

Origin and Creation: London Guilds of the Twelfth Century

Katherine Payne

Written records concerning guilds did not begin to appear until the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The only reference prior had been in the laws of Anglo-Saxon rulers. This paper will focus on the origins of medieval London guilds and the three most popular formations during the twelfth century: merchant, craft, and religious guilds. Each guild represented different influential institutions of medieval society and their economic contributions to the city as a whole. Many historians have debated over the true motivation in the formation of the guilds and two of the leading intellectuals are Lujo Brentano, with his theory of brotherhood, and in response George Unwin, who believes “volunteer associations” and the idea of Western European progress played a significant role in fueling the construction of the London guilds. London, as well as other towns and cities of the twelfth century, acted as the epicenter for guilds to create a regulated authority over members, monopolies, and outside merchants.

Prior to the invasion of 1066, England had been under the rule of the Anglo-Saxons who for over five centuries had established a social and political system, which transitioned “from a tribal to a territorial organization.”¹ These institutions echoed some of the feudal system’s principles of later centuries with “social unions, lordship and fellowship.”² In order to keep citizens and members of the guild community informed, social unions and meetings were held once a year to air grievances, collect dues, and set new laws. The notion of fellowship seemed to have the largest impact on the creation of the guilds. By forming groups of “fellows” with like-minded ideas and goals, the men and women would then be able to create their own forms of authority in their “fellowship” or guild.³ According to Joseph Strayer’s *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, guilds were considered “an association of merchants or artisans primarily intended to promote the interests of its members...The guild usually enjoyed legal recognition and social

Katherine Payne grew up in Lake Zurich, Illinois and earned her BA and MA degrees in History from Eastern Illinois University. She wrote "London Guilds of the Twelfth Century" in Fall 2011 for Dr. Bailey Young's HIS 5444 Church and Society in Medieval Europe course.

¹ Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London*, 16.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

permanence.”⁴ Some of the earliest guilds became examples of how the formation of power structures within the medieval towns or cities changed both politically and economically in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Due to the limited number of records on traditional Anglo-Saxon society, historians have had to “adopt an equally speculative approach toward English guilds.”⁵ There is no official written evidence of guilds existing in London prior to the ninth century, but by examining the word *gegildan*, or gild brethren, and its use “in the laws of Ina (c. 690) and those of Alfred (c. 890),” historians have been able to theorize who and what were a part of these “fraternal associations” during the seventh and ninth century.⁶ Laws written in greater detail are found in the tenth century with the records of the Dooms of the City of London, known as the *Judicia civitatis Londoniae*.⁷ This remarkable work created during the reign of Athelstan (924-940) “contains ordinances for the keeping up of social duties in the Gilds, or Gild-ships as they are called.”⁸ The social duties to which it refers are the by-laws or statutes on how guild members should act, dress, and conduct themselves while members of an established company. Some examples of the statutes are the donations to “a common purse, a monthly feast for members, charity for the poor, ceremonies to be performed upon the death of gild brethren, and a monthly meeting to transact business.”⁹ Every guild did not act in exact accordance with the *Londonaie*, but each did have specific requirements for its members to follow.

Some of the earliest companies of London are referenced in the *Judicia civitatis Londoniae*, including the Frith guilds, who were established “for the maintenance of peace” during Athelstan’s reign (925-40).¹⁰ The Frith guilds represented a group of like-minded individuals who kept law and order within the community instead of relying solely on the support of the local sheriff or alderman(s). By splitting into groups over the city, the Firth guild’s main objective was to reduce the amount of thefts taking place within a specific area.¹¹ A second tenth century guild found in the *Londoniae* was The English Knights (or

⁴ Joseph Strayer, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* v. 6 (New York: Collier Macmillan Canada Inc., 1985), 13.

⁵ Frank F. Kahl, introduction to *The Gilds and Companies of London*, by George Unwin (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1963), xxiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁸ Lucy Toulmin Smith, introduction to *English Gilds*, xvii.

⁹ Kahl, introduction to *The Gilds and Companies of London*, by George Unwin, xxiv.

