

MERCHANTS AND THE RISE OF COMMERCE

The development of more extensive trade, and cities built on trade, was a key development during the post-classical period in Western Europe. From very low levels after the collapse of Rome, trade began to increase in the 10th century. Internal trade within Europe was vital, but wider international activities developed as well. With trade came urban government and a new merchant class, vital innovations in social and political structure.

The rise of trade at this point raises a crucial analytical problem. The temptation is strong to say: aha, trade, merchants therefore modern, the seeds of Western capitalism. There is a bit of truth in this because some merchants did invest capital, and growing trade would ultimately help lead to commercial forms more familiar in the modern world. It is important, in other words, to recognize the significance of the development and its ultimate role in generating further economic and social change.

But the merchants involved were not modern, not even primarily capitalistic. They had distinctive values and institutions that fit well into the larger context of Western Europe at that point. Among other things, they formed guilds, which stressed cooperation and association, rather than competition.

The following document, from Southampton, a seaport in England, is fairly typical, in discussing the arrangements merchants made. It allows explicit exploration of what was commercial yet not modern about the patterns involved. It also deserves close reading for the light it also sheds on the impact of religious values and the implications for political life. Merchant activity was not just economic, but had broader connections with the community.

ORDINANCES OF THE GUILD MERCHANT OF SOUTHAMPTON

In the first place, there shall be elected from the guild merchant, and established, an alderman [magistrate], a steward, a chaplain, four skevins, and an usher. And it is to be known that whosoever shall be alderman shall receive from each one entering into the guild fourpence, the steward, twopence; the chaplain, twopence; and the usher, one penny. And the guild shall meet twice a year; that is to say, on the Sunday next after St. John the Baptist's day, and on the Sunday next after St. Mary's day.

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And when the guild shall be sitting no one of the guild is to bring in any stranger, except when required by the alderman or steward. . . .

And when the guild shall sit, the lepers of La Madeleine shall have of the alms of the guild, two sesters [eight gallons] of ale, and the sick of God's House and of St. Julian shall have two sesters of ale. And the Friars Minors shall have two sesters of ale and one sester of wine. And four sesters of ale shall be given to the poor wherever the guild shall meet.

And when the guild is sitting, no one who is of the guild shall go outside of the town for any business, without the permission of the steward. And if any one does so, let him be fined two shillings, and pay them.

And when the guild sits, and any guildsman is outside of the city so that he does not know when it will happen, he shall have a gallon of wine, if his servants come to get it. And if a guildsman is ill and is in the city, wine shall be sent to him, two loaves of bread and a gallon of wine and a dish from the kitchen; and two approved men of the guild shall go to visit him and look after his condition.

And when a guildsman dies, all those who are of the guild and are in the city shall attend the service of the dead, and guildsmen shall bear the body and bring it to the place of burial. And whoever will not do this shall pay according to his oath, two pence, to be given to the poor. And those of the ward where the dead man shall be ought to find a man to watch over the body the night that the dead shall lie in his house. And so long as the service of the dead shall last, that is to say the vigil and the mass, there ought to burn four candles of the guild, each candle of two pounds weight or more, until the body is buried. And these four candles shall remain in the keeping of the steward of the guild.

The steward ought to keep the rolls and the treasure of the guild under the seal of the alderman of the guild.

And when a guildsman dies, his eldest son or his next heir shall have the seat of his father, or of his uncle, if his father was not a guildsman, and of no other one; and he shall give nothing for his seat. No husband can have a seat in the guild by right of his wife, nor demand a seat by right of his wife's ancestors.

And no one has the right or power to sell or give his seat in the guild to any man; and the son of a guildsman, other than his eldest son, shall enter into the guild on payment of ten shillings, and he shall take the oath of the guild. . . .

