Introduction

The term “guild” requires careful definition because it has been used loosely in the literature. Guilds can be defined as associations of individuals formed for a common purpose, using a subscription model of membership (Hunt and Murray 1999: 34–5). Guilds may be differentiated by their primary function: religious observance, social interaction, or trade promotion. Many guilds had more than one function, for example combining social interaction with trade promotion. This chapter focuses on guilds whose primary function was trade promotion, but whose activities also encompassed social interaction and religious devotion. Trade promotion was split between merchants and artisans. Members of merchant guilds were usually involved in the sourcing, creation, or distribution of exports and the distribution of imports. Members of artisan guilds were generally focused on the creation of exports and of items for the domestic market.

Guilds were generally centered on a town or city, and possessed a clear urban identity. Religious and social guilds were primarily local (centered on a single town) in scope whereas merchant guilds could be local, regional, and international. The focus of this chapter is on the local and regional guilds and their members. Guilds were distinct from companies. This chapter covers individual members and partnerships between guild members. It does not cover federations of guilds, which are covered in the subsequent chapter. Guild members were usually from a specific town or city but sometimes there were also visiting and associate members from other locations. It was possible for guilds from different towns or cities to federate, as discussed in the subsequent chapter. Particularly detailed evidence survives on the operations of members of English guilds, and their activities will be the focus of the chapter. Evidence on the presence of guilds in other countries is discussed below.

Three main methods were available to co-ordinate trade in the Middle Ages. The first was that of a merchant operating alone but supported by a guild; the second was a partnership formed between members of a guild; the third was a corporate model in which the guild operated as a whole. This chapter focuses on the individual and partnership models (the corporate model is discussed in the next chapter.) The individual would pay a fee to join the guild, in return for which they would receive membership benefits. To provide the membership services, most guilds elected officials on an annual basis to take responsibility for tasks such as quality control inspections.
Guild members, operating as sole traders or partnerships, could engage in global trade by coordinating supply chains. Guild members would engage in part of a supply chain but rarely all of it. Some members might specialize in sourcing, others in production and others in distribution. This chapter focuses on the period c.1200 to c.1500 during which global trade operated through a series of supply chains. The Silk Road was an important overland route which provided a supply chain across central Asia, linking up with the distribution network of the Mediterranean. Venice served as a hub from which goods from Asia were distributed to the rest of Europe (Boulnois 2003; UNESCO 2017). Shorter supply chains around the English Channel, the North Sea, and the Baltic Sea fed into the longer global supply chain by providing export goods from England, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, and Germany and distributing imports (Barron 2004: 76–117; Miller and Hatcher 1995: 143). Most countries specialized in particular products or services which they exchanged for imports. England’s key export was wool, which it sent to the Continent in exchange for wine from France and woad and alum (used in wool and cloth processing) and spices which arrived from Asia via Venice.

Internal trade routes, often organized by members of merchant guilds, supported the external supply chains. Manufactured items from London, for example, were distributed to the Continent through the ports of London and Southampton while those from York were distributed to Scandinavia via Hull (Hicks 2015). Wool from Norfolk and salted herring were distributed from Great Yarmouth while agricultural produce from the west of England was exported through Bristol and Exeter. Many of the raw materials traded by the merchant guilds and the manufactured products produced by craft guilds reached the global market through those internal routes. On some occasions goods were also purchased directly by visiting merchants. Members of the Italian super-companies, for example, frequently visited England to arrange the advance purchase of wool, as did other overseas merchants. Records from Leicester’s merchant guild, among others, reveal that guild members traded directly with foreign merchants and were sometimes asked to arrange business trips for them (Bateson 1899: 187, 203–4).

