



# Changes in Medieval Society

## MAIN IDEA

**ECONOMICS** The feudal system declined as agriculture, trade, finance, towns, and universities developed.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The changes in the Middle Ages laid the foundations for modern Europe.

## TERMS & NAMES

- three-field system
- guild
- Commercial Revolution
- burgher
- vernacular
- Thomas Aquinas
- scholastics

**SETTING THE STAGE** While Church reform, cathedral building, and the Crusades were taking place, other important changes were occurring in medieval society. Between 1000 and 1300, agriculture, trade, and finance made significant advances. Towns and cities grew. This was in part due to the growing population and to territorial expansion of western Europe. Cultural interaction with the Muslim and Byzantine worlds sparked the growth of learning and the birth of an institution new to Europe—the university.

## A Growing Food Supply

Europe's great revival would have been impossible without better ways of farming. Expanding civilization required an increased food supply. A warmer climate, which lasted from about 800 to 1200, brought improved farm production. Farmers began to cultivate lands in regions once too cold to grow crops. They also developed new methods to take advantage of more available land.

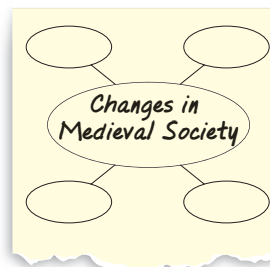
**Switch to Horsepower** For hundreds of years, peasants had depended on oxen to pull their plows. Oxen lived on the poorest straw and stubble, so they were easy to keep. Horses needed better food, but a team of horses could plow three times as much land in a day as a team of oxen.

Before farmers could use horses, however, a better harness was needed. Sometime before 900, farmers in Europe began using a harness that fitted across the horse's chest, enabling it to pull a plow. As a result, horses gradually replaced oxen for plowing and for pulling wagons. All over Europe, axes rang as the great forests were cleared for new fields.

**The Three-Field System** Around A.D. 800, some villages began to organize their lands into three fields instead of two. Two of the fields were planted and the other lay fallow (resting) for a year. Under this new **three-field system**, farmers could grow crops on two-thirds of their land each year, not just on half of it. As a result, food production increased. Villagers had more to eat. Well-fed people, especially children, could better resist disease and live longer, and as a result the European population grew dramatically.

## TAKING NOTES

**Determining Main Ideas**  
Use a diagram to identify changes in medieval society.



## Social History

### Surnames

Many people can trace their last names, or surnames, back to a medieval occupation in Europe. The name Smith, for example, refers to someone who “smites,” or works, metal. The surname Silversmith would belong to a person who works silver. In German-speaking areas, a smith was named Schmidt.

Someone who made goods out of wood was often surnamed Carpenter. In French-speaking areas, a carpenter was called Charpentier, while in German areas, the same person would be called Zimmermann.

The last name of Boulanger indicated a baker in France. A baker in Germany often had the surname Becker.

## The Guilds

A second change in the European economy was the development of the guild. A **guild** was an organization of individuals in the same business or occupation working to improve the economic and social conditions of its members. The first guilds were merchant guilds. Merchants banded together to control the number of goods being traded and to keep prices up. They also provided security in trading and reduced losses.

About the same time, skilled artisans, such as wheelwrights, glassmakers, winemakers, tailors, and druggists, began craft guilds. In most crafts, both husband and wife worked at the family trade. In a few crafts, especially for cloth making, women formed the majority. The guilds set standards for quality of work, wages, and working conditions. For example, bakers were required to sell loaves of bread of a standard size and weight. The guilds also created plans for supervised training of new workers.

By the 1000s, artisans and craftspeople were manufacturing goods by hand for local and long-distance trade. More and better products were now available to buyers in small towns, in bigger cities, and at trade fairs. Guilds became powerful forces in the medieval economy. The wealth they accumulated helped them establish influence over the government and the economy of towns and cities. **A**

### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**A** How did guilds change the way business was conducted and products made?

## History in Depth

### Craft Guilds

Craft guilds formed an important part of town life during the medieval period. They trained young people in a skilled job, regulated the quality of goods sold, and were major forces in community life.

