

History: Renaissance Italy GA 3 Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

The standard of this year's examination responses was impressive. Students were able to display a broad and varied range of knowledge and key concepts in all sections of the paper. There was not one particular section in which students performed well but there were outstanding answers in all sections. There was some evidence of prepared answers in Section A, particularly Question 1 but generally students answered the question asked. Most responses were restricted to the spaces provided and essays averaged three to four pages in length.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Section A

Section A comprised four short-answer questions, which drew on the skills of knowledge and understanding.

Question 1

Students were directed to explain how the Venetian empire helped determine the nature of Venetian society. Responses that scored well focused on the actual composition of Venetian society as determined by Venice's commercial and territorial expansion. For example, Venetian society was cosmopolitan because of the trading nature of the city; a number of Germans, Dalmatians and Greeks formed merchant communities within the city; black slaves existed as a result of the trade in the Levant; Jews worked as bankers. The generally congenial nature of social relations could also be noted. This question was not a question on the nature of the maritime empire itself, although the wealth resulting from the empire could be mentioned. The following answer demonstrates a high level of knowledge and understanding.

An entrepot city between East and West, Venice had a very cosmopolitan nature due to her location, trading economy and her empire. Germans were accommodated in Venice due to their trading connections, but they were not fully assimilated. They were restricted to living in the Fondaco – a three storey warehouse in the Rialto, but given this prime location in the commercial heart of Venice, this was actually a privilege. The Jews, hated throughout Europe, were tolerated in Venice due to their capacity to lend money. Usury, not permitted by the Catholic Church, was a vital cog in the Venetian trading empire, therefore the Jews were allowed to reside in the Ghetto. Puert of the Empire itself and sharing a common religious heritage, the Greeks were allowed to live where they liked. They were both merchants and provided sailors for the galleys. The Turks, although often at war with Venice, were allowed restricted residency, given that the Venetian Empire stretched to Constantinople.

It is important to note that Venice was not multicultural but rather cosmopolitan because the tight restrictions placed on foreigners by the government meant that they were forced to adhere to Venetian social norms. A number of students focused on the impact of the Venetian empire rather than society and had obviously prepared for a different question.

Question 2

Students were required to describe the political and ceremonial role of the Doge and the restrictions placed on his office. This was a straightforward question and most students responded well, although all three components of the question – political and ceremonial role and restrictions – had to be covered for a high score.

To score well, students should have included the following details. The Doge held office for life, but was essentially a figurehead in that he lacked executive power. He did not have personal power anywhere near equal to the honours formally paid him. He was able to participate in most Councils – he stood at the center of the inner circle, presided over the meetings of the top councils, and in all of them could make motions on his own. However, there were a number of restrictions placed upon him; for example, he could not leave Venice; he could not act alone; his estate was audited after his death and so forth. Restrictions on the office of the Doge increased over time. The following answer addressed all aspects of the question.

At the pinnacle of the Venetian political hierarchy was the Doge. Although this position was the figurehead of the State, there was a wealth of self-sacrifice required to fulfil the role due to the profusion of restrictions placed upon him. The Doge, elected for life, was a member of the Signoria along with his six ducal councillors and had an important role in the city's ceremonies and festivities. In the Procession of the Relic of the True Cross the Doge was followed by the Council of Ten, then the councils of less importance. On Ascension Day, the Doge cast a ring into the lagoon in the ceremony of the Marriage to the Sea. However, Zorzi writes that the Doge was 'the splendid incarnation of power held and manipulated by others.' Indeed, the promissioni records a continual limiting of the Doge's powers and freedom of action. Carter writes 'the Doge was granted every honour but limited power.' To make any decisions, the Doge needed the approval of at least four of his ducal councillors and he had to be accompanied by them at all times. The Senate, the Council of Ten, the Collegio each had more true power than the Doge, although each council was answerable to the others. The restrictions placed on the Doge grew out of the Venetians distrust of individual power.

Question 3

The role of the patron in the development of Renaissance Italian art was the focus. However, a number of responses were too broad. Students needed to explain that it was the patron not the artist who was seen as the creator; the artist was regarded as a craftsman, waiting upon orders. Patrons could stipulate anything from size, composition, style, quantity and quality of the materials used including paint, such as ultramarine, azure and gold. The work of art usually celebrated the financial, political and social prestige of its patron. The patron's coat of arms or portrait signified the work as the patron's, not the artist's. However, despite these restrictions on the artist, within this framework there was room for talented artists to express their own ideas or explore a new style. As the ability of specific artists was recognised, these artists were allowed greater freedom of expression; furthermore, the recognition (largely prompted by

Alberti) that intelligence and a grasp of theoretical principles were as much a component of good art as craft training enabled artists to display their own creativity. The following extract successfully pinpoints the patron's role.