The presence of guilds outside Western Europe is the subject of ongoing academic research. It has been suggested that formal guilds were absent from medieval Islamic cities such as Damascus, but that trades were informally organized into different groups, and that sometimes leaders of particular trades were asked to liaise with the sultan (Lapidus 1984: 95–107). It is possible that those informal groups were used by the central authorities as a convenient means through which to regulate certain trades, especially for taxation purposes. However, it seems unlikely that the informal groups performed the same range of functions as did some guilds in Europe, and especially England. In China, it has been suggested that kinship organizations, known as clans, were “an important conduit for economic exchange” in the Middle Ages (Greif and Tabellini 2010: 139). It has been proposed that merchant networks and organizations of craft and manufacturing producers existed in China from at least the mid fourteenth century, but there is debate amongst historians over whether they can be accurately referred to as “guilds” as not all of them had formal regulations or were recognized by other institutions (Moll-Murata 2008). Chinese organizations were probably utilized for the administration of tax collection, and it has been suggested that their members also engaged in religious and welfare activities and convened training and dispute resolution (Moll-Murata 2008).

**Guilds and supply chains**

The contribution made by guild members to international trade was described in an account of a Venetian official visiting England in 1496–7. He first described the raw materials available for export by guild members, noting that:
the riches of England are greater than those of any other country in Europe, as I have been told by the oldest and most experienced merchants, and also as I myself can vouch, from what I have seen. This is owing, in the first place, to the great fertility of the soil, which is such that, with the exception of wine, they import nothing from abroad for their subsistence. Next, the sale of their valuable tin brings in a large sum of money to the kingdom, but still more do they derive from their extraordinary abundance of wool, which bears such a high price and reputation throughout Europe.

(Amt 2001: 487–96)

The official continued his account by describing trading conditions in London, a city where many guilds were located. The city’s transport links through the river Thames and the sea provided “all the advantages desired in a maritime town.” As a trading center and place of residence the city abounds with every article of luxury, as well as the necessaries of life … in one single street, named the Strand, leading to St Paul’s, there are fifty-two goldsmith’s shops, so rich and full of silver vessels, great and small, that in all the shops in Milan, Rome, Venice and Florence put together, I do not think there would be found so many of magnificence seen in London.

Members of London’s goldsmiths craft guild were responsible for the creation of the beautiful items and guild officials fostered consumer confidence by policing the quality of goods made by members, as described later in this chapter.

The account illustrates how members of different guilds co-ordinated different parts of the global supply chain. Members of merchant guilds, individually or in partnership, could source wool from the countryside, organize its production into cloth or arrange its distribution to be turned into clothes by consumers. Members of artisan guilds could manufacture products to be sold directly to consumers in the domestic market, or to be sourced and distributed as exports by merchants.

Potential for supply chain conflict existed in such a situation. Conflicts could occur amongst merchant guilds if members of one guild decided to diversify their trading interests from their original specialty, thereby overlapping with the trading interests of another guild. In fourteenth-century London rivalries developed between the guilds of the grocers, the drapers, and the mercers, who all had interests in the wool and cloth trades (Barron 2004: 231). The grocers exported wool and imported spices, the drapers exported cloth and imported a wide range of goods, while the mercers imported “linens, silks and expensive textiles” but also exported a variety of items (Nightingale 1989: 12). The groups were in conflict over the location of the staple – the key port which was selected by the English king to administer and collect the revenues from overseas trade. The grocers favored a staple in Bruges or Calais, where they could easily obtain spices from Genoese traders, while the mercers and drapers favored staples in Antwerp or Middleburg, which were more convenient for the cloth trade.

Conflict could occur between merchant and artisan guilds if merchant guilds imported products that competed with those produced locally. In London in the 1310s and 1320s tensions occurred between the cappers guild on the one hand and the haberdashers and mercers guilds on the other. The cappers claimed that the haberdashers were selling imported caps of “inferior materials,” imported by the mercers, rather than caps manufactured locally by the cappers. In defense, the haberdashers and mercers argued that the cappers “sold old caps for new, and that they dyed black caps made of white and grey wool” (Archer 1991: 8).
The Venetian’s account, however, shows that guild members could also contribute to the overall prosperity of England’s economy. Guild members allowed natural resources to reach international markets, and their craft skills added value to raw materials. Guild officials policed the quality of the goods distributed and manufactured by members, allowing customers to shop with confidence and contributing to the positive reputation of English products. Guild members also contributed to the economic performance of the town in which they were located. A large town or city, such as London, might have many specialist guilds producing a wide range of consumer products that attracted buyers for the domestic and global markets. An overview of crafts and companies in London in 1328–1518 demonstrates that, in the area of metal working alone, there were guilds of “armourers, bladesmiths, braziers, cardmakers [who made combs for carding wool], coppersmiths, cutlers, ferrous, founders, goldsmiths, ironmongers, latteners, lorimers, pewterers, pinners, plumbers, smiths, spurries and waresellers” (Barron 2004: 220).

