English Learning for Curious Minds

Member-only content
Transcript & Key Vocabulary

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I’m Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The House of Medici, the Florentine family that effectively controlled the city for several centuries, produced four popes, and has had probably one of the largest influences on the world of art of any family that has ever lived.

[00:00:46] This is hot off the heels\(^1\) of another, member-only episode we did on Caravaggio, the baddest of the bad-boy painters, and his turbulent\(^2\) life. That was

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\(^1\) soon after

\(^2\) troubled, involving lots of changes
actually episode number 89, which is available exclusively on the website, which if you
need a reminder, is leonardoenglish.com.

And on that note, if you are interested in unlocking all of the bonus episodes,
so that's another 50 episodes or so, plus we do one bonus one every week, and if you'd
like to get access to the subtitles, transcript, key vocabulary, and all of the resources to
help you learn as you listen along, then I’d recommend checking out becoming a
member of Leonardo English.

You also get access to a whole load of other great things, like live sessions
and our new, fantastic community, so I’d definitely recommend checking out
becoming a member of Leonard English. You can get access to a whole lot of other
great things too, like live sessions and our new fantastic community.

So the place to go to for that is is leonardoenglish.com.

Ok then, the Medici.

Our story takes us back to the 13th century, when what we now know as Italy
was a series of self-governing³ city states.

The Republic of Florence was one of these states, and it was unique in that it
was a republic, not a monarchy⁴, there was no king or queen.

³ controlled by the people

⁴ a state with a king or queen
Instead, it was governed by a sort of rotation system, where different noblemen, merchants, and aristocrats would govern the city for two to six months, then new ones would be picked at random and they would take over for the next 2-6 months.

The story of the Medici is the story of a rise to power without ever really seizing power. It’s the story of behind the scenes manoeuvring, manipulation, and patronage, and it is inextricable, you can’t separate it, from the rise of Florence as a powerhouse in the Renaissance era.

And it all starts with a man called Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici.

In 1397, he set up a bank, called The Medici bank. He had married a woman from a wealthy family, and received a large dowry, a large amount of money for marrying her. And he chose to use the money from this dowry to start a bank.

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5 men of a high social class
6 people who buy and sell goods
7 people who belong to the highest social class
8 using clever and dishonest methods to gain something
9 controlling someone for your own advantage
10 support given to someone
11 unable to be separated (from)
12 very powerful country, city, or organisation
13 money given by a woman's family to the man she marries

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Banks back in 1397 were quite different to the sorts of banks that exist nowadays, but there were a lot of similarities. The Medici bank still made loans, it exchanged money, and held deposits, but you could say that it was really in the business of ‘trust and information’. As a bank making loans, the more information you had about the person you were giving money to, the more efficient you could be.

I guess the same is true with banks in 2020, but nowadays it’s a lot easier to get information about people than it was 600 years ago.

Giovanni di Bicci de Medici was a shrewd businessman, and the Medici bank grew under his leadership, particularly because it became the bank of the pope, of the papacy, of the Vatican City.

Obviously, this was a pretty great client to have, not only because the Catholic church wasn’t exactly short of money, but also because it was certainly not short of power.

However, it wasn’t until the ascent of Giovanni di Bicci’s son, Cosimo, that the Medici family really started to get going.

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14 money that is lent
15 clever
16 relating to the pope
17 poor
18 rise (to power)
[00:04:41] Cosimo expanded the bank, and it ended up having 9 different branches outside Florence, stretching from Venice to London, and dozens of other partner banks that it would do business with.

[00:04:57] Now, this isn't going to be a boring episode about banking, but the point is that the more branches this bank had, the more powerful it became.

[00:05:10] Having different branches in all these different places was particularly helpful for its biggest client, The Vatican, because one of the roles of the bank was to collect money on behalf of The Vatican from other branches of the Catholic church and send it back to The Vatican. Evidently, having a large, international banking network was very helpful for this particular task.

