


## THE COMMERCIAL CHARACTER OF THE WESTERN CITIES OF THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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### ABSTRACT

This article makes a brief historiographical analysis of the economic character of the main medieval cities, "resurrected" between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries in Western Europe. Initially, we discuss an old debate among historians that deals with the divergences related to the motivation that led to the "reappearance" of urban life in the period called the "Late Middle Ages". Were these urban agglomerations the result of the expansion of the old burghs, the continuity of the old episcopal cities, or the result of the expansion and intensification of the commercial relations developed by the new "class" of rich men, the merchants, in the old world? We seek to understand in what aspects these new urban agglomerations differed from the old cities of the West, especially in the economic and social fields. In the end, we address the main changes that took place in the mentalities of medieval society regarding the way of thinking about their social relations, with emphasis on the influence caused by the practical transformations that occurred in the productive and commercial base in the final phase of the Middle Ages and the effect of this on the process of reformulation of the new social concepts.

**Keywords:** Resurgence. Medieval Cities. Merchants. Production. Trade.

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## INTRODUCTION

The present work aims to understand what were the main characteristics and the way of functioning of the medieval cities "resurrected" during the so-called "Late Middle Ages", which comprises the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. The time frame proposed for analysis is because it is the period in which these urban agglomerations "reappeared" vigorously in Western Europe, after a long period of domination by the Feudal System, which had the countryside as the "natural" space of social organization. Despite the antagonism between "countryside and city", these environments were integrated and dependent on each other. As we will see later, the changes developed within the cities directly influenced Feudalism, greatly favoring the process of gradual dissolution of the old system.

These new urban spaces presented themselves as an extremely fertile ground for the development of new practices in the relations of production and exchange, the result of the decisive action of two prominent social actors, the merchants, and the artisans. For this reason, it is essential to analyze the urban environment from the observation of the influence that these two distinct social elements had. It is necessary to understand how the urban world of the late Middle Ages was organized and what were the social and economic values that prevailed in this society. However, given the characteristics and specificities of each city, it was not possible to refer to all of them for data analysis. In this sense, we were also unable to determine a single explanatory model, which would be able to determine how the "resurgence" of these urban spaces took place.

Avoiding going into the specific issues of each city and seeking to direct the focus of the study, we emphasized the common aspects existing between the great economic and commercial centers of the centuries in question. The main regions of the West that served for the historiographical analysis of the "new medieval cities" comprised mainly the regions of the current territories of France, Italy, and the Netherlands, where the most economically active cities at the time were located: Florence, Rome, Brussels, Lubeck, Ghent, Paris, Venice, Bruges, among others.

Initially, we will discuss the main theses defended by the authors that propose to explain the origin and motivation for the "resurgence" of cities from the eleventh century onwards. Despite the divergences about the origin, it is a consensus among most of them that these new urban agglomerations presented different characteristics from the old cities, especially in economic and social aspects. As in these cities, the productive and

commercial activity was much more intense than in the fiefdoms, there was a strong attraction of the peasants to it, mainly due to the search for a job that would guarantee the family's livelihood, as the countryside was already showing signs of exhaustion of the labor supply.

For our analysis, we chose to give special focus to the economic aspect of cities because we understand that this was what most influenced the changes that developed in the mentalities of the time and future generations. We will conclude the article by addressing the importance of this process for the development of Western society, especially in the social and economic aspects. We thus seek to corroborate and demystify the maxim, which is sometimes repeated, that the Middle Ages would have been the "Dark Ages", "of stagnation" and for some, even of "historical regression".

## **MEDIEVAL CITIES FROM THE ELEVENTH CENTURY ONWARDS: THE CONTROVERSY OF THE " RESURGENCE"**

The period between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century until approximately the end of the tenth century is known by traditional historiography as the "High Middle Ages". This first phase of the medieval period was characterized by a continuous process of urban decay and intense ruralization of Western Europe. During these centuries, Feudalism was constituted and large portions of land (fiefdoms) multiplied and spread throughout much of Europe. The Fief was the "natural *locus*" of the experience and social organization of most people.

In the feudal regime, the "lord" was the owner of a large portion of land where he exercised total power over his serfs. A *suzerain* (lord) could be a *vassal* (subordinate) of another, however, within the limits of his lands he was the "absolute lord", acting as judge, protector, administrator, and "police" authority, among others. Usually, the serfs or villains were subordinated to the lord by a contractual relationship of dependence that united them, and at the end of the obligation they could change fiefdom, although this in practice was not very common. These serfs made up of artisans or peasants, usually developed a lasting relationship with the feudal lord and ended up being linked to the lands of the fief, becoming "aggregated" to their value. Even those who were free did not have the right of ownership over the land, at most they were guaranteed not to be evicted from it.