Early discussion of guilds

Having considered the views of a medieval commentator, it is useful to examine the views of the earliest academics who studied the operation of guilds. Scholars have varied in their emphasis or marginalization of the functions of religious observance, social interaction, and trade promotion. They have also differed in their opinions on the benefits that guilds provided to individual members and to the overall economic performance of the town or city in which they were based (Richardson 2001).

Gross is credited with establishing guilds as a field of study. Focusing on the merchant guilds of medieval England, Gross emphasized their contribution to the regulation of trade at the local level (1890: 37). He was especially interested in the relationship between merchant guilds and local government and viewed the merchant guild as essentially “a department of town administration” whose members had the right to trade freely in the town, usually in return for a small entrance fee (Gross 1890: 44). Those who were not members of the guild, in contrast, faced more restrictions, including having to pay tolls, being barred from retail trade, and prohibited from buying certain items (Gross 1890: 45). Gross argued that an individual could be member of a guild without being a citizen of the town, or could be a citizen without being a member of the guild, or could live in the town without having the full rights of citizenship or being a member of the guild (1890: 66, 69, 71–2). He suggested that such distinctions were less rigid in locations where the merchant guild had taken more general responsibility for the regulation of trade in the town.

Other literature has been more critical of guilds, arguing that they created barriers to trade. This argument is prominent in the work of Ogilvie, who referred to guilds as “exclusive organizations for middle-class businessmen” (2011; 2014: 173). The monopoly possessed by guilds, Ogilvie (2014: 184) argued, created barriers to innovation by “blocking entry by venturesome upstarts.” Ogilvie was critical of the quality control responsibilities of guilds, suggesting that guild inspectors would sometimes accept the use of poorer quality materials if that was the only way for a profit to be made while failing to recognize situations where consumers were willing to pay a cheaper price for a lower quality item (Ogilvie 2014: 179–81). That argument has recently been contested by Davids and de Munck and their colleagues (2014) who have proposed that guilds in Italy and the Low Countries updated their practices to respond to changing consumer preferences in the fifteenth century, for example for glass tableware or high-quality mid-range cloth (Ammannati 2014; Maitte 2014).

The relationship between the artisan or craft producers of manufactured items and the merchants who distributed manufactured goods and raw materials has been questioned by historians
Guilds

Some scholars, notably Brentano and Swanson, suggested that the earliest merchant guilds welcomed artisans as members, as many artisans also traded the raw materials that they used in manufacturing. They argue that a division of labor then occurred, in which the trade in raw materials became increasingly concentrated amongst merchants to the exclusion of artisans (Brentano 1870: lxiv–ccix, cvii, cviii; Swanson 1989). At the same time, the financial burdens placed on the artisans increased, including the expectation of payments for special events and hospitality. Recent scholarship has taken a more positive view of the relationship. Examining merchant guilds involved in long distance trade Grafe and Gelderblom (2010: 478) proposed that there was “complementarity between different providers of services to merchants, for example ruler and guilds.” Strong merchant guilds, they suggested, were able to help the wider community by using their influence to lobby central government for initiatives which benefitted not just themselves but other participants in the economy who were “outside the guild” (Grafe and Gelderblom 2010: 510). This view was echoed by Epstein and Prak (2008: 4), who suggested that guilds helped to reduce transaction costs by promoting investment in training, co-ordinating “complicated production processes,” and communicating accurate information about product to consumers.

