



Advances in the Middle Ages

Between 1000 and 1300, farming and trade in Europe made a lot of progress. Towns and cities grew as the population of western Europe expanded.

The climate grew warmer, so farmers could plant crops in areas that were once too cold for farming. Farmers also came up with new methods of farming. They used horses to plow fields instead of oxen. Horses were faster, and farmers could plow twice as much in a day. They developed a three-field system of farming, which allowed them to grow more crops in a season.



Because of the advances in farming, more food was available to people. Villagers had more food to eat, so people could raise larger families. Well-fed people lived longer and resisted disease better. The population grew.

Trade and finance increased with the population. By the 1000s, people were making goods by hand for local and long-distance trade. Trade routes spread across Europe. They went from Flanders, the area along the coast of present-day Belgium and France, to Italy. Italian merchant ships traveled to the Byzantine Empire and to Muslim ports in North Africa.

Most trade happened in towns. Peasants from nearby manors came to town on fair days, the days when trade took place. Local fairs met the needs of daily life for a small community. Cloth was the most commonly traded item. Other items people traded included bacon, salt, cheese, wine, leather, dyes, knives, and rope.

Towns grew quickly. They offered many opportunities that were attractive to serfs who came to town on fair days. The custom was that if a serf lived in a town for a year and a day, he or she was free. So, many serfs who were bound by contract to lords left their manors and never returned.

Most towns grew too quickly to be carefully planned out. Towns were dirty, smelly, noisy, and crowded. They had no garbage collection or sewer system. So, people would dump their household waste into the streets in front of their houses. Narrow and crowded streets were filled with horses, pigs, and other animals. Houses were built of wood and had roofs made of straw, so they were a constant fire hazard. Most people rarely bathed, and their houses often had no fresh air, clean water, or light.

Although there were drawbacks to living in a medieval town, economic and social opportunities attracted people. Towns and cities like London, England, grew and did well in the Middle Ages.