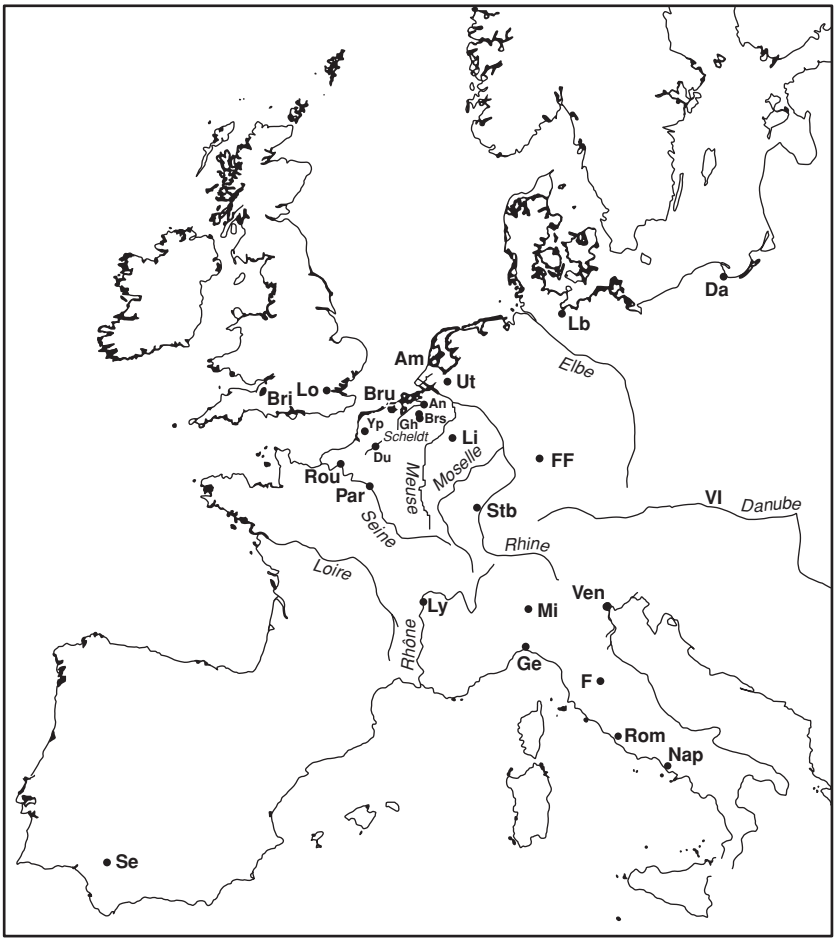
# Introduction

Between 1300 and 1600, commerce left the margins of the European economy where it had been confined for centuries. Although merchants had long before established trade routes along the subcontinent's coasts and river systems, the European landscape was now littered with densely urbanized regions devoted both to trade and to production for the market.[1] From southern England through the northern coastal areas of the continent, into regions bordering the Scheldt, the Meuse, the Seine, and their tributaries, down the Rhine and the Rhone, and then into the busy fringes of the Mediterranean, commercial cities flourished as never before.

The following chapters examine how the people who populated these cities or who regularly dealt in their marketplaces understood and used property. I argue that commerce was changing their sociocultural practices, giving birth to an economic culture unlike that which had come before and that which would follow. By paying close attention to these practices, we stand not only to grasp the distinctive character of this period in European history but also to appreciate the ways that this age

[1] For the early history of European commerce, which provides important corrective evidence about the extent of exchange in Carolingian Europe, see Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy* (Cambridge, UK, 2001); also Stéphane Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs frisons du haut Moyen Age* (Lille, 1983). For more on the later so-called commercial revolution itself, see Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971); Peter Spufford, *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe* (New York, 2003); Quentin Van Doosselaere, *Commercial Agreements and Social Dynamics in Medieval Genoa* (Cambridge, UK, 2009); and Paul H. Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven, CT, 2008).

