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A History of Business in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550

Edwin S. Hunt &
James M. Murray

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A History of Business in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550, demolishes the widely held view that the phrase "medieval business" is an oxymoron. The authors review the entire range of business in medieval western Europe, probing its Roman and Christian heritage to discover the economic and political forces that shaped the organization of agriculture, manufacturing, construction, mining, transportation, and marketing. Then they deal with the responses of businessmen to the devastating plagues, famines, and warfare that beset Europe in the late Middle Ages. The remarkable success in coping with this hostile new environment was "a harvest of adversity" that prepared the way for the economic expansion of the sixteenth century.

Two main themes run through the book. First, the force and direction of business development in this period stemmed primarily from the demands of the elite. Second, the lasting legacy of medieval businessmen was less their skillful adaptations of imported inventions than their brilliant innovations in business organization.

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Cambridge Medieval Textbooks

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CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Definitions are the first order of business for any book, particularly one whose title contains such slippery terms as "business" and "Europe." A second order is to forewarn the reader that there are two distinct divisions that must be recognized in this history, one geographical and the other temporal. And the third is to emphasize that this is a business history, not an economic history.

In this book, business will be dealt with in its broadest sense, that is, any activity involving exchange between two or more parties – in country or town, and on a local, regional, or international scale. Our coverage will therefore range from the organization of small artisanal workshops to the operations of large international manufacturers and marketers. And it will deal extensively with the vital role in business of medieval governments of all sorts. The Europe whose business we will be examining is somewhat more restricted in scope, being limited to those territories contemporaries called Western Christendom, including the Iberian peninsula as it became Christianized. Stated another way, we will be looking at what is commonly known as western Europe, plus Poland and Hungary. We will, however, also be discussing the activities of European businessmen wherever they took place, especially in North Africa and the Near East.

The geographic division is necessary in order to recognize the significant differences between northern and southern Europe in the evolution of business practice. First, what we will be calling "north" or "northwest" will include the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, Germany, and north and central France. The "south" will consist of Italy, Iberia, and southern France. Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, and

Switzerland do not fall into either of these categories and will always be cited specifically. In broad terms, the south was more sophisticated and innovative than the north with regard to corporate organization, financial devices, and accounting techniques for most of our period. But there were also numerous differences within each of these regions, so that it is misleadingly simplistic to lump all the south and all the north into single units of analysis. To be sure, it can be said that the evolution of banking and accounting procedures was more or less simultaneous throughout the cities of Italy, Provence, and Catalonia, but business organization developed very differently in each of those locations. For example, enterprise units in Venice were relatively small, closely regulated, and dominated by state policy, whereas in Tuscany, although businesses were closely identified with government, some of them became quite large and operated more or less independently. Similarly, in the north, enterprises in the Low Countries and England were not very large by Italian standards but maintained a degree of independence, while those of the German Hanse became highly regulated and dominated by the town and princely governments of the league. In this sense, Robert Lopez's vision of the north and south as mirror images of each other is insightful, despite the obvious differences.

The Black Death of 1347–50 marks the halfway point of our period and our book. Yet the plague's importance, we will argue, was as much symbolic as real, epitomizing a period of severe disruptions lasting throughout most of the fourteenth century. In this reign of "King Death" recurring famines, plagues, and endemic warfare profoundly affected the demography, psychology, and economy of western Europe, to which business had to adapt. Thus, in Part I we attempt to describe various components of business activity as practiced in the High Middle Ages, and to trace, however briefly, the evolution of each. Here was a business environment characterized by the need to provide necessities and luxuries for increasingly populous towns and increasingly prosperous rural magnates from increasingly long distances. Part II is the story, first of the successful adaptation of business to an extended period of calamity, and then of the pursuit of opportunities to secure low-cost sources of goods wherever they might be found.

The overriding theme of this book is that medieval business was driven from beginning to end by the continuous demands of the elite. To be sure, there will be plenty of evidence for mass markets, for example in foodstuffs and textiles, but these developed as a consequence of the urbanization that resulted from the expansion of trade. The initial thrust came from the elite's dietary preferences, inherited from Mediterranean and Christian cultures, and from their insatiable desire for lux-

uries of food, clothing, and ornamentation. These pressures stimulated exchange and the need for business specialists to provide or procure the goods. Thus, we depart somewhat from tradition as we argue that elitist demands affected, directly or indirectly, virtually all businesses, rather than just those dealing in luxury goods. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the point where our history begins, it is the ruling classes and their bureaucracies (which included businessmen) that largely determined how surpluses were spent, whether on cathedrals, castles, infrastructure, or luxuries. And although purchasing power began to spread among more people, especially after the Black Death, the demands of governments continued to influence the direction of investment and thus of innovation. These demands became increasingly accompanied by reams of enforcing regulations. At the end of our story, governments are vigorously engaged in controlling trade at all levels, but with diminishing success.