With the wealth gained from their mercantile and commercial pursuits, members of the urban bourgeoisie were able to commission paintings to commemorate themselves and to glorify the city of Florence ... The patron selected the subject matter, colours to be used, size of the painting, number of figures in it etc. And the painter had little control over the whole production ... As classical models were revived, the humanist influence pervaded all spheres of life and patrons demanded more mythological subjects as for example, Botticelli's 'Primavera'.

Question 4

This question required an appraisal of the importance of the family in the social relationships of Renaissance Florence. This is a rich field of discussion given that the patrician family was the primary unit of support – emotional, economic, political and social. The family provided wealth and business connections. Political success depended on the family's status, and the family provided the opportunity for social improvement via marriage. The following answer effectively conveys the essence of the family's importance.

In the volatile, fluid, dynamic and competitive society of Renaissance Florence, the family was an essential source of support and comfort. Family stood between an individual and society and provided him with wealth, power and connections. The blood tie was 'the most cohesive agent' (Weissman) and individuals were prepared to pay a high price to honour and protect their family's name. An individual's family forged their political, economic and social position within society. Families lived in the same gonfalone in order to rely on each other and the concentration of family members within an ancestral area was proof of the family's unity, strength and antiquity. While family was of the utmost importance in determining social status, marriage presented opportunities to increase both an individual's and a family's status and marriage alliances with families like the Strozzi and the Rucellai were highly sought after. The family played a significant role in the organization of the marriage, which was usually a public and ritualised affair. Through marriage, the family was able to widen its web of social, political and business alliances. The family was 'the basic nucleus' of life and 'family bonds were the strongest cement in the city's social structure'.

Section B

This section drew on skills of analysis, the ability to use evidence to support an argument, and the capacity to demonstrate an understanding of historical concepts relating to the ideas and values of the Venetians. The evidence provided were extracts from Sanudo's In Praise of the City of Venice. Most students handled this section very well. Some had difficulty concentrating on the question asked and just used long extracts from the Sanudo document.

Question 1

Question 1 required an understanding of the term 'spatial arrangement'. Some students were not comfortable with this term and hence their response was too vague. To achieve a high score, students should have referred to most of the following: Venice's lagoon setting – surrounded and penetrated by water, and therefore the Venetians adaptation of their limited space to suit their needs; the Rialto as the focus of commerce; the Arsenal, a ship building complex to facilitate maritime trade; the Piazza San Marco as a religious and civic ceremonial centre; the basilica of San Marco as the religious centre. The following response displayed this knowledge.

In Sanudo's description he speaks of the city being 'built above water' and that it 'must be seen to be believed.' Here he evokes an image of the unique site of Venice with no need for 'surrounding walls' or fortifications due to its protection by the sea. A broader reference to Venice's location is in the comment 'goods come in from both East and West', referring to Venice's location as an entrepot city between Europe and the Levant. Sanudo speaks of St Marks and 'two very large piazze'. We get the impression of a city, where although space is at a premium, much more importance and space has been given to the religious centres. The other piazza is where justice is meted out – here space has been given to the judicial buildings within the Doge's Palace. Sanudo speaks of the Island of Rialto. He describes the shops and goods to be purchased there.

Question 2

Students were required to describe the image of the city of Venice as portrayed by Sanudo. They should have noted that Sanudo emphasises Venice's unparalleled beauty; her wealth; piety; civic concord; justice; liberty; and cosmopolitan character. The following response contains an effective synthesis of what is, in essence, the 'Myth of Venice'.

Marin Sanudo's writings aim to portray an image of Venice as 'La Serenissima' - the most serene republic. He aims to propound the myth of Venice as religious, pious and blessed by God, when he claims the city was 'built by Christians'. This is furthered when he talks of the 'very beautiful and rich church' and how 'every day many masses and religious offices are celebrated'. The wealth of Venice is constantly alluded to, again to create a favourable image of the city. Sanudo mentions 'shops on each side' and says Venice is the 'richest place in the whole world'. The unique magnificence of the site of Venice is referred to by Sanudo; he claims the city is 'built above the water' and 'its foundations are in the water'. The notion that Venice is a free city, one of civil liberty is propagated by Sanudo, in his claims that 'justice is meted out to all' and there is 'no sedition' and 'no discord'. Through portraying the image of Venice as 'La Serenissima', Sanudo increases the 'myth of Venice'.

Question 3

Students were required to compare Sanudo with other representations (written and/or visual) in conveying the so-called 'myth of Venice'. There are many representations that can be used and students drew on a wide range, although the most popular were Barbari's *Map of Venice* and Bellini's *Procession in Piazza San Marco*. A number of secondary sources were also used. Students needed to focus on the ideas and values underpinning the myth of Venice. The myth versus reality could also be discussed. The following answer succeeds in drawing out pertinent comparisons.