### Guild Services

#### To members:

- Set working conditions
- Covered members with a type of health insurance
- Provided funeral expenses
- Provided dowries for poor girls

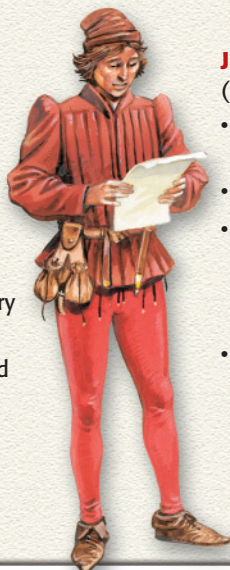
#### To the community:

- Built almshouses for victims of misfortune
- Guaranteed quality work
- Took turns policing the streets
- Donated windows to the Church



#### Apprentice

- Parents paid for training
- Lived with a master and his family
- Required to obey the master
- Trained 2–7 years
- Was not allowed to marry during training
- When trained progressed to journeyman



#### Journeyman

(Day Worker)

- Worked for a master to earn a salary
- Worked 6 days a week
- Needed to produce a masterpiece (his finest work) to become a master
- Had to be accepted by the guild to become a master



#### Master

- Owned his own shop
- Worked with other masters to protect their trade
- Sometimes served in civic government

## Commercial Revolution

Just as agriculture was expanding and craftsmanship changing, so were trade and finance. Increased availability of trade goods and new ways of doing business changed life in Europe. Taken together, this expansion of trade and business is called the **Commercial Revolution**.

**Fairs and Trade** Most trade took place in towns. Peasants from nearby manors traveled to town on fair days, hauling items to trade. Great fairs were held several times a year, usually during religious festivals, when many people would be in town. People visited the stalls set up by merchants from all parts of Europe.

Cloth was the most common trade item. Other items included bacon, salt, honey, cheese, wine, leather, dyes, knives, and ropes. Such local markets met all the needs of daily life for a small community. No longer was everything produced on a self-sufficient manor.

More goods from foreign lands became available. Trade routes spread across Europe from Flanders to Italy. Italian merchant ships traveled the Mediterranean to ports in Byzantium such as Constantinople. They also traveled to Muslim ports along the North African coast. Trade routes were opened to Asia, in part by the Crusades.

Increased business at markets and fairs made merchants willing to take chances on buying merchandise that they could sell at a profit. Merchants then reinvested the profits in more goods.

**Business and Banking** As traders moved from fair to fair, they needed large amounts of cash or credit and ways to exchange many types of currencies. Enterprising merchants found ways to solve these problems. For example, bills of exchange established exchange rates between different coinage systems. Letters of credit between merchants eliminated the need to carry large amounts of cash and made trading easier. Trading firms and associations formed to offer these services to their groups.