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| **Am** | Amsterdam |
| **An** | Antwerp |
| **Av** | Avignon |
| **Bri** | Bristol |
| **Brs** | Brussels |
| **Brg** | Bruges |
| **Da** | Danzig |
| **Du** | Douai |
| **F** | Florence |

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|---|---|
| **FF** | Frankfurt a.M. |
| **Ge** | Genoa |
| **Gh** | Ghent |
| **Lg** | Liège |
| **Lo** | London |
| **Lb** | Lübeck |
| **Ly** | Lyons |
| **Mi** | Milan |
| **Nap** | Naples |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Par** | Paris |
| **Rom** | Rome |
| **Rou** | Rouen |
| **Se** | Seville |
| **Stb** | Strasbourg |
| **Ut** | Utrecht |
| **Ven** | Venice |
| **Vi** | Vienna |
| **Yp** | Ypres |

Map 1. Major European Commercial Cities, c. 1400.

did – and did not – lay groundwork for the modern western market society.

In Chapters 1 through 3, I begin with three case studies focusing on property law, marriage, and gift-giving, respectively. In each realm


Map 2. Cities and Rivers of the Late Medieval Low Countries.

commerce disturbed received norms, altered practices, and created new meanings. These chapters are based principally on legal, administrative, and financial records produced in cities and courts of northern Europe, particularly in the greater Low Countries, the epicenter of my entire study. This region is not only the one I know best and where I have done almost all my archival work; it was also late medieval Europe's most urbanized area and, along with northern Italy, its most commercialized.

The home of renowned mercantile and industrial centers like Ghent, Bruges, and Antwerp, and then Leiden and Amsterdam, the entire region was precociously saturated by trade. It was in these cities that monetization and commercialization had their earliest and most visible effects in northern Europe and that a social class born of commerce left records that permit me to tell a story about commercialization that goes beyond the strictly economic.

Although the geographic focus of these chapters is by some standards narrow and although at times I have drawn my evidence from just one or two urban archives, my claim is that what happened in this region is representative of what had happened, was happening, or would happen elsewhere in Europe. This does not mean that property law was rewritten in the same way everywhere or that people began to rethink marriage or reorganize inheritance at the same pace or in the same way in other parts of Europe; nor did people exchange gifts in Florence or Lyons just as they did in Ghent or Bruges. It means only that, wherever commerce took hold, it affected ideas about property, marriage, and exchange, and it forced alterations in associated social practices. Often, as I will occasionally comment, the changes elsewhere occurred in precisely the same way as they did in the Low Countries, but that depended a lot on whether traditional practices in those places had resembled those in the Low Countries. In any case, the alterations in distant places came in response to the same forces at work in the cities and courts I have studied.

Historians have by no means ignored these topics; indeed, scholars have regularly observed that property law, marriage practices, and the norms surrounding exchange were in flux during this period, and most have understood that commercialization was the context for these changes. However, I do not treat these issues as incidentally connected episodes in this larger economic history, but as necessarily related aspects of the sociocultural upheaval that came as property changed form under commercialization. Indeed, anthropologists consider property itself, marriage and inheritance, and exchange as main pillars of social order everywhere, so it is no wonder that commerce's impact would have been so clearly registered in these three arenas.

The fourth chapter, which examines the Europe-wide explosion of sumptuary legislation in this age, treats a no less fundamental support of the social edifice: display. Medieval Europe was what anthropologists

call a display culture, where luxury goods such as dress, jewels, and arms not only signaled but also actually constituted political power, social bonds, and hierarchy itself; inevitably, the proliferation of such goods changed the meaning of these displays. The fifth chapter turns from the display of material objects to talk about their effects on social and moral order. It describes how, in response to commerce's increasing power from the central Middle Ages forward, moralists, cultural critics, and lawmakers rewrote a centuries-old critique of greed and luxury. Although once again treating Europe as a whole, the chapter ends in the greater Low Countries where, like my study, the northern version of the commercial revolution was rooted.

