculpture in marble, bronze and clay. Likewise in painting, I can do everything possible as well as any other, who-soever he may be. And if any of the above-mentioned things seem impossible or impracticable to anyone, I am most readily disposed to demonstrate them ... in whatsoever place shall please Your Excellency, to whom I commend myself with all possible humility."

Da Vinci entered the service of the of the *defacto* Duke of Milan at a time when Milan's annual income exceeded 600,000 ducats, a significant amount compared to all of England's during the same period of 700,000. For 17 years da Vinci was kept busy painting, sculpting, designing elaborate court festivals, machinery, flying machines, studying geometry, mechanics, municipal construction, canals, and architecture. His studies from this period contain designs for advanced weapons, including a tank and other war vehicles, various combat devices, and submarines in addition to his fresco "The Last Supper."

About the same time da Vinci entered the Duke's service Ludovico Sforza asked for Isabell d'Este's hand in marriage. Since Isabella was already promised to Galeazzo Sforza Ludovico accepted her sister Beatrice d'Este's hand instead. February 1487 Isabella and Galeazzo celebrated their wedding with a banquet in Milan, an event designed by da Vinci now mentioned as a set designer and theatrical engineer. First-hand accounts describe the setting for the operetta "Il Paradiso" having a ceiling appearing of a solid hemisphere structure "made like half an egg, all opened to show the inside, with lights for stars." The automation was made of iron with jointed arms and lighted perforations as stars being rotated by special devices with almond-shaped supports for 8 children to stand on as angels. Seven children were planets and the eighth on a larger support, was dressed as the Archangel Gabriel "rising toward the sky and descending again." Coordinated below were men dressed as poets turning with the planets above "with many songs and most sweet and haunting sounds" all in praise of the bride. Four years later Ludovico's own marriage to Beatrice d'Este took place again with da Vinci again staging a spectacle, said to be even more magnificent than Isabella's.



Caterina Sforza, 1482 CE, Lorenzo de Credi 1459-1537, San Domenico, Italy.

Catherina's father, fifteen year old Galeazzo Maria Sforza, older brother to Ludovico, first met his father's friend Cosimo de'Medici in 1459. Visiting Florence and the Magi Chapel Sforza was not only impressed by the beauty of Florence but astonished by their adoration of Cosimo. In 1466 Galeazzo became the Duke of Milan and for 10 years maintained a strong alliance with Cosimo while unsuccessfully trying to outshine Cosimo's patronage to the arts.

Catherina Sforza was an Italian noblewoman, Countess of Forlì and Lady of Imola. Although she was the illegitimate daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, the Italian society treated their



Catherina's personal armor, unknown source.

illegitimate children as a family's own, receiving a typical 15th-century Italian childhood as a nobleman's daughter, learning to read, write and educated in religious matters. She enjoyed various activities such as hunting, dancing and was especially interested in science. As a descendant of a dynasty of noted condottieri's, mercenaries, Catherina distinguished herself with bold actions defending her dominions from attack and political intrigues. She was married three times and had 8 children. Three of her most notable events include in 1484 Catherina, seven months pregnant, crossed the Tiber on horseback to occupy the Castel Sant'Angelo on behalf of her husband, positioning herself to monitor the Vatican's conclave after her husband's uncle Pope Sixtus IV death. In 1488 she defended the fortress at Rocca di Ravaldino after her first husband's assassination, refusing to surrender even when their children's safety was threatened. In 1500 Louis XII succeeded to the French throne claiming the rights to the Duchy of Milan, sending Caesar Borgia to capture Rocca. Catherina held the fortress with 2,000 supporters for several days against Borgia's siege of cannons and 6,000 French forces, having her men repair at night the destruction wrought during the day. Borgia, growing impatient, changed tactics relocating his cannons and began a continuous barrage until a large breach was opened in the walls enabling the German and Swiss soldiers to storm the Rocca. Catherina continued to resist, fighting with weapons in hand until taken prisoner and transported to Rome's dungeon in Castel Sain'Angelo where she was held for over a year, released only after renouncing all of her fiefs.

Catherina was interested in herbals, alchemy and medicine, recording recipes for beauty and health. She wrote *Experimenti*, a

manuscript offering a variety of instructions including the transmutation of a philosopher's stone. The majority of her recipes are medicinal in nature, requiring long preparation times and complicated methods, offering cures for diseases, aids for sleep, healing balms, teas to cure melancholy, male impotence fixes, and anesthetics for surgery. Her anesthetics are remarkable as its ingredients, besides being dangerous analgesics, were the same as used by the famous *Scuola Medica Salernitana*, recorded in a 13th Century surgery handbook published in Bologna. Having led a very active and often dangerous life, during her final years she confided to a monk, "Se io potessi scrivere tutto, farei stupire il mondo" (If I could write everything, I would shock the world.)