As the fiefdoms were practically self-sufficient in the production of what they needed, urban commerce practically did not exist. As a result of the intensification of the

displacement of people who migrated from the city to the countryside in search of family subsistence, municipal life was weakened. As a result, in this first phase of the Middle Ages, the seigniorial regime was strengthened around the fiefdoms, constituting serfdom as the economic and social basis for sustaining Western Europe. The absence of a strong and centralized power in the main regions gave each fiefdom great autonomy, creating within it a local and closed economy, which most of the time did not produce surpluses and did not make use of currencies in exchanges. Perhaps, for this reason, there were few urban markets constituted.

From the eleventh century onwards, the feudal system of Western Europe entered a second phase, undergoing significant changes in its structure. One of the main transformations was the "resurgence" of medieval cities, simultaneous with the weakening of feudal relations. This period became known as the "Late Middle Ages" and lasted until the end of the fourteenth century. These new urban spaces proved to be very different from the ancient Roman cities, especially in their administration and economy.

The enchantment, the prospect of work, and the possibility of social ascension that the cities generated attracted the peasants to the new urban spaces. The territorial perimeter of the cities increased systematically, as their population, their production, and their internal and external trade grew. This forced cities to organize themselves in a more complex way through the creation of local governments, mechanisms, and specific laws to regulate the behavior of city dwellers and rigidly supervise productive and commercial activities.

Although there are no precise records of numbers and not an abundance of documentary evidence that proves the population increase of cities in the Late Middle Ages, it is possible to determine their physical growth when we observe the successive constructions of the walls around the ruins of these medieval urban agglomerations. In them, up to four protective buildings appear around it, all built in different periods. The appearance of several towns and suburbs in this period also allows us to project a reasonable quantitative growth of the urban population.

As they surrounded the entire city, protecting it militarily from invasions and looting of products, the walls played an important role in the security of city dwellers, especially merchants. The construction and maintenance of these walls was initially the responsibility of the feudal lord, owner of the land where the city was located. However, with the growing

autonomy and subsequent independence that these urban spaces acquired, this became an obligation of the city dwellers, especially the wealthier bourgeoisie.

In addition, the wall had a symbolic representation of the population. To pass through its gates meant to leave the yoke of the feudal lord and acquire "freedom", even if it was not completely complete. The city was an isolated, autonomous, safe, and free place, entering it meant gaining independence. According to Pirenne (1977, p.118), "from the fact that it constitutes a fortified place, the city becomes a burgh." This statement demonstrates the character of the fortress that the cities had and gives clues to the origin of the word "bourgeois", which emerged in the eleventh century in France to designate the residents of the commercial burgh.

With the end of the Scandinavian, Slavic, and Hungarian invasions from the tenth century onwards, peace was again established in Europe. This process increased the birth rate and the resumption of population growth in several cities, new or old. "The fecundity of families appears as widespread among the nobility as among the peasants" (Pirenne, 1977, p.67). Other factors also influenced the proliferation of urban agglomerations in medieval Europe, such as the marked migration of peasants to the cities caused by the lack of land for cultivation, the increase in the descendants of the nobility, climatic inclement weather, the growth of trade and consumption of exotic products from the East, among others. This situation of emptying the countryside led to a drop in production and a consequent decrease in the incomes of the feudal lords. The solution they found was to increase taxation on peasants, which further forced migration to the large commercial centers. The plundering and the obligation to finance various crusades promoted by the Church also required increased taxation by the feudal lords.

As the land showed signs of depletion for agricultural production and no major innovations in cultivation techniques emerged, peasants found themselves under unsustainable pressure to increase productivity. They were forced to work more and more and, sometimes, to put their family's livelihood at risk to pay the required taxes. The solution envisioned by them was to seek refuge and survival in the cities. However, this migration did not take place smoothly, because even though they were not slaves, these peasants were attached to the lands and their departure from the fiefdoms provoked a strong reaction from the feudal lords. In some regions, groups were organized to capture the "fugitive" serfs.

Many of these gentlemen made cooperation agreements among themselves. However, these pacts were sometimes broken, as some landowners ended up covering up for runaway serfs in exchange for their commitment to settle on their land. In other regions, some lords chose to offer freedom to serfs in exchange for remaining in the fief or even changed the form of payment for their work by doing so through the use of coins (money). To force men to stay in the countryside, several feudal lords chose to make their relationship with the serfs even more coercive, making them almost slaves. This also generated a lot of revolts and led to the evasion of the countryside to the city.

