Life in a Medieval City Study Guide

Life in a Medieval City by Frances and Joseph Gies

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Life in a Medieval City provides a hypothetical, though factually researched and historically accurate, day in the life of the city of Troyes, the capital of the Champagne region of what is now modern-day France, in the year 1250. Rather than relying on the normal historical record of royals and wars, the book instead looks at life from an "everyday" perspective.

From Troyes' humble beginnings as a Roman fort, Troyes in 1250 is a bustling city of about 15,000 people, and the center of the Hot Fair and Cold Fair, two in a series of important merchant markets central to the economic success of the region. Troyes is part of a large and complex web of trade routes.

Wealthy merchants are called burghers. A typical residence is a four story home. Such things as dinner and etiquette are explained in detail. Housewives, while holding no political power, share the power of the purse and are crucial to the home for daily shopping and the direction of the several servants in the home. A pregnant woman is a woman in danger in this time; childbirth is still a mysterious process plagued by pagan myths.

Events like weddings, funerals, church services, and cathedral school (reserved for only well-to-do young boys) are explored in detail.

Of particular emphasis are the various craft professions. City professionals such as the smith, goldsmith, tanner, weaver, and miller are highly skilled in their individual work, and carve out a comfortable middle-class, clearly departing from the servile peasants of the feudal period. One professional of particular importance is the mason, who with a wide knowledge of mathematics, engineering, and stonecutting, erect the massive Gothic cathedrals of the error. Glass-makers, glaziers, also rise to prominence in this period, providing beautiful and complicated stained glass works of art.

Towns are governed by charters, agreements between the feudal lord and the city. In return for paying taxes, the privileged members of Troyes enjoy a certain freedom, though self-government remains elusive. This era is a prosperous one; books read for pleasure and humor become valuable commodities, songs and plays become popular, and in general a growing secularization threatens the iron grip of the Church.

Eventually, the rise of Paris as a commercial center, the wasteful spending and taxation of nobility, and the increasing localization of commerce, cause Troyes to decline in power and to become no longer the commercial epicenter it was. Today, apart from a few crumbling buildings from the period, Troyes' lasting legacy as a trade powerhouse seems to be contained in the "Troy weight," a measurement used to this day in gem cutting and ammunition.

Prologue, Chapter 1, Chapter 2

Prologue, Chapter 1, Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Prologue: A history of the city of Troyes is provided, from Roman times to the middle of the 13th century, 1250, the date at which the rest of the book examines Troyes in great detail. Prior to Roman conquest, northwestern Europe (modern-day France) was primarily wilderness dotted by only a few small villages, due to a lack of political organization, primitive religion, and scarce commerce. As Roman officials and soldiers took over the area, several villages became army fortifications which allowed merchants to safely trade, thus increasing commerce and population. Troyes was one of these fortifications, which developed into permanent settlements

The Christian church, especially after it was officially recognized by Constantine, made a huge impact on towns like Troyes, as bishops began asserting firm control over settlements in the 4th and 5th centuries. These episcopal towns, expanding through the church, came to be known as "cites" short for civitas, a place where people congregate inside walls. The Roman Empire lost power, and the Christian church became all the more powerful. Unfortunately so did tribes such as the Vandals, who eventually caused sackings and catastrophic decline in the cities. Vikings in the ninth century cause more chaos. Furthermore, Islamic influence and its threat of war and conquest led to further decline, ushering in "The Dark Ages."

Constant threat of attack was thwarted finally by the creation of large earthen walls around cities. These towns, made more safe (and thus more populous) by the addition of walls, came to be know as "bourgs" or "burroughs," with its inhabitants called bourgeois, or burghers. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, two sets of advancements helped cement the growth and permanence of these bourgs; improvements in agriculture (such as the horse instead of the ox, and the heavy plow), and advances in mining, which meant an inflow of money.

Bourgs began to specialize in different goods, and soon merchants were establishing a vast amount of trade routes. The need arose for a common marketplace for merchants to meet, to spur this trade. In Troyes, this took the form of a twice-a-year fair in which merchants would meet and trade. This fair system was importantly encouraged by several Counts, most notably Thibaut The Great. Troyes thus always has had a good working relationship with its merchants. The rise of "communes" and charters, essentially burghers banding together to form guilds and pay taxes in exchange for protected rights, further encouraged commerce and the rise of the burghers.

By 1250, though not as grand as cities in Italy or the rich commerce centers of Islam, northwest Europe and Troyes are enjoying commercial success, burgeoning populations, and peace.

Chapter 1:

This chapter describes the physical geography of Troyes in 1250, during one of its famous merchant fairs. Merchants from all around Champagne, and further, arrive to Troyes for the fair via a dizzying amount of established trade routes. Routes take into account geography, and merchants tend to band together and hire soldiers like crossbowmen and pikemen so their goods are not pilfered by bandits. Because the rainy season can make routes muddy, pack animals like horses and mules are used instead of carts that could get their wheels stuck in mud.

Troyes' wall is twenty feet high and eight feet thick. There are several entrances to get into the city. A main canal separates the "old city" from the "new city." The old city is home to wealthy families, members of clergy, ghetto Jews, and the poor. In the fair quarter, permanent halls provide merchants the space to sell their wares, be it spices, wool, or cloth, the main merchandise. Landmarks in the city include the Viscount's Tower (once home to the Viscount, now just a residence for many families) and the Count's Castle, a "donjon" now used for ceremonies and jousting tournaments. Most traffic is by foot; particular sections of the city to avoid are the butcher's and the tanner's sections, due to the strong unpleasant odors. Also notable is the vast number of religious buildings erected all over Troyes, indicating the city's status as an ecclesiastical town, and Christianity's still-powerful influence.

Chapter 2:

In this chapter the residence and domestic life of a wealthy burgher is explored in detail. In most cities, four-story buildings made of timber (and a few of stone) are erected as home to either a single family of wealthy burghers, or many poor families. In the burghers' case, the first floor is dedicated to merchant business and greeting clients. This floor includes an anteroom and counting room. The next two floors serve as the living space for the burgher family. There is a solar, or dining hall, as well a bedroom for the husband and wife (in which a straw mattress is suspended from the ceiling by ropes), and a smaller bedroom for children. The attic is reserved for servants and any apprentices. Common to all floors are huge fireplaces (some large enough for a person to walk into), which provide heat as well as illumination (as candles are at this point a somewhat expensive commodity).

A typical dinner is also explained. A long trestle table is assembled for meals. A tablecloth spread over the table serves as a communal napkin. Two neighbors share silverware (minus a fork, which hasn't been invented), a wine cup, and an "ecuelle," which is a bowl filled with stew or soup. A hunk of bread serves as a plate, with a hollowed out bread piece filled with salt passed around as a salt shaker. Though most food is finger food, table manners are strictly followed, including wiping your mouth before using the shared wine cup, breaking bread instead of biting it off, and not picking your nose whilst eating.

Toilets are usually in the form of a privy in the stable yard. Richer folks may have a "garderobe" or toilet just off their sleeping room, leading to a pit in the cellar which is emptied occasionally. Baths are a once-a-week affair, with water from the kitchen warmed and hauled to the bath in buckets.

Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Chapter 5

Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3:

Chapter 3 deals with the responsibilities of and attitudes towards women. Specifically, the authors lead us through a typical day in the life of a medieval burgher housewife. The day is divided by bells ringing at three-hour intervals to mark the offices of the Church. The dawn bell begins the day. The housewife refrains from any makeup, wigs, or undergarments that binds her bosom because it is frowned upon by the church. She does however apply ointment to lighten her skin, as the ideal beauty in medieval times has skin as "white as snow on ice."

Shopping for food is a daily chore, which includes stops to the butcher's, poulterer's, and the pastry shop. The accepted currency are silver coins called deniers. The housewife must always be on the lookout for poor quality goods, like watered down wine or yeasty bread. Dinner (which may happen as early as 10 a.m. depending on the season and household) is a multi-step affair, in which meats must be roasted in communal ovens (no one has an oven in their home), and servants must chop and blanch vegetables. Most households cultivate a small herb and flower garden to use for foods.

Other household chores include making the bed, filling the water vat, emptying the chamber pots, and doing the laundry, which amounts to soaking clothes in soap and ashes, pounding the clothes, then hanging them.

As far as freedom and power, women have both liberties and restrictions. Women can hold property and inherit property, sue, make wills, and plead cases in court. They are usually better educated than men, along with picking up a few recreational skills like the lute. They may hold a wide variety of jobs, though they are paid substantially less than men for the same work. There is a highly complex set of "rules" or suggested etiquette for a woman to follow, such as never accepting gifts or never running. Politically, women cannot hold office or sit on town councils, though there are several examples of women who, via their husbands or otherwise, exert political power nonetheless. Very importantly, many women hold the purse strings and wield significant power via money.

Chapter 4:

This chapter is entitled "Childbirth and Children." Childbirth represents the hazard for a women in these times, as Caesarian sections are only performed if the woman or child is dead (and no anesthesia), and other complications are poorly understood and usually fatal. There are many superstitions surrounding the birth. In particular, pregnant women are urged to record the time of the child's birth exactly, as it is thought time of birth can

be used astrologically to predict the child's future. There are also myths about influencing the sex of the child, such as sleeping on one side versus the other.

When the baby is ready, a "lying-in" chamber is created and access to the pregnant woman is restricted to all but the midwife. Not even a doctor can interfere with the birth. The midwife uses ointment and soothing words to calm the pregnant woman, and jasper stone and even magical intonations to aid the process. When the baby is born, it is cleaned and wrapped in very tight bands so it can't move, as it is thought a moving baby will twist and deform its limbs. A lady usually does not nurse her own baby, so a wet nurse is carefully selected. The wet nurse must be physically fit, and her diet must be strictly regimented, as it is thought her milk will profoundly influence the baby.

The baby is baptized on its first day of birth. The mother is still isolated and is considered impure after the birth; she must be "churched" and allowed back into society via a religious ritual.

A baby is tightly wrapped until it can walk, after which a child is allowed to play games which include chess, dice, ice skating (with horse shin bones as skates), play jousting, swimming, and cock fighting.

Though games and entertainments of most types are forbidden by the Church, all classes of people find time for these types of recreations. Storytelling and joke telling is also a popular way to pass the time.

Chapter 5:

Weddings and funerals are the subject of Chapter 5. It is noted that social mobility, though rare, did take place. Marriages were usually arranged, though all parties hoped for and encouraged mutual desire on both sides. Restrictions against marriage include either husband or wife being too young or too closely related ("consanguinity"). Everyone was allowed to get married except heathens, as they had not been baptized. Marriage was a legal as well as social contract, as it involved the transfer of the bride's property (dowry) to the groom.

Before marriage, an involved betrothal ritual is performed. For the actual marriage, both bride and groom dress in their finest clothes (not necessarily a special bridal dress). At the church, the priest offers a homily, then interrogates the couple. Finally he blesses the wedding ring and gives the groom a Kiss of Peace to transfer to the bride. The wedding party then adjourns to the bride's home, where a huge feast and party is had. "Jongleurs," or entertainers, amuse those assembled by playing instruments, doing magic tricks or acrobatics, and telling stories of old. This feast usually lasts one day, but it could go on longer depending on the importance of those being married.

As for preparations for death, the most important aspect of dying for a wealthy burgher is the proper transfer of his property, for which detailed wills are strongly encouraged. Without clear instructions, bitter and violent fights can and have broken out. Also, the will spells out the burgher's endowment toward the Church, which is believed to help the deceased through purgatory and into heaven.

A dying man may make arrangements to lie down on a hair cloth sprinkled with ashes as a form of penitence. There are examples of famous royals going through this penitence only to recover and live several more years afterward.

Upon death of the burgher, the burgher's house is covered in black. Abbey monks wash the body, treat it with herbs, and wrap it in a linen shroud, then sewing it in deerskin before depositing it into a coffin. The coffin is ceremoniously carried from the church to the burial site, with friends and family wearing black and mourning in a loud and obvious fashion. A prayer called the Mourning Office is given on the way, and citizens are paid to carry candles for the deceased behind the procession. At the grave site, further prayers are uttered and the priest ritually begins the grave digging, after which several gravediggers finish the job. The dead is laid to rest in the coffin, with a flat tombstone laid out.

Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8

Chapter 6, Chapter 7, Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6:

Chapter 6 deals with the business and various occupations found in Troyes. Craftsmen simultaneously sell their wares from the first floor of their homes. The front wall has a double-shuttered opening, making for an awning and then a counter to show goods on. The craftsmen will work in full view of the public, such that everyone can see his skill.

Blacksmiths deal with iron, first smelted by charcoal, a process that leaves varying degrees of carbon in the iron, and thus accounts for varying degrees of quality in iron. A smith, along with an apprentice working the bellows, will take iron in and out of a furnace, smashing it with a hammer on an anvil to eventually bend it to a desired shape. Wire can also be made by pulling iron through smaller and smaller holes. "Good" iron goes to armorers and swordsmiths; "Okay" iron goes to things like plows and nails.

Goldsmiths are a more sophisticated form of blacksmiths, and thus they usually enjoy higher wages. The bulk of a goldsmith's work is actually silver, as gold is so rare. Gold, then silver, are highly sought for their easy malleability (versus iron).

Discussed next is the tanner, whose job literally stinks. Animal skins are draped over beams and beaten, then rubbed with dung and then doused with fermented bran juice in order to soften the hide. It's then taken to a pit and doused in a series of baths based upon tannin (hence, tanner). The process can take months, but hides are quite valuable.

The miller is also an important figure, not only for milling grain, but for providing power to other professions via the millstone. Sometimes a water wheel is used, or sometimes oxen or horses.

Other notable people around town include the wine inspector (who tastes wine to assure quality and ensure fair prices), prostitutes (especially around Fair times), and saddlemakers (though horses are reserved for knights and nobles; burghers travel by mule or on foot).

Each of these professions have guilds. Guilds are important in restricting competition and thus increasing the earnings of its members, and in ensuring quality and standards. Guild members have to adhere to a strict set of rules concerning the quality of their wares. Random inspections ensure adherence. Guilds generally are divided into masters and apprentices (with some guilds having a middle category, journeymen). Apprentices spend from four to twelve years learning the craft before they can prove

their mastery through creation of a "masterpiece," thus becoming a master (usually after also paying a substantial fee).

