

GUILDS

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Guild, also spelled **gild**, an association of craftsmen or merchants formed for mutual aid and protection and for the furtherance of their professional interests. Guilds flourished in [Europe](#) between the 11th and 16th centuries and formed an important part of the economic and social fabric in that era.

Types And Functions

The [medieval](#) guilds were generally one of two types: [merchant guilds](#) or craft guilds. Merchant guilds were associations of all or most of the merchants in a particular town or city; these men might be local or long-distance traders, wholesale or retail sellers, and might deal in various categories of goods. [Craft guilds](#), on the other hand, were occupational associations that usually comprised all the artisans and craftsmen in a particular branch of industry or commerce. There were, for instance, guilds of weavers, dyers, and fullers in the wool trade and of masons and architects in the building trade; and there were guilds of painters, metalsmiths, blacksmiths, bakers, butchers, leatherworkers, soapmakers, and so on.

Guilds performed a variety of important functions in the local economy. They established a monopoly of trade in their locality or within a particular branch of industry or commerce; they set and maintained standards for the quality of goods and the integrity of trading practices in that industry; they worked to maintain stable prices for their goods and commodities; and they sought to control town or city governments in order to further the interests of the guild members and achieve their economic objectives.

Early History

There is no direct evidence for the existence of permanent associations of traders or craftsmen in ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt, and little more evidence exists about such societies in pre-Hellenistic Greece. Such associations are known to have existed in [ancient Rome](#), however, where they were called [collegia](#). These craft guilds seem to have emerged in the later years of the [Roman Republic](#). They were sanctioned by the central government and were subject to the authority of the magistrates. From the reign of the emperor Diocletian onward, the imperial government deliberately exploited these guilds in the interests of public authority and social order. The government tried to restrict the membership of the guilds to a hereditary caste of skilled artisans, but the increasing financial demands made upon the guilds by the government in the waning days of the Roman Empire had reduced most guilds to a precarious position by the 4th century CE. With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, guilds disappeared from European society for more than six centuries. The [collegia](#) did survive in the [Byzantine Empire](#), however, and particularly in the city of Byzantium (Constantinople, now Istanbul). The famous *Book of the Prefect*, a manual of government probably drawn up by the Byzantine emperor Leo VI in the year 900, provides a picture of an elaborate guild organization whose primary function was the imposition of rigid controls,

especially for financial and tax-raising purposes, on every craft and trade in the city. Some historians have contended that the guilds of medieval Europe derived from the *collegia* of the Byzantine Empire, but no direct connections have been established between these different institutions, and the origins of the medieval guilds can be found in the changing economies of western and northern Europe as they emerged from the Dark Ages.

Flowering In Europe

Guilds became possible in Europe only with the appearance and growth of towns in the 10th and 11th centuries following the chronic dislocation and agrarian backwardness of the Dark Ages. Until this time, merchants had been merely itinerant peddlers who executed all of their own trading transactions, personally traveling from market to market and from town to town. Such merchants tended to band together in order to protect themselves from bandits or predatory feudal lords as they made their business rounds. Gradually, merchants expanded their activities and delegated such tasks as the transportation of goods to others, while the merchants based themselves and their operations in a particular town. The merchants' associations soon became more tightly organized and were legalized and recognized by town governments. These merchant associations, or guilds, became intimately involved in regulating and protecting their members' commerce, both in long-distance trade and in those activities which catered to the needs of the town's inhabitants. Guilds came to control the distribution and sale of food, cloth, and other staple goods and thereby achieved a monopoly over the local commerce. Such guilds compelled foreign merchants or traders to pay a fee if they wanted to participate in the local trade, and some outside merchants were prohibited altogether from participating in that trade.

By the 13th century, merchant guilds in western Europe comprised the wealthiest and most influential citizens in many towns and cities, and, as many urban localities became self-governing in the 12th and 13th centuries, the guilds came to dominate their town councils. The guilds were thus able to pass legislative measures regulating all economic activity in many towns.

Craft guilds arose soon after merchant guilds did. They originated in expanding towns in which an extensive [division of labour](#) was emerging. The body of craftsmen in a town usually consisted of a number of family workshops in the same neighbourhood, with the masters or owners of such workshops related to each other by kinship, acquaintance, or the sharing of apprentices. These craftsmen tended to band together in order to regulate competition among themselves, thus promoting their own and the town's prosperity in general. The craftsmen would agree on some basic rules governing their trade, setting quality standards, and so on. In this way the first craft guilds were formed. Craft and merchant guilds would often control different areas of a particular industry. The [merchant guild](#) in a wool-processing town or city, for instance, would control the purchase of raw wool and the production and sale of the processed fibre, while the craft guilds would control the actual carding, dyeing, and weaving of the wool.