[00:05:39] Cosimo, and the Medici family, quickly became one of the richest in Florence, but being rich didn’t automatically equal being powerful.

[00:05:50] It helped, of course, but Cosimo turned out to have a very good understanding of how to gain power indirectly, without murder, without force, and without crime.

[00:06:04] Cosimo himself never actually held any real official position of political power, but instead controlled others through putting his friends, family, and contacts into positions of power, and doing favours for other people, and controlling Florence from the shadows.
He was incredibly effective at this, and it’s said that within a few years of taking over from his father he had become the de facto ruler of Florence, controlling everything, although without any kind of official title.

Interestingly though, while you might be listening to this and thinking that he was busy arranging for people to be killed, exploiting the poor, and only interested in increasing the size of his own bank balance, he is remembered as a good, honest, and kind man.

Rather than being interested purely in his own success, he was interested in the success of Florence, of the Republic, and he has to take a large amount of credit for the achievements of Florence during the Renaissance period.

He was a great patron of the arts, and if you’ve visited Florence as a tourist you will no doubt have seen great monuments and buildings that were commissioned by the Medici. Cosimo was a patron of Donatello and Fra Angelico, and you might not know the name Brunelleschi, but he was the architect who designed the famous duomo, the cathedral of Florence. That was only made possible with the money from the Medici family.

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20 existing, although not always officially

21 the amount of money someone has in the bank

22 a person who supports an activity

23 formally chosen to do a piece of work
Despite being, overall, a good man who wanted to improve the lot of Florence, Cosimo de Medici wasn’t without his enemies, rival families who felt that the Medici had stolen their power, and Cosimo was exiled from Florence in 1433 by a rival family before being voted back in by a ruling government full of people that Cosimo had done favours for and lent money to.

Cosimo understood the power of doing good things to people - you could say that this wasn’t always for completely altruistic reasons, but it certainly worked.

Cosimo wasn't to live forever though. When he died in 1464 the ownership of the bank, and with it, the non-official title of ‘most powerful man in Florence’ was passed to his son, who was a sick man, and only survived for 5 years.

Where it becomes more interesting is when power is passed again to his son, Lorenzo, who will later be given the name Lorenzo The Magnificent.

Lorenzo, if you are following, is the grandson of Cosimo, and the great grandson of Giovanni di Bicci de Medici, the original founder of the bank.

However, when Lorenzo first inherited power, he was far from magnificent. He lacked his grandfather’s skill at Florentine politics, and also proved to be not very good at running the bank.

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24 fortune

25 sent away

26 caring about other people, not just for yourself

27 received from someone who died

28 didn't have
His opponents sensed an opportunity, and a conspiracy was hatched between three different groups.

Firstly, a rival Florentine banking family called the Pazzi. They wanted some of the Medici power and influence.

Secondly, the archbishop of Pisa, a city just to the west of Florence that was under Florentine control. He wanted to be free from Florence, and the Medici wouldn’t allow it.

Thirdly, the pope’s nephew, and ultimately, the pope. The pope had transferred the Vatican City’s banking account away from the Medici to the Pazzi family, and the pope didn’t want the Medici around.

So, these three conspiratorial groups hatched a plan.

On the 26th April, 1476, the Duomo of Florence was packed with 10,000 people attending Mass.

Lorenzo de Medici and his family were there, at the front, in prime position, as you might expect.