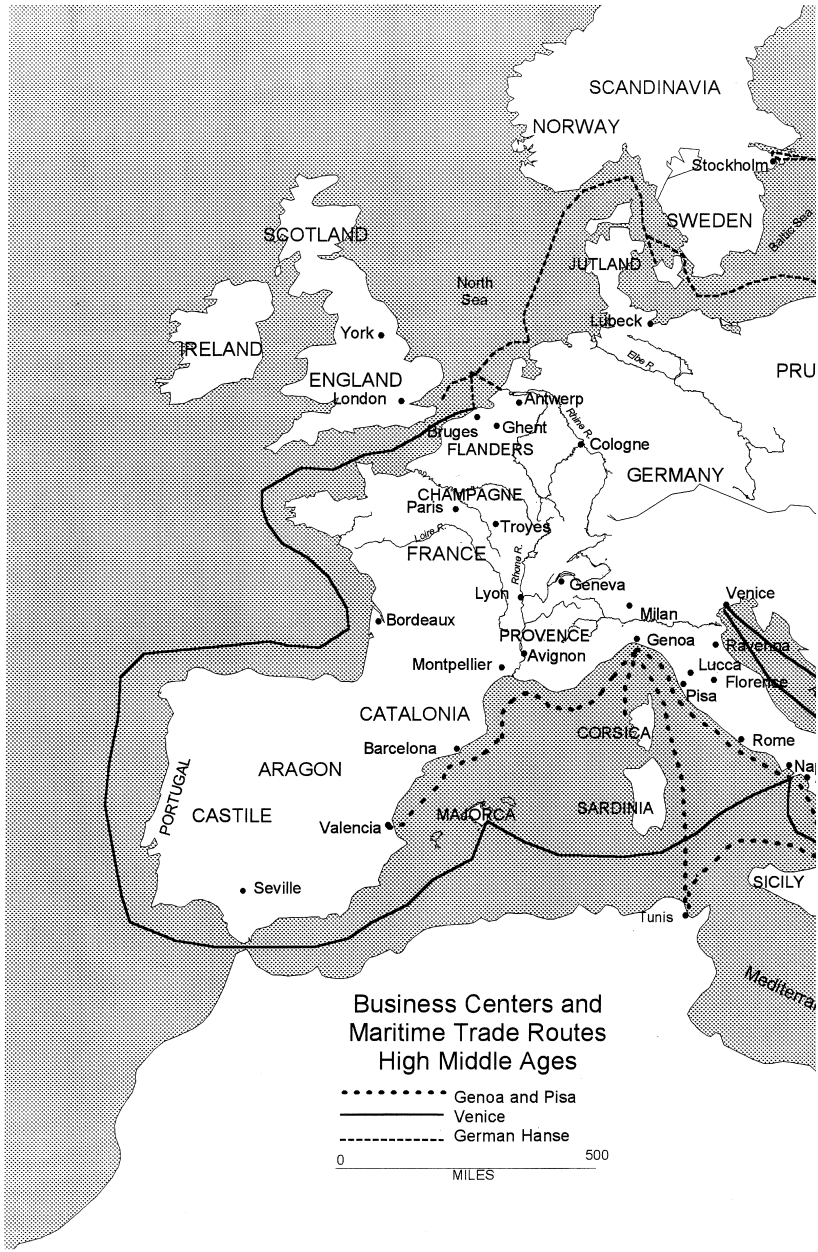
Chronology presents an inevitable problem in a book covering the many facets of business activity across a wide geographical area. The history of medieval business is not an orderly march over the centuries; the innovations and practices that we shall discuss do not fit into tidy time frames. Rather, each kind of business evolved over lengthy periods in different ways at different paces in different parts of our territory. Thus, our subject requires a business-by-business approach, each with its own chronology, especially in the first part of the book, where we must frequently reach back to ancient Mediterranean civilizations and the early Middle Ages to provide adequate background and perspective.

