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Inclusion and Exclusion in Medieval European Craft Guilds

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Abstract

This essay examines the effect of European craft guilds on early European society. Specifically, it focuses on guilds' impacts on women, Jews, and its own members. This historical analysis overwhelmingly finds that while European craft guilds fostered community for their members, they had the opposite, dividing, effect on excluded non-member populations. For members of a craft guild, participation meant access to expanding opportunities and greater social status and mobility. Guilds ensured members fair wages, equal chances for success, advancement of skills and social status, and a sense of stability. Guilds acted much like a social network, hosting a wide variety of activities that fostered cohesion and cooperation. Evidence indicated that some women were able to participate in guild life, though the scope of that participation was quite limited; Jews were barred from guilds entirely. Because guilds reserved the rights to certain skilled trades, Jews and women were denied many potential livelihoods. The essay ultimately explores the historical implications of such guild inclusion and exclusion.

Introduction

The role of agricultural surpluses in the eleventh century, among other lesser factors, made the Commercial Revolution possible (Lopez 56). The excess of food during this period, lasting until the mid-eighteenth century, liberated laborers from mere daily subsistence at the behest of lords, and provided many with time for other endeavors. With the advances of the Commercial Revolution came guilds, which can be defined as “an association of people engaging in the same activities and wishing to pursue shared purposes” (Ogilvie 3). The scope of this paper specifically investigates European craft guilds (rather than the prominent merchant guilds or guilds outside of the European continent), exploring the role they played in advancing or impeding an individual’s social and economic progress. These advancements included community building, skills training, quality standards, social activities, beneficial marriages, and occupational security, among others. This paper seeks to mediate the popular narrative of the revolutionary and profuse societal benefits attributable to the formation of medieval European craft guilds. By looking more comprehensively at guilds’ relationships with its members, with women, and with Jews, we will discover that the formation of European craft guilds fostered social and economic prosperity for its members but hindered the advancement of excluded non-members.

Master-Narrative: The Benefits of Guild Life

To understand the origins of this overly simplified narrative, we must recognize what life was like before the growth of guilds. During this period in medieval Europe, the feudal system of governance rigidly confined people to their social ranks, limiting opportunities. The lowest ranks were often restricted to arduous agricultural labor, and all levels of the social hierarchy were dependent on others above or below them (Lopez 48). When populations began to coalesce into towns, the formation of guilds provided desirable opportunities to those that would otherwise have few. As Robert S. Lopez notes, the change gave serfs and other peasants an avenue toward freedom and escape from feudal control (124). Specifically, for many new craftspeople, the formation of guilds alongside the Commercial Revolution meant “more food, better communications, relief from the worst forms of personal bondage, some labor-saving devices, and, above all, expanding opportunities” (Lopez 125). Guilds made their members feel like they were in a fair and even-handed community because, despite the hierarchies within them, guilds ensured an “equal chance of advancement and success” (Lopez 126); for example, the procedure to go from an apprentice to a master was the same for every member of that guild. Through such apprenticeships, guilds also diffused knowledge to foster training and skills among its members for mutual prosperity (Epstein 684; Cave and Coulson 249). Additionally, Robert Lopez notes, “it was fairly easy for [...] a master to enlarge

his staff, [and] for an apprentice to qualify as a master” (127). This supposed ease gave many individuals fair access to guilds along with the community and advantages that came with it. Furthermore, the quality standards that guilds enforced led to increased revenues for the many occupations they represented (Epstein 686). Craft guilds made their members feel secure in their occupation and future.

After members satisfied their essential needs of basic subsistence, they looked to guilds to fulfill their societal needs. Guilds were essentially multifaceted social networks, valuable in building community and a sense of belonging (Ogilvie 18). Guilds used their membership dues and admission fees to fund a variety of social activities, like meetings and parties, to strengthen inter-member bonds (Lopez 128). Many guilds went so far as to require attendance to assemblies, banquets, and feasts to further social capital (Ogilvie 19). Some guilds organized funeral ceremonies for members and their families and required all members to attend—including the funerals held for a member’s slave (Ogilvie 19). Similarly, guilds fostered solidarity through cultivating new familial bonds, as families belonging to the same guild often intermarried (Ogilvie 23). Some guilds, such as the one described in *The Shearers’ Charter of Arras*, punished those who did not generally favor their fellow members over non-members. In the Flemish textile industry, regulations state that “whatever brother of this Fraternity shall betray his confrère for others shall not work at the trade for a year and a day” (Cave and Coulson 252). These actions were motivated by a desire to cultivate mutual cooperation, collective action, and fair norms within their occupation (Ogilvie 23). Overall, guilds advanced collaboration and belonging for members in order to promote their interests.