The networking potential of guilds and their welfare provision was the focus of research by Toulmin Smith et al. (1870) and Rosser (2015). They emphasized the role of guilds as providers of “mutual help,” “charity,” and religious activity for the lay community. Rather than seeing guilds as closed organizations, both scholars highlighted evidence of the diverse membership of guilds, including evidence of the admission of women. They argued that the social capital aspects of guild membership meant that great importance was attached to the general behavior and personal reputation of members and prospective members, and not just the quality of their products. The guild of St Anne, based in the Church of St Laurence, London, for example, expelled members if they were found to lie too long in bed in the morning and refused to work once they had risen! (Toulmin Smith 1870: xxx, xxxix, xl).

Membership services

Individual merchants and craftspeople were encouraged to join a guild because of the membership services provided, alluded to above, and outlined below. These services were obtained in return for the payment of a member’s annual subscription.

Membership services: trade networks and infrastructure

Accurate and detailed information about markets and traders could limit some of the risks of global trade. Membership of a guild provided merchants operating the inland and overseas trade routes with access to social capital. Surviving registers reveal that some guilds drew their members from well beyond their immediate location, a situation which reflected the importance of networking along trade routes. Holy Trinity Guild in Luton in the south-east of England was founded in 1474 in order to pray for the souls of its founders after death. However, even with a strong religious focus, it appears that the guild served as a networking hub for traders on the long-distance inland trade routes which sourced wool and cloth for export. Members came from as far away as Canterbury in Kent, Coventry in the Midlands, Boston in Lincolnshire, Halifax in Yorkshire, and Kendal in Cumbria as well as the international trade center of London (Tearle 2012: xxii). Meanwhile the Guild of the Holy Cross in Stratford-upon-Avon, despite also having a religious focus, quickly attracted members from Bristol, Coventry, and London, including members from the London mercers’ guild, after its foundation in 1269 (Macdonald
2007: 24–5). It is probably not surprising, therefore, that some guilds eventually changed their emphasis from primarily religious to primarily economic. The York mercers’ guild was initially founded as a religious fraternity in 1357, before transforming into the mercers guild in the early fourteenth century and subsequently the York company of merchant adventurers in the sixteenth century (Wheatley 2008: 14–15).

Financial capital could also be an important outcome from guild membership and networking. Members of the York mercers’ guild, who were usually engaged in overseas trade with the Low Countries and Scandinavia, sometimes went into partnership with one another to organize and share the costs of shipping (Wheatley 2008: 15–16). There is also evidence that guild members obtained credit from each other, which facilitated their ability to make bulk purchases.

The annual guild feast was a key networking event, which provided an opportunity for social interaction between members and between members and representatives of other local and national institutions (Rosser 1994). Some guilds had rules that governed behavior at the feasts, including that conversations should only be about “peace and love” and that any disputes between members had to be resolved at the event (Rosser 1994: 441). Feasts were often impressive affairs; the wax chandlers guild of London consumed

(a loin of beef, a leg of mutton, two loins of veil and two loins of mutton, a goose, a capon, a pig and a rabbit, a dozen of pigeons, a hundred of eggs, a gallon of wine and 16 gallons of ale.

(Dummelow 1973: 16–17)

The surroundings could be equally attractive, as many guilds used membership payments and additional donations to construct a hall to provide a permanent base for hospitality, philanthropy, and business meetings. Between its foundation in 1269 to its dissolution in 1547 the guild of Holy Cross in Stratford-upon-Avon constructed an impressive range of buildings, comprising a guild hall, almshouses, and a chapel with wall paintings on subjects including the Last Judgement and the Dance of Death (Giles 2017). The York mercers’ guild constructed their guild hall in the fourteenth century with an upper story for business functions, an undercroft which served as a hospital, and a chapel for religious devotion (Giles 2000; Merchant Adventurers Hall 2017). The “outsiders and gentry” invited to the feasts would have left with a positive impression of the behavior of guild members in the spheres of trade, welfare, and religion (Rosser 1994) and may have helped to lobby on behalf of the guild for favorable economic policies.

Membership services: training and quality control

Membership of a guild provided an indication of the quality of manufactured goods and raw materials, information which was important to the merchants who sourced goods for export. Many merchant and craft guilds had rules that regulated the quality of the product, for example the cleanliness of the wool traded and the nature of the materials used in manufactured products. The rules were enforced in guild courts, for those guilds that had them, as well as in local courts. Domestic and foreign merchants could therefore purchase in confidence, knowing that they would receive a product of a certain standard and that, if anything went wrong, they could seek redress in a guild or local court.