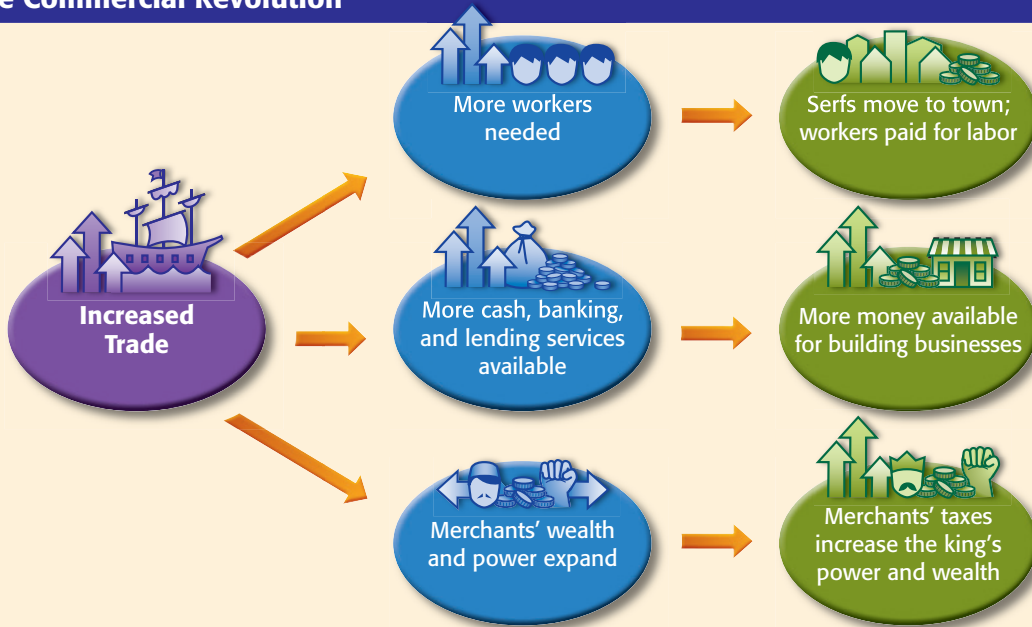
### Vocabulary

*Letters of credit:* A letter issued by a bank allowing the bearer to withdraw a specific amount of money from the bank or its branches.

▼ This fish market expanded the variety of food available in a medieval town.



## The Commercial Revolution



### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Graphics

- Drawing Conclusions** How did increased trade increase the power of the king?
- Making Inferences** Why would workers now have to be paid?

Merchants looked for new markets and opportunities to make a profit. Merchants first had to purchase goods from distant places. To do so they had to borrow money, but the Church forbade Christians from lending money at interest, a sin called usury. So moneylending and banking became the occupation of many of Europe's Jews. Over time, the Church relaxed its rule on usury and Christians entered the banking business. Banking became an important business, especially in Italy. **B**

**Society Changes** The changes brought about by the Commercial Revolution were slow, yet they had a major effect on the lives of Europeans. As you can see in the diagram, increased trade brought many changes to aspects of society. Two of the most important changes involved what people did to earn a living and where they lived. As towns attracted workers, the towns grew into cities. Life in the cities was different from life in the sleepy villages or on manors.

## Urban Life Flourishes

Scholars estimate that between 1000 and 1150, the population of western Europe rose from around 30 million to about 42 million. Towns grew and flourished. Compared to great cities like Constantinople, European towns were unsophisticated and tiny. Europe's largest city, Paris, probably had no more than 60,000 people by the year 1200. A typical town in medieval Europe had only about 1,500 to 2,500 people. Even so, these small communities became a powerful force for change in Europe.

**Trade and Towns Grow Together** By the later Middle Ages, trade was the very lifeblood of the new towns, which sprung up at ports and crossroads, on hilltops, and along rivers. As trade grew, towns all over Europe swelled with people. The excitement and bustle of towns drew many people. But there were some drawbacks to living in a medieval town. Streets were narrow, filled with animals and their waste. With no sewers, most people dumped household and human waste into the

### MAIN IDEA

#### Drawing Conclusions

**B** Why were changes in financial services necessary to expand trade?

street in front of the house. Most people never bathed, and their houses lacked fresh air, light, and clean water. Because houses were built of wood with thatched roofs, they were a constant fire hazard. Nonetheless, many people chose to move to towns to pursue the economic and social opportunities they offered.

People were no longer content with their old feudal existence on manors or in tiny villages. Even though legally bound to their lord's manor, many serfs ran away. According to custom, a serf could now become free by living within a town for a year and a day. A saying of the time went, "Town air makes you free." Many of these run-away serfs, now free people, made better lives for themselves in towns.

**Merchant Class Shifts the Social Order** The merchants and craftspeople of medieval towns did not fit into the traditional medieval social order of noble, clergy, and peasant. At first, towns came under the authority of feudal lords, who used their authority to levy fees, taxes, and rents. As trade expanded, the **burghers**, or merchant-class town dwellers, resented this interference in their trade and commerce. They organized themselves and demanded privileges. These included freedom from certain kinds of tolls and the right to govern the town. At times they fought against their landlords and won these rights by force.

