

Medieval Craft Guilds

In medieval Europe craft guilds were organizations of workers and craftsmen dedicated to a particular trade, such as weaving, masonry, or bread-making. Medieval craft guilds supported the economic lives of their members by promoting fair wages and a decent standard of living. Guilds offered many benefits to their members and to their communities, but those benefits came at a price. Guilds were so powerful that they not only stunted the professional and financial growth of their members, but also the economic growth of their communities. During the Middle Ages there were numerous advantages to guild membership, and thus guilds had no trouble attracting members. An adolescent male would enter a guild as an unpaid apprentice, living and working in the home of a master craftsman. Apprentices typically received free room and board while they learned their trade. When the apprentice's education was complete, he was promoted to journeyman, whereupon he would receive the full benefits of membership.

As a journeyman the craftsman assumed a paid position under a guild master, producing goods for public sale. A typical craftsman would remain in this position throughout his career supporting his family comfortably on a journeyman's wages. If a journeyman achieved enough financial success to start an independent business, he might obtain permission to become a master, hiring journeymen and taking on apprentices of his own. As a guild master, a craftsman would not only earn profits from his own work, but also from his apprentices' work, thereby making the position extremely lucrative.

The guild master had complete control of the money, and all too often kept the money for himself, rather than giving members an equal share of it. In addition, the guild fees were so substantial that members were unable to build savings. For all these reasons, though journeymen could comfortably support their families, it was very hard for them to gain financial independence from the guild.