2. What specific actions did Hus's detractors take against him and his supporters? Why do you think the archbishop of Prague and other church officials may have found his views threatening?

3. What advice did Hus give to his supporters in Prague while he was imprisoned in Constance? What does this letter suggest about the basis of his support? Do you think this may help to explain why many people in Bohemia reacted angrily to his execution?

5.

Extolling Humanism

Giovanni Rucellai and Leonardo Bruni,
Florence in the Quattrocento (1427 and 1457)

The Petrarchan ideal of humanism, which had refocused attention on the classics with special attention to language and letters, was given new expression in the 1400s. While Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) had found answers to many of his life questions through introspection, civic humanists felt that a true life could only be lived within the hustle and bustle of Italian city politics. A civic humanist was one who applied humanism's academic principles to the active, political life. The first document is by Giovanni Rucellai (1403–1481), a merchant connected through marriage and patronage to two great families of Florence, the Strozzi and Medici, who made their fortunes in business and banking, respectively. The second document is a funeral oration for a leading citizen, given in the midst of the wars with Milan by Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444), a noted scholar of the Greek language who served as Florence's chancellor and official historian. Both men paint portraits of Florence and the ideal Renaissance man.

Rucellai's "A Merchant's Praise of Florence"

Most people believe that our age, from 1400 onward, is the most fortunate period in Florence's history. I shall now explain why this is so. It is commonly believed that since 1400 the Italians have been superior to all other nations in the art of war, whereas before 1400 the northern Europeans were thought to be peerless. Thanks to their intelligence, astuteness, cunning, and strategic ability, the Italians are now the best at seizing cities and winning battles. In this age, moreover, there are more outstanding scholars of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew in Florence than ever before. . . . Our men of letters have revived the elegance of the ancient style that has long been lost and forgotten. Those who have participated in the government of the city since 1400 have surpassed all their predecessors. Likewise, the dominion of Florence has considerably expanded. . . .

There have not been such accomplished masters in joinery and woodcarving since the days of antiquity: they are able to produce such skillfully designed works in perspective that a painter could not do any better. The same can be said of our masters in painting and drawing, whose ability, sense of proportion, and precision are so great that Giotto and Cimabue would not even be accepted as their pupils. Similarly, we cannot forget to mention our excellent tapestry makers and goldsmiths.

Never before have men and women dressed in such expensive and elegant clothing. Women wear brocade and embroidered gowns covered with jewels and saunter through the streets in their French-style hats that cost at least two hundred florins apiece. Neither the city nor the countryside has ever had such an abundance of household goods.

This age has also had four notable citizens who deserve to be remembered. The first one is Palla di Nofri Strozzi, who possessed all seven of the things necessary for a man's happiness: a worthy homeland, noble and distinguished ancestors, a good knowledge of Greek and Latin, refinement, physical beauty, a good household, and honestly earned wealth. . . Then we have Cosimo de' Medici, probably not only the richest Florentine, but the richest Italian of all time. . . The third citizen I shall mention is Messer Leonardo di Francesco Bruni. Although he was born in Arezzo, he was an honorary citizen of Florence. He had a unique knowledge of and expertise in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin and was more famous than any rhetorician after Cicero. . . Finally, Filippo, son of Ser Brunellesco, was a master architect and sculptor. He was an accomplished geometer and . . . is the one who rediscovered ancient Roman building techniques.

The earnings of the Florentine commune are now greater than ever. In this period, both in our city and in its countryside, people have witnessed tremendous wars and political upheaval, the like of which were never seen in the past. Churches and hospitals are richer than ever, better supplied with gold and silk paraments and precious silver. There are numerous friars and priests caring for these places, which the faithful visit constantly. Men and women attend Mass and other religious ceremonies with greater devotion than ever. . .

The citizens have never had so much wealth, merchandise, and property, nor have the Montes' interests ever been so conspicuous; consequently, the sums spent on weddings, tournaments, and various forms of entertainment are greater than ever before. Between 1418 and 1423 Florence's wealth was probably at its height. At the time, in the Mercato Nuovo and the streets nearby, there were seventy-two exchange banks.