The selection of 1200–1550 as the prime period of enquiry might seem odd to economic historians accustomed to studying the spectacular rise and decline of commerce during the High and late Middle Ages. Starting with the commercial revolution near its apogee rather than at its beginning enables us to focus on the adaptations that businessmen in different lines of endeavor in different parts of Europe had made to take advantage of the long economic expansion. And extending the survey some fifty years beyond 1500, the conventional closing date of the Middle Ages, makes it possible to highlight the evolution of some extremely important business innovations and their direct linkage to some of the spectacular developments, good and bad, of the early modern period. These included large-scale mining, mass-market fisheries, new financing mechanisms, and slave-worked plantations, to name a few. This somewhat unconventional approach enables us to take full advantage of recent research and interpretations and separates this work from the older syntheses of economic historians such as Robert Lopez and Harry Miskimin, who regarded the fourteenth and fifteenth cen-

turies as an economic wasteland. Our closing date also coincides roughly with the last years before the flow of precious metals from the New World profoundly changed the economies of western Europe.

We strive throughout the book to observe the distinction between economic and business history. Seeking to imitate the lengthy magnificence of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* would be foolish, although the economic environment and changes in it are of course crucial to this survey. Consideration of developments in politics, warfare, technology, and social attitudes is also important, as all of these forces presented problems and opportunities to medieval businessmen who had to find a variety of ways of coping with them day by day. But business must remain the window through which we view the larger changes of European economy and society. It provides a quite different vision of the late Middle Ages from even those economic historians such as Carlo Cipolla who share our disagreement with the depression theory for that period. Cipolla's analysis stresses per capita economic improvement; the business window highlights the qualitative changes that laid the basis for the sixteenth-century expansion.

Pursuing our subject – even closely defined – across a culturally diverse territory over a 350-year period in a short format has forced considerable economies in the selection of representative data. Thus much interesting and important material has been omitted, and significant geographical areas and commercial endeavors have been given short shrift. And although we have cited certain business or cultural practices derived from Rome, Byzantium, and Islam that we believe to be relevant to the medieval story, we have avoided overburdening this book by venturing very deeply into those business histories. Some may find the lacunae too numerous, or the choices ill-made. Nonetheless, if our account brings a new and coherent picture of the vitality, variety, and adaptability of business activity in medieval Europe, it will have served its purpose.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Ghent
FLANDERS
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GERMANY
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Troyes
Loire R.
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Geneva
Lyon
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Milan
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PROVENCE
Genoa
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Lucca
Florence
Pisa
CATALONIA
CORSICA
Rome
Barcelona
ARAGON
PORTUGAL
CASTILE
Valencia
MAJORCA
SARDINIA
Ebro R.
SICILY
Seville
Tunis
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Business Centers and
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Novgorod
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Riga
LITHUANIA
Danzig
RUSSIA
SSIA
POLAND
HUNGARY
Caffa
Black Sea
DALMATIA
Ragusa
Constantinople
Phocaea
CHIOS
ARMENIA
RHODES
Antioch
CRETE
CYPRUS
LEVANT
Beirut
Alexandria

PART I

BEFORE THE BLACK DEATH: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

I

ECONOMICS, CULTURE, AND GEOGRAPHY OF EARLY MEDIEVAL TRADE

I saw a swelling tide of mobilized wealth, which seigneurial exactions channeled into the dwelling-places of the rich, and that new wealth fostered a taste for luxury and expenditure that laid the groundwork for the takeoff, for that crucial turning point in the European economy that inaugurated the age of the businessman . . .[1]

A world without business is as unimaginable in our fin de siècle age as one without light or air. Moreover, "doing business" has come to be an activity that bridges night and day, land and sea, and even airless space. Business is now all-embracing and, as it seems to some, all-consuming. This was not always so, and one of the purposes of this book is to trace the early history of what has become arguably the most powerful revolutionary force that Europe has unleashed on the rest of the world. But as Karl Marx, an early student of the historical implications of European business, has remarked, the revolution was not created "from whole cloth" but from materials found in the historical context of the period covered by this book.

The dynamics of the process of creation will be the particular focus of this introductory chapter. The reader may have already noticed that the authors believe the driving force for change in the medieval economy was created by the demands of the wealthy and powerful, the seigneurs of northwestern Europe. Clarifying the origins of this group and their needs and desires will cause us to range further in time from the strict confines of our delimited period and to concentrate our attention on economic and social developments to the north and west of the

Mediterranean basin. But the subject remains the same – the evolution of business in Europe as a whole.

