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Emporia and the Roots of Market Mercantilism in the Early Middle Ages

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Throughout the early Middle Ages, the decline of the Roman world was in full motion as various tribes assumed local power in the former provinces. Many aspects of classical life changed, including trade, which shifted from a large-scale global system to a compartmentalized, regional economy. The Roman system of high imports and sea trade gave way to the manorial economy, a regional system of agriculture and manufacture. However, the development of a North Sea Economic Zone and the rise and fall of the emporia created a global trade market in Northern Europe. This market flourished from the Merovingian period into the Viking age as demand for luxury and commodity goods resulted in development of more emporia, as well as smaller subsidiary locations and local trade fairs. These trade cities began as instruments of a ruler's political reach, but soon evolved into more independent areas of commerce that defined the economic zone around them. By the end of the ninth century the emporia were well into their decline, but modern archaeological research has brought about a valuable change in perspective on these strange trade cities. Gridded streets and permanent housing for craftsmen allowed emporia to combine elements of long-distance trade, monopolistic regional production, and urbanization. In the early Middle Ages, the roots of capitalist production took shape in the planning, production, and function of the emporia.

The economy of the Merovingian period was largely based on local rulers exerting influence over areas of economic activity in order to control the circulation of regional prestige goods,

which were in high demand at the time. These areas included emporia, which began appearing in the early sixth century along major waterways. Traders would dock at the wharf and offload their goods, setting them up for display and sale. Early emporia were ephemeral in structure, merchants simply arrived, conducted sales, and left to move on to the next stop. In this sense, emporia were not standing places of commerce but stops along the trade routes of merchants who brought Mediterranean goods into France through Marseilles. In the Merovingian period, the export activity of Marseilles sustained the emporia of the north. Goods such as papyrus and spices moved through the interior of France and into northern markets through toll roads situated along older Roman roads, as well as the Rhone and Saone rivers.¹ Two of the major emporia of the early Middle Ages, Quentovic and Dorestad, were already in existence and trading with England and Denmark at this time. They acted as centers of widely expanded shipping, seeing goods from all over the Merovingian Empire move through their docks.² Quentovic in particular was a center of shipping between England and Gaul; it first appeared in the writings of Bede as the stopping point for Anglo-Saxon monks on their way to Germany.³ Emporia likely began as a deviation of trade fairs. To Merovingian rulers, fairs represented an opportunity to bring commerce to new places, predominantly in the north.⁴ The fairs were organized in places where commerce had disappeared in the hopes of restarting or temporarily creating local commercial activity. In 629 AD, King Dagobert issued a grant of a fair at St. Denis, which would go on to be a prominent trade stop whenever it was active. Dagobert invited

¹ Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 19.

² *Ibid*, 33

³ Bertram Colgrave Bede and R. A. B. Mynors. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

⁴ Henri Pirenne, et al., *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1939), 104.

“all merchants dwelling in [the] kingdom and those coming from beyond the seas”.⁵ He levied no toll for the first two years, but after that period required that two solidi be paid to the monks at St. Denis for each measure of honey and madder. He required that Saxons, citizens of Rouen, and pagans pay tolls of twelve *denarii* for each measure of goods on their ships, along with a customary wheel tax. The fair lasted four weeks, and merchants from “Spain, Lombardy, Provence, and other countries” were invited to participate. In hopes of focusing trade on St. Denis, merchants were forbidden from conducting business in other neighborhoods of Paris. In this manner, Merovingian rulers invested in commerce and invited merchants from beyond their borders to participate; tolls were then used as a return on all revenue that was generated. Thus trade became centralized, inter-regional commerce was encouraged, and as more goods came through the fair more revenue went back into the palace treasury.

Archaeologist Richard Hodges terms emporia in the Merovingian period as “type A emporia” – ephemeral, periodic marketplaces used by lords to control the flow of goods through their lands.⁶ Type A emporia possessed a minor element of local artisan craftsmanship, but the focus was the sale of imported goods. Hodges uses the phrase “foci for ranked spheres of exchange”, indicating that production, even if it was occurring, was shelved in favor of trading prestige goods within their region.⁷ An example of a type A emporia is Ipswich, which was situated on the north side of the Gipping river. Ipswich acted as the gateway for many Frankish goods that made their way into Britain, including those found at the Sutton Hoo burial site.⁸

⁵ Dagobert, King of the Franks: *Grant of a Fair at St. Denis*, 629, in Roy C. Cave and Herbert H. Coulson, *A Source Book for Medieval Economic History* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1936; reprint ed., New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1965), 114-115.

⁶ Richard Hodges, *Towns and Trade in the Age of Charlemagne* (Bristol Classical Press, London, 2000), 77.

⁷ *Ibid*, 79

⁸ *Ibid*, 77

Around 675 AD, emporia became large centers of permanent occupation with gridded streets and apparent housing for a rather large force of resident craftsmen. Hodges terms these as “Type-B” emporia. Dorestad and Quentovic were the most prominent of these trade cities, though additional emporia are believed to have been founded by the end of the seventh century at Hamwic, Lundenwic, York, Medemblik, and Rebe. In some cases, such as Medemblik and Norwich, these evolved beyond individual settlements and became large mercantile areas with many smaller customs posts founded in a similar form as the major emporia. Type B emporia remained heavily involved in long distance trade, but they also monopolized regional production, which reached its height along with the Carolingian monetary reforms from 790 to 850. In the case of Dorestad and Quentovic, silver coins were minted, with the mint in Quentovic being active until the middle tenth century. Royal customs officials facilitated a division of labor, though in an embryonic form.⁹