Commercialization certainly predated 1300. Indeed, medievalists argue that significant sociocultural effects of commerce had been registered much earlier, when Venice and Genoa first opened the subcontinent to regions to the east and south and when northern traders gave new life to commerce in the Baltic and North Sea region. Rather than situating my study in those earlier years, however, I began my research when the sources available in the greater Low Countries became rich enough to reveal how commercial wealth disturbed the traditional practices of both ordinary people and the elite – implicit proof, I have concluded, that changes of the kind I investigated did not occur until this period. Just as the story of commerce and European economic culture did not begin in 1300, it did not end in 1600. In fact, scholars tracing the history of modern western capitalism usually concentrate on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when its institutional and sociocultural infrastructure was in visible formation, not on the years between 1300 and 1600. However, in ending when I did, I am proposing that if it were not for the kinds of changes that took place in these three centuries, the seventeenth or eighteenth century would not have emerged as the turning point in the history of capitalism.

Yet, if the new practices I describe did set the terms for future socioeconomic developments, they were not themselves embryonic forms of what we call capitalism. The merchants, artisans, and shopkeepers who lived in places like Ghent, Antwerp, Paris, or Leiden had no words for that concept; they never imagined the market as an "invisible hand," and they used the term *bourgeois* or *burger* only to mean urban citizen. Links between these centuries and the next ones certainly existed, but

the most fundamental connections cannot be identified by mining the evidence from this age for early signs of that future. They can be found only by approaching this economic culture on its own terms: by examining how people who lived from commerce managed their wealth, how their practices differed from those of earlier generations, and how their choices reflected the impact of commerce.

## COMMERCE AND CAPITALISM

By 1300, Europe's commercial revolution had reached its height. Florence, along with other Italian industrial and banking centers, had joined Venice and Genoa to make the Italian peninsula the engine of European commerce. The southern Low Countries, where Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres dominated the commercial landscape, had become the most urbanized area of Europe. The Rhine, where Cologne had established staple rights, served as a major artery of trade linking the south of Europe to the cities of the Low Countries, England, and northern France and, above all, to the Hanseatic cities that were taking control of the Baltic and North Sea trade. Paris had become a center of luxury consumption, spawning vigorous local industries and nurturing the same crafts elsewhere. Rome and then Avignon, where the papacy single-handedly generated local economies, governed a financial network that stretched out in all directions across the continent. London had begun its ascent, presaging the demographic, economic, and cultural explosion that would begin in the sixteenth century.

Europe was thus no longer an economic backwater of the known world. Its crisscrossing trade routes carried imported spices, gold, and silks; European-made cloth, metalwork, and armor; and timber, coal, and other raw materials to and from ports, inland entrepôts, financial centers, and industrial producers such as Bruges, London, Cologne, and Florence. It was dotted with fairgrounds where merchants and producers from all over Europe met to exchange goods, negotiate credit agreements, settle accounts, and share information.[2] By 1300, Europeans

[2] See John H. Munro, "The 'New Institutional Economics' and the Changing Fortunes of Fairs in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Textile Trades,

were in the Sudan in search of gold and in the East in search of spices and silks; by 1500, they were poised to traverse the globe in search of even greater commercial profits. Indeed, by 1500 huge swaths of the rural economy, isolated parts of which had long been affected by commerce, were being visibly transformed. In some places a free peasantry had already emerged; in others entrepreneurial landlords were making wage laborers of their dependent peasants; in still others peasants had themselves become market farmers. Industry was moving to the countryside, turning agricultural workers into industrial laborers.[3] Even the plagues and famines that ravaged Europe in the post-1300 period, the wars that all but destroyed some commercial networks, and the class conflicts that broke out sporadically in the late medieval centuries did not halt the march of commerce. They only slowed its progress and diverted it into new channels.