According to Pirenne (1977), in addition to the migration of peasants to the cities, in many cases, urban growth was a direct result of the intensification of the activity performed by merchants (new rich men), especially the exercise of long-distance trade. Most of the time, these men came from the countryside, expelled and fugitives from misery, wars, and hunger. Without any work options, they embarked on the adventure of selling products from one place to another to earn some profit for their subsistence, with this they reached increasingly distant regions. On these commercial trips, they sometimes stopped to rest in a safe place capable of protecting their cargo against possible looting. Many ended up settling in these places founding new cities, almost always close to junctions of ancient Roman roads, a river, or a bridge.

Other cities would have emerged from a castle or burgh, such as the region of England, where artisans and merchants settled in search of the protection of the walls against possible looting. Accommodated in these spaces, the bourgeois began to sell products internally and externally. This created the need to increase the production of handicrafts, to meet the new demands of the markets. The need for new products in an ever-increasing quantity attracted peasants and artisans to look for work. This large volume of people ended up settling around the castle or the village, giving rise to urban centers that would later become the "new cities". The marked commercial and productive character of these agglomerations was very different from the old episcopal cities.

However, the idea that "trade alone was responsible for the emergence of medieval cities" is questioned by Heers (1994, p.127-129), who states that studies show that most cities in the West were already pre-urban centers. For him, even before trade intensified in the eleventh century, these small cities already existed, although he also states that they had great growth with the increase in trade, developing new forms of organization and structuring. According to this author, in the South, the cities were influenced by merchants,



but these, unlike those in the North analyzed by Pirenne, were usually the sons of wealthy nobles and large landowners and were almost always members of the nobility who turned to commercial activity because they had tax and political privileges with the princes.

For the author, in this region, the cities served as military protection in case of attacks by the Saracens, being surrounded by walls and in them lived knights, feudal lords, and artisans and there was no apparent opposition between the countryside and the city, as the latter was an integral part of the feudal system. In Italy, the cradle of Catholicism, the idea of continuity of Roman cities seemed to be more evident, as a large part of them remained episcopal centers in the first phase of the Middle Ages.

Suárez Fernández (1984) also questions Pirenne's theses. According to this author, the study carried out by the Belgian historian referred only to the cities of northern France, because, when one studies the cities of the south and center, it is found that most of them were small urban agglomerations, but very dependent on the countryside. For him, trade was not always the determining factor in the emergence of cities and it can be observed, for example, that there was no large commercial city in the *Champagne region*, although one of the largest trade fairs in France took place annually there, which brought together merchants and buyers from all regions. There is also the example of other cities that were abandoned and rebuilt in other places seeking greater protection from invasions and looting.

In this sense, there are several theses discussed by historiography that seek to support the "emergence" or "resurgence" of medieval cities in the Late Middle Ages. Some authors defend the idea that these new urban agglomerations were the "continuity" of Roman cities; others that they would be the result of the increase in productive and commercial activity, intensified by the action of merchants and the reopening of trade in the Mediterranean. Still, others claim that cities would have emerged from an evolution of a fiefdom, a fortress, or a burgh, which would explain why some of them would have developed as commercial centers and others as manorial spaces. There were also places where these situations coexisted in the same city, as was the case of Arles in France, which, according to LE Goff (1992, p.16) "... It was composed of four elements, the *Cité*, the Old Town, the New Town, and the Market, each with its wall and administration. It was not until 1623 that they met within the same wall."

In our view, only the sum of all these theses will allow us to better understand how the process of urbanization of the West took place at the end of the Middle Ages, as well

as the emptying of the countryside that accelerated the destructuring of the Feudal System. Despite the diversity of theses on the origin of cities in the Late Middle Ages, we can safely affirm that in most of them, new social relations developed, very different from those established in the old cities and within the fiefdoms. We will see that this was greatly influenced by the new ways of producing and marketing developed within medieval cities.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIEVAL CITIES

Unlike the fiefdom, the city of the late Middle Ages was where freedom was conquered, which, although limited in some aspects, allowed artisans and merchants the right to work, to organize themselves in their associations, and to produce and market their products with quality and guaranteed minimum prices. At that time, the urban space represented the chance to find a job that was missing in the countryside and that could guarantee a minimum livelihood for the family, even if this work was as a *day laborer*<sup>3</sup>. Increasingly, city dwellers had the autonomy to organize their cities administratively and commercially, create their courts, formulate specific legislation, construct buildings, etc. However, belonging to the city and obtaining definitive citizenship sometimes depended on a large financial contribution that could be paid by the individual himself or by the "sponsorship" of someone wealthy, with great influence and a resident eradicated in the urban space for at least a year and a day (Rossiaud, 1989).