As the priest raised his hands, a group of attackers rushed forward, knives and swords in hand.
[00:10:52] Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano tried to **flee**.  
[00:10:57] Giuliano was caught, and was **stabbed** 19 times, murdered in front of the crowd of 10,000 Florentines.  
[00:11:06] Lorenzo managed to lock himself in the **sacristy**, the room where the priests get ready, and he escaped only with a few cuts and bruises.  
[00:11:17] Giuliano was dead, but the plot had failed. Lorenzo was still alive.  
[00:11:24] The conspirators were rounded up and **executed**, their bodies left hanging from various different buildings in Florence as a warning to others.  
[00:11:36] Although the immediate threat might have been over, the ruling pope was still firmly anti-Medici, he wanted them gone.  
[00:11:46] He **excommunicated** Lorenzo de Medici, he kicked him out of the Catholic church, and he persuaded the King of Naples, Ferdinand the First, to march north and invade Florence.  
[00:12:00] Understandably, Lorenzo didn’t like the idea of that. The Medici were bankers and politicians; war wasn’t their speciality.  
[00:12:12] Lorenzo decided to do something pretty brave, for which he was given his nickname, Lorenzo the Magnificent.
[00:12:20] He traveled secretly to Naples, and offered himself as a prisoner to Ferdinand, the King of Naples.

[00:12:29] He could well have been killed on arrival, but he did what the Medici did best. He operated behind the scenes, wooing, persuading Ferdinand to stop his invasion, arguing that war between the two kingdoms would just help the French, who might see this as an opportunity to march down and invade a weakened Kingdom of Florence or Naples.

[00:12:57] Ferdinand, after 3 months of persuasion, agreed, allowing Lorenzo to leave Naples and withdrawing his troops.

[00:13:07] Lorenzo returned to Florence a hero, he had saved the city, and was duly rewarded with this title of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

[00:13:17] If it hadn’t been abundantly clear before, this episode just underlined the extreme power of the pope, and Lorenzo decided that he needed his family, The Medici, not just as bankers to The Vatican, but actually in The Vatican.
After the previous pope died, Lorenzo persuaded the new one to make his son, who was only 13 years old at the time, a **cardinal**\(^{45}\), a position you need to have in order to have any chance of becoming pope.

Long story short, this strategy of placing family members within the Catholic church was incredibly effective for the Medici, and 4 Medicis became popes, starting with Lorenzo’s son, Giovanni, who will later be Pope Leo the Tenth.

Although Lorenzo proved to actually be a skilled **diplomat**\(^ {46}\), he wasn’t a skilled banker, and the Medici bank’s fortunes start to **crumble**\(^ {47}\). It had made a series of bad **loans** to European leaders, including King Edward the Fourth of England, and these **loans** were never paid back, so the bank went **bankrupt**\(^ {48}\) in 1499.

Luckily, even though they were without their bank, The Medici story doesn’t quite end there, although it never manages to reach the kind of levels of power that it achieved under Cosimo, its first great ruler.
As seems to be a theme with almost any rich, ruling family, there is a 
tendency\textsuperscript{49} for subsequent\textsuperscript{50} generations to be not such great custodians\textsuperscript{51} as their predecessors\textsuperscript{52} were, and the Medici family is no exception.

One thing that the Medici did incredibly well though was to make good marriage matches, with sons and daughters married off into almost every European royal family. Indeed, if you look through the family trees of almost all aristocratic\textsuperscript{53} European families, it would be strange not to see any Medicis in there.

But, it would be a failure to produce a male heir\textsuperscript{54}, a boy, that would be the final undoing\textsuperscript{55} for the Medici, that would prove to be the thing that caused the bloodline\textsuperscript{56} to end, and the original Medici line died out in 1743.

While the family may be gone, the legacy of the Medici certainly isn’t.

Cosimo was the first great patron of the arts, but this was a tradition that was passed down through the generations, and the family are responsible for