Guilds provided access to specialist craft training which promoted certain production standards. In order to become a journeyman (a wage earner but not a member of a guild) or a master in a guild it was necessary to complete the apprenticeship, usually of seven years, and in London
apprenticeship was an important step toward urban citizenship (Hovland 2006: 154–6; Minns and Wallis 2012; Wallis 2012; Wallis 2008). Masters were expected to provide bed and board, and education in business or manufacturing practices. Inadequate training or early termination of apprenticeships damaged the process of knowledge dissemination, however (Schalk et al. 2016). The goldsmiths records reveal that in 1386–7 some members caused problems by taking on apprentices who then left their training early having “learnt a little of the said craft and ... its privities [trade secrets]” and then traveled to other towns where they did work that was “not proper and not up to the legal standard ... to the great discredit of the people of the said mistery” (Jefferson 2003: 219). The threat that such practices posed to the reputation of all guild members meant that inadequate instruction of apprentices was an offense that could be prosecuted in both guild and town courts (Hovland 2006: 95).

Quality control was often delegated to guilds by local government, who recognized the benefits that trained expertise could provide. Control included ensuring that items were supplied in the correct quantity and quality and were safe to consume (Casson 2012). Wine was a key commodity in global trade but the health of consumers was threatened, and the reputation of the city diminished, by unscrupulous practices by members of the vintners’ guild, who imported the wine, and coopers’ guild, who made the barrels for it. The increased popularity of expensive sweet Romney wine in the fifteenth century resulted in some local and foreign merchants putting wine of Spain and Rochelle and other remnants of broken, sodden[or] reboiled ... wine of other countries, which are enfeebled in colour and nothing in value, in various butts and other vessels that are scraped to make resin adhere, gummed with pitch, cobbler's wax and other horrid and unwholesome things in order to reduce and bring again a pleasant colour and likely manner drinking of Romney to smell and taste, to the deceit of all.

(Crawford: 1977)

As members of the vintners’ guild had responsibility for policing taverns, the local authorities asked them to be vigilant for this offense, which was punishable by a spell in the stocks.

There was recognition that in a mutual association of guild members, poor quality goods produced by one member risked undermining the reputation of the products produced by others. The resolution of disputes with customers and the maintenance of quality are revealed in prosecutions in the goldsmiths’ court, including that of Gerard van Sweck, prosecuted in 1369–70 for soldering nails with tin when altering a gold girdle for the Duke of Lancaster (Jefferson 2003: 125). Reflecting the links between the members, his offense was recorded as being “to the disgrace” of the whole guild and he was ordered to pay half mark into the alms funds in recompense. The money from the fine went toward the support of those members of the guild and their families who had fallen on hard times, a further demonstration of the varied functions of medieval guilds.

On some occasions, the civic authorities and guild collaborated to prosecute offenses by guild members. In 1355 the civic authorities and wardens of the goldsmiths of London jointly charged guild member Henry Lyropol with using counterfeit metal to create a harness, a seal, and two small plates (Casson 2009: 290; Thomas 1926: 242–3). After returning a guilty verdict, the court barred Lyropol from trading for six months and confiscated the false materials. Guilds were willing and able enforce rules relating to quality control, and to co-operate with civic authorities to prosecute members whose behavior threatened the reputation of the guild and city as a whole. Their efforts in this area contributed to consumer confidence in
England’s export items, further enhancing the country’s ability to participate in global trade networks.

Membership services: welfare

Welfare provision during sickness and devotion after death were further benefits of guild membership (Rosser 1994). In a period before state welfare institutions, many guilds collected money toward the provision of healthcare facilities and accommodation for members and their families. Court fines, membership fees, and bequests from members helped to fund such provision. In 1446, for example, the vintner Guy Shuldham left land to the vintners’ guild of London for the construction of a guild hall and 13 almshouses for “poor and needy” members (Barron 2004: 225). Upon death, guild membership provided access to commemoration. Guild members were expected to provide prayers for the souls of deceased members and attend their funerals, and fines were levied on those who did not participate in those activities (Jefferson 2003: 101).