Even those who resided in the cities in an "irregular" condition because they did not gain definitive citizenship, were also freed from the rule of the feudal lord, had the right to the protection of the walls, could seek a job, housing, and a minimum subsistence, which could be the result of the conquest of a job or even the charity of the Church or other residents. But the city was not a "paradise". The larger it was, the more pronounced its problems and the more precarious its infrastructure conditions. The majority of the population lacked housing and, for this reason, people crowded into the attics of houses or hostels. In the cities, sometimes, there was also a lack of drinking water, there was a lot of sewage deficiency, and a lot of garbage accumulation. This chaotic urban situation made it difficult for the local administration to combat the proliferation of infectious diseases such as dysentery, diphtheria, malaria, leprosy, typhoid fever, and bubonic plague, among

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<sup>3</sup> The figure of the journeyman refers to an artisan who had completed his apprenticeship, but had not been elevated to the status of master, usually because he had not obtained the conditions to purchase tools and facilities to open his workshop. He ended up being hired by a master to work receiving wages for the work performed by day, week or month.



others. The vertiginous and disorderly growth of cities was not accompanied at the same speed by a development of knowledge that would provide technical support for solving such problems.

In most medieval cities, social multiplicity predominated, men and women who belonged to the "new" and the "old world" mixed. In this environment lived and interacted: with teachers, students, merchants, artisans, apprentices, day laborers, clerics, prostitutes, beggars, the unemployed, and even some members of the feudal aristocracy, who had their main residence in the cities. Despite the diversity, most of them had in common the receipt of payment for their work done through money. This represented a novelty for mediocrity:

The functions of the city may be multiple (and increasingly diversifying), but what prevails is the mercantile mentality, (...) the salaried artisan sells his skills, the owner sells a room or a piece of land, the jurist sells his knowledge of the law, the teacher sells his culture, the worker sells his physical strength and the prostitute sells his body. Their *ministry*, and their offices, are ordered according to a system of reciprocal exchanges (...) according to a fair price stipulated daily in money, in the market, or at the place of recruitment (ROSSIAUD, 1989, p.105).

This social variety, despite generating diversity in people's actions and behavior, did not prevent most of them from being influenced by the innovative environment that cities offered. This represented a great paradigm shift for the state society of the<sup>4</sup> Middle Ages, as it created the possibility of "social mobility" among the groups that made up the class. Social elevation became possible through the accumulation of possessions that the individual would acquire through his work, the richer the easier this ascension. Now, men could move from misery to fortune and from fortune to misery, regardless of their social origin.

The growing increase in monetarization in trade accelerated the transfer of wealth, with merchants accumulating the most. The mercantile trade made it possible for this segment to concentrate most of the money circulating inside and outside the cities, materialized by coins, pieces, or gold ingots. In addition, as Feudalism weakened with the

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<sup>4</sup> The estate society is a characteristic structure of the High Middle Ages, fifth to tenth centuries, which divided society into estates and with specific privileges. One of its main characteristics was the impossibility of social mobility between groups. Social ascension was almost non-existent, being basically determined by the birth of the individual. The estates were fixed and divided into three distinct groups: the clergy (*oratores*) – those who pray – composed of the religious: the nobility (*bellatores*) – those who war – composed basically of knights and feudal lords and the people (*laboratores*) – those who work – composed basically of merchants, masters, peasants and day laborers.

impoverishment of the feudal aristocracy, the new rich men also began to acquire land, inside and outside the urban space. The possession of land was still synonymous with power and wealth, so the purchase of land, in addition to being a form of investment of the money of the rich merchants, meant obtaining "social prestige" for them. Gradually this would make society evolve towards the idea of "private property", one of the characteristics of the capitalist system.

With the increase in trade, large markets appeared, and new itinerant and fixed fairs required the use of coins for exchange. It became increasingly necessary to establish referential units of exchange, as the complexity of trade and currencies required it. According to Heers (1994), some secular and ecclesiastical lords began to mint coins, at first silver and of low value, later several cities also began to manufacture their coins, heavier and golden, such as Venice and Florence in 1237, Flanders in 1275, Genoa and Florence in 1252. At the end of the thirteenth century, most Western cities used currencies in their trade, but with different values and weights.

In the new context of monetization and diversification of commercial transactions, the figure of the money changer who was responsible for exchanging currencies in markets, squares, and fairs gained importance. With the increase in the frequency of the use of money in the equivalence of exchanges, several of these money changers became "bankers" who were in charge of receiving money from their customers and managing it, charging of course for the service provided. The volume of interest-bearing money loans increased, which began to be offered by both Jews and wealthy Christians. Gradually, the Church softened the condemnation of *usury*<sup>5</sup>, since it also began to lend money from these bankers. The pecuniary loan with the collection of interest reached various strata of society, mainly artisans, nobles, the bourgeois, and the church. As a safeguard for the loans, the new rich men received as collateral land, tools, or urban goods from the borrowers.

