

Guilds

All business and industry within a medieval town was regulated by organizations called guilds. Merchant guilds consisted of businessmen engaged in trade. Craft guilds were made up of master craftsmen and journeymen who produced specific goods. Any person who was not a guild member could not do business in a town or had to pay a special fee to do so.

At first, merchant guilds were more common than craft guilds. However, the number of craft guilds rose significantly as the population of towns increased along with the number of skilled workers. There was a separate guild for each craft. Of course large cities had more guilds than smaller ones. By the year 1292, for example, Paris had nearly 130 different guilds.

The primary function of a craft guild was to assure quality workmanship among its members. Guilds also fixed hours, determined wages, and established prices. Another important duty of a guild was to judge the work a journeyman submitted in order to become a master. A journeyman whose craftsmanship passed the scrutiny of guild judges was then free to open his own shop and become a master.

Guilds were active in the political and social life of towns. They participated in town government and often dominated it. They built hospitals, orphanages, and schools. In some ways, they resembled modern labor unions. They looked after the welfare of their members and provided them with insurance against fire, flood, theft, disability, and the health problems that often accompany old age. Guilds even paid for the funerals of their dead.

Some guilds remained active until the late 1700s, long after the Middle Ages had ended.

1. How did merchant guilds and craft guilds differ?

2. What rule made it a great advantage for a worker to join a guild?

3. List several functions performed by guilds.

4. Explain how craft guilds were similar to modern labor unions.