Performances of plays at religious festivals provided an opportunity to combine religious devotion with an element of trade advertising. In York the subject matter of the annual plays of the Corpus Christi religious festival reflected the expertise of the craft performing them, for example Noah’s Ark was portrayed by the fishmongers and mariners and the Three Kings by the goldsmiths (Purvis 1969: 33). Indeed, the popularity of these plays often threatened to undermine the religious significance. In 1426 Friar William Melton complained that the audience “gave themselves over to feasting, boozing, carousing, sing-songs, and other improper behaviour” (Sellers 1914: 156–8).

The role of guild members in England’s economic performance

As well as providing benefits for their members, and potentially also their urban location, the activities of guild members also contributed to the performance of the English economy as a whole. In medieval England, the crown had overall responsibility for the performance of each town, and of the realm. The crown held ultimate control over the operation of English towns, although in some locations it delegated this power to local authorities in return for an annual payment and the right to intervene if the town was poorly administered. Tax on international trade provided a key source of royal income and so the English crown took a close interest in the regulation of the wool and cloth trades, the tax on which was a key source of royal income. The crown provided and policed the currency and the standard system of weights and measures. This ensured continuity in transactions between different locations within the country, fostered the confidence of foreign traders in English products, and made England an attractive trading location for foreign traders.

The English crown, historians have argued, appreciated the benefits of formally organized groups of merchants or artisans as a source of specialist expertise and quality control. In London and Winchester there is evidence that the earliest guilds to be officially recognized by the crown involved export commodities (the weavers’ and fullers’ guilds), the currency (the goldsmiths’ guild) and food necessities (the guilds of the bakers and fishmongers) (Barron 2004: 201–3; Keene 2005: 15). The crown also realized that the expertise of guild members could be applied to the affairs of central government, particularly in the maintenance of the strong currency (Keene 2005). From at least the thirteenth century, members of the London goldsmiths’ guild held roles in the Royal Mint (Reddaway and Walker 1975: 304).

The crown recognized the potential to apply best-practice from one guild to others in order to strengthen an entire sector of the English export economy. The crown promoted the use of
the London goldsmiths’ guild as a model for the conduct of the provincial goldsmiths. By 1300 the standards of the London goldsmiths’ guild were rolled-out to provincial goldsmiths and in the late 1320s the London goldsmiths appointed officials to supervise the goldsmiths of Oxford and York (Alsford 2017a). In London itself, the crown encouraged the clustering of the trade around Cheapside, as described by the Venetian visitor, to facilitate the supervision of the trade. The goldsmiths’ royal charter of 1327 stressed that no goldsmiths’ shops were to be opened in London outside that area (Alsford 2017a). Quality control was therefore an area in which the interests of guilds and of the crown overlapped (Keene 2005: 11, 14–15).

On some occasions, however, the interests of the crown and of the members of merchant and artisan guilds diverged. Competition from foreign merchants in areas of global trade covered by English merchants was a source of tension throughout the Middle Ages. The English crown saw foreign merchants as a source of both luxury goods and taxation income. On various occasions (especially in the reign of Edward I) overseas merchants were therefore encouraged to settle in England (Barron 2004: 94–101). In the 1280s, for example, merchants from the Hanseatic League established headquarters in the Steelyard in London (Alsford 2017b). In periods of prosperity, relations were fairly cordial, as the foreign merchants were customers for English manufactured products and their trade routes often complemented those used by the English merchants. Economic recession and warfare, however, intensified competition, particularly over the trade routes used for the distribution of raw materials. In the 1380s, war between England and France meant that many English merchants decided to focus their attentions on northern Europe, where trade was controlled by the Hanseatic League. Some English merchants wished to establish an English base in Gdansk to mirror that of the Hanse merchants in London. The new king Richard II supported this move, and imposed restrictions on Hanse merchants in England to put pressure on the Hanseatic League. In this tense situation, a number of disputes developed, including in 1385 when merchants from London, York, Beverley, Lynn, and Norwich collaborated to petition the Grand Master of the Hanseatic League to resolve offenses that they claimed had been committed against them by Hanse merchants, including the seizure of their goods, the failure to pay correct value for them, violence against some English merchants, and failure to settle debts (Alsford 2017c). The English merchants stated that they were “quite astonished” that, rather than providing a remedy, the Prussian authorities had encouraged Hanse members to bring “all kinds of trumped up counter-charges … against the English.” In an attempt to resolve the situation an exchange of ambassadors occurred between the English king and the Grand Master, and both sides were ordered to return to each other seized goods while other claims were to be properly heard and settled.