Guilds also reinforced religious bonds. It is important to note that a majority of guilds were located in cities, and many cities were centered around castles or churches (Rosenwein 160). With religious institutions already an essential part of the community, many guilds reinforced this unity by holding their assemblies in religious buildings such as convents or churches or by practicing religious observances together (Ogilvie 21). Furthermore, some guilds directly dedicated themselves to saints; for example, the Shearers of Arras Guild was “founded in the name of the Fraternity of God and St. Julien” (Cave and Coulson 250). Reinforcing religiosity in this way further united guilds in a community of common beliefs and shared values.

Access Denied: Entry Barriers to Guilds

While there is evidence that guilds benefited many in society, there is also contrasting proof that guilds were exclusive and restrictive for particular groups. When Lopez said it was easy to join a guild, he was referring to privileged Christian men. Statistical analysis of the inhabitants of medieval European households suggests that many guilds served as “exclusive

organizations for relatively well-off, middle-class men” (Ogilvie 14). Guild regulations show that many guilds “discriminated against women, poor men, Jews, Slavs, [Romani], migrants, people they defined as ‘dishonourable’ [sic] or ‘untouchable’, and members of minority ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups” (Ogilvie 7). These statements show that one must question who specifically benefited from guilds, and who was left out or harmed.

Evidence of this discrimination is codified through the entry barriers craft guilds employed. These barriers fell into four predominant categories of exclusion: group affiliation, demographic characteristics, economic characteristics, and collective acceptability (Ogilvie 96-116). Ogilvie notes that these group affiliation barriers involved matters concerning local citizenship such as passing a citizenship test or proving local citizenship, a minimum period of prior citizenship, or proof of local residence. Demographic characteristics included choosing or barring guild applicants on the basis of age, marital status, legitimate birth, or familial ties with guild masters (Ogilvie 106-111). Economic barriers included minimum ownership of wealth or property, restrictions on those previously associated with another guild, and fees for such categories as apprentice admissions, mastership, or operating licenses (Ogilvie 116-126). Finally, collective acceptability requirements barred those who may have satisfied all other requirements by barring anyone from a “dishonorable occupational background,” those that could not prove a good reputation, and those who were not collectively accepted after their probationary period (Ogilvie 128-132). Any barrier that a particular guild chose to apply further divided people in society by excluding them from its membership and the advances that came with it.

Despite the scholarship claiming that many of these entry barriers were largely unenforced, the fact that guilds claimed exclusive rights suggests they still intended to restrict membership in some way (Ogilvie 133). Additionally, primary sources show citizens complaining about restricted entry (Ogilvie 134). Since often anyone who wanted a job in a craft had to first become a member of that guild, not being accepted into a guild had a significant economic impact (Ogilvie 86). The exclusion of outsiders likely agitated the discontent between those inside and outside a particular guild.

Women and Guilds

Medieval women had both mixed success in accessing a guild’s social and economic benefits. Some women were allowed to participate in guild life. The provost of Paris’ book of guild regulations regarding Parisian silk fabric makers is one example showing that women were involved in certain trades; it also demonstrates that they were subject to the same rules as men in advancing to the topmost position within a guild (Amt 162). The ability to become a mistress of a craft imbued women with a greater degree of agency, demanding respect by virtue of attaining the highest status within a guild, placing her above male apprentices or

journeymen. Furthermore, the regulations mandated quality standards and stated that silk-maker apprentices, who were most likely to be female, would receive a fair pay; this would prevent the head of that guild from taking economic advantage of them (Amt 162). Overall, because women were held to the same standards as men, many of the same features of guilds promoting social and economic advancement were available to women.