Finally, the unique position of Jews in the city system is explored. In Troyes, many Jews may be found in an area called Broce-aux-Juifs, the ghetto. Jews must wear a yellow circle on their clothing to identify their religion. As merchants, they are accorded the same rights and protections as Christian merchants. Many Jews engage in money lending and are wealthy. However, Jews are always in a precarious position, as many royals have been known to suddenly issue decrees banning all Jews from their kingdom (and thus confiscating all the Jew's possessions). Thus, Jews tend to lend at high interest rates (considering their higher risks) and to riskier people than Christian moneylenders.

Chapter 7:

One step up from the craftsmen in Chapter 6 are the extremely wealthy burghers who engage in the wool trade and money lending/banking. Currency is briefly discussed. Princes and bishops enjoy the right of coinage (making currency), and sometimes they take liberties by diluting the amount of silver in the coins of common currency, the denier. The amount of silver in a coin is thus an unknown. Twelve pennies (deniers) is a shilling, and twenty shillings is a pound.

Wealthy merchants invest in wool. This wool comes primarily from England. Sometimes a merchant will make an agreement with a particular abbey to have the right to buy all its wool, known as a consignment. When received, wool is cleaned of its impurities and washed, then given over to weavers, who spin the wool into yarn. The yarn is then taken to a fuller, who uses fuller's earth compound, among other treatments, to give the yarn firmness and body. A dyer then soaks the wool in various colors of dye. While a merchant may also invest in linen, silk, and cotton, wool is far and away the most common and profitable.

Becoming wealthy from the wool trade, a typical merchant may start investing in real estate, including houses to rent to families, land for timber, or rights to fish at a stream or pond. Eventually this merchant will probably find himself money lending for maximum profit. Moneylenders are both resented and respected in this period. While the Church calls any money lending "usurious" and sinful, the fact is that even royalty will borrow money, to pay for a Crusade for one example. Merchants at this time can grow to great riches and stature, obtaining the title "Sire," and rivaling nobility.

Chapter 8:

Medieval medicine is the subject of Chapter 8. There are perhaps only 6 doctors in a town of Troyes' size; they are in high demand, and are wealthy people of stature. Doctors obtain licenses to practice from bishops after five years at a medical school. They are taught that the body is comprised of four "humors" or liquids, and three spirits, and that disease usually arises because of some imbalance, or perhaps because of the alignment of the stars. Doctors at this time were heavily reliant on astrology and

numerology as an aid in treating illness. While this may seem absurd, doctors were actually an advance from the "medicine" practice a few hundred years earlier, in which illnesses were simply seen as acts of God, requiring no rational explanation. Doctors at this time were at least attempting to rationally explain the root cause of illnesses.

In Medieval times, illnesses were widespread and varied. Skin diseases were common considering the level of hygiene, and the fact that wool irritates bare skin. Lack of proper diet or starvation also accounted for a high number of patients. Pneumonia and typhoid are also big problems. Also common are injuries and wounds, and in this area doctors actually displayed a decent and sound course of treatment, involving good binding of wounds and an effort to keep a wound clean and sterile. On the contrary, surgery, such as for removing cataracts, kidney stones, or correcting hernias, was poorly understood, and the prognosis for any surgery patient surviving the surgery probably was not good. Mental illness was rampant but treated simply as a religious problem and not a bodily one.

The disease that frightened doctors and clergymen alike was leprosy. At this time about two-thousand leprosy colonies existed in France alone. Sufferers of leprosy were led out of town, given cloaks and gloves, given rites as if they were already dead, and then were banned from ever contacting "normal" society again.

Finally, at this time hospitals were on the rise, usually the result of philanthropic efforts and under the auspices of the Church.

Chapter 9, Chapter 10, Chapter 11

Chapter 9, Chapter 10, Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9:

In the thirteenth century, churches were not only places to conduct religious services. They also served secular purposes, such as a marketplace gathering area during the Fairs, or town council meetings.

Physically, the church is a cold place with no place to sit. Some bring stools, or simply kneel on the straw-colored floor. All wear warm clothes, especially for a long service. A church service is started with a bell ring. Gregorian chant is used to sing hymns, perhaps the first example of polyphonic music. This singing may be accompanied by organs, which at this point are cumbersome, loud, and difficult to play.

Sermons are given in the vernacular, since few understand spoken Latin. The priest gives a "thema," or short passage from the Gospels, following it with an explanation or anecdote to relate to the audience and underscore the moral of the Biblical passage. Sermon is followed by the Creed, the Offertory, and the communion, involving a Kiss of Peace. The priest then asks the congregation to pray for certain persons, some called by their name. After these prayers and a final blessing, the service is over.

A peculiarity with Christianity in this period is explored, that of the need/desire for physical remains of saints to be revered and held sacred. These are called relics, which may be kept in very ornate boxes or containers trimmed with gold and enamel, even containers that are made in the shape of the relic (an arm-shaped container for an arm bone shard, for example). Relics seem to multiply during this period, with every Crusade bringing home bits of the True Cross, or a skull, a one of Judas' pieces of silver. Naturally, some of these relics fell to suspicion, such as Christ's baby teeth or stone fragments from the Ten Commandments.

Sainthood at this time was only just being standardized by the Pope's canonization process. As a result, the exact amount of saints was impossible to determine, and the roster changed from town to town. One saint, however, stands above all others: the Virgin Mary, adored as an ascetic ideal.

Many make pilgrimages to particular cathedrals or other religious sites in order to have a prayer answered, sickness cured, or to do penance for a sin. A famous pilgrimage at this time is to the cathedral at Chartres, where one can follow the "Chartres mile," a pattern of stones on the floor of the cathedral, on one's knees.

Cities like Troyes, because of their cosmopolitan, secular nature, tend to be criticized by church officials. This criticism turns to war-like aggression with the rise of a sect called

the Albigensians, or Cathars, and the Church established an Inquisition to ferret out these heretics. Cathars deny the Redemption and Incarnation, scoff at the power of the cross, and feel marriage is a wicked sin, because marriage (and subsequent procreation) embed people deeper into the material world. Inquisitors may make a heretic Cathar repent, or an unrepentent Cathar may be burned at the stake in the town square. In one famous instance, the infamous inquisitor Robert le Bougre burned 183 men and women Cathars as a huge crowd watched.

Chapter 10:

Cathedral building is the focus of this chapter. In Troyes and northwest Europe generally, construction and reconstruction of cathedrals are overseen by the powerful bishop that oversees a particular area. Troyes' cathedral, which grew from chapel to basilica to cathedral, is called the Cathedral of St. Pierre and St. Paul.

Cathedral-building is a costly enterprise, and as such a cathedral's construction may be stopped and started, under many different master masons, for centuries. Troyes' cathedral is not completed until the sixteenth century. Master masons are skilled, well-paid craftsmen who enjoy special privileges, even the freedom of taxes for life. Masons move from town to town, depending on where a cathedral is being built, and are always in high depend. This geographical freedom, along with their upward social mobility, gives rise to the concept of the "free mason." Masons have a wide range of skills, from engineering to architecture to mathematics, geometry, and even sculpture and art. The advanced knowledge of math and geometry they have is a well-kept secret within the trade. The masons working below a master mason are also skilled, and there is really no room for unskilled or volunteer labor in building a cathedral.

A typical construction day has a master mason instructing stonecutters on the stones needed, which are numbered according to written plans to avoid confusion. Meanwhile, the bell founder makes bells, brass cooking pots, and other bronze items. Using a careful mold, an exact proportion of copper and tin, and a labor-intensive tuning process, the bell founder is also highly skilled and sought after. The bell founder takes pride in his bells and may mark them with his name or a small rhyme.

