



◀ Merchants offer their wares to shoppers in a 13th-century marketplace.

Life in Medieval Towns

4.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about how the Roman Catholic Church influenced life in medieval times. In this chapter, you will find out what **daily life** was like for people living in towns during the later Middle Ages, from about 1000 to 1450 C.E.

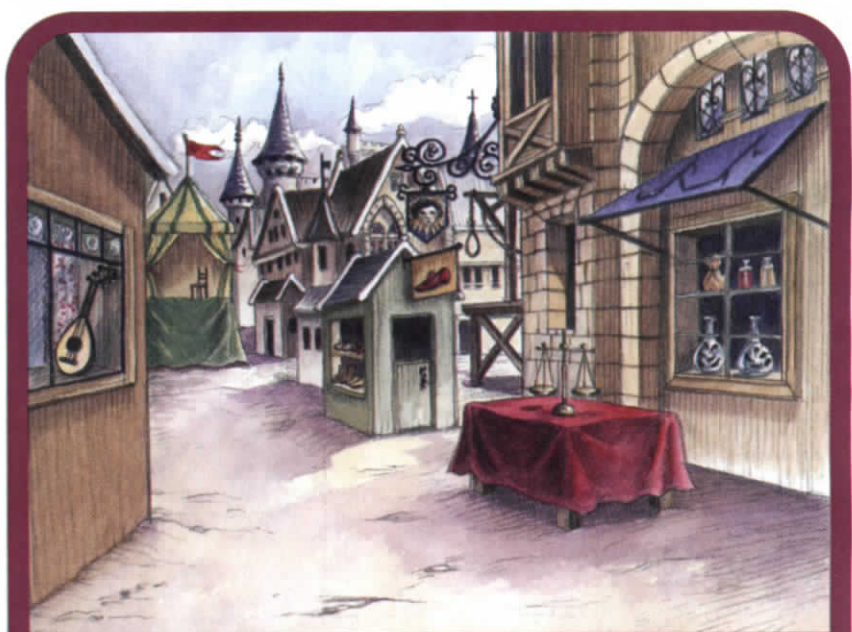
At the start of the Middle Ages, most people lived in the countryside, either on feudal manors or in religious communities. But by the 12th century, towns were growing up around castles and monasteries and along trade routes. These bustling towns became centers of trade and industry.

Almost all medieval towns were surrounded by thick stone walls for protection. Visitors entered through gates in the walls. Inside the walls, homes and businesses lined unpaved streets. Since few people could read, signs with colorful pictures hung over the doorways of shops and businesses. Open squares in front of public buildings such as churches served as gathering places.

Most streets were very narrow. Often the second stories of the houses were built projecting out over the first story, so very little daylight filtered down to the streets.

Squares and streets were crowded with people, horses, and carts—as well as cats, dogs, geese, and chickens. There was no garbage collection, so residents threw their garbage into nearby canals and ditches, or simply out the window. As you can imagine, most medieval towns were filled with unpleasant smells.

In this chapter, you'll first learn about the growth of medieval towns. Then you'll look at several aspects of daily life in these towns. You'll explore **guilds, trade and commerce, homes and households, disease and medical treatment, crime and punishment,** and **leisure and entertainment.**



Use this drawing as a graphic organizer to help you learn more about daily life in medieval European towns.

