Italian medieval towns

GLOSSARY

defeated: *sconfitto*
due to: *a causa di*
trade: *commercio*
settlers: *coloni*
moat: *fossato*
ensued: *seguì*
guilds: *corporazioni*

The Early Middle Ages in Italy began after the Western Roman Empire was defeated by the Barbarians. During this period, towns and bigger cities which had been inherited from the Roman Age went into decline due to a decrease in trade, as the new settlers preferred to create self-sufficient towns, producing what they needed from the land round about. Therefore, there were a lot of small poor towns with a small population. In addition, lack of roads also prevented commerce. Some of these towns were situated where Roman colonies had been previously, while others grew around a castle or monastery. These towns were surrounded by a moat and stone or brick walls which had round or square towers both for defensive and decorative purposes.

After defeating the Lombards in 774 with the help of the Franks, the Pope created the Papal States which occupied the whole of the central part of Italy, while the rest of Italy remained under the control of the Lombards or Byzantines. Charlemagne, the Frankish king, created a period of stability in Italy and he was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. During this period there was a slight revival of commerce but after his death in 814, a period of chaos ensued and the empire soon fell apart.

Between the 10th and 13th centuries, in the period known as the High Middle Ages, the population increased and as a result, trade improved and the Maritime Republics became more important. Guilds developed in the medieval towns which also helped to encourage trade. These guilds introduced regulations regarding who could be admitted to a trade, and the growth of law merchants in these cities greatly influenced the development of European Law. Cities in the north of Italy gained almost complete independence from the Church, while the south of the country was invaded by the Normans. In the Late Middle Ages (14th century) Italy was divided into three parts: the Maritime Republics in the North, the Papal States in the centre, and the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily in the South.

Visiting Italy you can still admire many old medieval towns with their defensive walls and bell towers in the whole country.

READING COMPREHENSION

2 Read the text and answer the following questions.

  1 What were the consequences of the Barbarian invasion?
  2 What was a medieval town like and where was it situated?
  3 What happened after Charlemagne died?
  4 Why were guilds important?

WRITING

3 PET Write a short paragraph (about 100 words) describing a medieval town in your region or one you have visited, and saying what you liked or didn't like about it and why.

MORE ABOUT...

San Gimignano is a small walled medieval hill town in north-central Italy. It is famous for its 14 surviving towers of varying heights. Its historical centre is a UNESCO world heritage site for its architecture.

Marostica is a medieval town in northern Italy. Surrounded by the ancient walls of its castles, the town is best known for its square which is like a giant chess board. In fact, the town is famous for the biennial chess game festival during which a spectacular open-air chess game takes place where the 'pieces' are human beings and horses, dressed in medieval costumes.