Bruni's Funeral Oration for Nanni Strozzi, 1427

This is an exceptional funeral oration because it is appropriate neither to weep or lament. . . . His first claim to fame is conferred on him because of his country's merit. For the homeland is the first and chief basis of human happiness and more worthy of our veneration than even our own parents. If we begin therefore by praising the motherland, we will be starting in the right order.

¹Monte della Doti (dowry fund) was a credit fund established by Florence in 1425 to help well-to-do families finance in advance their daughters' marriages. [Ed.]
He was born in the most spacious and greatest of cities, wide-ruling and endowed with the mightiest power, without question the foremost of all the Etruscan cities. Indeed, it is second to none of the cities of Italy either in origin, wealth, or size. . . . The Tuscans had been the chief people of Italy and supreme both in authority and wealth. Before the foundation of the Roman empire their power was so great that they had the seas on both sides of Italy under their control and governed the whole length of the country. . . . Finally, this one people diffused the worship of the immortal gods as well as learning and letters throughout Italy. . . .

What city, therefore, can be more excellent, more noble? What descended from more glorious antecedents? . . . [Our fathers] so established and governed it that they were in no way inferior to their own fathers in virtue. Sustained by the most sacred laws, the state was ruled by them with such wisdom that they served as an example of good moral behavior for other peoples and had no need to take others as their model. . . .

Worthy of praise as well are those who are its present-day citizens. They have augmented the power received from their predecessors even more by adding Pisa and a number of other great cities to their empire through their virtue and valor in arms. . . .

Our form of governing the state aims at achieving liberty and equality for each and every citizen. Because it is equal in all respects it is called a popular government. We tremble before no lord nor are we dominated by the power of a few. All enjoy the same liberty, governed only by law and free from fear of individuals. Everyone has the same hope of attaining honors and of improving his condition provided he is industrious, has talent and a good sober way of life. For our city requires virtue and honesty in its citizens. . . .

This is true liberty and equality in a city to fear the power of no one nor dread injury from them; to experience equality of law among the citizens and the same opportunity of ruling the state. These advantages cannot be had where one man rules or a few. . . .

This capacity for a free people to attain honors and this ability to pursue one's goals serve in a marvelous way to excite men's talents. For with the hope of honors extended, men raise themselves and surge upward; excluded they become lifeless. . . . Our citizens excel so greatly in talents and intelligence that few equal them and none surpass them. They have vivacity and industry and alacrity and agility in acting with a greatness of spirit equal to all challenges.

We thrive not only in governing the republic, in domestic arts, and in engaging in business everywhere, but we are also distinguished for military glory. . . .

What now shall I say about literature and scholarship in which all concede that Florence is the chief and most splendid leader? . . . But I am speaking about those more civilized and lofty studies which are considered more excellent and worthy of everlasting immortal glory. For who is able to name a poet in our generation or in the last one who is not Florentine? Who but our citizens recalled this skill at eloquence, already lost, to light, to practical use, and to life? Who but they understood Latin literature, already abject, prostrate and almost dead, and raised it up, restored and reclaimed it from destruction? . . . For the same reason, should not our city be proclaimed the parent of the Latin language . . . ? Now the
knowledge of Greek literature, which had decayed in Italy for more than seven hundred years, has been revived and restored by our city. . . Finally, these humanities most excellent and of highest value, especially relevant for human beings, necessary both for private and public life, adorned with a knowledge of letters worthy of free men, have originated in our city and are now thriving throughout Italy. The city enjoys such resources and wealth that I fear to arouse jealousy by referring to its inexhaustible supply of money. This is demonstrated by the long Milanese war waged at an almost incredible cost. . . Now at the end of the war men are more prompt in paying their taxes than they were at the beginning of the war.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Bruni's funeral oration for Nanni Strozzi seems to have little to do with the man himself. What is its true subject? What are its possible purposes?