A woman believed to be Catherine Sforza as one of the three graces, Sandro Botticelli, *The Three Graces*, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

Isabella d'Este was of the House of Este, a family whose golden age began in 1391 with the founding of the local university, augmenting the family's power to such an extent that the Este Court was included within the most important European power circles. Her father Ercole I, Duke of Ferrara, a contemporary to Lucrezia and Catherina's father, took on an ambitious urban project known as the Herculean, transforming Ferrara from a medieval citadel into a true Renaissance masterpiece. He was a patron to poets but his greatest passion was music, hearing a Mass sung every morning, then visiting one of the city's churches later in the day by attending Vespers. He employed Josquin des Prez, a composer who wrote *The Miserere* ca 1503, a motet of Psalms 51 for 5 voices, one of that psalm's most famous compositions in the entire Renaissance.

In 1490 Isabella married Francesco Gonzaga, a member of a powerful family, relocating to Mantua, an area that had belonged to Matilda of Tuscany during the 11th century. Isabella, as Marchesa of Mantua, was a major force on the area, becoming known for her cultural splendor and respected for her statesmanship which she developed thru personal connections with major players of the time. In 1500, while on a diplomatic mission in Milano, she met King Louis XII of France and successfully persuaded him to not to send his troops against Mantua. In 1509, when her husband was captured and held hostage, Isabella took control of Mantua's military forces, remaining in control after his release until his death in 1519 when she then served as regent for their son Federico, Duke of Mantua who continued to rely on her for guidance. As a political figure her connections, coupled with her secret spy system and perseverance nature enabled her to maneuver thru early 16th century intrigue. During the period when Italy was twice conquered and three times divided, under her leadership her small city-state Mantua remained independent.

Isabella d'Este, is often considered "the First Lady of the Renaissance," with her intense passion for knowledge, fluent in Greek and

Latin, and fascination of Roman history and its arts. A collector of books she invited writers, artists, and poets to her home to exchange ideas and corresponded frequently with a variety of prominent figures. Twelve thousand of her letters still exist providing a woman’s rare point of view on the Italian Renaissance. She supported painters such as Mantegna, Titian, and da Vinci and was a leader of fashion, ordering the finest clothing including furs, as well as the newest distillations of perfume which she concocted herself and gave as presents. Her style of dressing included a ‘Capigliari’ head-dress in the shape of the ribs of a pumpkin, a style that was copied for years throughout Italy. While her husband devoted his energies to military endeavors, she deployed culture and the arts as a way to expand the prestige of their small state. Becoming one of the most energetic, knowledgeable, and committed of all Renaissance patrons at the close of her life she left a state that was prosperous and relatively independent, one that would endure as such for almost another century. She gave new meaning to what it was to be a woman, demonstrating that a woman could climb beyond the role of playmate, mother, and housekeeper. Reflecting back on her life Isabella told her son, “I am a woman and I learned to live in a man’s world.”



Titian, *Isabella in Black*, 1534-1536.

Lucrezia Tournabuoi, Catherina Sforza, Isabella d’Este and their families were major contributors, both as patrons and/or artists, in the Italian humanist movement in art, architecture, literature, music, philosophy, and science, positioning Italy as the European leader until about 1600. The Italian period of enlightenment we know as the Renaissance ultimately encompassed all of Europe and marks the transition from Medieval to Early Modern Europe.

Josquin Des Prez: Miserere mei Deus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6pBEHBXmKk>

## MEDIEVAL BOOKMARKS



Static bookmark, Leiden University Lib, 12th century, BPL MS 2001 © EK.

Various types of bookmarks were used during the Middle Ages. Early 12th century static bookmarks were created by sliding a small slip of paper into a cut in the page resulting in an unmovable yet destructive bookmark. A less destructive version was “fore-edge” bookmarks which glued a tiny strip of parchment onto the long side of the page which could then include extra information, similar to our tabs of today.



Register bookmark, Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Collections, Med. MS S.1588.

A more complex system was a “register bookmark” appearing as a spider with its legs trapped, securely fastened to the top of the binding marking multiple locations.

