**Medieval Guilds and the SCA**

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**What were guilds in the middle ages?**

Medieval European guilds were groups of people who banded together to foster some common interest. The earliest groups in Western Europe that called themselves guilds formed with the primary goal of increasing safety and security for the members and encouraging almsgiving for departed brethren. We refer to these mutual-support guilds as social guilds, since they provided a service to society in a time where there was no substantial help from the state for the poor, old or infirm. Other guilds formed as associations of employers. These guilds included craft-based groups where the members produced a product, and merchant guilds, where the members controlled long-distance trade. There are elements of both social and craft guilds that can inspire us to form our own groups in these modern middle ages.

Evidence for social guilds, or confraternities of laypersons, exists from the 9th and 10th centuries. These early groups, formed throughout Western Europe, started the general tradition where groups of people from a common background or neighborhood assembled for religious and social reasons. Early social guilds formed in towns or cities in recognition of the need for mutual support among the members. Guild members pledged to care for infirm brothers and to arrange for burial. In this way, medieval guilds acted much like modern trade unions, which take in dues and generate pensions for retired and disabled members. Many social guilds formed with religious observances at their core, and a roll of 14th century guildsshows far more religious or social based guilds than craft guilds. In many ways, the SCA is reminiscent of these early social guilds. We gather periodically, with our own livery, and offer a great deal of mutual support. There are feast days (events) and there is a governing body of local officers. Fortunately, the SCA does not have to worry about caring for the ill, or arranging for burial.

During the 11th and 12th centuries, increased trade and urbanization brought craftspeople together in large numbers. The earliest craft guilds appeared in cities and towns along major trade routes in Europe. The craft guilds formed for two primary purposes: to regulate the trade of a particular craft in a town or city and to protect the members against the abuses of power of the lords of the towns. Regulation of trade covered two aspects. First, guilds regulated the quality of work produced by a crafter in order to maintain the reputation of a town. The masters of craft guilds acted as associations of employers, and would only hire workers who met their quality and moral standards. By hiring selectively, "foreign" crafters would be prevented from selling their wares locally. The only way to achieve this level of regulation was for all local masters who carried out a particular trade to belong to the guild. These masters could then agree on how they would compete among themselves while excluding anyone outside the guild. A local lord or burgher had to acknowledge the guild for this universal membership to work. Either a petition - asserting the divine and ancient origin of the guild — obtained this acknowledgement, or a yearly license was negotiated and paid. The earliest documented craft guilds include weavers, tailors and other dealers in cloth along with various fishing, herding and victualling groups. The formation of the cloth trade guilds most likely occurred because of the high concentration of crafters in these trades in some of the earliest urban areas of medieval Europe - Flanders and Northern Italy. Guilds dealing with foodstuffs, especially meat and fish, were no doubt encouraged by local lords to ensure the quality and quantity of food available to the town. In all cases, control over the price of goods and the wages for services was a self-interest for guild formation.

Statutes of medieval guilds had several things in common: Generally an oath was taken upon induction to uphold the by-laws of the guild and some sort of payment was required. Payments varied, but generally included an "entrance" fee, along with a variety of special contributions. Payment of dues was recorded in both money (geld) or in kind. An elected internal governing body administered the property and funds of the guild. Each guild would have an appointed day or days of meetings, which generally followed the feast-day for the patron saint of the guild. As population in urban centers increased, guilds developed livery, or common garments, which would identify them to the citizens of a city.

The rules of these craft guilds, to which all men practicing the trade had to submit, were designed to both insure the good quality of the work produced and to insure the welfare of the members of the guild. The members had to be both morally upright and proven craftsmen. There were three ways to prove your worth as a craftsman, and gain the freedom of the guild - you could be the son of a guild member, purchase an entry to the guild or, as was most common, submit to a period of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship contracts were legal documents wherein the apprentice promised to serve a specific term for the purpose of learning and working in the chosen craft. The master, in turn, promised to teach the apprentice and to feed, clothe and house them for the appointed term. The apprentice or the master would be assessed a cash penalty or other sanctions (jail time, stocks, etc.) if either broke the terms of the agreement. The length of an apprenticeship varied from two to twelve years depending on the country and the craft. Inducting an apprentice into a guild was a solemn occasion, done in the town hall, in the presence of the town authorities. Generally, the completion of the apprenticeship assured entrance into the guild (after a small fee was paid) and recognition as a citizen of the town (also known as the freedom or liberty of the city).