

**Western University, Department of History**  
**HIS3426F/G: Making a Living in the Middle Ages:**  
**Farmers, Guild Artisans and Merchants**  
(two hour single term seminar course)

## **Course Description**

Was the middle ages a period of general prosperity or poverty? Our answer to this question determines our conclusions on the quality of life and options for the vast majority of its population, ordinary people. It also shapes our understanding of historical change: what was the lever of progress and who directed that lever? were the medieval centuries much poorer than later ones or did they provide the developmental take-off for western Europe's early modern global supremacy? This course provides an overview of select critical debates about the medieval western European economy by examining the lives of its most important actors: farmers, guild artisans and merchants. Students will also learn how to analyse some of the historical documents employed by researchers in these debates, in order to arrive at their own conclusions about medieval society (all documents are in translation and no knowledge of Latin is required).

## **Learning Objectives**

- an introduction to the literature's debates over medieval western European economic development and the roles of its players; for history students unfamiliar with development theories, this course will also supply an introduction to some of these concepts
- an introduction to analytical methods employed by historians to assess individual and general wealth and poverty in the past
- an introduction to pertinent medieval historical documents and the issues around their interpretation

## **Course Grading**

- seminar participation and presentations (25%)
- 2 short papers (3-6 pages each, including tables and graphs), which provide an analysis of the historical documents (45% in total)
- annotated bibliography (7-14 pages, 30%)

## **Readings and Historical Documents**

There is no required textbook for this course. All articles and selections from books for the weekly class discussions, as well as the historical documents for the short papers' analyses of primary sources will be online, either on our Owl class site or that of Weldon Libraries. Students are also welcome to employ different historical documents in their analyses, as long as they pertain to the question under discussion, with my permission.

## **Course Work**

Students will do the same reading for the general introduction to the sections of the course that examine the economic lives of artisans and merchants (I'll summarize medieval farmers' working lives in a lecture). For the two weeks following the general introduction to each section, students will sign up to summarize and present one of the weekly readings to their classmates. These readings present opposing views on the same question. By dividing up the readings in this fashion, you will gain a greater exposure to more ideas and be able to debate their relative merits in class.

The structure of the course does not lend itself to a final exam. Instead, you will supply an annotated bibliography that provides a summary of each reading (arguments, historical sources and methods) that you selected to examine for the class, along with your critique of the author's ideas. You will also summarize the contents of the historical document (s) and discuss how it (they) might be employed in research analyses for the week in which you are not analysing these documents in a short paper. In total, you will therefore discuss six readings and one type of document (s) in this fashion (about 1-2 pages for each reading).

The short papers (3-6 pages, including all tables, graphs and charts) contain your own analyses of primary sources that provide us with some insights into the economic choices made by farmers, artisans and merchants and their consequences. These analyses will give you the opportunity to engage in the methods and sources employed by historians in the field of economic history. You will choose which two of the three possible areas (farmers, artisans, merchants) that you wish to study in this fashion. Depending on the class size, you will present your findings one or more times to your classmates for discussion.

## **Weekly Topics and Assignments**

Week 1: Introduction to the course and its materials.

Farmers (the agricultural sector)

Week 2. General introduction to farmers and agriculture in the middle ages (lecture).

Week 3. Outline provided of historical documents for analysis. Sample reading for discussion: Bruce M. S. Campbell, "Land, Labour, Livestock and Productivity Trends in English Seignorial Agriculture," in *Land, Labour and Livestock: Historical Studies in European Agricultural Productivity*, edited by Campbell and Overton (Manchester University Press, 1991): 144-182.

Week 4. Sample reading for discussion: Eona Karakacili, "English Agrarian Labor Productivity Rates Before the Black Death: A Case Study," *Journal of Economic History* 64 (2002): 24-60.

Week 5. Historical Documents: Farm accounts and agricultural treatises. Short analysis of one document type due in class. Students will present and compare their findings for discussion.

#### Guild Artisans (the industrial sector)

Week 6. General introduction to medieval craft guilds. Sample reading for discussion: Sylvia Thrupp, "The Gilds," in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. III, edited by Postan, Rich and Miller (Cambridge University Press, 1963): 230-80.

Week 7. Outline provided of historical documents for analysis. Sample reading for discussion: S. R. Epstein, "Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship and Technological Change in PreIndustrial Europe," *Journal of Economic History* 58 (1998): 684-713.

Week 8. Sample reading for discussion: Gary Richardson, "Guilds, Laws and Markets for Manufactured Merchandise in Late-Medieval England," *Explorations in Economic History* 41 (2004): 1-25.

Week 9. Historical Documents: guild ordinances and court cases. Short analysis of one document type due in class. Students will present and compare their findings for discussion.

#### Merchants (markets and the financial sector)

Week 10. General introduction to merchant guilds. Sample reading for discussion: R. De Roover, "The Organization of Trade," in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. III, edited by Postan, Rich and Miller (Cambridge University Press, 1963): 42-118.

Week 11. Outline provided of historical documents for analysis. Sample reading for discussion: Avner Greif, "Reputation and Coalitions in Medieval Trade: Evidence on the Maghribi Traders," *Journal of Economic History* 49 (1989): 857-82.

Week 12. Sample reading for discussion: Avner Greif, Paul Milgrom and Barry R. Weingast, "Coordination, Commitment and Enforcement: The Case of the Merchant Guild," *Journal of Political Economy* 102 (1994): 745-76. Annotated bibliography due in class.

Week 13. Historical Documents: merchant letters and diaries. Short analysis of one document type due in class. Students will present and compare their findings for discussion.

