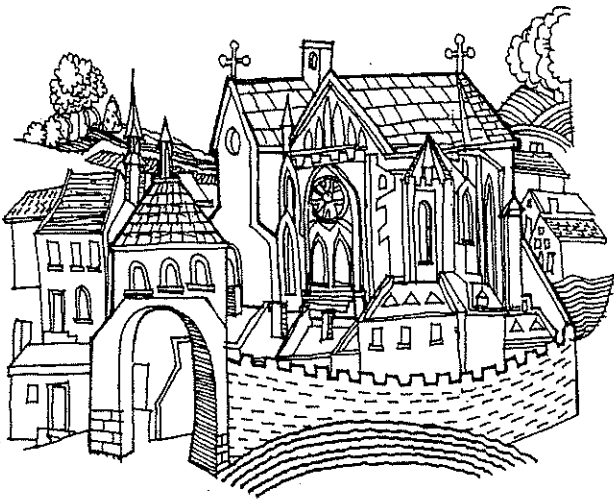


Medieval Town Life

During the Early Middle Ages, town and urban life came close to fading away. Old Roman towns sometimes ceased to exist altogether. During the High Middle Ages, however, beginning around A.D. 1000, Western Europe experienced a revival of town life. The influences that had worked to destroy the old Roman communities—a lack of communication and trade, wars, lawlessness, little local government—had been reduced in influence.



Local noblemen were partly responsible for this urban growth. Under the feudal system, the serfs worked the lands of the local lord in exchange for agricultural produce such as sheep, cattle, wheat, and other crops. Such a system did not bring ready cash to the estate, however.

Lords and other nobles began encouraging sprawling settlements of free people to establish themselves under a town charter. Such charters provided the framework of government for a town or borough. Local tradesmen established themselves in the towns, traded and manufactured, and created a local cash economy.

Under this system, urban centers were governed not by the local lord, but through a town council, established under the town charter. Local residents of the town accepted the authority of an elected mayor and other officers of the community. They paid taxes to the local lord and the town officials. Such municipal taxes might be used to construct a defensive wall around the town, or to build roads or bridges.

Such defensive walls were important to the security of the town. The gates of the community were closed at night to keep out marauders and thugs. A night guard patrolled the streets, which were dark without street lights. In case of an emergency—such as a fire or raid—a town crier was responsible for waking up the citizens.

Some of these medieval urban centers were built on the sites of old Roman cities that had fallen into ruin or maintained minimal populations. Others were completely new towns, many built near a local lord's castle or manor house.

The streets of medieval towns were lined with many private homes and businesses, shops which sold a wide variety of goods, many locally produced by the very merchant who ran the shop. There was little advertising along the streets, but local patrons—most illiterate—could identify the shops by signs indicating what was sold inside: a boot, a fish, a loaf of bread. The local barber shop featured a red-and-white-striped pole indicating the place where one could shave and receive a bloodletting, a practice of the day done for health reasons.

Medieval towns were often not pleasant places. There were few sewage systems, and waste water flowed down the streets. People threw their garbage and trash out their doors and windows into the alleyways, where pigs roamed to help clean up the refuse. Typically, streets were narrow, about six or eight feet wide. Mud and manure were everywhere, and keeping clean on a walk down a town lane could be difficult. Such towns smelled bad and could be detected by an approaching traveler from miles away.

If life in such a town was so bad, what caused people to live there? One reason was the freedom one had in a town. Townspeople were not bound to anyone. A common saying of the day told the story: "Town air makes men free."

Town growth was an important development of the High Middle Ages. In 919, Germany had only 30 towns. By 1125, there were 150. By 1300, Paris and Venice had populations of over 100,000, while Milan and London could boast populations of 50,000. By the beginning of the 14th century, approximately 10 percent of Europe's population lived in towns.

Changes Brought By Towns

Social Changes

A) New Community:

- Towns replaced manors with homes, markets and work places.
- Communities did not have to be self-sufficient.

B) Freedom:

- People became free from obligations and responsibilities (i.e. serfs who lived in a town for one year and a day could gain their freedom).
- People could marry who ever they wanted, live anywhere, travel wherever and whenever they wanted.

C) New Social Class:

- The middle class emerged (i.e. merchants and skilled trades people), who became very important.

Economic Changes

A) Economy

- People earned money through trade, work and selling goods.

B) Wealth

- Money defined wealth and power, instead of land and position in society (i.e. merchants had more power and wealth than feudal lords)

C) Independence

- People could earn money for themselves and be independent from the community.

Political Changes

A) New Government

- Feudalism was eliminated, the feudal contract did not exist so people did not have to follow specific obligations and responsibilities.

B) Charters

- The monarch or local authority gave a charter, a written order authorizing the right to operate as a town, in exchange for money or authority over a town.

D) New Authority

- Many merchant guilds or wealthy individuals controlled government.