A crude crane, a windlass, driven by a team of oxen, is used to hoist heavy stones into place. Smaller stones may be lifted via a crank windlass, an invention of the Middle Ages. In some ways, these Middle Ages masons are cruder and less advanced than their Roman counterparts from centuries ago. Roman were able to move much larger stones, and Roman stonecutting was so exact that no mortar was needed. However, medieval masons did have some significant advancements. They discovered the innate strength of a double arch, arches intersecting at right angles, for a building's skeleton and especially the ceiling. This double arch allowed the ceiling to rise to vast heights, giving rise to what is now known as Gothic architecture. The elegant flying buttress was invented out of a need to support these very high ceilings.

Money to pay for such daring construction came from the Church in the form of indulgences, sums paid by members of the congregation in exchange for forgiveness of

their sins. Another source of money were the various guilds, who supported the cathedral not just because of religious reasons but because it was a common meeting place. Guilds may donate, for example, several windows toward further construction.

Glass is manufactured outside the city, in the forests where ample material may be found. Tree ash and sand is heated and then blown via a six-foot-long tube. The result is a greenish glass (no one accomplished truly clear glass in this period) full of bubbles and defects. However, since stained glass was the preferred glass for windows, these defects could be ignored. Glass could be further "stained" by introducing other ingredients during the blowing process. Glass from the forest is then shipped inside the city to a master glazier. Like the master mason, the glazier is highly skilled and respected. He draws up the picture for the glass on a wooden bench, marking each segment of glass. His team will then shave down the right colored glass to fit in a particular segment. Glasses are assembled by fitting double-grooved lead pieces in between and welding them together, with putty applied to keep the rain out.

Finally, it is pointed out that glaziers, masons, and the other skilled craftsmen do not consider themselves artists, though they do take great pride in their work.

Chapter 11:

Cathedrals are sometimes the site of schools for young boys, mostly well-to-do's and nobles. While the cathedral school was at first intended only to teach religious clerks, it has since expanded.

There are no grades; all are taught together. Instruction is conducted in Latin. Students take notes using bone styluses applied to a board covered in wax. There is but one teaching method, rote memorization, and students are expected to memorize a large variety of passages from Scripture, and both Christian and pagan (Roman/Greek) authors. As a result, modern letters are full of quotations.

Curriculum consists of the "Seven Liberal Arts," called liberal because they are not expected to make money, and they are worthy of free men. These Arts are divided into the "trivium" - grammar, rhetoric, and logic - and the "quadrivium" - arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Grammar involves writing, spelling, speech, poetry, and history. The Ars Minor and Ars Grammatica by Donatus are the central texts. Authors of such texts are considered authorities meriting no disagreement. Verse is also an important part of the lesson plan; history is often written in verse, and even legal documents have some verse in them.

Rhetoric involves speechcraft. Logic involves "clear thinking" and Aristotle is the undisputed authority and author for this. As to the scientific-leaning "quadrivium," at this time very little accurate scientific knowledge is provided. Students instead learn long-held myths, like hyenas being able to change their sex at will, or that ostriches eat iron. Astronomy mixes study of the stars along with astrology. Students learn the "computus," the rules for determining the exact date of movable feasts like Easter. In arithmetic children learn ratios and proportions and how to use an abacus. Geography is very

poorly-understood at this time. Students may study a map showing three continents of equal size - Asia, Europe, and Africa - full of creatures from Greek mythology or other oddities.

Only just beginning at this time is the adoption of the Arabic system of numerals, and importantly the use of the zero, making additions and similar manipulations much easier than the Roman system. By 1250, the Arabic system has found its way to Italy, but it is not yet adopted but only known about by northwest European merchants.

As for higher learning, of course exceedingly rare for anyone but the wealthy and royalty, there are only five universities in northwest Europe at this time - Paris, Orleans, Angers, Oxford, and Cambridge. Here, secular learning wins over religious learning, with Aristotle once again being the supreme and dominant text. After six years, a student faces examiners and, should he pass their test, receive a license to teach, either at the university or perhaps at a cathedral. This license also allows him to go into law or medicine, both lucrative professions.

Chapter 12, Chapter 13, Chapter 14

Chapter 12, Chapter 13, Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12:

Books and authors are discussed. Students disinclined to law, medicine, or teaching, would sometimes wander the country, living by their wits. These wanderers were called "Goliards," and they came to develop a new type of Latin verse known for its irreverence and pagan nature.

Other poets and authors wrote in one of the two French languages of the time, Provencal or northern. Troyes was a major center for northern-writing authors. Chretien de Troyes is Troyes' most famous author. His works are the basis for most of what is known about the Arthurian legends. A soldier, Geoffroi de Villehardouin, wrote about the sacking of Constantinople in the vernacular, creating the first masterpiece in French prose.

In 1250, Champagne is ruled by Thibaut IV, a famous poet and songwriter. He has a famous infatuation with the French queen, Queen Blanche (a dozen years older than him), and is otherwise an irreverent cut-up and rabble-rouser. Love for the queen makes it into his songs, and they become quite popular. Another poet, Rutebeuf (literally "rough ox") writes of more grounded problems common to the peasants and burghers, such as owing money or his horse breaking its leg. Work such as these become distributed through the work of copyists, who literally transcribe manuscripts word for word. This is an exhaustive, pain-staking process; the Bible can take fifteen months to copy. Books are thus a valuable and rare commodity. Students may rent such books, usually in order to copy them himself. At this time, the font known as "Caroline miniscule," which features lower-case and upper-case letters, give way to the Gothic font, characterized by its stiff, angular letters written with heavy lines.

Though Latin is the language for most books, increasingly the public is demanding books written in the vernacular, and popular vernacular tales do appear. Among the most famous is the Roman de Renard, a series of verse tales about Renard the Fox who causes mischief. Perhaps most popular are what is known as "fabliaux," short folk tales written in verse. Common to fabliaux is humor, an often bawdy humor such as what can be found later in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Also popular are romances, sometimes written by verse but sometimes in prose, including the Provencal tale Flamenca, involving a woman imprisoned by her jealous husband but rescued by a rogueish, handsome knight.

Chapter 13:

Alongside books, theater is also experiencing a revival from its scarcity in the Dark Ages. This revival starts in the Church, where frequent pagan-inspired feast days and other important events allow for some degree of theater. "Troping," or words and melodies added to a traditional service, develops into "playlets," stories from the bible that are visually communicated, with page boys playing roles. These playlets included the presentation of such things as the reincarnation of Jesus and the nativity. The Prophets, involving the priest speaking to disciples of Christ, is also an important playlet.

These were spoken in Latin, and as with books, there was an increasing demand for something in a language most could understand. This was achieved with a play called "L'Mystere d' Adam," which was staged outside the church rather than inside. This play recounts the story of Genesis, with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan arrives and tempts Adam, who refuses and remains resolute. Satan then appears as a snake to Eve, who gives the apple to Adam. He eats it and is full of grief at his sin. They are cast out of the garden, and in the play's most exciting portion, Adam and Eve are herded into Hell as "devils" dance around them, hitting pots with spoons. Jean Bodel's "Play of St. Nicholas" and "Le Courteois d' Arras" further expand and popularize vernacular plays.