¹⁰ George Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London* (London: Frank & Cass Co., 1963), 16; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Firth Guilds.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Cnihten) Guild of London. This is thought to have been established under the reign of King Edgar, but did not receive its first charter until Edward the Confessor.¹² After receiving a number of charters to “prove its continuous existence until its dissolution in 1125,” historians have been able to trace the influence of the Knights Guild into the twelfth century.¹³ Charters allowed guilds to gain municipality within the cities and towns, influencing the governmental power structure previously established.

Granting of a charter did not always give exclusive power within the city, but in the case of guilds it allowed members to have autonomy within the institution itself. A town in medieval England “produced almost exclusively for itself; it was practically economically independent.”¹⁴ There is speculation that due to the turbulent eleventh century, guilds were created in an attempt to secure economic stability in the face of changing political power during the twelfth century. In order to find a balance of power, the guild administration, “its Officers, and its Ordinances or Bye-laws, were based on the same principles as those of the other free institutions of England.”¹⁵ Almost every guild had a set of their own elected officers, who enforced the regulations and statutes mentioned earlier, such as the payment of fees, honoring fallen brethren, or meeting once a month to settle administrative inquiries.

Of those voted into office, the Alderman, or the “Graceman,” ruled over the body of members.¹⁶ This person was usually of a higher societal status because of his wealth or connection with the nobility. Stewards handled the administrative duties and were considered the wardens of the guilds, collecting funds and fees.¹⁷ The guild members also chose Clerks and Deans and their main duty was to summon the brothers and sisters of the guilds when needed, an example being for the death of a fellow member.¹⁸ Election of the ruling body provided a framework for the ruling courts, which would later be held in a number of guilds, especially those involving trade. Even with having sovereignty of their own court, guilds did not have much power within the whole of the municipality they served. It can be implied that “whatever power the court...possessed, was implicitly, if not explicitly, delegated by the

¹²Ibid., 24.

¹³ Ibid., 24–25.

¹⁴ Rev. George Clune, *The Medieval Gild System* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan Limited, 1943), 111.

¹⁵ Smith, introduction to *English Gilds*, xxxviii.

¹⁶ Ibid., xxxviii.

¹⁷ Brentano, *English Gilds: The Original Ordinances of more than One Hundred Early English Gilds*, 46.

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

city.”¹⁹ One benefit of holding court was the ability to control and penalize both its own members and those not of the guild who still practiced in trade.

One of the three most influential guilds of the twelfth century is the Guild Merchant. This was “an organization of merchants in the last sense who had been given the trade monopoly of their town.”²⁰ Some historians believe these guilds were created during the Anglo-Saxon era and carried into the rule of the Normans, but the general theory seems to be that they began to flourish primarily after the Norman invasion of 1066. The unique feature about the Guild Merchants was their involvement “in long-distance commerce and local wholesale trade and may also have been retail sellers of commodities in their home cities and distant venues where they possessed rights to set up shop.”²¹ These guilds, because of their economic and political influence, could not be found in every city, but in the twelfth century “of 160 towns represented in the English Parliament, 92 had the Gild Merchant.”²² Those men and women who became involved in the guild were guaranteed rights and protection from outside traders and even rulers of other countries who would try to seize goods. In response “guilds threatened to boycott realms of rulers who did this, a practice known as *withernam* in medieval England” and this was a serious threat to countries whose lives depended on trade.²³ Merchant guilds also enforced the by-laws of its members as “medieval commerce operated according to the community responsibility system,”²⁴ making all members responsible for one another, including incidents involving late payments and law breaking. With the capability to enforce codes of conduct on both rulers and members, guild merchants had an incredible ability to monopolize every aspect of trade within a town.

The organization of merchant guilds allowed those dealing in commerce, such as tradesmen, merchants, and craftsmen to feel confident they were getting the best price for their goods and services. With power over the city, merchant guild members usually held higher positions within medieval society and had the ability to influence local governments.²⁵ The Mercers Guild of 1172 is an example of a guild that withstood the test of time. A journal entry in 1870 *British Periodicals* examines how all the guilds which still existed at the time of the entry

¹⁹ Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London*, 28.

²⁰ Clune, *The Medieval Gild System*, 14.

²¹ Strayer, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 751.

²² Clune, *The Medieval Gild System*, 16.