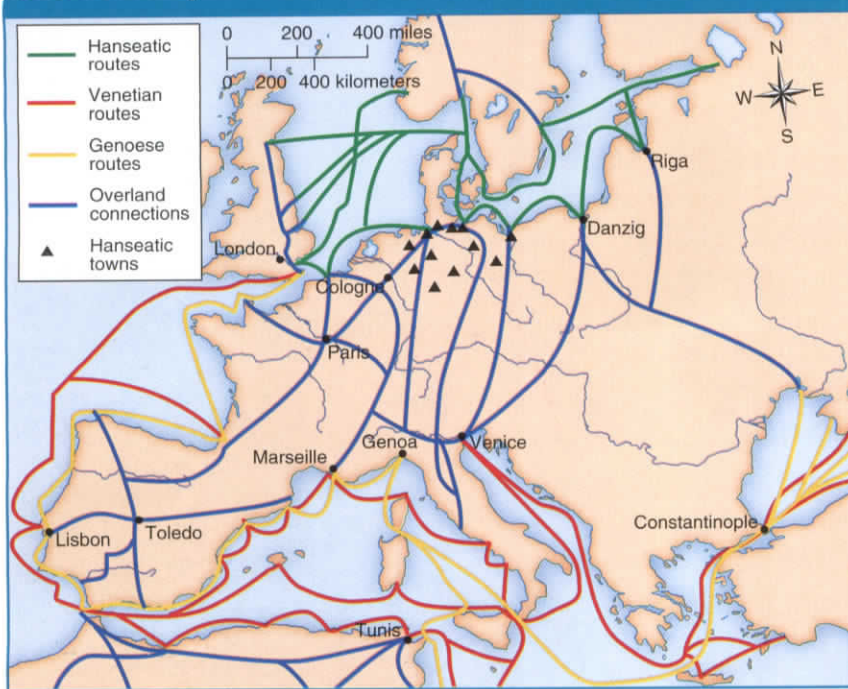
4.2 The Growth of Medieval Towns

In the ancient world, town life was well established, particularly in Greece and Rome. Ancient towns were busy trading centers. But after the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, trade with the east suffered, and town life declined. In the Early Middle Ages, most people in western Europe lived in scattered communities in the countryside.

By the High Middle Ages, towns were growing again. One reason for their growth was improvements in agriculture. Farmers were clearing forests and adopting better farming methods. As a result, they had a surplus of crops to sell in town markets. Another reason was the revival of trade. Seaport towns like Venice and Genoa in Italy served as trading centers with the east. Within Europe, goods often traveled by river, and many towns grew up near these waterways.

Many of the merchants who sold their wares in towns became permanent residents. So did people practicing various trades. Some towns grew wealthier

Medieval European Towns and Trade Routes, About 1500 c.e.



The trade routes shown here were used by people from Venice, Genoa, and Hanseatic towns. Hanseatic towns were part of a group called the Hanseatic League. Merchants in this group worked together to make trade safer and easier.

because local people specialized in making specific types of goods. For example, towns in Flanders (present-day Belgium and the Netherlands) were known for their fine woolen cloth. The Italian city of Venice was known for making glass. Other towns built their wealth on the banking industry that grew up to help people trade more easily.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, towns were generally part of the **domain** of a feudal lord—whether a monarch, a noble, or a high-ranking church official. As towns grew wealthier, town dwellers began to resent the lord's feudal rights and his demands for taxes. They felt they no longer needed the lord's protection—or his interference.

In some places, such as northern France and Italy, violence broke out as towns struggled to become independent. In other places, such as England and parts of France, the change was more peaceful. Many towns became independent by purchasing a royal **charter**. The charter granted them the right to govern themselves, make laws, and raise taxes. Free towns were often governed by a mayor and a town council. Power gradually shifted from feudal lords to the rising class of merchants and craftspeople.

domain the land controlled by a ruler or lord

charter a written grant of rights and privileges by a ruler or government to a community, class of people, or organization

4.3 Guilds

Medieval towns began as centers for trade, but they soon became places where many goods were made. Both trade and the production of goods were overseen by organizations called **guilds**.

There were two main kinds of guilds, merchant guilds and craft guilds. All types of craftspeople had their own guilds, from cloth makers to cobblers (who made shoes, belts, and other leather goods) to the stonemasons who built the great cathedrals.

Guilds provided help and protection for the people doing a certain kind of work, and they maintained high standards. Guilds controlled the hours of work and set fair prices. They also dealt with complaints from the public. If, for example, a coal merchant cheated a customer, all coal merchants might look bad. The guilds therefore punished members who cheated.