However, while certain guilds connected women, most others excluded them. Despite the Parisian silk-makers' guild example described above, evidence suggests that women faced intense discrimination and were largely excluded from guilds (Ogilvie 7). Certain guilds "adopted the hard-line position of the German jurist Adrian Beier who declared in 1683 that '[m]asculine sex is one of the indispensable basic preconditions for admission to a guild'" (Ogilvie 33). Even in guilds where women did have a role, men usually "were the ones who dominated the offices and set guild policies" (Rosenwein 219). In the silk fabric makers example, it was a male provost, Etienne de Boileau, who determined the regulations (Amt 162). So though some guilds fostered community and belonging for women, many more had the opposite social effect, solidifying distinct patriarchal roles by requiring male leadership or excluding women altogether.

Jews and Guilds

Jews were prohibited from joining craft guilds altogether (Rosenwein 223), and their exclusion was just one of many direct attacks on their potential for community and belonging in a Christian-dominated society. In addition, agricultural jobs were an unattractive alternative option because there was always the "possibility of sudden expulsion and the difficulty of obtaining help from Gentile hands" (Lopez 61). Barred from practicing any craft, the only two options available to a Jewish person were to become a moneylender or a long-distance trader. Long-distance trading was one of a very limited number of options for a Jewish person if they were residing along the Mediterranean. Sadly, those Jews who did become traders were at best "tolerated, but nowhere secure" in the Muslim and Christian societies in which they traded (Lopez 62). Exclusion from guilds exacerbated the distance and distrust in an already anti-Semitic time. With Jews absent on frequent lengthy travels for long-distance trade, we can postulate that many of their neighbors did not even consider them to be a part of the community in which they lived. This distance likely further fueled the insider-outsider divide and antipathy between a guild's members and non-members. Jewish people had the option of moneylending because it was an occupation from which Christians were prohibited. Sadly, their success in this field and other lucrative endeavors further increased their unpopularity (Lopez 62). In fact, as Rosenwein reports, one of the motivations to kill Jewish people was so that debtors would not have to pay back their debts (Rosenwein 233). The occupations that

Jews were forced into, partially due to guilds' exclusion of Jews, deepened resentment and increased the generalized fragmentation of guild and non-guild society members.

Conclusion

The heightened sense of community and belonging, as well as the access to social and economic advancements for members within a guild, was precisely part of the problem. As Ogilvie explains, guilds were so close-knit that everyone knew who was and was not a member (Ogilvie 6), and this closeness likely helped foment an insider and outsider mentality. The modern psychological term "groupthink" applies perfectly to this kind of situation (Ogilvie 6). Guild members were so invested in being a part of the group that they accepted ethically wrong or unjustified decisions, including mandating social penalties through collective action by "imposing ostracism on members who failed to discriminate against women or Jews" (Ogilvie 24). The guilds' fostering of community and belonging between members created the conditions necessary for discriminating against and excluding already marginalized people.

All in all, European craft guilds varied greatly across societies and their impact on the community varied as well. Those that were included in a guild enjoyed many benefits and were connected through various events. Guilds also ensured a member's livelihood by providing fair dealing, mobility within their hierarchy, and many opportunities for success. They increased business and brought in more customers by enforcing quality standards. Conversely, guilds imposed a plethora of entry barriers against groups such as women and Jews. While women were not barred from all guilds as the Jews were, their role in guilds was accepted in only certain cases; in most circumstances, a woman's role in a guild was either minimized or completely absent. Guilds fueled resentment against Jewish people and hindered social and economic advancement, chiefly their feelings of community and belonging. Jewish people were forced into moneylending or long-distance trade occupations which facilitated setting Jews apart from the wider society as a whole.

The mixture of community building and community exclusion in guilds deepened the divide between larger groups in European society. A guild's ability to fragment community likely had an immense effect on later historical processes and events, including the constant reinforcement of the male-dominated social class structure. Furthermore, the exclusion of Jews likely fed into the resentment demonstrated by the massacres of the People's Crusade in the eleventh century, and other occurrences such as the accusation of blood libel and the blame imposed on them during the Black Death. On the other hand, the equality guilds ensured for their members may have inspired others later in the industrial age to unionize for fairer pay and working standards reminiscent of guilds.

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