²³ Strayer, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 751.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 751.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 751.

could be “traced back to the twelfth century.”²⁶ In one case he studies the Mercers Guild of 1172, mercers being “a person who deals with textile fabrics,”²⁷ who became known as the “Company of Merchant Adventurers” in 1296, and received a charter from Henry IV in 1406.²⁸ The success of this guild merchant was in verifying the importance of trade during the twelfth century and possibly, the members of this guild, due to their higher status, were able to maintain their social standings to keep and preserve their guild and crafts.

Craft guilds were similar to merchant guilds in their need to ensure financial security for their members. One of the main theories on the origins of the crafts is their split away from the merchant guilds and reorganizing into more specific skill sets. This move weakened the merchant guilds, but did not cause them to totally disband, as seen in the case of the mercers. Another theory is proposed by Lujo Brentano, suggesting that the craftsmen were kicked out of the guild merchant’s halls. After attempting to survive on their own, they realized the necessity of having a fellowship of members to ensure that the needs were met for each craftsman.²⁹ This supports his overall theory of guild formation and the importance of bonds in a familial sense. In almost every town there were those who practiced a craft, and while not all belonged to the association of the guilds, many who did enter memberships received benefits such as the guarantee of business and limited competition.

Divided into three categories, craft guilds came to represent the economic structure of the towns and the importance in the division of labor. The “Guilds of victuallers brought agricultural commodities... Guilds of manufacturers made durable goods... [and] Guilds of a third type sold skills and services.”³⁰ Brewers, bakers and butchers were considered part of the victualler’s guild; blacksmiths and goldsmiths became members of the manufacturer’s guild; the guild of skills and services could include, but was not limited to, clerks and entertainers.³¹ There are no known reports on any disputes which occurred during the transition from merchant to craft guilds and gradually over time the craft guilds were able to acclimate and establish themselves in a city or town. The statutes and regulations introduced by the craft guilds were

²⁶ William Chambers, “The Livery Companies of the City of London,” *Chamber’s Journal* 317 (1870), 57.

²⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mercier.”

²⁸ Chambers, “The Livery Companies of the City of London,” 57.

²⁹ Lujo Brentano, “On the History and Development of Gilds and the Origin of Trade Unions,” in *English Gilds: The Original Ordinances of more than One Hundred Early English Gilds* (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1870), cxv - cxvi.

³⁰ Strayer, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 751.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 751.

similar in many ways to the merchant guilds, upholding the same standards of honor and respect shown to the other and acts of charity, all while following the by-laws to avoid being fined.

Evidence of fines found in the discrepancies on payments to the Royal Exchequer of 1155, reveal that the bakers of London guild found themselves close to seventeen pounds in debt. The Pipe Roll “gives us the dues originally payable by the London bakers as the customs of the hallmoot.”³² The hallmoot was an extremely important aspect to the guilds political system. When “the legal and administrative business of the city increased and became specialized, it passed largely into the hands of smaller assemblies held more frequently,” such as the house-meetings, or hallmoots.³³ One of the administrative duties performed included handling “tolls,” similar to taxes, but paid by the bakers in respect to the amount of goods sold.³⁴ It is thought that the bakers must have charged their members a small amount per week to avoid paying their tolls and in the end made a small profit for themselves and ended up owing money to the crown.³⁵

Power and money are not the only reasons guilds formed during the twelfth century. The third most popular guilds of the age were the religious guilds. Religious guilds, considered also a social guild, seemed to be more concerned with the moral well being of the towns, versus the growth of personal economic endeavors. Because they did not deal directly with trade, unlike the merchant and craft guilds, religiously affiliated societies “did not carry the legal powers of a court.”³⁶ The religious guilds had an extensive and clearly defined set of goals, and its appeal to so many caused a rapid development of similar societies in the wider world. The object of these guilds was to “unite in every exercise of religion” and pay homage “under the patronage of the Holy Trinity, or of certain Saints, or of the Holy Cross, or of the Holy Sacrament, or of some other religious mystery.”³⁷ Craft and merchant guilds also required some religious action, but nothing compared to the devotion shown by the members of the religious societies.

Nearly every religious guild during the medieval age identified their name with a patron of the church. Some examples include Guild of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Guild of St. Katherine, or the *Fraternitas Sancte*

³² Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London*, 35.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶ Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London*, 29.

³⁷ Lujo Brentano, “On the History and Development of Gilds and the Origin of Trade Unions,” lxxxiii.

