**Historical thinking Skills: Historical Argumentation (secondary documents)**

**Doc. 1:**

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arabian had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race. It will not be difficult to show that this result was owing above all to the political circumstances of Italy…. Dante, who, even in his lifetime, was called by some a poet, by others a philosopher, by others a theologian, pours forth in all his writings a stream of personal force by which the reader, apart from the interest of the subject, feels himself carried away. What power of will must the steady, unbroken elaboration of the ‘Divine Comedy’ have required! And if we look at the matter of the poem, we find that in the whole spiritual or physical world there is hardly an important subject which the poet has not fathomed, and on which his utterances—often only a few words—are not the most weighty of his time. For the plastic arts he is of the first importance, and this for better reasons than the few references to contemporary artists—he soon became himself the source of inspiration

The fifteenth century is, above all, that of the many-sided men. There is no biography which does not, besides the chief work of its hero, speak of other pursuits all passing beyond the limits of dilettantism. The Florentine merchant and statesman was often learned in both the classical languages; the most famous humanists read the ethics and politics of Aristotle to him and his sons; even the daughters of the house were highly educated. It is in these circles that private education was first treated seriously. The humanist, on his side, was compelled to the most varied attainments, since his philological learning was not limited, as it now is, to the theoretical knowledge of classical antiquity, but had to serve the practical needs of daily life. While studying Pliny, he made collections of natural history; the geography of the ancients was his guide in treating of modern geography, their history was his pattern in writing contemporary chronicles, even when composed in Italian; he not only translated the comedies of Plautus, but acted as manager when they were put on the stage; every effective form of ancient literature down to the dialogues of Lucian he did his best to imitate; and besides all this, he acted as magistrate, secretary, and diplomatist—not always to his own advantage.

But among these many-sided men, some who may truly be called all-sided, tower above the rest. Before analysing the general phases of life and culture of this period, we may here, on the threshold of the fifteenth century, consider for a moment the figure of one of these giants—Leon Battista Alberti (b. 1404? d. 1472). His biography, which is only a fragment, speaks of him but little as an artist, and makes no mention at all of his great significance in the history of architecture. We shall now see what he was, apart from these special claims to distinction.

In all by which praise is won, Leon Battista was from his childhood the first. Of his various gymnastic feats and exercises we read with astonishment how, with his feet together, he could spring over a man’s head; how, in the cathedral, he threw a coin in the air till it was heard to ring against the distant roof; how the wildest horses trembled under him. In three things he desired to appear faultless to others, in walking, in riding, and in speaking. He learned music without a master, and yet his compositions were admired by professional judges. Under the pressure of poverty, he studied both civil and canonical law for many years, till exhaustion brought on a severe illness. In his twenty-fourth year, finding his memory for words weakened, but his sense of facts unimpaired, he set to work at physics and mathematics. And all the while he acquired every sort of accomplishment and dexterity, cross-examining artists, scholars, and artisans of all descriptions, down to the cobblers, about the secrets and peculiarities of their craft. Painting and modelling he practised by the way, and especially excelled in admirable likenesses from memory. Great admiration was excited by his mysterious ‘camera obscura,’ in which he showed at one time the stars and the moon rising over rocky hills, at another wide landscapes with mountains and gulfs receding into dim perspective, and with fleets advancing on the waters in shade or sunshine. And that which others created he welcomed joyfully, and held every human achievement which followed the laws of beauty for something almost divine. To all this must be added his literary works, first of all those on art, which are landmarks and authorities of the first order for the Renaissance of Form, especially in architecture; then his Latin prose writings—novels and other works—of which some have been taken for productions of antiquity; his elegies, eclogues, and humorous dinner-speeches. He also wrote an Italian treatise on domestic life in four books; various moral, philosophical, and historical works; and many speeches and poems, including a funeral oration on his dog. Notwithstanding his admiration for the Latin language, he wrote in Italian, and encouraged others to do the same; himself a disciple of Greek science, he maintained the doctrine, that without Christianity the world would wander in a labyrinth of error. His serious and witty sayings were thought worth collecting, and specimens of them, many columns long, are quoted in his biography. And all that he had and knew he imparted, as rich natures always do, without the least reserve, giving away his chief discoveries for nothing. But the deepest spring of his nature has yet to be spoken of—the sympathetic intensity with which he entered into the whole life around him. At the sight of noble trees and waving corn-fields he shed tears; handsome and dignified old men he honoured as ‘a delight of nature,’ and could never look at them enough. Perfectly-formed animals won his goodwill as being specially favoured by nature; and more than once, when he was ill, the sight of a beautiful landscape cured him. No wonder that those who saw him in this close and mysterious communion with the world ascribed to him the gift of prophecy. He was said to have foretold a bloody catastrophe in the family of Este, the fate of Florence, and the death of the Popes years before they happened, and to be able to read into the countenances and the hearts of men. It need not be added that an iron will pervaded and sustained his whole personality; like all the great men of the Renaissance, he said, ‘Men can do all things if they will.’

Source: *Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*

**Doc. 2:**

    Jacob Burckhardt defined the period in terms of two concepts, 'individualism' and I modernity'. 'In the Middle Ages', according to Burckhardt, 'human consciousness ... lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil.... Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation-only through some general category.' In Renaissance Italy, however, 'this veil first melted into air ... man became a spitual individual, and recognised himself as such'. Renaissance meant modernity. The Italian was, Burckhardt wrote, 'the first-born among the sons of modern Europe'. The fourteenth-century poet Petrarch was 'one of the first truly modern men'. The great renewal of art and ideas began in Italy, and at a later stage the new attitudes and the new artistic forms spread to the rest of Europe.  
    This idea of the Renaissance is a myth. Burckhardt's mistake was to accept the scholars and artists of the period at their own valuation, to take this story of rebirth at its face value and to elaborate it into a book. To the old formulae of the restoration of the arts and the revival of classical antiquity, he added new ones such as individualism, realism, and modernity.  
    This nineteenth-century myth of the Renaissance is still taken seriously by many people. Television companies and organisers of package tours still make money out of it. However, professional historians have become dissatisfied with this version of the Renaissance, even if they continue to find the period and the movement attractive. The point is that the grand edifice erected by Burckhardt and his contemporaries has not stood the test of time. More exactly, it has been undermined by the researches of the medievalists in particular. Their arguments depend on innumerable points of detail, but they are of two main kinds.  
    In the first place, there are arguments to the effect that so-called 'Renaissance men' were really rather medieval. They were more traditional in their behaviour, assumptions and ideals than we tend to think-and also more traditional than they saw themselves. Hindsight suggests that even Petrarch, 'one of the first truly modern men', according to Burckhardt, had many attitudes in common with the centuries he described as 'dark'. . . . . In the second place, the medievalists have accumulated arguments to the effect that the Renaissance was not such a singular event as Burckhardt and his contemporaries once thought and that the term should really be used in the plural. There were various I renascences' in the Middle Ages, notably in the twelfth century and in the age of Charlemagne. In both cases there was a combination of literary and artistic achievements with a revival of interest in classical learning, and in both cases contemporaries described their age as one of restoration, rebirth or 'renovation.

*Source:* Peter Burke, The Myth of the Renaissance