As commerce secured its hold, the men and women who lived from trade established independent sociopolitical status. This was the age of the urban commune and of guild revolutions, the time when words like the German *Bürger*, the French *bourgeois*, and the Dutch *burger* or *poorter* acquired permanent places in northern European vocabulary. It was then that the riches accumulated in trade threatened to dwarf those garnered elsewhere, when the possessors of that new wealth challenged traditional powers, and when both moral codes and law began to change to accommodate commerce. Names like Coeur, Peruzzi, Medici, Boinebroke, and Fugger came to signify power itself. As many scholars have

Warfare, and Transaction Costs," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial – und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 88/1 (2001), pp. 1–47, for a recent discussion of the literature on the medieval and early modern fair and an excellent guide to the literature. Also S. R. Epstein, "Regional Fairs, Institutional Innovation, and Economic Growth in Late Medieval Europe," *Economic History Review* 47, no. 3 (1994), pp. 459–82; and Evelyn Welch, "The Fairs of Early Modern Italy," in *Buyers & Sellers: Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Bruno Blondé et al. (Turnhout, 2006), pp. 31–51.

[3] Basic studies include Immanuel M. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 2 vols. (New York, 1974 and 1980) and Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick, and Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1981). Philip Hoffman's more recent *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside 1450–1815* (Princeton, 1996) is also useful.

told it, by 1600 Europe was poised to give birth to the age of capital, and commerce would be its midwife.[4]

However, the commercial economy of those days was not a capitalist market economy, if by that term we mean the modern western economic system. Prices did not converge over broad regions as a result of negotiations between buyers and sellers, as they are considered to do in a modern capitalist economy.[5] In fact, most agricultural prices in

[4] An essential starting point for the story of European commercialization is the work of Henri Pirenne. See in particular his *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London, 1939), *Histoire économique de l'occident médiéval*, ed. Emile Coornaert (Bruges, 1951), and *Medieval Cities* (Princeton, 1952). For a critique and an appreciation, see Georges Despy and Adriaan Verhulst, *La fortune historiographique des thèses d'Henri Pirenne* (Brussels, 1986).

For recent interpretations of the process of commercialization that provide a good synthesis of mainstream scholarship, see Jean Favier, *Gold and Spices: The Rise of Commerce in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1998) [Original edition: *De l'or et des épices: Naissance de l'homme d'affaires au moyen âge* (Paris, 1987)] and R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society, 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1993). Also useful are the older studies by Harry Miskimin, such as *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe, 1300–1460* (Cambridge, 1975); idem, *The Economy of Later Renaissance Europe, 1460–1600* (Cambridge, 1977), as are M. M. Postan et al., eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. 2: *Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK, 1987) and Vol. 3: *Economic Organization and Policies in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK, 1965). For a general overview of the preindustrial economy, see Carlo Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1976).

For the Marxist tradition, see in particular Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1946); Paul Sweezy et al., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1978); T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985); Peter Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists* (Cambridge, 1983); and Robert S. DuPlessis, *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997).

[5] This was true even in the Low Countries. There, according to Richard W. Unger, "Thresholds for Market Integration in the Low Countries and England in the Fifteenth Century," in *Money, Markets and Trade*, eds. Lawrin Armstrong et al. (Boston, 2007), pp. 349–80, grain prices *within* the urban market itself were highly integrated, particularly for wheat, but *between* cities (even neighboring cities) there was surprisingly little price convergence. Unger thus modestly corrects earlier studies by Marie-Jeanne Tits-Dieuaide and Herman Van der Wee, who had argued that within the Low Countries in the fifteenth century

Europe were not market outcomes in that sense; rather, they were fixed by custom, law, or political exigency and often remained unchanged for decades.[6] Trade was by no means open to all; even in cities in which commerce found its most secure home, it was often only those privileged by birth, citizenship, or corporate membership who were permitted to offer their goods for sale, and some marketplaces were themselves confined to fixed sites and allowed to function only at specified times. For example, a 1407 ruling of the Parisian Parlement reserved the "hale des Blanc Manteaulx" for local artisans and required that they sell only their own goods in that site, and none made by "foreign" craftsmen in other cities.[7] Fairs were one response to these restrictions, for one of their functions was to provide moments of open trade, times when even

there was a high and increasing degree of market integration. See Marie-Jeanne Tits-Dieuaide, *La formation des prix céréaliers en Brabant et en Flandre au XVe siècle* Brussels, 1975) and Herman Van der Wee, *The Growth of the Antwerp Market and the European Economy* (The Hague, 1963), Vol. 1, especially pp. 23–4 and 41). As Unger shows, however, integration was local and at most regional for most of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, noting that "levels of transactions costs, warfare, and government regulations worked to prevent exchange" and that "at many points in the fifteenth century and for many parts of the region . . . the level of integration with other urban markets was scant" (pp. 351–2).