## The Revival of Learning

During the Crusades, European contact with Muslims and Byzantines greatly expanded. This contact brought a new interest in learning, especially in the works of Greek philosophers. The Muslim and Byzantine libraries housed copies of these writings. Most had disappeared during the centuries following the fall of Rome and the invasions of western Europe. **C**

### MAIN IDEA

#### Recognizing Effects

**C** How did the Crusades contribute to the expansion of trade and learning?

**The Muslim Connection** In the 1100s, Christian scholars from Europe began visiting Muslim libraries in Spain. Few Western scholars knew Greek but most did know Latin. So Jewish scholars living in Spain translated the Arabic versions of works by Aristotle and other Greek writers into Latin. All at once, Europeans acquired a huge new body of knowledge. This included science, philosophy, law, mathematics, and other fields. In addition, the Crusaders brought back to Europe superior Muslim technology in ships, navigation, and weapons.

**Scholars and the University** At the center of the growth of learning stood a new European institution—the university. The word *university* originally referred to a group of scholars meeting wherever they could. People, not buildings, made up the medieval university. Universities arose at Paris and at Bologna, Italy, by the end of the 1100s. Others followed at the English town of Oxford and at Salerno, Italy. Most students were the sons of burghers or well-to-do artisans. For most students, the goal was a job in government or the Church. Earning a bachelor's degree in theology might take five to seven years in school; becoming a master of theology took at least 12 years of study.

New ideas and forms of expression began to flow out of the universities. At a time when serious scholars and writers were writing in Latin, a few remarkable poets began using a lively **vernacular**, or the everyday language of their homeland. Some of these writers wrote masterpieces that are still

### History *in* Depth



#### Muslim Scholars

A number of Islamic scholars had a great influence on European thought. The image above shows Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna. He was a Persian philosopher, astronomer, poet, and physician. His book, *The Cure*, an interpretation of Aristotle's philosophy, greatly affected Western thought. This work, translated into Latin, influenced the scholastics.

#### INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY

**INTERNET ACTIVITY** Create a documentary film script on Muslim scholars. Go to [classzone.com](http://classzone.com) for your research.



▲ Thomas Aquinas's writings focused on questions of faith versus reason and logic.

read today. Dante Alighieri wrote *The Divine Comedy* (1308–1314) in Italian. Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* (about 1386–1400) in English. Christine de Pisan wrote *The Book of The City of Ladies* (1405) in French. Since most people couldn't read or understand Latin, these works written in the vernacular brought literature to many people.

**Aquinas and Medieval Philosophy** Christian scholars were excited by the ideas of Greek philosophers. They wondered if a Christian scholar could use Aristotle's logical approach to truth and still keep faith with the Bible.

In the mid-1200s, the scholar **Thomas Aquinas** (uh•KWY•nuhs) argued that the most basic religious truths could be proved by logical argument. Between 1267 and 1273, Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologicae*. Aquinas's great work, influenced by Aristotle, combined ancient Greek thought with the Christian thought of his time. Aquinas and his fellow scholars who met at the great universities were known as schoolmen, or **scholastics**. The scholastics used their knowledge of Aristotle to debate many issues of their time. Their teachings on law and government influenced the thinking of western Europeans, particularly the English and French. Accordingly, they began to develop democratic institutions and traditions.

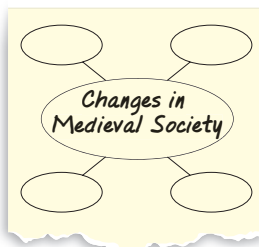
## SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- three-field system
- Commercial Revolution
- guild
- burgher
- vernacular
- Thomas Aquinas
- scholastics

### USING YOUR NOTES

2. How did medieval society change between 1000 and 1500?



### MAIN IDEAS

3. How did guilds influence business practices in medieval towns?
4. How were Muslim scholars linked to the revival of learning in Europe?
5. In what ways did burghers expand their freedom from landlords?

### CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **RECOGNIZING EFFECTS** What was the effect of the development of towns on the feudal system?
7. **ANALYZING MOTIVES** Why would writers choose to produce works in the vernacular instead of in Latin?
8. **RECOGNIZING EFFECTS** How did the Commercial Revolution lay the foundation for the economy of modern Europe?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **ECONOMICS** Write a brief **news article** on the value of letters of credit and how they have changed commercial trade activities.

### CONNECT TO TODAY WRITING AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Contact a local bank and find out what services are available to its commercial clients. Write a brief **report** on the banking services. Identify which services seem to have had their beginnings in the late medieval period and which ones are modern.