Chapter 14:

In the 1180s, Troyes suffered three distinct disasters. In 1180 the Seine overflowed and the town was badly flooded. In 1184 there was a crop failure and subsequent famine. And in 1188 a fire damaged the cathedral, hundreds of homes, and other areas of the city. Unfortunately, there is little the medieval civilization can do as a precaution against such things.

Famines begin with rumors and hoarding. Speculators may try to directly go to farmers to buy grain before the farmer gets to market. In bad times this speculation is frowned upon and may be punishable by death. Prices go up as grain becomes scarce, and bakers can be up to their old tricks of diluting the amount of grain in their bread. With famine sometimes comes pestilence, a phenomenon not understood to which many fall victim. With fire, the crowded timber construction of many homes are perfect fuel for the flames. People are advised to avoid straw for their roofs, but this policy can only be poorly enforced. The town is largely subject to the weather and season as to the severity of the fire.

War is another danger, though for a strongly-walled town like Troyes, the danger is somewhat remote. The way an army might try to defeat a wall is by siege mining, involving digging under a wall, and then setting fire to the wooden supports of the mine, such that the wall above also catches fire and collapses. A city's defense against the mine is the countermine, or the building of additional wooden walls after a stone wall has collapsed. Siege machines like the trebuchet or catapult are also in use, and upgraded from their Roman predecessors due to the invention of counterweights. All things considered, however, the city inhabitants hold a strong advantage over attackers, especially with the height advantage, and towns as fortified as Troyes are usually safe from attackers.

Chapter 15, Chapter 16, After 1250

Chapter 15, Chapter 16, After 1250 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 15:

This chapter deals with the intricacies of town government. It is first important to note that cities like Troyes were first being granted charters in the twelfth century. These charters, negotiated and granted by feudal lords like the Count of Champagne, essentially freed the citizens of the town from a variety of feudal taxes, in exchange for a single, smaller tax. This freedom also extended to the town handling its own "low justice," or justice against crimes falling short of murder or other "high" crimes. Chartered towns are called communes.

A particular right to be negotiated and bartered is the issue of military service. It is commonplace for a lord to be able to call his subjects to arms in the case of a crisis like an invasion, or a Crusade against Islam. In this era, communes begin to win limits to this requirement of military service, setting geographical or political limits.

The mayor and town council may be selected by the heads of the guilds, or "corporations," or members may simply name their own successor, a process called co-optation. Co-optation tended to lead to a large amount of nepotism and oligarchy, such that powerful families retained council positions for centuries.

Justice handled by the commune is usually swift and punitive, with the idea of prison terms being rare to non-existent. Justice may come in the form of "eye for an eye." For example, a thief has his hand cut off. More common, however, is simply death by hanging, though sometimes a first offender may escape with a mere flogging. At this time, theories behind justice are a hodgepodge of the Germanic system (where crimes are considered personal, rather than civil), Roman (resembling a more modern system with lawyers, evidence presented, testimony, etc.), and the vestiges of barbarian justice, such as duels and the process of ordeal, by which someone proved their innocence by thrusting their hand in boiling water or something similar. Ordeal had fortunately largely fallen into disrepute by this time.

There is also the matter of the bishop's continuing power and influence, such that crimes involving members of the clergy are settled within the church system itself. As the result of justice could mean fines and confiscation of property, that is to say wealth, the church, the lord, and the town constantly bicker over jurisdiction.

The relative freedom of burghers during this period begins to lead to further lessening of royal power, in the form of a reduction in Crusades. Subjects are increasingly reticent to provide money to these expeditions across the sea which are not directly related to the country's safety, and many times end in failure, including financial failure.

Chapter 16:

The "Hot Fair" of Troyes occurs in July and August, one of a series of fairs in Champagne attracting merchants from all over the Mediterranean. Two Keepers of the Fair are appointed, entrusted to hire security and handle the logistics for a smooth fair, who are paid very well. In exchange for a host of taxes, merchants gain legal protections and assurances, such as recourse against debtors, robbers, or cheaters who would dilute their wares.

The first event is the Cloth Market, where wool, linen, and other fabrics are bought and sold. Next is the "avoir de poids," the market for anything that must be weighed, like sugar, grains, and dyes. Most important here are spices, probably the most expensive and sought-after commodity of the High Middle Ages. Pepper especially is a popular spice, for its flavor and for its ability to preserve meat.

Next to be sold are luxury goods, like gems and ivory, and also iron and skins. The final part of the fair involves moneychangers and pawnbrokers. It is at these fairs that an early form of credit is developed; moneychangers lend money that is payable at the next fair with interest, for example. Letters of promises to pay are also exchanged in lieu of money, creating a sophisticated financial system.

After 1250:

The book concludes by providing a brief overview of what happened to Troyes and similar cities after this snapshot in time. Foolishly harsh taxation by a succession of lords led to a decline economically. Worker dissatisfaction, the first rumblings of what would lead to the French Revolution much later, hastened this decline. Commerce became more local and sophisticated, lessening the need for such a central, regular Fair. A series of disasters, including famine and the Black Plague, led to further decline. By the time of the 15th century and Joan of Arc, Troyes had ceased to be a center of commerce, much overshadowed by the powerhouse economy of Paris. Today, a few buildings, including the cathedral, survive from that period, along with a sense of the original street layout. Perhaps the one lasting legacy to remind us of Troyes is the term "Troy weight," still used in the field of precious gems.

Characters

The Burgher

The Burgher, derived from the Germanic name for a fortified town, "bourg," is a city dwelling male who makes his living from commerce, the buying and selling of goods. In the 13th century, he is enjoying a certain amount of freedom and individual liberty, in contrast to the feudal system that dominated the Dark Ages of the 800s and 900s. Burghers in most cities of northwest Europe have been granted charters from the local feudal lord. These charters grant certain liberties in exchange for taxes. These merchant burghers thus enjoy some degree of autonomy, and some degree of upward mobility. A wealthy burgher in the town of Troyes may enjoy a four-story building. He may be a craftsman, like a smith or potter, and sell his wares directly from the first story of his home. Or, the particularly wealthy and wise merchant may engage in the wool trade, which is perhaps the most profitable commodity in this period. The burgher will buy raw wool, outsource the refinement of the wool to poorer weavers, and then sell the finished wool at the Fair, earning a pretty profit. Eventually the merchant may enter the money lending trade, offering loans and a primitive form of credit to other merchants.

While not as free or privileged as the clergy or royalty, the Burgher in 1250 is enjoying unprecedented wealth, mobility, recreation, and education.

The Mason

The Mason has a unique position in the High Middles Ages and the 13th century. He is a skilled, highly sought-after craftsman, well paid for his work, who moves from city to city depending on where cathedrals and other masonry projects may be being erected. In this sense of physical and social mobility, the "free mason" enjoys rare freedom and autonomy. The Mason has a wide knowledge, encompassing stonecutting, engineering, architecture, geometry, arithmetic, and even art. It is the wisdom of the mason engineer that allows for the towering architecture that would become known as Gothic architecture. Masons, though in some ways falling short of Roman engineers as far as precision of cuts, discovered the cross-ribbed arch, an innovation that provided an unusually strong ceiling skeleton allowing for great heights.

