



THE RETURN OF TOWNS AND TRADE



University of Oxford founded in 1096: Oxford, England

Unit Overview

The Crusades had given Europeans a glimpse of life beyond the manor and renewed an interest in goods that could not be produced locally. This brought about a revival of trade and the return of towns in the West. Improved farming methods increased the food supply and sparked a growth in population. Society was no longer divided between nobles and peasants. It included a thriving middle class. Let's see how it all happened.

Better Farming Methods

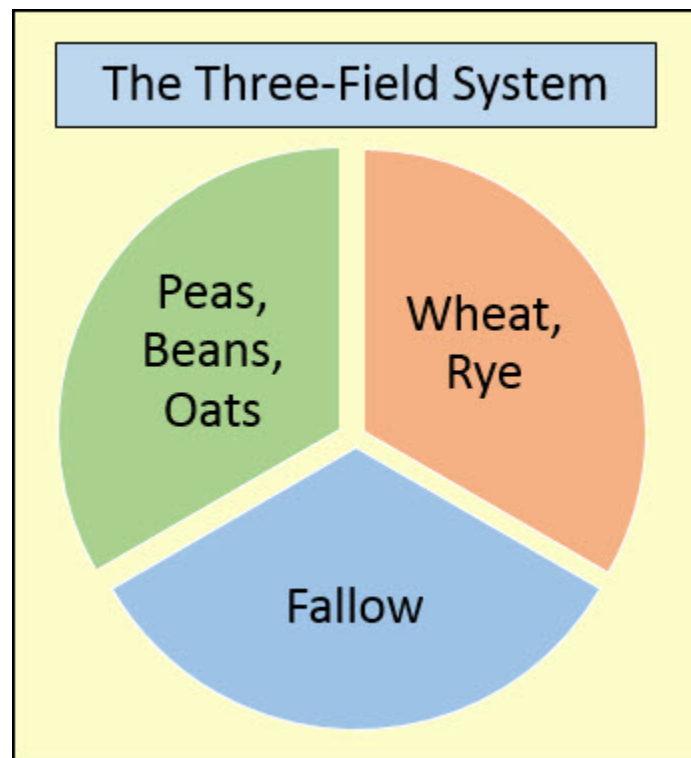
The dramatic changes that occurred in Europe between 1000 and 1300 would have been impossible without better farming methods. Heavy metal plows gradually replaced lighter wooden ones. They reached into the ground and turned over the deeper, richer soil. This resulted in larger harvests and more food for millions of peasants. There was also a change in the type of animals that pulled the plows. For several centuries, farmers had used oxen for this purpose. Although they were strong and could survive on straw, oxen did not move very fast. Horses were much quicker but required more nourishment. More importantly, the harnesses customarily used during the early Middle Ages made it difficult for them to breathe. The invention of the **horse collar**, which fit across the chest rather than the neck, solved this problem. With the introduction of the collar, horses gradually replaced oxen in the fields. Because farmers could plow more land in a single day, forests were cleared, and swamps were drained. With more fields available to plant, stronger plows and animals better suited to farming, peasants saw a major increase in their crops.



Illustration from a French Manuscript Showing the Horse Collar and Improved Plow

At the same time, farmers adjusted their planting schedules to grow more crops. In the early Middle Ages, fields were divided into two parts and rotated annually. One section included the standard crops, while the other was left **fallow** or unplanted. In theory, the two-field system made the soil less likely to wear out. About 800, some peasants shifted to the **three-field system**. On one-third of their land, they planted grains, such as wheat or rye. In another sector, peas, beans and oats made up the crop. The third portion remained fallow. This meant that farmers were using two-thirds as opposed to

one-half of their growing space every year. This gave the peasants an ample supply of food and a better diet. They also lived longer and had larger families.