An important external factor that also expanded the use of money in exchanges was the expansion of maritime trade. For Heers (1994), it was the reopening of the Mediterranean Sea in the eleventh century that boosted trade in the region of Italy, especially through Venice. Although this city never ceased to trade and communicate with Constantinople, buying spices and fine fabrics to be traded with other cities, because

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<sup>5</sup> Excessive interest charges on loans. A practice condemned by the Church of the Middle Ages that could even lead to the practitioner being excommunicated.

despite the Muslim domination in the region, this did not seem to bother the Christian Venetians, they seemed more interested in the profits obtained from the trade with the port than with the religious precepts of the Holy Church. According to Pirenne (1977), after the opening of the sea, trade also intensified in other cities in southern Italy, such as Bari, Tarentum, Naples, and Amalfi, which began to trade more frequently with Constantinople. With the growth of maritime trade, more distant regions also "rekindled economically", as in the case of the French and Spanish coasts at the end of the eleventh century.

For Heers (1984), the North Sea region, where Flanders was located, also showed a visible commercial renaissance. But it was Bruges that best took advantage of the increase in trade in this region, as it was located at the bottom of the Gulf of Zwin, close to France, and was therefore preferred by the Counts of Flanders. In addition to Bruges, other cities also developed, mainly due to mercantile activities, such as Ypres, Ghent, Bruges, and Douai, which intensified the production of fabrics traded, especially with the most distant Italian cities and with the north of France, in the famous Champagne fairs. In the eleventh century, other cities located in the Low Countries also benefited from the North Sea trade, such as Liege and Scheldt, which appeared as thriving commercial centers.

In the eleventh century, it was possible to see two centers with greater development and commercial vigor: to the south, part of Italy, and especially Venice, and to the north, the coast of Flanders. But undoubtedly at that time Venice was the great commercial center of the West, as it was directly connected to Constantinople by sea and therefore enjoyed the commercial advantages that the largest port in the Mediterranean provided, it was a junction for Byzantine textiles and spices from Asia. Venice still exported wine and cereals, obtaining from the German emperors freedom to trade, first with neighboring cities and then with all of Italy.

The vigor of this trade was contagious throughout the nearby region, such as Lombardy, where Pavia began to trade with Venice and Luca to produce fabrics, also influenced by Venetian commercial activity. "Lombardy, where the entire commercial movement of the Mediterranean converges to the east, to the west by Pisa and Genoa, develops with extraordinary vigor. On this admirable plain, the cities grow with the same vigor as the crops" (Pirenne, 1977, p.75). Ancient cities were also revived with developed trade, such as Bergamo, Cremona, Lodi, and Verona. Cities were raised, walls, markets, bridges, and churches, and showed progressive economic growth.

Until the "resurgence" of medieval cities, the monetary economy practically did not exist in feudal society, and exchanges took place in the form of equivalence of products, and production was based in the countryside, based on the servile relationship. It is with the change in the way of producing goods and carrying out commercial exchanges that this reality has changed. The increase of currency in these transactions established a new way for men to think and relate economically. Products were no longer used only for barter and consumption and were also destined for trade and money exchanges: "The cadres of the feudal system, which had until then closed economic activity, broke down and the whole of society became impregnated with a more malleable, more active and more varied character" (Pirenne, 1977, p.82).

Both foreign and domestic trade favored this process of monetization, but the urban space was the place where it was most applied and best developed, greatly influencing life in the countryside:

The profound transformation of the rural classes in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is not only a consequence of the increasing density of the population. It is also due, in large part, to the commercial revival and the growth of cities. The old seigniorial organization, which suited a time when the lack of foreign markets forced the consumption of the produce of the soil in the very place where it was cultivated, would necessarily have to collapse when permanent markets were established to guarantee them regular sales. This is what happened on the day that these cities began to absorb, so to speak, the production of the fields that ensured their subsistence (PIRENNE, 1968, p.84).

The countryside began to supply the city with the products necessary for its supply and the city, in return, supplied it with commercial products and objects manufactured by artisans. The urban population increase caused an increasing need for new professionals: *butchers, trawlers, dyers, tailors, shoemakers, brewers, blacksmiths, furriers, bakers, etc.* All this is to meet the new demands for the production of goods for sale in the domestic and foreign markets, in fixed and itinerant fairs and caravans for export. As cities grew, their power of influence in an increasingly larger geographical area increased proportionally.

