

Primary and Secondary Sources on Merchants and Commerce in Medieval Europe

As towns grew in the Middle Ages, so did business. Craftsmen who had once sold their goods right from their homes conducted trade in town. As a result, they needed merchants—shopkeepers and traders—to sell their products. The merchants formed guilds (groups of merchants with the same interests) to help them prosper. Merchants ranged from peddlers who sold goods door to door in the countryside to wealthy traders who traveled across Europe to great international fairs. The Church disapproved of business for profit, so it imposed fines and regulations on many businessmen. The merchants, nevertheless, flourished.

- The first merchants who left farmwork on the manor to make money by trading probably became drifters, wandering about in search of work. For these early merchants who broke free of serfdom, trade represented both risk and freedom. They usually settled around coastlines, caravans, and harbors, working as sailors and boatmen. As towns developed into trade centers, merchants moved into them.
- The first business of a (merchant) guild in a town was to look out for the interests of its **merchants and tradesmen**. It prevented strangers from coming into the town to sell any goods unless they paid tolls; and even then they were allowed to sell only certain things whose sale would not interfere with the interests of the guildsmen. (WKWB, p. 233)
- These merchant guilds often became wealthy and powerful. They were able to loan large sums of money....In many cases, the guild even made bargains with the king. It would pay the round sum the king demanded from the city in taxation, and then it was entirely free from him in money matters and could collect the amount as the members thought best. (WKWB, p. 234)
- Many **goods** were sold in the country...by **peddlers** who roamed about the land. They packed their merchandise into bundles or boxes and slung them over a horse or mule. They carried...caps, hats, girdles, gloves, purses, pewter pots, hoods for men, headdresses for women, and even musical instruments. (WKWB, pp. 247–248)

- Another opportunity to dispose of goods was at the **markets** held in many **towns** from one to three times a week. No town could hold a market without permission of the king...everyone wishing to sell at the market had to pay a toll unless he lived in the town....Every market had a court of its own to decide disagreements. (WKWB, p. 250)
- If a man who was not a citizen of the market town wished to sell fish, for instance, he must first pay a toll for each load—cart load, horse load, or man load—that he brought in. For the board on which his fish were laid for sale he paid a rent of one farthing a day; and every cart load on the board was also taxed one penny. (WKWB, p. 252)
- **Fairs** were an extremely important part of merchants' lives. These events brought together customers, craftsmen, and merchants from all over Europe. Fairs were held only a few times a year, sometimes less often, but usually went on for up to a few weeks.
- For (the earliest) fairs, merchants at first put up simple **booths** of green branches in the churchyards, and there sold their goods. This was soon forbidden, but they were allowed to establish themselves outside the towns. (WKWB, p. 253)
- When a fair was to be held, **streets** were laid out and lined with wooden or canvas booths. People of one trade were usually on the same street or row. (WKWB, p. 254)
- It was forbidden to make any sale until the fair was opened; but when the hour had come, a trumpet was blown as a signal, and **trade** began at once. There were swarms of people from town and country. There were merchants from distant lands, there were knights and ladies and peasants, there were jesters and jugglers and minstrels....Iron goods, tar, gold, cattle, horses, wool, hides, cloth, velvets, ribbons, silks, satins, hay, grain, glass, copper, flax, salt fish, wax, tallow, honey, oil, resin, pitch, timber, armor—these were a few of the articles that were for sale. (WKWB, p. 256)
- Each fair lasted about three weeks. The first was taken up with unpacking goods and setting up stalls. During the second week, everyone had a chance to see what was for sale....In the last week of the sale the merchants finalized bargains and made arrangements for payment. This could be complicated with money from so many countries being involved....There were bankers who could give advice and lend money for more costly purchases. (MAEL, p. 45)

- When merchants first became popular, the **Church** was very disapproving. For the Church, making a profit meant that a person was greedy, a characteristic condemned (criticized) by God. Later, the Church relaxed its position and began to accept merchants.
- “Business is in itself an evil.” (St. Augustine, ADM, p. 37)
- “A man who is a merchant can seldom if ever please **God**.” (St. Jerome, ADM, p. 37)
- The Church condemned the practice of **moneylending**. In Deuteronomy 23:20-21, the Bible says: “You shall not lend on interest to your brother, interest of food or money or anything on which interest can be charged.”
- Business was often difficult without anyone to lend money. Most Christians, however, refused to be moneylenders. During this time, anti-Jewish laws in Europe were becoming more strict. Men wishing to own land needed to take a Christian oath, and most Jews refused. For this reason, many Jews had trouble making enough money to support themselves and became moneylenders. Because Jews usually only lent money to Christians, tensions increased even more between the two groups.
- The doctrine (belief) that Jews were doomed to perpetual servitude (slavery) as Christ killers was announced by Pope Innocent III in 1205 and led Thomas Aquinas to conclude...that “since Jews are slaves of the church, (it) can dispose of their possessions.” (ADM, p. 110)