Many languages have a variation on the well-worn cliché, "you are what you eat." While this expression is absurd literally, when applied to economic systems it contains a kernel of truth: what people put on their tables will have a great impact on the organization of their economy. In the Middle Ages, what people ate, and just as importantly, what they wanted to eat, played a marked role in defining the possibilities and limitations of business organization. Therefore to understand medieval business, one needs to appreciate the tremendous transformation of northern European eating habits and agricultural practices that occurred roughly between 700 and 1000.

ROME'S DIETARY LEGACY – BREAD ABOVE ALL

Some of the most arresting images of the Christian New Testament have to do with food. Jesus of Nazareth throughout his ministry sought to use images and objects that were readily comprehensible to his audience to express his teachings. His miracles reflect this: the first was the transformation of water into wine, his most famous the multiplication of loaves and fishes, and his most enduring, the ritual of breaking bread with his disciples at the Passover meal of Holy Thursday. And despite his famous phrase borrowed from a psalm, "Man does not live by bread alone," bread in fact dominated the diet of most of Christ's audience in common with that of most inhabitants of the first-century Roman Empire. Thus, as Christianity was a Mediterranean religion, it is not surprising that the dietary expectations of Mediterranean peoples were sacralized in Christian liturgy. Christianity's emphasis on bread, wine, and to a lesser extent olive oil, was to have a profound effect on the dietary and agricultural history of the vast non-Mediterranean territories of western Europe.

The Mediterranean as a region is not blessed with either great soil fertility or regular and ample rainfall. Arable land is widely scattered and abundant enough in only a few places, such as Sicily and North Africa, for large-scale grain cultivation during Roman and early Christian times. Rain is also often scarce and scattered, falling predominantly in winter months, leaving summers more or less arid. With an almost universal shortage of pasturage, significant stock-raising ventures were out of the question. Necessity dictated that the prototypical "Mediterranean diet" consisted almost exclusively of vegetable products, such as bread and other grain dishes, wine, and olive oil, supplemented with cheese, vegetables, and a scant quantity of meat. Only for a desert people like

the ancient Hebrews could Mediterranean Palestine seem like a land of "milk and honey"; by modern standards the preindustrial Mediterranean was arid and famine-ridden.

Over time a strategy developed to cope with the inherent poverty of Mediterranean agriculture and its attendant crop failures and famines. The Pax Romana, the extensive free trade zone within Roman boundaries, both permitted the spread of the Mediterranean diet to the four quarters of the empire and remedied local shortages and inability to raise certain staple crops. The keys were crop specialization and shipping services: simply put, those regions endowed with natural advantages for the raising of a particular crop specialized in it and shipped the surplus in return for surpluses from other regions of specialized agriculture. Thus North Africa and Sicily raised considerable quantities of wheat on large farms worked by slave labor; by the first century A.D., North Africa alone was exporting 250,000 to 400,000 tons of grain per year to Rome. Other regions, such as Greece and Spain, specialized in viticulture and olive oil production, while Italy was known for its cheese among other products. In this way, as one historian has put it, a common dietary language was shaped, more widespread and persistent than even the Latin tongue spoken by the empire's rulers.

Common to all these staple foods is the need for a degree of processing – they are all to a certain extent manufactured. Not only is the production of wheat (the most popular bread grain of the Roman world), grapes, and olives time-consuming and expensive, but also the harvest of the crop is only the first step in the sometimes lengthy process of preparing it for the table. To speak only of wheat for the moment: after harvest it must be threshed to separate the edible wheat berries from the inedible chaff, then ground into flour, then mixed with water and some kind of wild yeast preparation, kneaded to develop a structure, allowed to rise, and lastly baked in a hot oven. The return for such labors is the capacity to be stored for a considerable period (properly kept, wheat berries remain edible for years) as well as a nutritious, portable, and slow-spoiling product – bread. No wonder then that daily bread was a given, and that the daily dietary question was what to have with bread, *cum panis*, the etymological root of the word "company" and its derivatives, which acquired great social and business significance over time.

What went with bread was more varied than suggested by Juvenal's jibe directed at ordinary Romans that they lived on "bread and circuses." The Roman diet even for the humble was never made up exclusively of cereal products. Garden crops such as onions, garlic, and green vegetables were always assumed to accompany bread as part of any meal.