Guild members paid dues to their guild. Their dues paid for the construction of guildhalls and for guild fairs and festivals. Guilds also used the money to take care of members and their families who were sick and unable to work.

It was not easy to become a member of a guild. Starting around the age of 12, a boy, and sometimes a girl, became an **apprentice**. An apprentice's parents signed an agreement with a master of the trade. The master agreed to house, feed, and train the apprentice. Sometimes, but not always, the parents paid the master a sum of money. Apprentices rarely got paid for their work.

At the end of seven years, apprentices had to prove to the guild that they had mastered their trade. To do this, an apprentice produced a piece of work called a "master piece." If the guild approved of the work, the apprentice was given the right to set up his or her own business. Setting up a business was expensive, however, and few people could afford to do it right away. Often they became **journeymen** instead. The word *journeyman* does not refer to a journey. It comes from the French word *journee*, for "day." A journeyman was a craftsman who found work "by the day" instead of becoming a master who employed other workers.

guild an organization of people in the same craft or trade

apprentice a person who works for an expert in a trade or craft in return for training

Journeyman a person who has learned a particular trade or craft but has not become an employer, or master



The cobblers working in this shoemaker's shop were probably journeymen working for the master of the shop.

commerce the buying and selling of goods

Jew a descendant of the ancient Hebrews, the founders of the religion of Judaism; also, any person whose religion is Judaism

During the Late Middle Ages, marketplaces provided townspeople with food and goods from local farmers and faraway merchants.

4.4 Trade and Commerce

What brought most people to towns was business—meaning trade and **commerce**. As trade and commerce grew, so did towns.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, most trade was in luxury goods, which only the wealthy could afford. People made everyday necessities for themselves. By the High Middle Ages, more people were buying and selling more kinds of goods. These included everyday items, like food, clothing, and household items. They also included the specialized goods that different towns began producing, such as woolen cloth, glass, and silk.

Most towns had a market, where food and local goods were bought and sold. Much larger were the great merchant fairs, which could attract merchants from many countries. A town might hold a merchant fair a couple of times a year. The goods for sale at large fairs came from all over Europe and the east.

With the growth of trade and commerce, merchants grew increasingly powerful and wealthy. They ran sizable businesses and looked for trading opportunities far from home. Merchant guilds came to dominate the business life of towns and cities. In towns that had become independent, members of merchant guilds often sat on town councils.

Not everyone prospered, however. In Christian Europe, there was often prejudice against **Jews**. Medieval towns commonly had sizable Jewish communities. The hostility of Christians, sometimes backed up by laws, made it difficult for Jews to earn their living by farming the land. Their lords sometimes took their property and belongings at will. Jews could also be the targets of violence.

One opportunity that was open to Jews was to become bankers and moneylenders. This work was generally forbidden to Christians, because the church taught that charging money for loans was sinful. Jewish bankers and moneylenders performed an essential service for the economy. Still, they were often looked down upon and abused for practicing this “wicked” trade.



4.5 Homes and Households

Medieval towns were typically small and crowded. Most of the houses were built of wood. They were narrow and could be up to four stories high. As wooden houses aged, they tended to lean. Sometimes two facing houses would lean so much they touched across the street!

Rich and poor lived in quite different households. In poorer neighborhoods, several families might share a house. A family might have only one room where they cooked, ate, and slept. In general, people worked where they lived. If a father or mother was a weaver, for example, the loom would be in the home.

Wealthy merchants often had splendid homes. The first level might be given over to a business, including offices and storerooms. The family's living quarters might be on the second level, complete with a *solar*, a space where the family gathered to eat and talk. An upper level might house servants and apprentices.

Even for wealthy families, life was not always comfortable. Rooms were cold, smoky, and dim. Fireplaces were the only source of heat as well as the main source of light. Windows were small and covered with oiled parchment instead of glass, so little sunlight came through.