Trinitatis, which translates to “Fraternity of the Holy Trinity.”³⁸ As a sign of respect, religious guilds closely followed religious practices; their most important was the lighting of the candles, thought to represent the origins of their society. More common acts of devotion included “masses, orisons, and other good deeds.”³⁹ Religious guilds during the twelfth century are numerous and many were licensed and practicing legally. The “Pipe Roll of 1179-80” focused on what are to be known as the “unlicensed or ‘adulterine’ guilds.”⁴⁰ Within this account there are eighteen adulterine guilds, and only one is religiously affiliated: owing money to the king because of its illegitimate existence. The Guild of St. Lazarus had a recognized alderman by the name of “Ralph le Barre,” and because of his affiliation the guild can be assumed to have an established ruler, but not enough power to have a court.⁴¹ The monetary amount of twenty-five marks owed to the king also signifies a prestigious existence for the guild, as only three other companies were fined higher than twenty marks.⁴² The “adulterine” guilds listed did not represent the majority of guilds during the twelfth century, but it is important to see how devoted the aldermen and members were to their society.

Historians have studied the effects of the formation of the guilds and through their writings have recognized competing theories on the origin of guild formation. Lujo Brentano’s *English Gilds: The Original Ordinances of more than one hundred Early English Gilds* is an interesting and thorough look into the origins of the guilds and their regulations. Within his body of work there are quite a few return ordinances of English guilds, each explaining their origins, properties, and usages, or daily procedures, of everyday activities.⁴³ What is useful from the study are the two introductions: one by his daughter, Lucy Toulmin Smith, and the second by him, an essay “On the History and Development of Gilds and the Origin of Trade Unions,” written prior to the book being published. Due to an untimely death, his daughter wrote an introduction examining her father’s ideas, and I pull from both works, Brentano’s main argument on the origins of the medieval guilds.

Lujo Brentano studied the bonds of brotherhood and the associations of fraternity. He believed “it is an essential characteristic of

³⁸ Lujo Brentano, *English Gilds: The Original Ordinances of more than One Hundred Early English Gilds* (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1870), 25; Google Translate “Fraternitas Sancte Trinitatis.”

³⁹ Brentano, “On the History and Development of Gilds and the Origin of Trade Unions,” lxxxiv.

⁴⁰ Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London*, 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴³ Lujo Brentano, *English Gilds: The Original Ordinances of more than One Hundred Early English Gilds* (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1870), 1.

the system of local self-government, that its constant tendency is, to bring men together continually, with feelings of brotherhood.”⁴⁴ In the introductory essay, he also noted familial bonds that created the strongest “natural union.”⁴⁵ His theory then expanded into the formation of licensed guilds and eventually trade unions, believing if a bond is strong enough between brothers, neighbors, or friends; it will survive the creation of “restricted association[s].”⁴⁶ His romanticized view of history, at times, makes it difficult to find historical accuracy with psychological insight into the formation of natural bonds.

George Unwin’s methodology was similar to Brentano, as both studied primary documents of the time. However, Unwin’s argument is in contention with Brentano’s idea of brotherhood and fraternity. Unwin wanted to take it one step further into an idea of the “voluntary association,” instead of an obligatory familial bond. He believed this aspect of the natural bonds came “into relationship with political power.”⁴⁷ To Unwin, willing participants of an association, much like the guild system, would lead to the progress of Western Europe as a whole, not just England. This approach seemed to be a stretch when trying to relate it to the whole of Europe, but it does fit the historical aspect of the medieval twelfth century.

The debates and questions surrounding historical origins of medieval guilds may never be fully answered. In this brief essay I have tried to explain the two main arguments of Lujo Brentano and George Unwin and how their interpretation on the earliest history of the guilds is similar. Yet, through their understanding of the subject and methodological approaches to guilds, they have concluded different outcomes as to why and how the guilds were created. By giving some historical background, one gains a better understanding of how the guilds came into being and the differences and similarities between the economic institutions.

⁴⁴ Lucy Toulmin Smith, introduction to *English Guilds: The Original Ordinances of more than One Hundred Early English Guilds*, by Lujo Brentano (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1870), xxvi.

⁴⁵ Brentano, *English Guilds*, lxxx.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, lxxi.

⁴⁷ George Unwin, *The Guilds and Companies of London* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1963), 14.