

A new notion of Time

In the 14th century, the growth of towns also brought with it an explosion of new occupations: artisans and tradesmen of various types, from smiths and shoemakers to carpenters, butchers and bakers, who added themselves to the cloth-makers who made up the greater part of the country's growing industry. These skilled artisans organised themselves into guilds, laying the foundations of an urban bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, in the countryside, a new aristocracy which became known as the gentry was emerging. Landowners were beginning to enclose open fields. The idea of labour in the service of God was gradually being replaced by that of working for money.

But to fully understand the forces behind social changes that occurred in the late medieval period we have also to consider the crucial role played by the merchants. In early medieval Europe, the profession of merchant was among the most despised categories of labour. This was related to the belief that man should work in the image of God and therefore the only approved forms of labour were either cultivation of the land or craft work, which was also considered 'creative' in a religious sense. Traditionally, the Church had prohibited usury but as economic activity expanded, it was obliged to moderate its position, and also the merchant slowly became a valued member of the new society. Linked to the rise of the merchants was a new idea of time. In the eyes of the Church, time was eternal and belonged to God. Agricultural workers had only to think of time in the cyclical terms of the changing of seasons. But with the rise of trade and commerce came the idea that 'time is money'. As French historian Jacques Le Goff says, time became an object to be measured in terms of the length of a given operation or process. Prices could rise or fall depending on how long a journey took, or how much time a craftsman spent on a job.

For the merchant, time became something that required increasingly precise calculations. The merchants made their living both by borrowing and sometimes lending money. This effectively meant that time was bought and sold, since money borrowed or lent had to be paid back after a given time, usually with interest.

But as Le Goff writes in *Money and The Middle Ages*, "Money was a reality which medieval society found it increasingly difficult to contend with, and it was beginning to assume the features that would characterize it in the modern period. Nevertheless the man of the Middle Ages, including the merchants, the clergy and the theologians, never had a clear and unified conception of what we mean by this word today".

TIME IN MOTION

- 1 Lab** Many people nowadays are asking themselves how one could imagine a society based on a different relationship with time. Have you heard of Time bank projects? A Time bank is a system that encourages people to help each other. Participants 'deposit' their time in the bank by giving it to others through practical help and support and they can 'withdraw' their time when they need something. Look for more information on the web and share your findings with other students.
- 2 Your turn!** Can you think of other ways one could 'value' and 'exchange' time outside the money economy?