\begin{itemize}
\item if someone has a tendency to do something, it means it usually happens
\item following
\item people with responsibility for protecting something
\item people who came before
\item see 'aristocrat'
\item someone who will receive money or inherit a name or title
\item the cause of someone's failure or decline
\item all the members of a family over a period of time
\end{itemize}
commissioning some of the Renaissance’s most famous works, by Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli, as well as countless others. [00:16:21] They are the fathers of modern philanthropy, and it’s been said that they really normalised this idea that if you were incredibly wealthy it was your duty to pay for great works of art, and to support the development of arts and culture. Now, this is sort of the expectation for the super wealthy, but it wasn’t before the Medici. [00:16:47] And if you go to Florence, if you go to the Uffizi gallery, if you go to the Duomo, or even if you have read some of the works of Galileo, you have benefited from the patronage of the arts and sciences by the Medici family. [00:17:04] And that is certainly quite a legacy. [00:17:06] Ok then, that is it for the House of Medici. It is a pretty interesting story, and it’s always nice to hear a story where almost everyone seems to win, and nobody needs to have their head cut off or be stabbed in the back. [00:17:23] Although those kinds of stories can be pretty great too, and if you like those, I’d recommend you listen to our episode on Jack the Ripper, which is not short of people getting stabbed. [00:17:35] As always I would love to know what you thought of the show. We now, for members of Leonardo English, have a lovely new community, where you can discuss

57 very many
58 the activity of giving money or paying for things to support those who need it
59 made normal
episodes, ask questions about anything relating to learning English, and meet other curious minds.

[00:17:50] And if you’re not a member yet, and want to get access to the community, to transcripts, subtitles, bonus episodes, and our live sessions, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:18:04] You’ve been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:18:09] I’m Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I’ll catch you in the next episode.
transition from food of the aristocracy, of lords and ladies, to the way that the working man would start the day.

[00:12:44] Until then, you’ve been listening to the English Learning For Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English.

[00:12:51] I'm Alastair Budge and I will catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

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60 a change from one form or type to another, or the process by which this happens

61 a class of people who hold high social rank
### Key vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot off the heels</td>
<td>soon after</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turbulent</td>
<td>troubled, involving lots of changes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-governing</td>
<td>controlled by the people</td>
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<td>Monarchy</td>
<td>a state with a king or queen</td>
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<td>Noblemen</td>
<td>men of a high social class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Merchants</td>
<td>people who buy and sell goods</td>
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<td>Aristocrats</td>
<td>people who belong to the highest social class</td>
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<td>Manoeuvering</td>
<td>using clever and dishonest methods to gain something</td>
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<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>controlling someone for your own advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronage</td>
<td>support given to someone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inextricable</td>
<td>unable to be separated (from)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Powerhouse</td>
<td>very powerful country, city, or organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dowry</td>
<td>money given by a woman's family to the man she marries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>money that is lent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shrewd</td>
<td>clever</td>
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<tr>
<td>Papacy</td>
<td>relating to the pope</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short of money</td>
<td>poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ascent</td>
<td>rise (to power)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Branches</td>
<td>office of a business</td>
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<tr>
<td>De facto</td>
<td>existing, although not always officially</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bank balance</td>
<td>the amount of money someone has in the bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patron</td>
<td>a person who supports an activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioned</td>
<td>formally chosen to do a piece of work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lot</td>
<td>fortune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exiled</td>
<td>sent away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>caring about other people, not just for yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inherited</td>
<td>received from someone who died</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lacked  didn't have

Hatched  formed

Archbishop  a bishop of the highest rank

Conspiratorial  relating to a conspiracy, a plan to do something bad

Packed  very full

Prime  most important

Flee  escape

Stabbed  if someone stabs you, they push a knife into your body

Sacristy  the room where members of the church get ready

Executed  killed, especially as a legal punishment

Excommunicated  kicked out of the church

Operated  worked

Wooing  persuading

Withdrawing  moving away

Duly  as expected
Underlined showed the importance (of something)

Cardinal a very high-ranking priest in the Catholic church

Diplomat an official representing a country or city

Crumble break into small pieces

Bankrupt not able to pay your debts

Tendency if someone has a tendency to do something, it means it usually happens

Subsequent following

Custodians people with responsibility for protecting something

Predecessors people who came before

Aristocratic see 'aristocrat'

Heir someone who will receive money or inherit a name or title

Undoing the cause of someone’s failure or decline

Bloodline all the members of a family over a period of time

Countless very many
**Philanthropy** the activity of giving money or paying for things to support those who need it

**Normalised** made normal