

0:22

Craftsmen were a key factor in late medieval urban life. They accounted for between 50 and 70% of the inhabitants.

Skilled trades were the backbone of economic life in the community, providing work and supplying the population with vital products.

Title: Commerce, Craftsmanship and the Marketplace

0:48

The marketplace was the central location for buying and selling goods. The raw material for these textiles, for example, was flax or hemp fibres. The dried plants were crushed by millstones or by hand. Then spindles were used to spin the natural fibres into yarn.

1:09

Most craftsmen made their products at home - like this shoemaker. Private life and gainful employment were not separated. People worked hard - 12 to 16 hours a day - on a purely voluntary basis, because urban craftsmen were their own bosses. These goldsmiths achieved prosperity by the work of their own hands. Usually the whole family was involved in the business.

1:34

The youngsters were no exception. Instead of attending school, many boys became apprentices when they were only seven, as here with a wagon-wheel-maker.

1:49

Most craftsmen were specialists. They were in charge of all the work routines, from the raw materials to the finished product. Quality was the crucial factor. Mass production and assembly lines were only introduced hundreds of years later.

2:12

Master craftsmen belonged to associations called guilds. These associations were headed by a guild-master. Membership of a guild was obligatory, no one could opt out. Working hours, wages and prices were laid down by the guild regulations.

2:33

The guild-masters checked on product quality at regular intervals. Here we see wine being tested.

2:45

The guild-masters also supervised production processes, keeping an eye on the workers harvesting the grapes.

Guild regulations prevented competition between the members and assured work and an appropriate income for all the winegrowers.

3:03

First the workers trod the grapes with their bare feet, then the last of the juice was squeezed out in a winepress.

3:12

Wine was sold in vats on the wine market. A large crane loaded the vats onto the customers' wagons.

3:27

The marketplace was the commercial heart of a medieval town. Food, clothing, crockery and everything else needed for everyday life was exchanged and sold here. Local farmers offered their wares. But goods from much further afield were also available. Business hours were precisely regulated and the rule of "market peace" ensured that buying and selling could be done in safety.

3:55

Not all medieval markets were of a general kind. Specialised markets were equally common, selling for example only fish (4:03), herbs (4:05) or cattle.

4:10

The town council provided scales for the market-people and facilities for changing money or entering claims for payment in the municipal debt registers. The council also laid down the prices for staple foods. This system called "just price" ensured that the poorer citizens were also assured a supply of food.

4:33

In the entrance to Freiburg Cathedral, the town's market laws are carved in stone. They include a system of weights and measures obligatory for the traders. They defined such things as a tub of charcoal (4:44) and the correct size of a bread-roll (4:48) or a loaf. The regulations could be consulted at any time.

4:55

It was the market supervisor's job to enforce these measures. He made sure that the regulations were observed and also collected the dues charged for a stand on the marketplace.

5:12

Market supervisors still exist today. They are municipal employees who ensure that stands are put up and taken down properly, check the quality of the products and insist on the observance of hygiene standards. As in the Middle Ages, they also collect the market dues imposed on the traders.

5:58

In medieval times, money already existed. But there was no uniform national currency. Many towns and cities were entitled to issue coinage of their own.

6:12

Most coins were made of silver, which was processed for the purpose in minting works. The silver blanks were secured in a matrix and then stamped.

6:34

The metal for the coins was taken from the local silver mines. The Black Forest, for example, had major silver resources. For a long time, Freiburg owed much of its wealth to its silver mines. Today the resources are exhausted and the mines are empty.

7:09

As there were so many different currencies in the Middle Ages, it was necessary to determine the exact value of the coins. The major criterion of value was weight. Medieval merchants used special scales to weigh the coins.

7:26

With a counting board and reckoning counters, they could then calculate their profits and losses.

7:35

The merchants took foreign coin to the exchanges run by money-changers, where the coins were converted into local currency.

7:48

Merchants stored their wares in their own homes, usually in the cellars or the attic. The attic was the best place for goods that had to stay dry. They were hoisted to the top of the house by a roof crane operated by a winch.

8:08

The other floors of the house accommodated the merchant's living quarters and his office - the counting house.

8:18

The counting house was the place where the merchant kept his accounts and collected news from various markets and trading centres.

8:30

Merchants were out to make a profit, so they had to keep a close record of incoming and outgoing goods.

8:45

In the late Middle Ages, many merchants had shops of their own to display their wares and attract potential customers. Major trading centres had rows of shops one next to the other. They were not always out in the open. Furs, cloth and jewellery were also sold in spacious vaulted cellars.

9:10

Successful merchants spent much of the time away from home. Sometimes their business trips took them to foreign countries. Overland travel was arduous and full of hazards.

9:26

Merchants were easy prey for highwaymen and footpads.

9:39

A faster and safer way of transporting goods from one place to another was the river. But shipping had drawbacks and dangers of its own.

9:52

This boat has capsized, losing its entire cargo. Sometimes merchants were taken prisoner by the authorities of enemy towns, who confiscated their wares.

10:07

On arrival at their destination, merchants had to pay import duty on their goods. The money was collected either at the gates of the town or in the urban customs office. The goods were temporarily stored at this office and sold from there.

10:30

Around the year 1500, one South German merchant dynasty had long-distance trading down to a fine art. The Fuggers of Augsburg (10:39) were the richest men in Europe. They even established an outstation in the West Indies for trade in spices. Jakob Fugger (10:48), known as “the Rich”, had his portrait painted by no less an artist than Albrecht Dürer.

11:02

At the end of the Middle Ages, new products found their way onto the market, for example, paper. It was made in paper mills from mashed textile fibres such as linen rags.

11:23

The paper-maker extracted the sheets of paper from the fibre mash with a fine sieve. Then they were pressed and dried.

11:37

Before paper was invented, people wrote on dried animal hide known as parchment. The availability of paper revolutionised written communication. It was much cheaper than parchment and could be produced in large quantities. When the last great ecclesiastical assembly, the Council of Basel, met in that city in 1431, a great deal of paper was needed to record the Council decisions and publish many copies of them. Several paper mills were set up in Basel especially for the purpose.

12:14

A little later, the invention of printing meant that copies of documents and books could be produced in almost unlimited numbers.

12:29

Printing revolutionised public life. The town councils could now print and publish their laws and regulations in as many copies as they saw fit. This was the dawn of bureaucracy.

12:46

But not only secular writings were printed. Precious religious books were commissioned by high church officials in monasteries and bishoprics. This missal was printed in 600 copies and cost as much as a horse.

13:03

The printer, Johannes Froben of Basel, was a personal friend of the famous scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and printed all his works.

13:12

This one was a bestseller entitled “In Praise of Folly”. Another of Erasmus’ works was an edition of the New Testament. Froben established a publishing house of his own and became a successful entrepreneur.

13:28

So by the end of the Middle Ages the significance of urban craftsmen and merchants was no longer purely economic. They contributed a great deal to the spread of new ideas like humanism and the Reformation.