The construction of Type-B emporia provides valuable insight to the intended nature of these cities. Where earlier historians such as Pirenne believed that these emporia had a mitigatable effect on trade and were not producing wholesale goods, later architectural evidence suggests the opposite. Type-B emporia were built in regions with no previous history, severing the trend of medieval cities growing in the shadow of Roman ruins. However, the rectangular grid that many emporia were built on suggested a familiarity with classical cities and their internal layout. Because these were areas with no previous history, kings and other authorities were able to make huge investments to control the production and distribution of goods in their region through the installation of a dedicated customs service. Wharfs were built from scratch with post and plank,

⁹ Ibid, 78-79.

and the size of the emporia themselves was impressive. Quentovic covered thirty five hectares, Hamwic encompassed forty, and Lundenwic at its height took up a massive sixty hectares.¹⁰ Many type-B emporia placed their trading community on the shores, allowing easy access to shipping, while the rest of the city was focused on craft production. In Hamwic, sixty eight buildings were involved in interdependent, multi-craft activity such as metal production, leather working, carpentry, bone and antler work, and possibly pottery and bead production. Buildings were outfitted with locks and keys, creating a sense of non-tribal privacy. The rise of urban craftsmen in the later Middle Ages can be seen in its early stages in type B emporia through social interdependence and specialization of production. The kin-based model of earlier years was giving way to a gathering of people for economic purposes, as well as the creation of collective workshops to meet high regional demand.¹¹ The break from traditional seats of authority found in Roman towns indicated that emporia such as Quentovic and Dorestad were creating their own identities, which were quite alien to the medieval world.

Emporia were not limited to the Carolingian world. Birka, Ribe, and Hedeby rose up in the pagan wilderness beyond the borders of Christendom, but this did not stop them from being worked into the growing network of emporia that formed the North Sea Economic Zone. Ribe, founded in the early eighth century, demonstrated multi-craft workshops (as opposed to the single craft monopolization of many of the wics) and evidence of urban planning. The craftworks were arranged as a series of tenements behind a large open area. It is believed that Ribe and its supposed founder, King Ongendus, looked to Dorestad as a model. In addition to dominating the local agrarian economy, Ribe was importing glass and pottery, as well as

¹⁰ Ibid, 80

¹¹ Ibid, 81-83.

circulating silver currency.¹² At Hedeby and Birka, slave trade was the main article of commerce, and many of the slaves seen in English markets came from these emporia.¹³ Gold, silver, and excess booty from raids were sold, while outside merchants, often Christian Frisians, dealt slaves and furs. Hedeby was in regular contact with Dorestad, and both it and Birka became entrenched in crossroads of shipping lanes. The church, which had already taken a vested interest in Frisian emporia such as Dorestad and Medemblik, took an interest in Ribe and incorporated its investigation and investment into Willibrord's mission to Denmark in 710 AD, though he was received harshly by Ongendus and returned home soon after.¹⁴ Unlike other cities and towns of the early Middle Ages, emporia were not cities of god, but cities of commerce. As Mediterranean trade came to a halt, commodity sales in the north peaked.¹⁵ Commerce in the Merovingian and Carolingian empires was more active than ever before, but it was focused almost solely on the north. The resulting inward focus led to a rise in capitalist spirit. Instead of being Mediterranean in nature, trade became Frisian, Danish, or Anglo-Saxon. By the turn of the millennium, trade in the north became largely Flemish.¹⁶ Before the invasions and raids of the Viking age, Norse traders frequented the ports of Quentovic and Dorestad, while Scandinavian shipping along the coast of Flanders helped vitalize the area as the western focus of northern maritime commerce.¹⁷ As Quentovic and Dorestad waned, Flanders became the natural drop-off point for ships arriving from Northern England and heading toward the south. Quentovic and Dorestad were raided numerous times during the invasions; Dorestad disappeared in the ninth century, while Quentovic held on through repeated raids, minting coins until the late tenth

¹² Ibid, 82.

¹³ Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1974), 122.

¹⁴ Richard Hodges, *Towns and Trade in the Age of Charlemagne*, 83.

¹⁵ Henri Pirenne, et al., *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, 238.

¹⁶ Ibid, 242.

¹⁷ Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities*, 97.

century before being fully abandoned by the eleventh. Bruges became the natural successor, capitalizing on the commerce concentrated around Flanders. The Counts of Flanders provided security and stability to the region through diplomacy, and Bruges dominated northern trade by the turn of the millennium.

Emporia are a phenomena still cloaked in mystery. There is much more to be learned from these settlement's contributions to the economic landscape of the Middle Ages. They existed in a vacuum, demonstrating economic tendencies that were far ahead of their time while simultaneously laying the foundation for the practices of market mercantilism and capitalist spirit, as well as division of labor and creation of a class of urban craftsmen. Emporia existed on the outer limits of Christendom where interaction was at its height, thus allowing the exchange of goods from every corner of northern Europe while also forming a network of production.

Emporia encouraged relationships between Latin Christendom and the pagan lands of the north and east on economic terms, though missionary and religious interaction was still dominant.

International in design but local in effect, emporia served their local lords as mercantile cities of production and trade. By blurring the line between secular and non-secular, as well as traditional Roman and newer non-Roman, emporia were vital in the urbanization and economic development of Europe and the development of the high medieval city.

About the author

Lee Morrison is a junior at Florida State University pursuing a double major in History and Classical Civilizations, with a focus on the late Roman Empire and early antiquity.

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