Even cloth prices seem to have sometimes been relatively impervious to traditional pressures of supply and demand, even to production costs themselves. See Simonne Abraham-Thisse, "La valeur des draps au moyen âge: de l'économique au symbolique," in *In but not of the Market: Movable Goods in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Economy*, eds. Marc Boone and Martha Howell (Brussels, 2007), pp. 17–53.

[6] A recent study by Mark Aliosio shows that, even in Sicily (a key supplier of grain to urban markets in the south of Europe) prices did not respond to the usual market forces, principally as a result of interference by elites and governing bodies that were "often more concerned with protecting their particular fiscal and commercial privilege than in reducing the cost of regional trade" (p. 308): Mark A. Aliosio, "A Test Case for Regional Market Integration? The Grain Trade between Malta and Sicily in the Late Middle Ages," in *Money, Markets, and Trade*, pp. 297–309. On market integration in England in this period, see John Hatcher and Mark Baily, *Modelling the Middle Ages: The History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford, 2001).

[7] *Les métiers et corporations de la ville de Paris III. XIVe–XVIIIe siècle*, ed. René Lespinasse (Paris, 1897): Sixième Partie: Tissus, Étoffes, Vêtement, III (Arrêt de Parlement), #11, p. 157.

"foreigners" could buy and sell freely. As Pope Leo's 1519 license to the city of Senigallia put it, "the city of Senigallia is permitted to celebrate a fair, safely and securely, to which all type of merchandise can be brought and removed."[8]

This was emphatically not the "self-equilibrating, self-regulating, hegemonic market economy out from under the constraints of the larger society" imagined by neoclassical theorists. Nor did it resemble the capitalist economy that Polanyi described in almost identical terms: "an economic system controlled by markets alone . . . [where] the production and distribution of goods is entrusted to this self-regulating mechanism . . . [and] there are markets for all elements of industry, not only for goods (always including services) but also for labor, land, and money."[9] In those days, few decisions about production, distribution,

[8] Cited in Welch, "Fairs of Early Modern Italy," p. 34.

[9] The first quotation is from Winifred Barre Rothenberg, *From Market-Places to a Market Society: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750–1850* (Chicago, 1992), p. 4; the second is from Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, 1957), pp. 68–9. There, Polanyi continued, "the supply of goods (including services) available at a definite price will equal the demand at that price. . . . Production will then be controlled by prices . . . the distribution of the goods will also depend upon prices."

C. B. Macpherson, in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (London, 1962), pp. 51–54, offers a similar definition of what he called the "possessive market society," but unlike Polanyi, who dated its emergence to the mid-nineteenth century, Macpherson thought that in England the principal elements were in place by the seventeenth century.

Also see Y. Ben-Porath, "The F-Connection: Families, Friends and Firms and the Organization of Exchange," *Population and Development Review* 6 (1980), pp. 1–30, who describes capitalism as a system in which "faceless buyers and sellers, households and firms that grind out decision rules from their objective functions (utility, profit) meet . . . for an instant to exchange standardized goods at equilibrium prices": cited in Avner Greif, "On the Interrelations and Economic Implications of Economic, Social, Political, and Normative Factors: Reflections from Two Late Medieval Societies," in *The Frontiers of the New Institutional Economics*, eds. John N. Drobak and John V. C. Nye (San Diego, 1997), p. 60.

Nor does the late medieval economy resemble the system Marx described in *Capital*, where the focus is on the prolongation of the working day to produce surplus value that is automatically appropriated by capital. "This," Marx said,