Rations of meat were also commonly distributed by the emperor as part of the public dole, with pork being customary. Olive oil came in myriad varieties and was used for many purposes from culinary to cosmetic; wine was equally ubiquitous and diverse in kind and quality. Of course, for the rich of the Roman Empire, the choice of rare delicacies was endless. In the admittedly caricatured depiction of one Roman banquet, Trimalchio's feast found in Petronius' *Satyricon*, the courses numbered at least eight and ranged from simple black and green olives to roasted wild boar stuffed with live birds that were released when the roast was carved. Such variety and extravagant display of foodstuffs would only be equaled by the Burgundian dukes of the fifteenth century.

Even though the Roman Empire remained Mediterranean-centered throughout its history, its expansion under the first emperors had pushed its borders into a vast hinterland north, west, and east of the Mediterranean basin, from Britain to the Rhine and Danube river valleys. These were the vaguely conceived lands of "over there" across the Alps, whose peoples were barbarian both in speech and dietary habits, seemingly remote from the cultural norms of the empire. The names given these barbarians were as vague and imprecise as the Romans' geographical understanding of their homeland. Most were simply called *Germani*, Germans, and one of their chief identifying qualities was a preference for animal products – meat, both domestically raised and wild, milk and cheese, and beer, with butter and lard for cooking fats. To the mixed wonder and repugnance of Romans, this barbarian diet treated grain products from rye, wheat, and barley as distinctly second-class and in no way the principal object of food production. Indeed, much of the German grain crop must have been drunk in the form of ale, a product that the Roman historian Tacitus described as "a liquid distilled from barley and wheat, after fermentation has given it a certain resemblance to wine."[2]

From the second through fifth centuries of our era, the formerly distinct categories of "Roman" and "German" dissolved across increasingly broad areas of the western Roman Empire through intermarriage, settlement, and a mixture of Germanic conquest and Roman collapse. Nowhere was this merging of cultures more apparent than in diet: not only had the formerly rude barbarians acquired a taste for the bread and wine of Mediterranean provenance, but Romans also began to extol the strengthening qualities of meat and other animal products. The most important result of this shift in tastes, however, was in the lands of "over there," where the predilections and desires of the ruling class were translated into a new agrarian system whose formation would occupy the next several centuries and have consequences stretching across the next half-millennium.

Following the collapse of the western empire, the barbarian heirs of Rome still wished to retain the benefits of that civilization for themselves and their descendants; but numerous obstacles lay in their path. First among them was the geographical and climatological reality of northern Europe, which was a land of heavier soil, more constant rainfall, and ubiquitous forest – difficult conditions for large-scale wheat production. Second was a severe shortage of agricultural labor; where the Romans relied on slave gangs to farm the specialized crops of their agrarian system, German rulers could dominate only small settlements of peasants as their work force. Third was the absence of widespread, long-distance transport, due not only to political instability but also to the very different geography of the European north, where rivers, rather than a large inland sea, provided the transportation nexus.

Because specialization and transportation were out of the question, Germanic rulers and their peasantry forged a new economic relationship governed by the twin forces of compulsion and cooperation. Medieval peasants were unfree (their very name, *servi*, was derived from the Latin word for slave), but the essence of the serf-lord relationship was not the application of despotic force; rather, it was a remarkable meshing of interests. For the lord, the interest was provision of the elements of the "civilized" diet in sufficient quantities; for the peasant, it was to secure the survival of himself and his family through unfettered use of the land. Both sides came to agree on the purpose to which the productive potential of the land should be put: the realization of a diet based on bread.

Even though the goal and the social means to that goal were remarkably consistent across Europe, the reality of social and economic organization varied considerably. Village settlements were of many types depending on their location; the relationship of lord and peasant might vary in innumerable ways according to the evolution of custom; and the crop types raised also varied. The weather conditions of a region often determined that rye, spelt, and oats replaced wheat as the primary cereal crop, although wheat bread – the whiter the better – never ceased to be the ideal product of agriculture. Through all the bewildering diversity and local particularity, there remained continuous pressure for more and better bread grains, a pressure exerted both by the lords and, after ca. 750, by a growing population in the peasant community.