Growing up in a medieval town wasn't easy, either. About half of all children died before they became adults. Those who survived began preparing for their adult roles around the age of seven. Some boys and girls attended school, where they learned to read and write. Children from wealthier homes might learn to paint and to play music on a lute (a stringed instrument). Other children started work as apprentices.

In general, people of the Middle Ages believed in an orderly society in which everyone knew their place. Most boys grew up to do the same work as their fathers. Some girls trained for a craft. But most girls married young, some as early as 12, and were soon raising children of their own. For many girls, their education was at home, where they learned cooking, cloth making, and other skills necessary to run a home and care for a family.



The Meal at the House of Epulone was painted by artist Carlo Saraceni around the year 1600. The family appears to be wealthy, with an outdoor space in which to gather and be entertained by lute players.

4.6 Disease and Medical Treatment

Unhealthy living conditions in medieval towns led to the spread of many diseases. Towns were very dirty places. There was no running water in homes. Instead of bathrooms, people used outdoor privies (shelters used as a toilets) or chamber pots that they emptied into nearby streams and canals. Garbage, too, was tossed into streams and canals or onto the streets. People lived crowded together in small spaces. They usually bathed only once a week, if that. Rats and fleas were common, and they often carried diseases. It's no wonder people were often ill.

leprosy a skin and nerve disease that causes open sores on the body and can lead to serious complications and death

bubonic plague a deadly contagious disease caused by bacteria and spread by fleas

Many illnesses that can be prevented or cured today had no cures in medieval times. One example is **leprosy**. Because leprosy can spread from one person to another, lepers were ordered to live by themselves in isolated houses, usually far from towns. Some towns even passed laws to keep out lepers.

Common diseases that had no cure included measles, cholera, and scarlet fever. The most feared disease was **bubonic plague**, also called the Black Death. You'll learn more about this disease and its impact on Europe in the next chapter.

No one knew exactly how diseases like these were spread. Unfortunately, this made many people look for someone to blame. For example, after an outbreak of illness, Jews were sometimes accused of poisoning wells.

Although hospitals were invented during the Middle Ages, there were few of them. When sickness struck, most people were treated in their homes by family members or, sometimes, a doctor. Medieval doctors believed in a mixture of prayer and medical treatment. Many treatments involved herbs. Using herbs as medicine

had a long history based on traditional folk wisdom and knowledge handed down from ancient Greece and Rome. Other treatments were based on less scientific methods. For example, medieval doctors sometimes consulted the positions of the planets and relied on magic charms to heal people.

Another common technique was to “bleed” patients by opening a vein or applying leeches (a type of worm) to the skin to suck out blood. Medieval doctors believed that “bloodletting” helped restore balance to the body and spirit. Unfortunately, such treatments often weakened a patient further.

This doctor is treating patients by “bleeding” them. It was believed that this technique removed contaminated blood from the body and would restore health.



4.7 Crime and Punishment

Besides being unhealthy, medieval towns were noisy, crowded, and often unsafe. Pickpockets and thieves were always on the lookout for travelers with money in their pouches. Towns were especially dangerous at night, because there were no streetlights. Night watchmen patrolled the streets with candle lanterns to deter, or discourage, criminals.

People accused of crimes were held in dirty, crowded jails. Prisoners had to rely on friends and family to bring them food or money. Otherwise, they might starve. Wealthy people sometimes left money in their wills to help prisoners buy food.

In the Early Middle Ages, trial by ordeal or combat was often used to establish an accused person's guilt or innocence. In a trial by ordeal, the accused had to pass a dangerous test, such as being thrown into a deep well. Unfortunately, a person who floated instead of drowning was declared guilty, because he or she had been "rejected" by the water.

In a trial by combat, the accused person had to fight to prove his or her innocence. People believed that God would make sure the right party won. Clergy, women, children, and disabled people could name a champion to fight for them.