In the new urban spaces, a new conception of "work" began to be developed. In some sectors, the first modalities of "free labor" with cash wages emerged, especially in textiles, which subdivided their activities into several stages, requiring a large volume and variety of artisans in their process. In a way, this accelerated the gradual decay of servile labor, until then prevalent in medieval society. The payment in cash for work and products

manufactured in the cities contaminated the form of payment of income in the countryside. As we saw initially, in Feudalism the income paid for the use of the land was made in the form of the availability of weekly "working time" of the serfs on the lord's land or with the delivery of a "percentage of the production" harvested and products of the primitive peasant crafts. Influenced by the cities, this gradually began to be done in money, and also in the countryside, causing structural changes in the feudal system, especially in the economic and social aspects.

Thus, it was the expansion of the use of money between the exchange of products and its introduction in the payment of rent in the countryside that inserted into the feudal system the novelty of the "possibility" of transferring wealth among the members of this society. This novelty could more easily lead to the impoverishment of some and the enrichment of others, allowing changes in the social position among the members of society, something that until then was practically impossible. This new economic dynamic of society would change the way of thinking of many people, as they began to envision the earning of money as a mechanism for social elevation. Dobb (1983) reinforces this idea by stating that the intensification of productive and commercial activities that occurred in the Late Middle Ages triggered profound changes in the basis of feudal society, both in the way men thought and in the way they related and organized.

## **THE ECONOMIC FUNCTION OF MEDIEVAL CITIES**

In his work "The Apogee of the Medieval City", Jacques Le Goff (1992) discusses the main characteristics of the new urban spaces that emerged in the final phase of the Middle Ages. Despite the multiplicity of facets presented by him, in this article, we have chosen to give special emphasis to *the economic function* played by cities. The common sense that many make about mediocrity is that it was characterized as a period of "almost immobility" of social and economic relations. In a way, it is possible to say that until the end of the tenth century, there were no great advances in these relations, since until then they were determined by religious values and ancient feudal traditions. However, in the final phase of the Middle Ages and especially in the interior of the cities, the political and economic action of the new social groups facilitated the breaking of this social inertia, changing people's mentalities and positions.

Indeed, these changes did not occur simultaneously or quickly throughout Europe, they varied according to the region and the period. For Rossiaud (1989), the migration of

peasants to the interior of the cities attracted a multitude of people from the most diverse regions and social strata, who presented themselves as disturbers of the social order established by the Church and medieval customs. But if all this development frightened the representatives of the old order, the nobles, and the clergy, it greatly excited businessmen.

This migratory flow increased the urban surface of the cities, buildings grew irregularly, schools were established, the variety of handicrafts multiplied, the local market grew, the Church increased its influence, mills, bridges, walls, and houses were built for merchants, princes, artisans, clerics, prostitutes, among others. The city, despite being integrated into the feudal system, was a complex and heterogeneous center that sought its own identity. This agglomeration began to require better political and administrative organization, the elaboration of laws, and the intensification of control and inspection of the various activities developed in its domains.

Possessing different conceptions of the world, the various social segments present in the cities related to each other daily were influenced by commercial, social, traditional, and religious aspects. The merchant, the main local economic agent, ran away from the traditional model of the individual of society in force. Most of the time he had no connection with the land (an element that determined power and status in society), he carried out a dangerous activity, subject to looting and pillage, traveling along different and distant paths. Usually, these merchants traveled in groups along the roads of Europe and divided what they sold into shares, according to the right of each one. They carried bales of goods on horses or mules, accompanied by an armed military escort for their protection. They went from city to city and, although they were abhorred by the Church because of the activity they performed, they were useful, as they sold the products that everyone wanted, including the clergy and the nobility.

As they settled in a city or town in search of protection, merchants began to develop their commercial activities in this place. With the complexity acquired by trade, merchants saw the need to create associations that were called *Hansas* or *Guilds*, which were organizations that brought together merchants or cities and had as their main function to protect the businesses of the members belonging to it. The merchants grouped themselves in these associations and swore an oath among themselves of fidelity and common action. This powerful organization facilitated their influence and participation in the government and administration of the cities.



The enrichment and social ascension of these merchants made these men become part of a kind of "urban aristocracy", occupying the main positions in the courts and municipal administrations. The diversification in the form of the constitution of these bodies varied according to the city, but they were usually composed of a council or *consuls*, elected by the aristocracy itself, which almost always chose members of the nobility and the high bourgeoisie (merchants). In a few cities, there were masters occupying positions in this council, when this occurred it was in a very incipient way and they had little power. There were cities in which the municipal council was confused with the court, however, the councils had very different functions, such as taxation, which took place progressively and according to the possessions of the citizens, except for the nobles and the clergy; the execution of public works such as bridges, roads, walls, monuments; the creation of laws that varied according to the city and the power of the groups, among others.