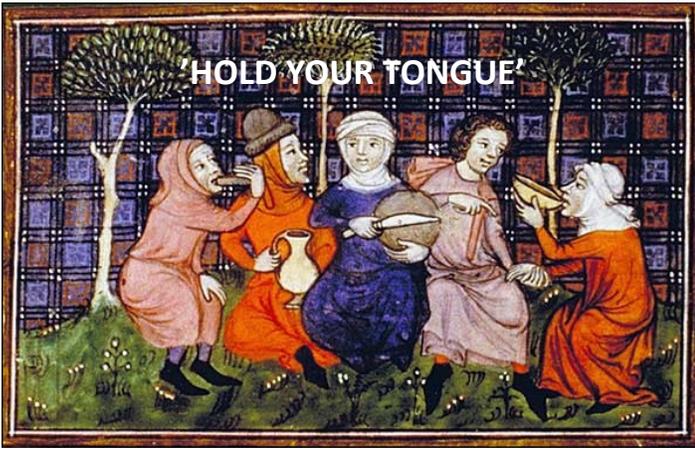
There were dynamic and multi-dynamic bookmarks, movable bookmarks that could be used on any page in the manuscript. The most basic mirrors typical bookmarks of today, a small piece of paper inserted in the location desired yet could be lost in time.

Most interesting are multi-dynamic bookmarks that could move yet do more than simply marking a page. As with the spider bookmark, it featured a string attached to the top of the binding allowing the reader to mark a certain page yet also included a disk with the numbers 1-4 fitted in a tiny sleeve. The reader could pull down the marker along the string until the flat top hit the line where he had stopped reading. The disk could subsequently be turned to the appropriate column, an open medieval book usually showed 4 columns of text— meaning the device marked page, column and line. Although such rotating bookmarks were used until well into the age of print only about 35 of these most ingenious bookmarks have survived.



Adjustable dial Register book, Harvard, Houghton Library, 12th century, MS 277 © EK.

**“The distance is great from the firm belief to the realization from concrete experience.”**  
**Isabella I of Castile, 1451-1504**



**'HOLD YOUR TONGUE'**

A group of peasants sharing a simple meal of bread and drink;  
*Livre du roi Modus et de la reine Ratio*, 14th century. Paris,  
 Bibliothèque nationale, Département des manuscrits, Français 22545 fol. 72.

Of all the drinking vessels used between the 11th to 16th centuries none were as common or prized as the mazer. Mazers were shallow bowls standing on a broad flat foot with a knob or 'boss' centered inside the bowl. Made primarily from maple, beech or walnut the most prized mazers were of bird's-eye maple. Mazers are mentioned in wills and inventories under various names as cipi, cuppae de mazer, mazeri, murrei, hanaps de maser, murrae and mazers, yet whatever its name it is clear the vessel was a turned wood grained drinking bowl with the most elaborate mazers having a silver or silver-gilt rim added, a decorated disc in the bowl's center and verses emphasizing religious and moral duties with warnings against indulgence. By the end of the 15th-century mazers had become standard inexpensive drinking vessels, one load of 200 imported into Exeter in 1493 cost only 6 shillings, sixpence each. About 63 medieval mazers are known to survive with the best collection display at the Museum in Canterbury, England.



Maplewood Mazer with silver-gilt mounts, engraved 'Hold yowre tunge and say ye best and let yowre neyzbore sitte in rest hoe so lustyee God to plesse let hys neyzbore lyve in ese' (Hold your tongue and say the best / And let your neighbor sit in rest / He is so eager to please God / He lets his neighbor live in ease), ca 1380, V&A Museum, London.

## "EUREKA"

The treasure of Guarrazar was discovered during an archaeological dig near Toledo between 1858 – 1861. The discovery, found close to the Sancta Maria monastery which probably served as a hideout during the Muslim invasion, included twenty-six 7th century votive crowns and gold crosses which the Visigoths in Hispania had initially offered to the Roman Catholic Church to signify their submission. The most important crowns discovered are the votive crowns of King Recceswinth and King Suinthila decorated with blue sapphires and pendilia.

The Christian practice of votive crowns originated in either Rome or Byzantium dating back to at least the 4th century, later widely adopted across Europe. The votive crown was in the form of a crown to be suspended by chains over an altar, shrine or image.

Pagan votive crowns were known to the ancient world, documented in Vitruvius' records citing when Hiero II of Syracuse, 3rd century BC suspected his goldsmith was cheating him over the making of a votive crown. Hiero asked Archimedes to devise a test which led to the famous "Eureka" moment when Archimedes realized he could test the crown by comparing its displacement of water to the same weight of pure gold.