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Christian culture played a crucial role in supplying the common vocabulary of diet in western Europe. As mentioned earlier, Christianity issued from a milieu foreign to many country dwellers, but through the assid-

uous encouragement of Germanic kings, notably the Carolingians after 725, the full power of its message was brought to the countryside of northern Europe before the year 1000. The first missionaries to these Germanic peoples – Anglo-Saxons, Saxons, Alemanni, and many others – borrowed copiously from the religious metaphors first fashioned by the church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries. Their greatest source was Saint Augustine, who in a sermon addressed to a new Christian drew a powerful analogy between bread and religion. "This bread retells your history . . . You were brought to the threshing floor of the Lord and were threshed. . . . While awaiting catechism, you were like grain kept in the granary . . . [At the] baptismal font, you were kneaded into a single dough. In the oven of the Holy Ghost you became the true bread of God."[3]

All this merely complements the central ritual of Christianity introduced to the new converts, the reenactment of Christ's Last Supper, which is itself a metaphor for Christ's presence among Christian believers. Even if the newly Christianized peasants rarely partook of the Eucharist, the Christian invocation of bread, wine, and oil, but especially bread, must have made a powerful impression among the European peasantry. Although we have no direct testimony as to its effect, we do have the startling data that between the eighth and eleventh centuries, cereals increased their share of the northern European peasant's diet from approximately one-third to three-fourths or more of total consumed calories.[4] Thereafter until the modern era, bread was the most significant item in the diet of the average European man, woman, and child, and still today the price of bread is a politically sensitive subject in many European countries.

Christian influence was also buttressed by the institutional example of the monastery at the very heart of European agriculture. The founding father of western monasticism, Saint Benedict, had enshrined the vegetarian diet as the ideal of the ascetic life. Though considered moderate in allowing monks comparatively abundant food in proportion to the severity of their work, the Benedictine rule is uncompromising in restricting meat consumption to the aged and infirm. The monks were to be satisfied with a pound of bread a day and two cooked dishes, presumably gruel or porridge, and if any fruit or fresh vegetables were available, they could make up a third. Given the assumption that a monastery should provide most of its own food, it is not surprising that monastic institutions led the way in spreading cereal cultivation throughout Europe.

We have already noted the variety and hierarchy of bread grains and the pressure for more and better bread grains. For the elite, only white

loaves made of sifted wheat flour would do. Of course wheat was the most difficult of bread grains to produce under growing conditions prevalent in many areas of the European north. For the common people there were rye, barley, oats, spelt, millet, and a few others to make into their daily bread. These grains, especially rye, yielded more dependable and usually larger crops, but produced a darker, heavier bread without those qualities of whiteness and lightness esteemed in wheat bread. For centuries, the bread of the poor was understood to mean dark, heavy bread that was substantial and hard to digest.

Despite the cultural attraction of bread and other cooked grains, the consumption of other foods, especially meat, never lost its appeal for medieval Europeans. Domestically raised animals, especially pigs, cattle, and to a lesser extent sheep, as well as game, continued to supply the meat dishes demanded especially by the social elite. The Frankish king Charlemagne preferred roasted meat to all other foods and refused to give it up even upon the advice of his physicians. Somewhat surprisingly, there is evidence that ninth-century monasteries consumed large amounts of meat: the abbey of Corbie consumed 600 pigs in the year 822 alone. Pork remained the meat of choice for many, both for its flavor and for the relative ease of raising pigs, given their ability to forage for food. These preferences account for the fact that stock raising always remained an adjunct to farming in the medieval countryside and could become in some cases a specialization if sufficient demand were present for the meat, hides, or fibers.

The demands of religion also dictated a prominent place for fish in the European diet, especially after the seventh century, when meat consumption was prohibited for observant Christians on approximately 150 fast days per year. Much of the fish supply must have come from fresh water or coastal salt water, because deep-water fishing was not a significant activity until the later Middle Ages. Few data survive about fish consumption, but there are scattered mentions of fish ponds in sources predating 1000. In England, fish ponds are described in tenth-century charters, and the best documented case, the royal fishpond at Fosse, York, was constructed by William the Conqueror before 1086, supplying fish for the royal household and gifts for others until the thirteenth century. More sophisticated methods of farming fish began after the twelfth century with the development of specialized fish ponds, often linked with a system of pools by which supply could be tailored to fit the life cycle of the fish and to meet increased demand during Lent. Ingenious fish farmers also discovered that ponds could be drained every three to five years and planted with crops that profited from the enriched soil, then grazed over by stock and ultimately returned for use as fish ponds