As Pirenne (1968) states, it was the conquest of administrative autonomy that made possible the legal autonomy of cities. As the bourgeois did not accept being judged by regional courts (fiefdoms), they created their courts, which transformed the cities into true judicial islands. The judges were appointed by the bourgeoisie themselves and needed to have the specific knowledge to arbitrate on commercial matters, according to the rules of commerce. The feudal courts functioned differently, in them the members were for life and the court judged according to precepts and traditions, based on the serf/lord relationship.

New laws were created in the cities, including more severe penalties for serious crimes such as theft. The use of various contracts proliferated, marriages were made official, and debts were materialized in the form of written documents. All of this was aimed at maintaining peace and organization, so necessary for the new urban reality. As the municipal administrations had a strong presence of bourgeois merchants, they exercised strict control of the entry of products into the cities intended to supply the urban and rural population. They were concerned with regulating the quality and prices of the products, legally preventing the participation of competitors or intermediaries in the process, and forcing the peasant and the artisan to sell their products directly to the city dwellers or the bourgeois merchant, in the local market.

They also severely punished those who stockpiled goods. The products considered most essential even had their prices increased to avoid speculation. The inspection was rigid and constant, requiring both the practice of fair price and the guarantee of ideal quality, and in case of infraction, the confiscation of the product and even the punishment

of the offenders was appropriate. These laws applied to basic products produced in or near the cities, for the scarcest products marketed by long-distance merchants, such as spices, such as spices, such as vigorous inspections were not possible.

The strengthening of trade over the centuries has made cities a mostly bourgeois space. Despite being a minority, the rich merchants began to exercise power and almost total command of urban spaces. How the definition of who would have control of the cities was given varied according to each location, but normally, those who exercised the hegemony of the main local economic activity were those who had the conditions of command. This allowed the wealthy merchant to occupy or appoint people connected to him to hold the main public, administrative, and judicial positions. Occupying these positions proved to be strategic to ensure freedom and facilities for the development of commercial activities.

The economic practices developed within the urban space conflicted head-on with the interests of the feudal lord, who lived off the rent paid by the peasants under his rule. The enchantment and economic character of the new cities that drove the migration of peasants represented an important element that disaggregated the countryside. On the other hand, the city became increasingly fundamental to the survival of the fiefs and the feudal lord. The urban markets served both for the sale of the products necessary to supply the fief and for the purchase in cash of the produce of the countryside. With this, they provided the necessary coins for the serfs to pay the rent in cash owed to the feudal lord, and the latter could buy other products with money or pay workers in the new modality of "free labor" that arose with the evasion of the fiefs. Thus, urban commerce proved to be contradictory to the countryside, it was a "fundamental" and at the same time "disaggregating" element of Feudalism.

As we have already seen, the enrichment of merchants and the growth of long-distance trade fostered the production of handicrafts. This provoked negative reactions from the traditional groups of mediocrity, the nobility, and the Church. But it also generated protests from the bourgeois for the discrimination suffered and, therefore, they began to demand freedom and the right to exercise their activities:

(...) the right to get rich, the right to manage, and the possibility of easily disposing of labor. It is necessary, therefore, that there are no exorbitant seigniorial rights on artisanal production and trade; the bourgeois must be free and able to dedicate themselves to their business, have the right to assemble freely and have the

possibility of control the economic and administrative life of the city (LE GOFF, 1992, p.56).

Despite the divergences between these groups, there was a relationship of dependence between them. For this reason, they usually reached agreements that satisfied everyone, as it was strategic that conflicts be mitigated. However, the "harmony" between the cities and the feudal mode of production lasted as long as feudalism did not represent an obstacle to commercial advancement, "the city found its place in the feudal system" (Le Goff, 1992, p.59), and the lords accepted the cities. It is evident that this did not happen in a peaceful way, there were conflicts. But the groups reached a level of "peaceful coexistence" as they had interests of their own to preserve. The recurrent financial aid made to the feudal aristocracy and the Church by the "new rich men" helped to gradually undermine the aggressive posture of the first who became more tolerant of the merchants and their activities.

With administrative autonomy, cities began to trade with each other and at increasingly greater distances. For Pirenne (1977), the survival of cities was only possible to the extent that foreign trade between them was also constituted. This is because the diversity of the climate and regions was so varied that it was inevitable that the production of goods or cereals would be different in each location. The increasing need for quantity and variety of products forced the strengthening of foreign trade, in addition, it made handicrafts and trade closer together, to cope with the increase in consumption demands.