Punishments for crimes were very harsh. For lesser crimes, people were fined or put in the stocks. The stocks were a wooden frame with holes for the person's legs and sometimes arms. Being left in the stocks for hours or days was both painful and humiliating.

People found guilty of serious crimes, such as highway robbery, stealing livestock, treason, or murder, could be hanged or burned at the stake. Executions were carried out in public, often in front of large crowds.

In most parts of Europe, important lords shared with kings the power to prosecute major crimes. In England, kings in the early 1100s began setting up a nationwide system of royal courts. The decisions of royal judges contributed to a growing body of **common law**. Along with an independent judiciary, or court system, English common law would become an important safeguard of individual rights. Throughout Europe, court inquiries based on written and oral evidence eventually replaced trial by ordeal and combat.



The introduction of a court system to judge crimes and punishment was a great improvement over trials by ordeal and combat.

common law a body of rulings made by judges that become part of a nation's legal system

4.8 Leisure and Entertainment

Although many aspects of town life were difficult and people worked hard, they also participated in many leisure activities. Medieval people engaged in many of the same activities we enjoy today. Children played with dolls and toys, such as wooden swords and hobbyhorses. They rolled hoops and played games like badminton, lawn bowling, and blind man's bluff. Adults also liked games, such as chess, checkers, and backgammon. They might gather to play card games, bet on rolls of dice, or go dancing (although the church frowned on these activities).

Townpeople also took time off from work to celebrate special days, such as religious feasts. On Sundays and holidays, animal baiting was a popular, though

cruel, amusement. First a bull or bear was fastened to a stake by a chain around its neck or a back leg, and sometimes by a nose ring. Then specially trained dogs were set loose to torment the captive animal.

Fair days were especially colorful. Jugglers, dancers, clowns, and **minstrels** entertained the fairgoers. Guild members paraded through the streets, dressed in special costumes and carrying banners.

Guilds also put on **mystery plays** in which they acted out stories from the Bible. Often they performed stories that were appropriate to their guild. In some towns, for instance, the boat builders acted out the story of Noah. In this story, Noah had to build an ark (a boat) to survive a flood that God sent to “cleanse” the world of people. In other towns, the coopers (barrel makers) acted out this story. The coopers put hundreds of barrels filled with water on the rooftops. Then they let the water out to represent the 40 days of rain the story tells about.

Mystery plays gave rise to another type of religious drama, the **miracle play**. These plays dramatized the lives of saints. Often they showed the saints performing miracles, or wonders. For example, in England it was popular to portray the story of St. George, who slew a dragon that was about to eat the daughter of a king.



Mystery and miracle plays were performed by guild members to entertain townspeople with dramatizations of stories from the Bible or the lives of saints.

minstrel a singer or musician who sang or recited poems to music played on a harp or other instrument

mystery play a type of religious drama in the Middle Ages based on stories from the Bible
miracle play a type of religious drama in the Middle Ages based on stories about saints

The church eventually disapproved of both mystery and miracle plays, but people still enjoyed seeing them acted out in the streets or the public square.

4.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about daily life in towns in the High and Late Middle Ages. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, most people lived in the countryside. By about 1200, however, towns were growing. Farmers came to towns to sell their crops, and the revival of trade brought merchants with many kinds of goods to sell.

As trade and commerce grew, so did towns. Many became powerful and wealthy enough to purchase their independence from their feudal lords. Guilds, especially the merchant guilds, became leading forces in their communities.

Life in towns was crowded, noisy, and dirty. Diseases spread rapidly, and many people could not be cured with the medical knowledge of the time. Crime was also a problem, and it was punished harshly. Despite these hardships, many types of leisure activities made life more enjoyable for town dwellers, including games, fairs, and religious plays put on by guilds.

The growth of towns, and of an economy based on trade and commerce, represented a significant change in people's way of life. Many historians believe that these developments prepared the way for sweeping change at the end of the Middle Ages. In the next chapter, you'll learn about the decline of feudalism.

As towns grew, farmers brought their crops to sell at the town marketplace.

