The “Renaissance” was a term coined by fifteenth-century Italians to describe their own achievement: the supposed “rebirth” of classical culture after centuries of medieval “darkness.” It was one of the great publicity coups of all time, for it still defines how many people think of this period in European history. For the first two-thirds of the course, we will focus on Italy as the birthplace of this movement, and assess whether “Renaissance” should be understood they way fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italians understood it—that is, as an artistic and intellectual movement—or whether it’s possible to think of a “Renaissance society,” in which common themes and approaches characterize aspects of life beyond art and literature. To do this, we’ll examine a different primary source from Renaissance Italy each week: Boccaccio’s bawdy short stories, Pico’s high philosophy, an obscure merchant’s notebook, the great art (and treatises about art) by Michelangelo, Donatello, Alberti, and others. Along the way we will survey the political and economic changes of Italy between 1350 and 1500, including rulership, warfare, and the family.

For the final third of the course, we will look at what happened when “Renaissance” ideas traveled north of the Alps after about 1450. Because the movement began later in the north, and because of the different social and political organization of northern Europe, the ‘Northern Renaissance’ looks somewhat different from the Italian. We will read four examples of northern Renaissance writing from three different countries and focus on assessing what makes the Renaissance here different from and similar to Italy.

Almost every week, a different, relatively short primary source will be assigned and discussed seminar-style in class. Participation in these discussions is a major, required part of the course. Students will write very short (one-page) response papers about eight of these sources; they will also write a midterm paper on the Italian Renaissance, and a final paper comparing the Italian and Northern Renaissances.