The Return of Trade

When the crusaders returned, they told stories about what they had experienced on their travels. Europe's growing population soon developed an interest in goods that could not be produced on the manor. Furs from Asia, spices from the Middle East and iron farm tools were in high demand. Because wars among the lords and foreign invasions had declined, traders journeyed abroad and back to meet these needs. They formed companies and hired guards to protect their caravans as they traveled across the deserts and on to Asia. When the caravans returned to Constantinople, merchants were able to purchase everything from Chinese silk to gold jewelry for resale in Europe. These goods were usually transported by ship to Venice, Italy and other cities. Then, they were carried across Europe by pack animals. Traders met their customers at weekly trade fairs held in towns and cities that were once again thriving throughout Europe.



Trade Routes from Asia and the Middle East

The Return of Towns

The increase in population encouraged people to leave the countryside and to settle in towns and cities. They were small by modern standards but became a powerful force in Western Europe. The towns sponsored weekly **trade fairs** or market days. Farmers brought produce and animals to exchange for tools, and traders sold more expensive goods to the families of local nobles. Jugglers, musicians, acrobats and animal trainers with dancing bears entertained the crowds. The manor was no longer the self-sufficient supplier of all things, and this fact totally changed the economy of Europe. Towns with cathedrals attracted even more visitors because people came as pilgrims to worship in these beautiful churches. During these trips, they ate in the local taverns and bought items from the town's merchants. To explore life in the medieval town of Saint-Denis, click on the graphic below.



Eventually, some merchants established permanent shops within the towns. Candle makers, wheelwrights and other small businesses opened storefronts rather than stalls on market day. The townspeople did not quite fit into the traditional feudal pyramid, because they were not nobles or peasants. Instead, they formed a new social group called the **middle class**. Since the walled, medieval towns were called **burghs**, those who lived in them were referred to as **burghers**. As expected, nobles were not pleased with the development of the middle class and their increasing wealth. The lords resented the towns established on their property and charged fees for everything from the use of bridges to the right to hear cases in court. The burghers, however, held very powerful weapon—cash. In exchange for money, the lords reluctantly granted written **charters** that gave the towns certain privileges and tax exemptions.

