

Post Classical Trade: Western Europe

Overview From the early Mediaeval period to the flourishing of cities, cathedrals, and international trade in the thirteenth century, is a long stretch. If we date the breakdown of the Roman economy to the fifth century C.E., we will have to wait five or six centuries before we see the emergence of a vigorous trading economy in Europe. Involved in that development are gradual improvements in transportation--both by sea and land, in agricultural efficiency and know how, in the concentration of capital in banking centers, and in manufacturing processes, which readied foodstuffs, fabrics, and even building materials for long-distance transport.

The early Middle Ages The term 'dark ages,' pejoratively first applied during the Renaissance, but now rarely used, usually designated the period from 500-1000 C.E., when the deterioration of society, transportation, and trade had replaced the still serviceable vestiges of the Roman Imperial structure, which succumbed to 'barbarism,' both internal and external, by the mid-fifth century C.E. This 'early' period was not without cultural development--think of the Benedictine monastic tradition or the Carolingian Renaissance of the 9th century--but its foundations, in a still pretty stagnant agricultural economy, with little more than local trade, were mired down and unprogressive.

The trade explosion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Trade, culture, military prowess and urbanization went hand in hand in the Later Middle Ages. One can look at three facets of this development of trade: the maritime explosion of trading networks among interlinked regions; the growth of a commercial and banking culture; the rapid development of cities, with their fairs, markets, and manufacturing centers.

Maritime trade The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a rapid expansion of ocean trade. One factor in this expansion was the growing expertise in ship building, commercialization of seaworthy manpower, and establishment of reliable ports and harbors to which to ship the increasingly abundant products of European industry: wool, processed fabrics, wines, foodstuffs, horses. That is not to mention the exponential development of European port systems at which to receive spices and oils from as far away as China, the fruits and fabrics of the Muslim Near East, and wool from the British Isles, ready for the refinements of the Flanders textile industry.

Commercial and banking culture To bankroll the exploding maritime undertakings, of the High Middle Ages, required a network of lenders and bankers, who could put their hands on enough venture capital to send fleets of expensive cargo, of hundreds of workers and oarsmen, and often of cattle and cavalry, far across the ocean. The seed ground for this new commercial industry was in large part the wealthy cities of North Italy--Genoa, Venice, Florence--in which high commerce and high culture co-existed at a fruitful level never since attained.

Cities and their relation to trade The two centuries which culminate the movement of Mediaeval Europe, the 12th and 13th, saw the rapid growth of population, of urbanization, and of the centrality of the city to commerce and trade. We talk here of a period during which great fairs attracted the economic energy of the civilized world, bringing together merchants from both the local scene and from as far away as ships could transport goods. We talk also of the atmosphere of the larger cities--say of Paris or Northern Italy or Flanders--where negotiations and deals were the name of the game, and rich and powerful families regularly schmoozed with international bankers.

Reading

Haskins, Charles, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1971
Postan, M. M., *The Mediaeval Economy and Society*, Harmondsworth, 1972.

Discussion questions

There is a great population explosion in Western Europe, from the time of the Fall of the Roman Empire to the high economic flowering of the 13th century. How would you explain this population growth?

We stressed maritime trade. Did the patterns of inland trade, in Western Europe, suggest the same economic growth as maritime trade? What was the state of roads? Of transport vehicles?

There was extensive 'manufacturing' in the new cities of 13th century Europe. What were factories like? How many were employed In a large factory? Was there any wage and salary control? Were there unions?