2. What do both Bruni and Rucellai see as the desirable attributes of a citizen? Why do they portray the city of Florence as a model for other cities?

3. What role does wealth play in both Petrarchan and civic humanism?

4. In these documents, how do Greece and Rome serve as models for Florence?

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**6. Women's Place in Renaissance Italy**

**Alessandra, Letters from a Widow**

**and**

**Matriarch of a Great Family (1450–1465)**

Although there were differences by region, women in medieval and Renaissance Europe were usually under legal guardianship — typically that of a father or husband. Although women of the lower classes may have had more freedom in terms of work and marriage early in their lives, their upper-class counterparts gained their greatest prestige and power through widowhood. Alessandra (1407–1471) married Matteo Strozzi (c. 1397–1435), a wealthy merchant whose business had branches throughout Europe. But when Matteo died of the effects of the plague while exiled for being in opposition to Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), Alessandra's financial situation became more difficult because she had sons and daughters to marry and a great household to maintain. She engaged in lengthy correspondence with her sons about political, marital, and economic conditions that affected the family. The following excerpts from letters to her son Filippo show some of the realities of Italian life during the Renaissance — exile; political danger if one did not agree with the ruling faction; marriages that were contracted solely for reasons of politics, honor, and clientage; and slavery.

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To Filippo, 1450

Really, as long as there are young girls in the house, you do nothing but work for them, so when she leaves I will have no one to attend to but you three. And when I get the house in a little better shape I would love it if you would think about coming home. You would have no cause to be ashamed with what there is now, and you could do honor to any friend who dropped in to see you at home. But two or three years from now it will all be much better. And I would love to get you a wife; you're of an age now to know how to manage the help and to give me some comfort and consolation. I have none.

You know that some time ago I bought Cateruccia, our slave, and for several years now, though I haven't laid a hand on her, she has behaved so badly toward me and the children that you wouldn't believe it if you hadn't seen it. Our Lorenzo could tell you all about it. . . . I've always suffered it because I can't chastise her, and besides I thought you would come once a month so that we could come to a decision together or she could be brought to better obedience. For several months now she has been saying and is still saying that she doesn't want to stay here, and she is so moody that no one can do a thing with her. If it weren't for love of Lesandra, I would have told you to sell her, but because of her malicious tongue, I want to see Lesandra safely out of the house first. But I don't know if I can hold out that long: mark my words, I'm going to get her out of my sight because I don't want this constant battle. She pays no more attention to me than if I were the slave and she were the mistress, and she threatens us all so that Lesandra and I are both afraid of her.

To Filippo, 1459

It grieves me, my son, that I'm not near you to take some of these troublesome things off your hands. You should have told me the first day Matteo fell sick so I could have jumped on a horse and been there in just a few days. But I know that you didn't do it for fear I would get sick or would be put to trouble. . . . I have been told that in the honors you arranged for the burial of my son you did honor to yourself as well as to him. You did all the better to pay him such honor there, since here they don't usually do anything for those who are in your condition [that is, in exile]. Thus I am pleased that you did so. Here these two girls, who are unconsolable over the death of their brother, and I have gone into mourning, and because I had not yet gotten the woolen cloth to make a mantle for myself, I have gotten it now and I will pay for it.

To Filippo, 1465

I told you in my other letter what happened about 60 [the daughter of Francesco Tanaghi], and there's nothing new there. And you have been advised that there is no talk of 59 [a woman who belonged to the Adimari family] until we have placed