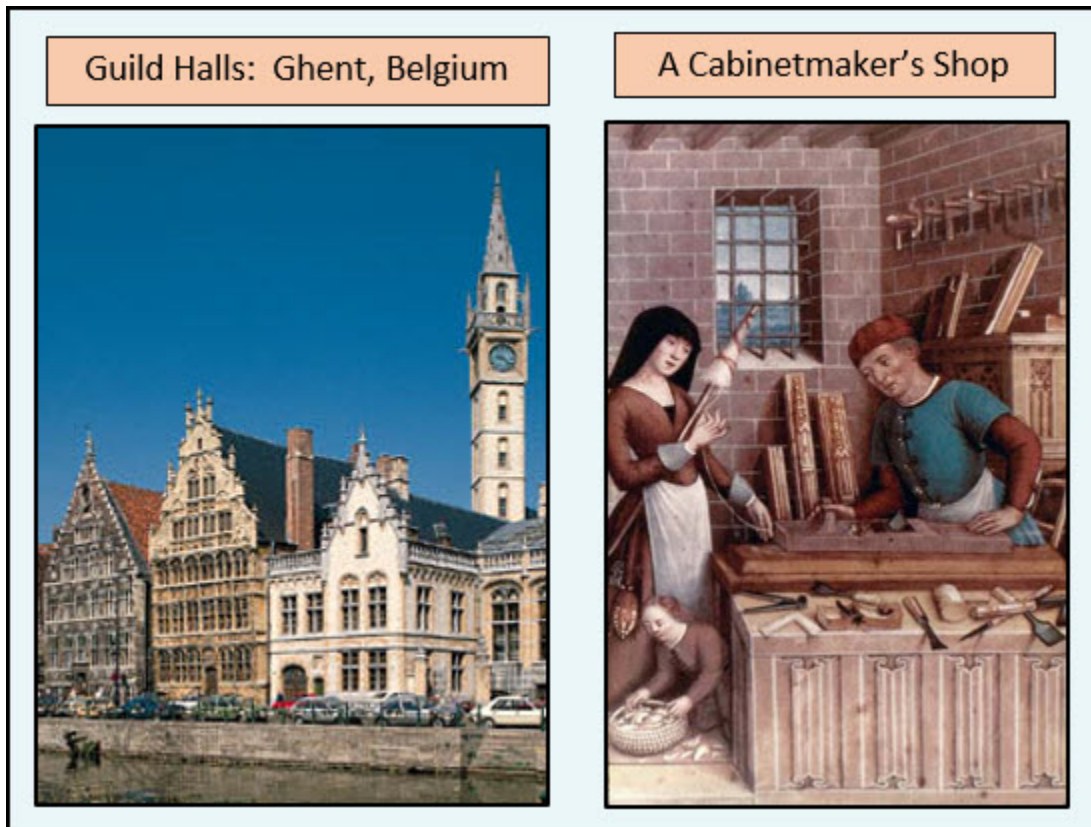


Market Day in a Medieval Town

The Formation of Guilds

To keep prices uniform and to provide standards for conducting business, merchants in the towns formed **guilds**. The members built guild halls where they held meetings to make rules and to discuss the concerns of local shopkeepers. The guilds collected dues

from their members and contributed money for the upkeep of the town's protective walls and for the pavement of streets. Soon workers who were skilled in particular crafts created their own guilds. They cooperated to do what was best for their own economic interest. A town often had a variety of these organizations, such as a bakers' guild, a glassmakers' guild and a shoemakers' guild.



To become a member of a craft guild, a worker had to be a skilled **master** of his trade. The process began when parents paid a fee to a master craftsman to train their child. As an **apprentice**, the trainee lived in the master's home and worked in his shop. Although he did not collect a salary, the apprentice did receive room and board. This arrangement continued anywhere from three to twelve years. The apprentice then became a **journeyman** and worked for wages. Eventually, when the journeyman had made an item that was considered a masterpiece in his field, he became a master craftsman and joined the guild.

There were certain advantages to joining the guild. For example, the guild established the minimum and maximum prices for which its craft could be sold. Agreements with the town ensured that only guild members could sell their wares within its borders.

Membership was almost like a type of insurance policy. The guilds often covered the funeral expenses of their members and cared for a master's family if he became

disabled. At the same time, the use of new technology had to be approved by the members of the guild and added to their regulations. This often became a long and difficult process that limited the use of new and better methods.

A Renewed Interest in Learning

By 1110, a new generation of Europeans recognized the need for education. The Church wanted a more knowledgeable clergy, and kings looked for literate men to keep records. The improving economy needed individuals who were able to write and who knew basic math. All of these factors led to a new interest in learning and resulted in the establishment of **universities** in Western Europe. Today, when we think of universities, we picture a group of impressive buildings located on an attractive campus. In the Middle Ages, a university consisted of a group of scholars that met in a rented room or a church choir loft. These rooms were often cold and drafty with uncomfortable seats. Nonetheless, Paris in France, Bologna in Italy and Oxford in England all had these busy, academic communities by 1200.



University Class: 1300

Most university programs consisted of grammar, logic, rhetoric (the art of public speaking), music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. Students, most of whom came

from the middle class, did not have their own textbooks. At this time, all books were handwritten and very expensive. Some students rented their books, but this, too, was a costly venture. Teachers read aloud from single copies of books and commented on the content. Those in attendance were supposed to listen and to memorize as much as possible. All lectures were given in **Latin**, which was still considered the language of scholarship. Tests were oral because writing materials were scarce.

The Crusades brought Europeans into contact with the Byzantine Empire and renewed interest in Greek and Roman learning. Although many Greek and Latin texts were destroyed in the West, Muslim scholars had preserved them by re-writing them Arabic. When Christian scholars visited Muslim libraries in Spain, they discovered that Jewish researchers had translated the Arabic versions into Latin. The new translations provided the key to the works of Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates and other writers from the classical past.

What Happened Next?

Just as Europe seemed to be on the verge of a new era of growth and prosperity, a series of crises threatened its progress. Throughout the 1300s, crop failures, a plague and destructive wars between France and England combined to create disastrous consequences. Before examining these events and their effects in Unit 17, review the information in Unit 16; then, complete Questions 21 through 30.