

Rise of the merchant class in the middle ages



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The Middle Ages, which is considered to be the time between 500 and 1500 AD gave rise to a new economic and cultural experience in Europe. The transition from the Classical Age to the Renaissance was a process of evolution. After the “ barbarian” invasions of Europe during the fourth and fifth centuries by the Anglos, Saxons, Goths, and Huns, the great Roman Empire declined. It was only starting in the eighth century that Europe slowly began its cultural, as well as economic, recovery.

Politically, several new states emerged starting in the year 900, including the consolidated Scandinavian states under King Sweyn of Denmark; the creation of a Hungarian state; and the states of Bohemia and Poland. These states were very stable monarchies, which helped widen commercial exchange between one another. The Scandinavians traded extensively with the east, the Mediterranean countries, and with Russia. The end of various civil wars in Europe helped countries like Italy make a name for themselves in trade with the Mediterranean. Pisa, Genoa, and Amalfi, were all major commercial hubs. Germany and northern Europe were also able to make use of trade routes to the Mediterranean through Italy and France.

Another result of the more settled Europe was the revival of agriculture, which was further stimulated by commercial expansion due to the growing exchange economy. Many cities began expanding, creating the demand for larger amounts of agricultural produce. As a result, previously unproductive lands in countries such as France and Germany were converted to fertile farms, rich with grazing herds. Nobleman with large pieces of uncultivated land offered these lands to peasants for cultivation in return for which they

collected payment or rent. This was the beginning of the feudal system in Europe.

Under the feudal system, kings gave nobleman large grants of land in exchange for soldiers. In exchange for fighting, the soldiers were given gifts of jewels, horses, and sometimes land, in territories that had been newly conquered, called fiefs. These vassals, or servants to the king had authority over the peasants, called the serfs, who worked on their land. The vassals became powerful local rulers who made their own laws, which the workers on their land were required to obey. Economic progress stimulated by this system gave rise to new towns and a rise in population in areas that were previously unsettled.

The rapid increase in population due to the economic revolution resulted in a shortage of land. However, instead of causing a problem, farming and land cultivation techniques improved so that land could be used more efficiently. This also shifted quite an amount of the population away from farming jobs, and into jobs in towns and cities. By the 1100s, these hard working urban citizens formed the middle class and were enterprising, ambitious, and contributed to the success of an early form of capitalism. This medieval capitalism is often referred to as the birth of capitalism.

Contributing to the development of the European intellectual, religious, and moral recovery was the setting up of new monasteries, since the church had also suffered due to the numerous invasions in the past. The more settled political climate helped bring back the influence of the church. A few of the great noblemen founded new reformed monastic houses that were more

inclusive including the famous abbey of Einsiedeln, the monastic school of St. Emmereram, and the Episcopal school of Bamberg. This reformation of the monasteries broke down regional differences and revived discipline as well as literary and artistic life. The feudal ideas of lordship extended even to the monasteries, as in the case of the abbot of Cluny who was the head of all monasteries founded or reformed by his order.

Even though there was much political, economic, and religious progress, new problems were created by all this development. Consolidation of kingdoms created complications for German, Italian, Hungarian, and Polish rulers. In Germany, the economic recovery caused tension between the aristocracy, which was only interested in profiting as much as possible from the revived economy, and the government. In Italy, it led to antagonism between the knights, and their feudal lords, or bishops. However, the social revolution between the knights and the bishops gave rise to powerful new classes that strived to better their positions, leading to nobles and non-nobles.

In spite of all of these tensions, people still had jobs to support the growing population in cities and towns. Any commodity that was unavailable in individual fiefdoms, was obtained by barter. Artisans made farm implements, dishes, and clothing, which they exchanged for the grain, wine, and meat produced on the farms. Beginning in the tenth century, a new class of trading people emerged, referred to as peddlers. Peddlers traveled from town to town, supplying the nobility and the peasants with the products they needed. The areas frequently visited by them quickly developed into towns, which emerged as major centers of trade and attracted many merchants who supplied the prospering nobility. As the nobility got wealthier, they were

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able to afford gems, silks, exotic spices, and other symbols of wealth. The merchants who previously went from town to town, were now traveling to foreign locations such as Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey. The activities of the traders permanently altered the face of European society, leading to a commercial revolution, which was essentially the shift of power from the landlords and nobility to the merchants. Concentration of wealth in emerging cities such as Florence, Venice, London, and Paris attracted merchants worldwide.

By the tenth century, extensive trade routes had been established connecting Britain, the European continent, the Middle East, and North Africa, by river and by sea. Asia and the Middle East had several excellent overland trade routes. For instance, the four thousand mile long Silk Road led out of China all the way to the Black Sea in Eastern Europe, through Persia, Afghanistan, and India. Germany's Hanseatic League saved traders time with their larger ships that carried wine and salt to the East in exchange for the grain and timber they bought back.

Some traders and merchants began plying the sea routes in search of more goods and profits. Due to its location between the East and Europe, Italy was a vital trading country. Merchants from Venice traded with those from the Byzantine Empire through Turkey, and merchants from Pisa and Genoa traded with cities in North Africa. They brought back African gold and ivory, precious stones, silks, perfumes, and spices from Persia and India, Turkish carpets, Persian ceramics, and Syrian glass and metalwork, all of which commanded high prices in Europe.