**Change over time**

The membership services outlined above made guild membership an attractive proposition for individuals engaged in the sourcing, production, and distribution of items in global supply chains. The quality control facilities and skills of members could be positive attributes to a town, while the crown also saw a potential alignment between its goals and the services provided by guild officials to guild members. However, the rapid expansion of global trade from c.1500 was coupled by a decline, rather than enhancement, in the attractiveness of guild membership. The reasons for this situation are unclear, but changes in the political and economic environment may have played a part. The royal enquiry of 1388–9 and the dissolution of the chantries in 1547 demonstrated that guilds, though useful to the crown, were not immune from challenge. The 1388–9 enquiry occurred in the aftermath of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and reflected a fear of the potential use of religious and craft guilds as organizations for social unrest, as well as
a mounting concern with the amount of land that was under guild control. Guilds across England were asked to state their “aims, resources and activities,” although there is little surviving evidence to reveal what purpose, if any, the information collected was used for (Jones 1974; Rosser 2015: 64–5; Toulmin Smith et al. 1870). The dissolution in 1547 was part of the English Reformation and primarily affected guilds with a religious focus. The English crown, it appears, became more suspicious of the activities of guilds as the Middle Ages progressed.

Competition between England and other countries intensified from c.1450 onwards, posing a particular challenge to the merchant guilds and raising questions about their usefulness to members engaged in the distribution networks for global trade. The control of the London vintners’ guild over the Gascon wine trade, for example, became less significant as competition from other products, notably beer from the Low Countries and sweet wines from the Mediterranean, intensified. Guild members also suffered disruption in their supply chain due to the English crown’s loss of Gascony in 1453 (Crawford 1977: 54, 61). The vintners’ guild responded by successfully petitioning the crown, on behalf of its members, to extend their control to other types of wines. Members of the guild enjoyed a brief resurgence in their fortunes until royal legislation in 1553 placed significant restrictions on the volume of wine that could be stored for trade and on the number of taverns an individual vintner could operate. As guild membership began to be associated with limitations on trade, rather than opportunities, there was less incentive for merchants or artisans to pay a fee to join.

The relocation of manufacturing from towns to the countryside may have contributed to the decline of guilds whose members were engaged in production. From c.1450 onwards some industries, including cloth making, became more reliant on mechanized production rather than hand production. The countryside provided easier access to fuel and water power for such production (Britnell 2009: 174–5). Raw materials and manufactured products for the global trade routes could increasingly be sourced directly from the countryside or from the new factories, rather than needing to be obtained from guild members.

Mechanization encouraged the centralization of production in factories organized by a single entrepreneur, rather than in individual workshops. There was therefore less incentive to use a model of business organization that co-ordinated craft producers working in individual workshops. Furthermore, mechanization aided the standardization of production, potentially reducing the need to provide quality inspections through the guild system (Gross 1890: 52). There was therefore little need to establish guilds in the new rural locations, while established urban guilds saw membership diminish as manufacturers relocated.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the contribution that members of merchant and artisan guilds made to global supply chains during the Middle Ages. It has shown that guild members sourced, created, or distributed exports or distributed imports. By focusing on English guilds, it shows that merchant and artisan guilds provided trade promotion services for their members as well as opportunities for religious observance and social interaction. Some of the services provided helped members to reduce the risks of overseas trade, for example through the potential for partnerships and access to specialist knowledge. Other services, such as quality control and training, helped to boost consumer confidence in products. The importance of the services provided by guild officials to guild members was recognized by local and central government, with whom guild members shared the common goals of promoting a good reputation for the products of their town and a strong performance of their country in the global marketplace.
Guilds

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