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1Because much of her family was already in exile or in political danger, Alessandra used numbers to refer to possible marriage alliances, eliminating the danger of seeming to be associated with certain factions, even during the negotiation phase.
he older girl. 13 [Marco-Parenti] believes we should do nothing further until we can see our way clearly concerning these two and see what way they will go. Considering their age, this shouldn't take too long. It's true that my wish would be to see both of you with a companion, as I have told you many times before. That way when I die I would think you ready to take the step all mothers want — seeing their sons married — so your children could enjoy what you have acquired with enormous effort and stress over the long years. To that end, I have done my very best to keep up the little I have had, foregoing the things that I might have done for my soul's sake and for that of our ancestors. But for the hope I have that you will take a wife (in the aim of having children), I am happy to have done so. So what I would like would be what I told you. Since then I have heard what Lorenzo's wants are and how he was willing to take her to keep me happy, but that he would be just as glad to wait two years before binding himself to the lady. I have thought a good deal about the matter, and it seems to me that since nothing really advantageous to us is available, and since we have time to wait these two years, it would be a good idea to leave it at that unless something unexpected turns up. Otherwise, it doesn't seem to me something that requires immediate thought, particularly considering the stormy times we live in these days, when so many young men on this earth are happy to inhabit it without taking a wife. The world is in a sorry state, and never has so much expense been loaded on the backs of women as now. No dowry is so big that when the girl goes out she doesn't have the whole of it on her back, between silks and jewels. . . . If 60 works out well, we could sound out the possibility of the other girl for him. There's good forage there if they were to give her, and at any [other] time it would have been a commendable move. As things are going now, it seems to me better to wait and see a while for him. . . . This way something may come of it, and they will not offer a wife without money, as people are doing now, since it seems superfluous to those who are giving 50 to give her a dowry. 13 wrote you that 60's father touched on the matter with him in the way I wrote you about. He says that you should leave it to us to see to it and work it out. For my part, I've done my diligent best, and I can't think what more I could have done — for your consolation than my own. . . .

Niccolò has gone out of office, and although he did some good things, they weren't the ones I would have wanted. Little honor has been paid to him or to the other outgoing magistrates, either when they were in office, or now that they have stepped down. Our scrutinizer was quite upset about it, as were we, but I feel that what was done will collapse, and it is thought they will start fresh. This Signoria has spent days in deliberation, and no one can find out anything about them. They have threatened to denounce whoever reveals anything as a rebel, so things are being done in total secrecy. I have heard that 58 [the Medici] is everything and 54 [the Pitti] doesn't stand a chance. For the moment, it looks to me as if they will get back to 56 [the Pucci] in the runoffs, if things continue to go as now. May God, who can do all, set this city right, for it is in a bad way. Niccolò went in proudly and then lost heart — as 14's [Soderini] brother said, "He went in a lion and he will go out a lamb," and that's just what happened to him. When he saw the votes were going against him, he began to humble himself. Now, since he left office, he goes about accompanied by five or six armed men for fear. . . . It would have been better
for him if [he had never been elected], for he would never have made so many enemies. . . .

[Think about having Niccolò Strozzi touch on the matter with Giovanfrancesco for 45 [Lorenzo], if you think it appropriate. Although I doubt that she would deign [to marry] so low, still, it sometimes happens that you look in places that in other times you wouldn’t have dreamed of, by the force of events—deaths or other misfortunes. So think about it.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is Alessandra’s role as matriarch of her family?
2. What is her view of the politics of the city in her day?
3. What is Alessandra’s relation to her slave? How does the existence of slavery affect your view of Florence’s vaunted “liberty for all”? 
4. How were marriages formed among the middle and upper classes? What was required before one could marry?

**Comparative Questions**

1. What connections can you draw between the plague and the peasant rebellions that swept over Europe during the decades after 1347?
2. What do Hus’s and Chaucer’s views of the church have in common? What does this suggest about the effects of the Great Schism and perceived abuses within the church on Europeans’ spiritual life?
3. Compare the portraits of Florentine life and politics painted in Documents 5 and 6. What similarities and differences do you see? What does this suggest about the limitations of Renaissance ideals?
4. One of historian Jacob Burckhardt’s chapters in *The Civilization of the Renaissance* is entitled “The Discovery of Man and the World.” What is “new” about the Renaissance? What could be considered a continuation of medieval ideas?