And if any guildsman strikes another with his fist; and is convicted thereof, he shall lose the guild until he shall have bought it back for ten shillings, and taken the oath of the guild again like a new member. And if a guildsman strikes another with a stick, or a knife, or any other weapon, whatever it may be, he shall lose the guild and the franchise, and shall be held as a stranger until he shall have been reconciled to the good men of the guild and has made recompense to the one whom he has injured, and has paid a fine to the guild of twenty shillings; and this shall not be remitted.

If any one does an injury, who is not of the guild, and is of the franchise or strikes a guildsman and is reasonably convicted he shall lose his franchise and go to prison for a day and a night.

And if any stranger or any other who is not of the guild nor of the franchise, strikes a guildsman, and is reasonably convicted thereof, let him be in prison two days and two nights, unless the injury is such that he should be more severely punished. . . .

And no one of the city of Southampton shall buy anything to sell again in the same city, unless he is of the guild merchant or of the franchise. And if anyone shall do so and is convicted of it, all which he has so bought shall be forfeited to the king; and no one shall be quit of custom unless he proves that he is in the guild or in the franchise, and this from year to year.

And no one shall buy honey, fat, salt herrings, or any kind of oil, or millstones, or fresh hides, or any kind of fresh skins, unless he is a guildsman: nor keep a tavern for wine, nor sell cloth at retail, except in market or fair days; nor keep grain in his granary beyond five quarters, to sell at retail, if he is not a guildsman; and whoever shall do this and be convicted, shall forfeit all to the king.

No one of the guild ought to be partner or joint dealer in any of the kinds of merchandise before mentioned with anyone who is not of the guild, by any manner of coverture, or art, or contrivance, or collusion, or any other manner. And whosoever shall do this and be convicted, the goods in such manner bought shall be forfeited to the king, and the guildsman shall lose the guild.

If any guildsman falls into poverty and has not the wherewithal to live, and is not able to work or to provide for himself, he shall have one mark from the guild to relieve his condition when the guild shall sit. . . .

And no private man nor stranger shall bargain for or buy any kind of merchandise coming into the city before a burgess of the guild merchant, so long as the guildsman is present and wishes to bargain for and buy this merchandise; and if anyone does so and is convicted, that which he buys shall be forfeited to the king.

And anyone who is of the guild merchant shall share in all merchandise which another guildsman shall buy or any other person, whosoever he is, if he comes and demands part and is there where the merchandise is bought, and also if he gives satisfaction to the seller and gives security for his part. But no one who is not a guildsman is able or ought to share with a guildsman, without the will of the guildsman.

And if any guildsman or other of the city refuse a part to the guildsman in the manner above said, he shall not buy or sell in that year in the town, except his victuals [food]. . . .

Every year, on the morrow of St. Michael, shall be elected by the whole community of the town, assembled in a place provided, to consider the estate and treat of the common business of the town—then shall be elected by the whole community, twelve discreet men to execute the king's commands, together with the bailiffs, and to keep the peace and protect the franchise, and to do and keep justice to all persons, as well poor as rich, natives or strangers, all that year; and to this they shall be sworn in the form provided. And these twelve discreet men shall choose the same day two discreet men from among themselves and the other profitable and wise men to be bailiffs for the ensuing year, who shall take care that the customs shall be well paid; and they shall receive their jurisdiction the day after Michaelmas, as has been customary. And this shall be done from year to year, so that the bailiffs shall be renewed every year, and the twelve aforesaid, if there is occasion. The same shall be done as to clerk and sergeants of the city, in making and removing. . . .

No one shall go out to meet a ship bringing wine or other merchandise coming to the town, in order to buy anything, before the ship be arrived and come to anchor for unloading; and if any one does so and is convicted, the merchandise which he shall have bought shall be forfeited to the king.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the main goals of guild merchants, and how did they organize to achieve these goals?
2. How were the guild organizations effective in promoting trade and the general increase in commercial activity?
3. How did the structures and values of these merchants differ from those associated with modern capitalism? Are there any connections?
4. How did the guild relate to Christian religious values?
5. What were the political implications of the guild? What did the guild organization imply about relations between the merchants and the king, and about the power of central government in the growing towns?