In the eleventh century, local merchants primarily sold their goods in weekly markets. A network of weekly markets was one of the main components of the booming economic progress that swept across Europe in the Middle Ages. These markets spurred the creation of money, and harbored huge amounts of wealth to the merchants. Fairs, which lasted for weeks and were held at crossroads of important trade routes, were another means by which well-established merchants bought and sold goods. Some of the most important trading fairs included the 12-day cloth fair and the 8-day leather fair, both held in Champagne, France.

Since fairs and markets could easily be ruined by undesirable weather conditions, some traders eventually came up with ways to make profits without ever leaving their homes. Using credit, they bought and sold goods through agents at various fairs, giving rise to a form of banking. This contributed to a free flow of money, which enriched the lives of people in all classes of society. This increase in wealth helped patronize artisans, goldsmiths, and retailers. The towns that expanded around the fair sites attracted business and brought about the standardization of currency, weights and measures.

The merchant class largely populated the new towns that sprang up, and influenced the economy and social life of their societies. The towns attracted specialists such as grocers, spice merchants, cobblers, apothecaries, and goldsmiths who formed unions called guilds. These guilds set the prices for the goods they produced, as they were the only ones in the area creating this product in the area. Therefore the citizens in this area were willing to pay whatever price they charged. Their control over these prices led to much

of their control over the economy. Additionally, they effected and influenced social life with the elaborate feasts and celebrations they held for religious services, holidays, and similar events.

With the increase of merchant activities and the rise of the merchant class, it became necessary for them to learn to read, write, do arithmetic, and have a general knowledge of foreign affairs. Local governments and scholars, both of which profited from teaching the children of these merchants, set up schools to take care of the demand for education. The success of the schools in turn, led to the establishment of universities, so that people were able to continue their education if they desired. Some of these universities include Oxford, Cambridge, Chartres, Reims, and the University of Paris. The rising importance of schools broke the monopoly that the church previously had in the area of education.

Since merchants made great profits from buying and selling goods, they were considered sinners by the church, because they enriched themselves rather than working for common good. The fear of hell was very real and the church often confiscated merchant estates. To avoid this, merchants began contributing some of the wealth they made to monasteries and churches, and providing funds to charitable causes including hospitals and homes for those without shelter.

The rise of the merchant class gained them access to high society and some became famous patrons of the arts, constructing concert halls, churches, and other cultural centers. These merchants spread wealth and culture to the masses and assisted in dissolving the previously existing social structure by

creating a society where even a peasant was able to rise in wealth and status.

Merchants that joined the ranks of nobility further strengthened their position in society by patronizing the arts even more. They hired artists, musicians, and writers to produce works that still live on today, including works of art such as Madonna and Child, Nativity, and the Wise Man, by renowned artists such as Michaelangelo, Botticelli, and Leonardo Da Vinci. Some of the extremely successful merchants, known as the merchant princes, sometimes became so powerful they controlled their countries wealth. The Medicis, a family of bankers that lived Italy, are an example of such powerful and successful merchants.

As a result of this patronage of the arts, many architectural and artistic gems were produced during this time. Some of the buildings built during the Middle Ages using the Gothic or Romanesque styles used such advanced techniques that these buildings are still existent today. The Chartres cathedral, the Laon Cathedral, and St. Denis, all in France for instance, represent the quality of the churches, houses, and castles built during that time. Also produced during the Middle Ages was some beautiful art work that is often overlooked, including jewelry, pottery, metalwork, carved woodwork, sculptures, and illustrated manuscripts. Most of the art work was created in the setting of the church, such as murals of Biblical stories, chalices, shrines, reliquaries, and statues of angels and saints. The rise of the merchant class also made portraits very popular, along with intricate work for personal use such as woven tapestries, decorated manuscripts, tableware, jewelry, and carved furniture.

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Inventions and technology during the Middle Ages were in the form of a gradual improvement in the way things were done, rather than a series of dramatic discoveries. It took place in the form of a gradual shift away from mass slavery, the use of wind power, of open fields in agriculture, the use of the wheelbarrow, double entry book-keeping, and finally the use of firearms and printing. The windlass, a rope around a barrel which turned using a crank, was used to lift heavy loads. Water mills and windmills were used to power all kinds of machinery. For instance, a hammer driven by a mill was used in fulling cloth, which is a method of cleaning fabric used in textile production. A new kind of loom was introduced as well as the invention of the spinning wheel, which greatly reduced the time taken to weave cloth, and produce new fabrics. The secrets of producing silk were passed on from Greece to other parts of Europe. Papermaking was brought back from China, greatly reducing the cost and time to write and produce books.

The growth and progress of the European civilization in the middle ages was largely due to the rise of the merchant class. With their ambition and hard work, they paved the way for modern times. Under their leadership, Europe enjoyed a prosperity not known since the Roman Empire. When Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, it had attained a level of sophistication in its universities, literature, art, learning, science and technology, that were unmatched in the world. Significant advances were made in the areas of tenant farming, harnessing the horse to the plough, cloth making, iron working, ship building and navigation. This technical progress would not have amounted to much if it had not been coupled with the intellectual tools that the businessmen of that time used to manage his business and observe

and measure fluctuations in the economy. The world of trade had to perfect various systems: from dealing with rates of exchange for goods and services outside their towns or even countries, establishing credit procedures, legal bases in keeping with the times, and methods for monitoring and balancing their accounts. All of these eventually became the foundation for our modern system of economic relations. Although it is often ignored in history, the Middle Ages saw the birth of a new cultural experience in Europe, which eventually led to the Renaissance. The cultural heritage of the Middle Ages is still apparent in architecture, art, education, science and technology, that have survived the test of time.

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