To support this cross-ribbed ceiling, masons developed the flying buttress, an elegant support structure that would also come to define the Gothic style of architecture. A master mason, well-respected and well-known in a particular region and even across countries, would be hired by the Church or a town for a project. After drawing up plans, the master mason would hire a team of masons, directing them in the skilled, involved erection of a cathedral or other building. Because Church funds widely varied, and cathedral-building is such an expensive undertaking, masons could abandon a project after the funds dry up, only to pack up and find another town where the funds flowed better. As a result, cathedrals sometimes took centuries to build, with a dozen or more

masons attached to some aspect of its construction or another, leading to different styles and inconsistencies in the building.

The Housewife

The Housewife to a wealthy burgher has a variety of responsibilities, and a certain degree of freedom. She is usually in charge of the family's purse strings, and is responsible for the daily food and other purchases for the home. She also directs her servants, including the wet nurse (who is charged with nursing her baby), in the many daily chores around the house, including cleaning the chamber pots and privy chamber, tending to the stables, preparing baths, and cooking.

Generally, women in this period cannot be members of councils or hold political office, though there are several famous examples of noble women influencing politics in one way or another. A woman is, however, entitled to several legal freedoms, such as the ability to own property, draft wills, and sue in court. She is generally better-educated than a man, and may hold a wide variety of jobs, though she will be paid substantially less than a man for the same work. She must battle widely-held misogyny, emanating from the Church and elsewhere, and she is carefully controlled by a complex set of manners, customs, and etiquette.

Thibaut the Great

This Count of Champagne gave an unprecedented amount of freedom to the merchants of Troyes in conducting their Fairs. This relative liberty would become customary as Champagne was handed down.

The Midwife

The midwife aided the pregnant woman in childbirth. As even doctors were not allowed near a pregnant woman giving birth, the midwife is very important, and there are instances of midwives even accompanying Crusades. The midwife employs a combination of truly useful methods (like emotionally calming the pregnant woman, and using ointment to dull pain), and pagan myths to aid in the birth.

Jongleur

A jongleur is an entertainer employed during happy events like weddings and feasts. This entertainment can come in the form of juggling, magic tricks, singing, playing an instrument, and storytelling.

Craftsmen

Various craftsmen make up the professional services to be found in a town of any decent size. A blacksmith provides iron for armorers, horseshoes, and other needs. A tanner makes animal skins soft and supple. A miller grinds wheat into grain flour. A goldsmith works gold for religious objects and jewelry. A wine inspector ensures fair prices and wine quality at taverns. A saddle maker makes saddles for knights and nobility. A glazier blows glass. Weavers prepare wool and other cloth.

Jews

In Troyes, as over Europe, Jews are generally segregated into a section of town called the ghetto. They must wear yellow circles to identify their religion. While they enjoy legal protection and are generally tolerated, Jews are in constant danger of a feudal lord rashly banishing all Jews from the realm, after which their property is confiscated. Many Jews engage in money lending.

Doctors

Doctors are beginning to approach a more rational approach to illness, seeking to find causes instead of simply assigning cause to God and spiritual forces as had been done during the Dark Ages. However, medicine is still poorly understood, and doctors are many times powerless to halt the progression of hygiene-related diseases, malnourishment, and plague. Especially misunderstood is leprosy. A leper is simply given religious rites, then banished to a leper colony never to return to normal society.

Albigensians

Albigensians, or Cathars, are considered heretics by the Church and are actively sought and made to repent, upon threat of death. They deny the Redemption and Incarnation, scoff at the power of the cross, and feel marriage is a wicked sin, because marriage (and subsequent procreation) embed people deeper into the material world.

Goliards

Goliards are scholars and poets, bard-like figures who move from town to town and live by their wits. They are the source of Latin verse that is humorous, irreverent, and satirical, in sharp contrast to usual religious-based Latin writings.

Chretien de Troyes

Chretien de Troyes is the most famous writer from Troyes. His writings form the basis of what we know about the Arthurian legend.

Thibaut the Songwriter

Thibaut was a Count of Troyes. He encouraged commerce and the Fairs, if only as a way to earn money. He distinguished himself with a Crusade, but also incurred much embarrassing debt. He was a Songwriter, famous for poems written to song, some of which survive today.

Rutebeuf

Rutebeuf is a writer interested in common, everyday subjects that a worker or peasant may relate to, like owing money or his horse breaking a leg. His writings come in high demand, and writers like him spur the interest and proliferation of books in this period.

Jean Bodel

Jean Bodel wrote "Play of St. Nicholas" and "Le Courteois d' Arras," two plays that helped drama escape from the church and be able to be enjoyed in the common language by everyone.

Keepers of the Fair

For the Fairs taking place twice a year in Troyes, two Keepers of the Fair were appointed by the town council, in charge of hiring security personnel and otherwise coordinating a successful Fair. Keepers were paid extraordinarily well, and this "cushy" position was much sought-after.

Objects/Places

Troyes

Troyes (a name derived from the French for "three") is the city under discussion and scrutiny in this book, though much of the book's information can be generalized to other cities. Troyes is a commercial center due to its twice-a-year Fairs, drawing merchants from all over the Mediterranean. It is the capital of Champagne.

The Church

The Christian Church certainly has much influence over the Western world at this time, and Troyes is no exception. The Church has its own court and legal jurisdiction, its own political power in the form of various Bishops, and a great deal of economic influence through tithing and indulgences.

Commune

A commune is the city structure arising from a charter negotiated between merchant burghers and the feudal lord, in Troyes' case the Count of Champagne. Merchants agree to provide the lord a certain amount of tax in exchange for individual liberties.

The Count's Castle

The castle and its "donjon" or keep is used for primarily ceremonial purposes.

Ecuelle

An ecuelle is a serving pitcher full of stew or soup, that is shared among two guests at a dinner table.

Lying-in Chamber

The lying-in chamber cordons off a pregnant woman about to give birth, so that no one may view or be near her, save the midwife. This custom underscores the fears and myths still attached to childbirth.

Consanguinity

Consanguinity attests to the degree of relatedness two people have, by blood. There is a certain degree of relatedness that is allowed for a marriage to take place; if a couple is too closely related, the Church will refuse to marry them.

Broce-aux-Juifs

Broce-aux-Juifs is the section of Troyes reserved for the Jews, the ghetto.

Denier

The common currency is the denier, a silver penny.

Wool

Wool is the most profitable commodity a typical northwestern European burgher may deal in.

Spices

Spices are a very valuable commodity, rare and considered luxurious and exotic. Many come from the East and the Far East. Pepper is especially valued for its taste and its ability to preserve meat. Other valuable spices include cinnamon and saffron. It is easy to dilute spice with another substance, and thus spice is commonly scrutinized and argued over during a typical transaction.

The Gregorian Chant

The Gregorian chant method of uttering Scripture becomes prevalent during this period, and it is perhaps the first instance of polyphonic music.

Relics

Relics are (supposed) pieces of saints or historical religious artifacts. These could come in the form of a piece of bone or hair from a saint, or a piece of the True Cross, or one of Judas' pieces of silver. Relics enjoy much popularity during this period, and are held sacred in ornamental boxes in churches. The most favored oath or promise in this period is to swear "by the relics."

Cathedral of St. Pierre and St. Paul

This is the large cathedral located in Troyes. It is completed only after several centuries, given the availability of construction funds.

Gothic Architecture

Advancements such as the cross-ribbed vaulted arch and the flying buttress provide for the style and sheer height characteristic of what would later be called Gothic architecture.

