

# Primary and Secondary Sources on Guilds in Medieval Europe

*In the medieval town, almost every citizen was involved in some manufacturing, even if it was only making candles in his own home and selling them. Even then, it was important for him to get his wax as cheaply as the other candlemakers of the town and to keep his prices the same as others. And he did not want foreigners or even people from other towns to come in and spoil his sales. It was for these reasons that many craftsmen joined merchant guilds. In addition, men of each craft formed their own craft guilds in order to see that every member had work, and that their work met certain standards of quality. In order to rise to the top of the craft, a boy began as an apprentice. If he was successful, he became a journeyman, qualified to work for wages. The highest title he could earn was that of master of his craft.*

- **Craft guilds** were associations of craftsmen who agreed to cooperate in order to increase profits and benefits for all members. Guilds were organized around a particular craft; there were guilds for bakers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and so on.
- All members agreed to abide by the **rules** set by the guild. These rules often included limits on how many hours a craftsman could work and guidelines concerning the **quality** of products. In this way, a guild was able to organize all similar craftsmen in a certain area and prevent competition from foreign craftsmen and merchants from hurting local craftsmen.
- An important part of the guilds was the **apprenticeship system**. Boys from 10 to 14 years old would be hired by a master craftsman for a specific period of time. The apprentices received no salary, but were given food, housing, and clothing for their work.
- The craft guild limited the number of **apprentices** who were allowed to learn any one trade....Each craftsman was obliged to allow the guild officers to examine his materials and his work both in the making and after it was finished.

(WKWB, p. 235)

- As an apprentice the boy, usually as he was entering his teens, was bound to a **master** under a contract, generally for seven years; but the more difficult the trade the longer the preparation. In some places it required 10 years to become a qualified goldsmith. (MA, p. 605)
- A master might flog (whip) an apprentice; and he could chase him if he ran away. If a lad ran away three times he forfeited whatever rights he had gained in the trade. (MA, p. 605)
- Apprentices learned to make their own **tools** and prepare their own materials. When one had served his time, he had to submit a masterpiece to the guild. It was not necessarily the finest work of which he was capable, but a piece of good, ordinary work. (MA, p. 605)
- (According to guild laws), no one was allowed to labor on Saturday afternoons, Sundays, or holy days. Working in the night was strictly forbidden...it was difficult to inspect night work and...with the poor lights...few articles could be well made. (WKWB, p. 236)
- The craft guilds looked out for the **interests of their members**...they cared for them in illness, attended their funeral services, and helped their widows and orphans. (WKWB, p. 237)
- The guild **settled disputes** between members, and sometimes there were disputes between guilds. The work of each craft was strictly marked off. A man who made shoes must not mend them; a man who made hat...was forbidden to make caps. (WKWB, p. 237)
- Merchant guilds—for shopkeepers and traders—began when early merchants joined together in order to protect their goods. Members were required by oath to be **loyal** to one another. Goods were bought and sold as a group, and profits were given to each member according to how much he contributed.
- Guilds often acted as **social organizations** for the members, sponsoring different social and religious activities during the year.
- Every guild had its **feast day** once a year or oftener; and every guild also had its patron saint. On the day sacred to him all the members put on guild livery, or uniform, and marched from their guild hall to the church for services. (WKWB, p. 238)

- Another religious duty of the craft guilds was the acting of plays, **mystery or miracle plays**....In almost all of these plays there was considerable fun-making and horseplay....In the play of "The Flood," Noah's wife is angry that her husband has worked on the ark so many years without telling her...(guild members) looked upon presenting these plays as an honor...they chose actors from their members, and paid them. (WKWB, p. 239)
- Fights between apprentices of different trades were numerous. Each industry had its own street from which the men would sally forth to attack those of another **trade**, or in which they would in turn barricade themselves. (MA, p. 599)