Parallels can be drawn between the image of Venice propagated in this document and the messages and ideas ingrained in Jacopo Barbari's 'Map of Venice'. Whilst the map is the physical embodiment of the state, the powerful figures of Mercury and Neptune are the incarnation of its secular spirit. The figures have been embedded into the map to represent the great trading nation and reinforce Venice's divine foundations. Rosand writes that the 'myth of Venice' is a mixture of fictions and half truths about the many spheres of Venetian life. Grubb writes 'only the partisan or naïve could find the myth an accurate description of the Venetian Constitution'. The myth of Venice was a collection of densely woven stories which Muir calls 'a Venetian reading of Venetian experience'. For writers like Navarego and Sanudo and others like Barbari and Carpaccio, the task is not to record Venice's history accurately but to celebrate the ideal of it.

Section C

Question 1

Question 1 was much more popular with students than Question 2.

Students needed to discuss the techniques used by Cosimo to ensure Medici dominance such as political exile and confiscation, manipulation of the Balìa and Accoppiatori, Council of 100, his judicious use of wealth, rewarding supporters, patronage, festivals, use of neighbourhood networks and confraternities/political patronage, and avoidance of the appearance of seigneurial control. Students could note that a period of relative peace in foreign affairs, promoted by successful diplomacy with Milan and culminating in the Peace of Lodi in 1454 gave the Medici a reputation for promoting peace and prosperity that enabled a relatively smooth transition of control from one to another. A discussion of Piero de' Medici's skill in overcoming the Pitti challenge of 1466 should be included as well as Lorenzo's political skill, including his manipulation of the constitution (a tighter Council of 70 and more overt political decision-making). An appraisal of "structure" versus "skill" and/or other factors was also required. A disturbing trend noted last year was the paucity of primary evidence and this has continued. Failure to use a range of evidence can have an adverse impact given that two criteria (10 and 12) relate to the use of and understanding of historical sources. The followings example successfully use evidence to support an argument (Criterion 10) and display an understanding of historical sources (Criterion 12):

Rinuccini, a friend of the Pazzi family who were enemies of Lorenzo wrote of the maligned parties in which Lorenzo 'rendered them (the government) too weak or powerless to resist. Machiavelli, writing after Lorenzo's death agrees with this referring to parties and the patronage of Lorenzo.

While Machiavelli's comment is accurate as far as Lorenzo is concerned, as he was a brilliant leader who used 'institutional and personal patronage' (Murphy) to secure himself politically, it is not accurate for the entire Medici rule.

Question 2

More students selected a question on political theorists this year and a number of impressive responses were the result. It was expected that students cover the following aspects: Machiavelli's experience qualified him as an authority. He was a career politician – he spent time as Secretary to the Council of Ten for War and he went on diplomatic missions to France, Germany and the Romagna, where he met Cesare Borgia. His shock in France at observing Italian weaknesses (Florence as 'Ser Nihilo'). His admiration for Cesare Borgia's ruthless skills in the Romagna. However, Machiavelli was prompted to write not just from experience and a classical education – his passion as a Florentine patriot, his desire to rid Italy of 'the barbarian' and his desire for employment all played a role. Thus experience (and a classical education) led Machiavelli to write that republics were preferable to princely governments when territorial limits were stable and the citizens politically mature enough to share selflessly the burdens of office; that native troops were vastly superior to mercenaries or to soldiers loaned by an ally; that political success depended on vigilance, activism, and a calculated unscrupulousness. Guicciardini also wrote from experience. He was from a long and noble Florentine family with a history of involvement in political affairs. He was deeply involved in public affairs which enabled him to observe what was happening in political life. This gave him his emphasis on practicality and commonsense, seeing things as they were, rather of responsible citizens than as they ought to be. Though the servant of popes and dukes, Guicciardini was at heart the protagonist of a republic run by an elite group. Some responses did not tackle the question effectively but the following did:

Machiavelli believed that Florence's downfall was due to their 'lack of a national militia' (Chabod). This view is due to his involvement in forming a national militia during his time in the Soderini government.

Viewing the disarray and disorder which characterised both the Provincia and the Patria, Machiavelli theorised according to the reality of Italian politics as he viewed it. His experience as a Florentine, a bureaucrat in Soderini's republic and an observer of the events on the mainland clearly shaped his theories.

Gilbert claims the Machiavelli viewed the political scene from one pole, the aristocrats from another. His experience in political exile following the Medici return to Florence led Machiavelli to formulate such views.

In contrast, Guicciardini's differing perception of Italian politics and experience gives him a more controlled style – that of the careful analysis of a historian.