The Ars Minor and Ars Grammatica

These classic Greek texts, by Donatus, become the authoritative texts on grammar and usage.

Fabliaux

"Fabliaux," from which we derive the word fable, are short stories, usually involving bawdy humor. These stories become very popular, prompting the proliferation of books.

L'Mystere d' Adam

This play, involving the story of genesis and Adam and Eve's fall, becomes the first notable play to escape from the church and provide a dramatic story that could be enjoyed in the vernacular by common folks.

Co-optation

Co-optation is the process whereby a political official names his own successor. This system, used in France, Italy, and elsewhere, leads to severe nepotism and oligarchies, where families remain in council seats for centuries at a time.

Avoir de poids

Avoir de poids encompasses all commodities that have to be weighed, such as sugar, spice, dyes, and grains.

Themes

The Rise of the Burgher

The Dark Ages was clearly oppressive towards the so-called "Third Estate" - commoners - with the feudal system creating servitude approaching slavery. The High Middle Ages, prompted by such events as the Magna Carta, began to free commoners from the feudal system and allow them to climb upward, socially. The rise of the "bourg" city structure engendered the banding together of its citizens, "burghers," into guilds, perhaps the first form of a labor union, united by common goals of freedom and the pursuit of wealth. This unity gradually pressed lords, living off the fat of the land, to cede power and wealth to these guilds in exchange for taxes that would allow these lords to continue living as nobility. Charters became the legal document to make these concessions concrete, establishing the arrangement of many guilds united as a "commune."

Unfettered now in pursuit of free trade, commerce explodes, concentrating wealth in a place - this "Third Estate" - it had never been before, though naturally the other two estates - nobility and the clergy - took their share of the burgher's hard-earned wages. Burghers, demonstrating a power in numbers, begin to influence political events. The Crusades largely stopped because of common Burghers collectively objecting to tax money going towards fruitless expeditions in foreign lands. This system of developments, the Commercial Revolution, set the stage for such events as the French Revolution.

Paganism, Christianity, Progress

Northwest Europe in 1250 is a hodgepodge of old and new, paganism and Christianity, backward-looking tradition and forward-looking advancements. For example, in education, "pagan" authors like Aristotle and Donatus are praised as authoritative sources in the context of the "cathedral" Christian school. Accurate astronomy is taught alongside subjective astrology and numerology. Sound arithmetic and geometry is taught alongside baldly false myths about the natural world. In medicine, doctors begin to search for rational causes for illnesses, yet the ancient belief about disease being the imbalance of humors in the body still prevails. Wounds are treated in a correct, scientific, and antiseptic manner, yet surgery is again dominated by wild myths, many times resulting in the death of the patient.

In architecture, masons of the Middle Ages can't achieve the perfection of Roman engineers, yet in other ways they advance architecture, introducing the cross-ribbed vault and ushering in Gothic architecture. Most texts are written in Latin, a language no one outside the clergy and nobility understands, yet there is an increasing clamor for books written in the common language, with subjects and tones quite different from religious texts. Plays similarly break from church orthodoxy into a form to entertain the

masses. Women both enjoy certain freedoms, like owning property and suing in court, and suffer under age-old oppression. And the merchant burgher both enjoys a certain amount of individual liberty, but lacks the right to self-government. This period is rife with these sort of transitions and complexities.

The Rise of Books

In the Dark Ages, books were reserved for copies of the Bible and other strictly religious texts, written in Latin and not distributed outside the Church. During the period of this book, books broke from this tradition in several important ways. Wealthy children, schooled in cathedral schools and perhaps attending university, became the source of education and knowledge about writing that could make written texts outside the Church even possible. University students begin to rent books in order to copy them, and students known as "Goliards" even begin to write their own texts in Latin verse, beginning the spread of texts and leading to a black market of sorts for books, given their innate popularity. The common folk, always amused through a rich oral tradition of storytelling, clamored for a written mode of communication and storytelling. Unfortunately, even books being copied by students were written in the Church language, Latin, a language the commoners did not understand.

Finally, types of literature would rise up and break through the Latin barrier, being written proudly in the vernacular for public consumption. These early literature forms would include: poems and songs, such as those composed by Count Thibaut the Songwriter; fabliaux, short, funny, irreverent short stories such as those about Renard the clever and mischievous fox, and romances, stories of chivalry, knights, and fairy-tale love. This new art form was irrepressible.

Style

Perspective

The authors, Joseph and Frances Gies, are self-described "amateur historians." Perhaps appropriately, the historical account presented is not particularly dense, detailed, or revelatory. Here is an account of mostly common knowledge about the High Middle Ages, at the level of a primer or introduction of a broad range of topics. The reader, enticed by a particular subject, may then want to explore the subject in greater detail in a more traditional history book with a more narrow focus.

The book is rarely interested in the various rises and falls of royals, and the outcomes of wars, as perhaps more traditional historical accounts might be. The authors instead adopt the perspective of a typical burgher in a typical town. The interest lay in the everyday and the prosaic, rather than the monumental and great. Particular people are eschewed for a broader and more generic approach; the author may describe a "typical" blacksmith and his process of manipulating iron, but the blacksmith is no real historical person. However, the authors do frequently abandon the prosaic to provide a fuller historical context, such as explaining Thibault the Songwriter's hand in establishing Troyes' charter, or explaining that the Arabic system of numerals that would greatly simplify a merchant's record keeping would only be gradually adopted at a slightly later date. The authors also provide a very quick "before" as well as "after" of 1250 Troyes, explaining how the town came to be a commercial center, and how it declined after its zenith in the 13th century.

Tone

The various accounts are presented matter-of-factly, and no doubt the authors' assertions are backed by historical research, no matter the hypothetical nature of the accounts. When there is any doubt as to the factual truth of an assertion, the authors will employ such adverbs as "probably" or "perhaps" to qualify their assertions and make it clear that there may be some competing theories. Because of the overall generality of the book, and its status as an introductory text, tone need not be overly combative or forceful, as the vast majority of information is not in dispute or disputable. There are relatively few footnotes, again owing to the generality of the information, and the authors do not have the need to project a didactic or academic certainty for such a text. Instead, the tone is more familial. The authors welcome the reader to explore what they have uncovered as "amateurs" interested in common folks. With the focus on "everyday" topics, the authors clearly offer an alternative to the "Great Men" approach to history. And by removing the "particular," by stopping at the level of generality and typicality, the authors are free to bound around to different subjects without having to prove theories or document specific events. This relative breeziness is appropriate to an introductory text aimed at the curious reader in need of a general overview of the High Middle Ages.

Structure

The book begins with a Prologue, explaining in broad strokes the history of a town called Troyes before the year 1250, around which the book will be centered in a "day in the life" style. Sixteen chapters are divided by subject matter, be it "Children and Childbirth," "Cathedrals," or "School and Scholars." In each chapter, various everyday aspects of the subject will be explored - what a general attitude may be towards the subject, how a task is carried out in a step-by-step manner, or the context or reasoning behind a particular movement, event, or scenario. Topics are approached lightly so that many things can be touched on, a typical strategy for an introductory text. Chapters, despite titles, are not so narrowly defined. Sometimes exploration of one aspect of a subject easily transitions into another subject entirely. For example, "Children and Childbirth," eventually touch upon popular forms of recreation at the time. This is done in fairly seamless fashion, and without the use of obvious subheadings.