The arrival of a large number of peasants and artisans in the cities looking for work, either as day laborers or to open their workshops, made the urban space a diversified environment of trades, making it necessary to organize and regulate the professions through the constitution of "associations" of artisans. Several types of associations emerged in this period and received different names, with "Ofício Corporation" being the best known. The creation of these associations varied according to the city and the interests involved. Many of them were formed on the initiative of artisans, others under the influence of merchants, and others on the initiative of members of the feudal aristocracy, and even the clergy.

Despite the diversity in the motivation for their creation, these associations had in common the objective of protecting their members, ensuring the quality of products, ensuring fair competition, and the practice of acceptable prices for both those who produced and those who bought. To this end, they regulated and organized production,

stipulating commercial rules and coexistence among its members. The need to create these associations was due to the variety of professions within the urban space and included: *goldsmiths, weavers, carpenters, saddlers, blacksmiths, butchers, tailors, saddlers, surgeons, goldsmiths, glassmakers, bakers, floorers*, among others. The growth of cities has exponentially multiplied the number of artisans. One of the segments of corporations that were most numerous was that linked to food: fish, cattle, grains, and herbs. Le Goff gives us an idea of the variety and large number of professionals in the interior of the new cities:

Artisans multiply everywhere. In Narbonne, 940 artisans take the oath to the viscount. In Toulouse, in the village alone, more than 200 of them are known in 1335. In Paris, the Book of Trades (*Livre des métiers*) by the provost Étienne Boileau (c.1268) introduces us to 101 categories of organized artisans, to which must be added the butchers (LE GOFF, 1992, p.65).

It is evident so far how much the economic and social bases created by the actions of artisans and merchants were decisive for the constitution of contemporary society. These two groups, by developing and improving productive, commercial, and monetary activity in the Late Middle Ages, forced a first rupture, although still tenuous, with the servile mode of production and launched important economic and social embryos for the formulation of a new model of society conceived in the following centuries, but which inherited important economic elements created in this period.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The polemics about the theses about the emergence or resurgence of medieval cities do not allow us to determine a single factor for this phenomenon. However, it is possible to highlight that the re-establishment of commercial activity in the Late Middle Ages and the opening of the Mediterranean in the tenth century greatly contributed to the economic reheating in the West and the proliferation of commercial cities. However, other factors such as the merchant's performance traveling long distances or settling in specific places, which later became new cities; Crises in field production caused by climatic adversities, wars, or even the decrease in the area available for planting also favored the agglomeration in cities and, consequently, their economic development. The city represented freedom and the possibility of work for peasants fleeing the crisis and hunger

of the countryside. It was the set of these factors that favored the emergence of new cities in the West and also the strengthening of those old, already existing.

What is important to highlight is that medieval cities constituted a dynamic and contradictory environment that, at the same time, brought together old values and elements of the old feudal society and new values and elements created by the increase in commercial activities. This mutual coexistence caused inevitable clashes, since the medieval world was ruled above all by religious precepts and ancient traditions, and the new world, which emerged in the urban environment, was mainly the result of the intensification of productive, commercial, and monetary activity. There was a crucial and decisive struggle for control of the cities that was won by the merchants, as they imposed themselves economically and began to control the political, economic, and administrative power of the large commercial centers. This was decisive for the development of Mercantile Capitalism in the following centuries.

At first, the clash of merchants and artisans with the feudal lords and the nobility was inevitable. This clash, however, was much more political and developed in a negotiable way over the centuries. After all, these elements needed to coexist peacefully, as they depended on each other. Commerce needed the raw materials of the countryside to sell its products to as many buyers as possible, and the feudal world needed to sell its production and have access to the new products that only artisans manufactured and merchants sold.

This is the most striking character of the great commercial cities, "resurrected" in the Late Middle Ages. The urban space was a different environment from the ancient Roman cities since the dynamics of the functioning of these new agglomerations had as its main organizing element the manufacture of products by artisans and the trade carried out by merchants. We can conclude that this new environment created was innovative for the Middle Ages, constituting an important economic and social embryo for the evolution of society in the following centuries that led to the consolidation of the capitalist system, which has salaried labor as an organizing social mode of production.

In a way, we can dare to affirm that the figures of the "merchants and artisans", so decisive in the Late Middle Ages, seem to have greatly inspired the constitution of the figures of the "workers and capitalists" of today. And yet, the evolution and relevance of the "economy" present in the cities of the Late Middle Ages are very similar to the structural and economic environment of today's cities. As Le Goff (1998, p.9) states, "... there are

more similarities between the contemporary city and the medieval city than between the medieval city and the ancient one".



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