Votive crown references include a ca 572 will from Ardeius, a wealthy friend of Gregory of Tours, describing a crown similar to the Spanish examples. Easter 601 Emperor Maurice received a votive crown from his wife and Dowager Empress Sophia. Circa 900 Leo VI gave the church a precious votive crown with rubies and pearls while a later medieval source sites King Cnute, consort to Emma of Normandy, placed "his" crown on or over the head of the large crucifix, rood, in Winchester Cathedral, his capital city and later their burial site.



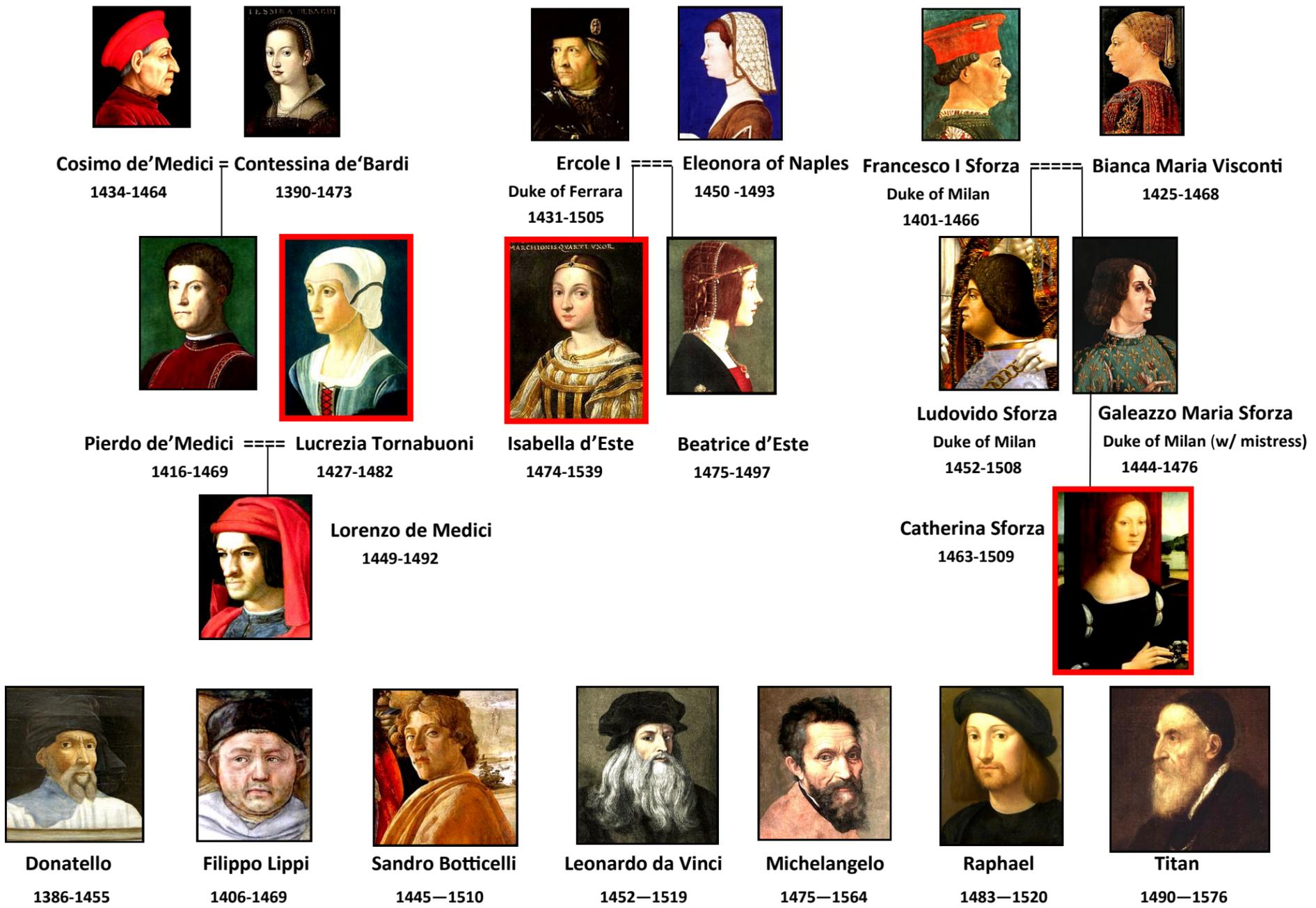
Visigoth King Reccesuinth's Votive crown, gold, sapphires, precious stones, mid 7th century, National Archaeological Museum, Spain  
 © Santiago Relanzon CC BY-SA 3.0.



Votive crown of Leo VI, ca 886-912, Treasury of St. Mark, Venice, Italy.

# Connections

## Italian Renaissance: Noble Families And Their Artists



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