Following these particular subjects, an epilogue entitled "After 1250" brings us, in whirlwind fashion, up to date on the fate of Troyes after its zenith, and up to the present day. Following this brief epilogue, an appendix includes the genealogical tree for the Counts of Champagne (as this can get confusing), brief footnotes, an extensive bibliography, and in index. No doubt the fullness of the bibliography is meant to provide medium to advanced avenues for further learning and study, should the reader feel the need or desire to step beyond the introductory level.

Quotes

Prologue: "The western European city, with all its implications for the future, was born in the Middle Ages. By 1250 it was alive and flourishing, not only on the ancient Mediterranean coast but in northwest Europe. The narrative that follows is an attempt to depict life at the midpoint of the thirteenth century in one of the newly revived cities: Troyes, capital of the rich county of Champagne, seat of a bishop, and, above all, site of two of the famous Fairs of Champagne." (1)

Prologue: "Apart from its seasonal fluctuations of population, Troyes in the twelfth century was much like a score of other growing cities of Western Europe. All had strong walls. All had abbeys and monasteries, as well as many churches - most of timber, a few of stone with timber roofs. A feature of many cities, including Troyes, was the palace of a secular prince. There were still empty spaces in these municipalities. [...] Some, like Troyes, had excavated canals or canalized rivers. Many had built timber bridges on stone piers, and in London a stone-arch bridge had actually been constructed." (15)

Chapter 2: "At mealtime a very broad cloth is laid on the trestle table in the solar. To facilitate service, places are set along one side only. On that side the cloth falls to the floor, doubling as a communal napkin. At a festive dinner it sometimes gets changed between courses. Places are set with knives, spoons, and thick slices of day-old bread, which serve as plates for meat. There are several kinds of knives - for cutting meat, slicing bread, opening oysters and nuts - but no forks. Between each two places stands a two-handled bowl, or ecuelle, which is filled with soup or stew. Two neighbors share the ecuelle, as well as a winecup and spoon. A large pottery receptacle is used for waste liquids, and a thick chunk of bread with a hole in the middle serves as a salt shaker." (38)

Chapter 3: "Perhaps the most important point to note about the medieval housewife, in contrast to women of earlier times, is that she has a purse. She goes shopping, she gives alms, she pays fees, she hires labor; she may, if the occasion arises, buy privileges and pay bribes.
She may do many other things with her money. Women make large gifts of land, money, and chattels to church institutions; found convents, monasteries, hospitals, orphanages, and asylums; buy benefices for their sons and places in convents for their daughters; [...] they may travel extensively, sometimes as far as the Holy Land.
A woman of means is always a person to reckon with." (56)

Chapter 4: "Well-to-do women rarely nurse their own children. The wet nurse is chosen with care, for all manner of qualities may be imbibed with her milk. She must be of good character, have no physical defects, and be neither too fat nor too thin. Above all, she must be healthy, for corrupt milk is blamed for many of the maladies that afflict infants. She must watch her diet - eat white bread, good meat, rice, lettuce, almonds and hazelnuts, and drink good wine. She must rest and sleep well and use moderation in bathing and in working. [...] As the baby grows bigger, she will chew his meat for him. She is often the recipient of presents to sweeten her disposition and milk." (61)

Chapter 6: "Every guild recognizes its stake in protecting the public, for since the guild restricts competition, it has an obligation to guarantee standards of quality. On being invested, the officers of the bakers' guild solemnly swear that they will "guard the guild" carefully and loyally, and that in appraising bread they will spare neither relatives nor friends, nor condemn anyone wrongly through hatred or ill-feeling. Officers of other guilds swear similar oaths. Guild legislation on the quality of merchandise is painstakingly detailed. Precise quantities and types of raw materials are specified and supervision follows through all the stages of manufacture and sale." (89)

Chapter 7: "Feudal dues, guild regulations, princely prerogatives and ecclesiastical dicta notwithstanding, the western European businessman of the thirteenth century makes money - often a great deal. There are two main avenues to fortune, the cloth trade and banking. Very commonly the two are combined by a single entrepreneur." (98)

Chapter 9: "One of the features of the Christian religion which has given worship a distinctive character is the taste for intercessory saints. Though prayers to a saint may be said at home as well as in church, their effect is believed to be greatly enhanced by the presence of part of the saint's mortal remains. This conviction dates from the martyrdom of the early Christians. Bones and other physical fragments of men stoned, burned, and tortured were reverently rescued and preserved." (126)

Chapter 10: "The master glazier is not aiming at immortality or even fame, though he is agreeably aware that his name is well known among glassmakers, masons, prelates, and even the general public. Yet he puts something into his work that is not merely talent and knowledge. Neither is it religious zeal. It is pride, and he can find ample justification for it in religion, for the priests say that God was a craftsman who looked on his work and found it good." (152)

Chapter 11: "Twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers have developed an extraordinary fondness for versifying, and almost every species of literary production appears at one time or another in verse. Historical chronicles are often written in verse. There are verse formularies for letter writing. Sermons sometimes lapse into poetry or rhythmic prose. There is a versified Bible (the Aurora of Peter Riga). Even legal documents are sometimes rhymed." (159-160)

Chapter 12: "Most popular of all are the fabliaux, the humorous short stories in verse, sometimes written, sometimes recited. These stories, the product of authors of various social classes, are enjoyed by all kinds of audiences. Some have folk tale origins, some are drawn directly from life. Their common ingredient is humor, often bawdy. Certain characters recur: the merchant, usually older than his wife, cuckolded, swindled, beaten; the young man, often a student, who outwits the husband; the lecherous priest who is his rival. The women, treacherous, lustful, and faithless, may be beaten by their husbands but always manage to get the better of them." (178)

Chapter 16: "The very mystery of the spices adds something to their desirability. Their basic value is twofold: as flavoring for meat whose toughness needs long cooking, and as preservatives. For these two purposes, one spice surpasses all others: pepper. The

small black wrinkled berry has become a metaphor - "dear as pepper." It is not the most expensive spice; saffron and cinnamon are much costlier. But at four sous a pound it is expensive enough, and by far the most popular of the spices. Pepper merchants sell it retail by the peppercorn; a housewife may buy just one if she wishes.
Its popularity and costliness cause pepper to be guarded like diamonds. Longshoremen who handle it are closely watched and frequently searched. Crossbows and blades bristle on the galleys that bring it through the Mediterranean, and in the pack trains that carry it through the Alpine passes and across the hills and plains of Burgundy and Champagne." (218)

Topics for Discussion

What is a woman's responsibility in the High Middle Ages? What freedoms does she enjoy, and what freedoms is she denied? How are women viewed, generally?

Why is it important that texts start to be written in the vernacular languages, rather than Latin? What are a couple reasons behind this surge of vernacular writing?

Describe a typical meal during this period, from preparation to what the guests may do to entertain themselves after dinner.

How did dramatic plays develop in this period? What did they start as, and what did they become?

How are cathedrals instructed, in a general sense? What accounts for the rise of Gothic architecture during this period?

What is the state of medicine in this period? What is believed about the body, and how illness is caused? What methods are used to treat illness and injury?

What is the approach to education in this period? Who is education for? How is curriculum set, and what is the teaching method?

How are cities attacked in this period? What methods do potential invaders have at their disposal? What might deter these invaders, either within or outside of the city itself?