Structure And Social Role

The internal structures of medieval craft guilds are well known from documents and were generally alike throughout Europe. Assemblies of the guild's members enjoyed

some legislative powers, but the control of guild policy lay in the hands of a few officials and a council of advisers or assistants. The guild tended to be an extremely hierarchical body structured on the basis of the [apprenticeship](#) system. (See apprenticeship.) In this structure, the members of a guild were divided into a hierarchy of [masters](#), journeymen, and apprentices. The master was an established craftsman of recognized abilities who took on apprentices; these were boys in late childhood or adolescence who boarded with the master's family and were trained by him in the elements of his trade. The apprentices were provided with food, clothing, shelter, and an education by the master, and in return they worked for him without payment. After completing a fixed term of service of from five to nine years, an apprentice became a [journeyman](#), *i.e.*, a craftsman who could [work](#) for one or another master and was paid with wages for his labour. A journeyman who could provide proof of his technical competence (the "masterpiece") might rise in the guild to the status of a master, whereupon he could set up his own workshop and hire and train apprentices. The masters in any particular craft guild tended to be a select inner circle who possessed not only technical competence but also proof of their wealth and social position.

Apprenticeship was the basic element in the craft guild, since it secured the continuity of practice, tradition, and personnel on which the welfare of the guild depended. Apprenticeships in some trades came to be highly valued, and a family would have to pay a master a large sum of [money](#) for him to enroll their son as an apprentice. Often apprenticeships came to be restricted to the sons or other relatives of masters. The craft guild policed its own members' professional practices, and guild courts and officials investigated complaints of poor workmanship, unfair competition, and other problems, levying fines on those found in violation of the guild's rules and standards. Besides their economic and educational functions, guilds also served other purposes. A guild was often associated with a [patron saint](#), and a local guild would maintain a chapel in the parish church to be used by its members. Guilds performed charitable work, not only among the poor and indigent among their own members but among the community at large. Guilds also built and maintained residences, called [guildhalls](#), in which the membership would hold banquets and conduct official business. Friction often arose between the wealthier members of the merchant guilds and the less prosperous but far more numerous members of the craft guilds in a particular city. Conflict between these two groups became especially intense when they competed for control of the city government, as happened in a number of cities in Italy, [Germany](#), and the Low Countries.

Decline

In their heyday from the 12th to the 15th century, the medieval merchant and craft guilds gave their cities and towns good government and stable economic bases and supported charities and built schools, roads, and churches. Guilds helped build up the economic organization of Europe, enlarging the base of traders, craftsmen, merchants, artisans, and bankers that Europe needed to make the transition from [feudalism](#) to embryonic [capitalism](#). Yet the guilds' exclusivity, conservatism, monopolistic practices, and selective entrance policies eventually began to erode their economic utility. Apprenticeships became almost entirely hereditary, and masters set ridiculously high

standards for apprentices to become journeymen and for journeymen to become masters. The guilds worked exclusively for their own interests and sought to monopolize trade in their own locality. They were frequently hostile to technological innovations that threatened their members' interests, and they sometimes sought to extinguish commercial activities that they were not able to bring under their own control. The merchant guilds became parties of aristocrats who dominated the town and city governments, sometimes over the opposition of the craft guilds.

The decline of the medieval craft guilds was a slow and tortuous process during the Renaissance and Reformation periods. New guilds were still being founded throughout Europe in the 17th century, but the 16th century had already marked a turning point in the fortunes of most guilds. Apart from the disruptive effects of the Reformation and the growth of the power of national governments, the craft guilds were seriously weakened by the appearance of new markets and greater capital resources. Merchants were becoming capitalistic entrepreneurs and forming companies, thus making the merchant guilds less important. Craft guilds broke down as the pace of technological innovation spread and new opportunities for trade disrupted their hold over a particular industry. Masters tended to become foremen or entrepreneurs, while journeymen and apprentices became labourers paid their wages by the day. The emergence of regulated companies and other associations of wealthy merchant-capitalists thus left the guilds increasingly isolated from the main currents of economic power.

It is perhaps a sign of the general insignificance of the surviving guilds that they evoked surprisingly little serious criticism until the Enlightenment of the 18th century. By the time decrees abolishing craft associations were enacted in [France](#) (1791), Spain (1840), Austria and Germany (1859–60), and Italy (1864), the guilds' authority had long been on the wane. Craft guilds continued to flourish in India, China, Japan, and the [Islamic world](#) into the 20th century, but they too proved unable to withstand the impact of modern Western industrial organization.