

Sheilagh Ogilvie, The European Guilds: An Economic Analysis

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Sheilagh Ogilvie, *The European Guilds: An Economic Analysis*, Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 2019; 672 pages, 7 figures, 20 plates, 102 tables; ISBN-10 9780691137544, Hardcover, £23.

Sheilagh Ogilvie's *The European Guilds: an economic analysis* is a meticulous and provocative study of the European craft guilds over a six-hundred year period. It provides a major contribution to economic history and to the history of institutions by investigating guilds' positive or negative influence on economic growth in Europe during the medieval and early modern period. It is the natural progression of Ogilvie's previous scholarship, in particular of her 2011 *Institutions and European Trade*, which focused on merchant guilds' influence on economic development. Her conclusion then was that merchant guilds and trading companies were detrimental to the economy. They existed only for the benefit of the members and did little for society as a whole. *European guilds* similarly sets out to challenge the notion that craft guilds' were beneficial to the economy and society as a whole. As such, the argumentative line is not surprising, but the richness of details and firmness of the argument makes Ogilvie's newest addition to the debate on the role of institutions a worthwhile read.

To bolster her points, Ogilvie draws extensively on two databases – one of qualitative statements concerning guilds and one focused on quantitative data – throughout the book. In order to further collaboration among scholars, the databases have been made available to the public, which provides readers and fellow scholars with an exceptional opportunity to follow the argument and documentation closely. Others will hopefully be inspired by this practice and make their datasets accessible for wider audiences in the future. The databases are largely created from secondary literature and it is unclear what criteria has been used to select the relevant data. When examining the materials used in for instance the qualitative database, it appears that 20% of the sources used are more than century old. This naturally does not necessarily disqualify them, but the accuracy and the historical understanding found in nineteenth century scholarship might differ from today's ideas of methodological rigor.

Across ten chapters, Ogilvie argues against the economic usefulness of craft guilds and disputes the historiographical status quo. The first chapter, 'The debate about guilds' is the ambitious mission statement setting the tone for the book. In Ogilvie's opinion, the debate has focused too much on the guilds' positive economic, social and cultural influence on society. Historians have been too willing to accept guild's behaviour as expressions of prevailing cultural values (17). Instead of examining negative influences on the economy and society, a number of historians have promoted the view that guilds were innovators, guarantors of quality and beneficial to society. To rectify this, Ogilvie sets out to test these claims and prove that guilds only furthered the interests of their limited membership and actively discriminated against outsiders such women and religious minorities.

Each of the following empirical chapters follow a similar pattern: they begins with summary outlines of historians' arguments concerning positive effects of craft guilds while the bulk of the chapter is dedicated to take those arguments apart. This approach appears very convincing, but the relentlessness of refuting the claims carries with it a feeling of strawman arguments. As a result, the approach, though effective, becomes somewhat repetitive. The remainder of the book can be divided into two intertwined sections: chapters 2-5 pertain to the issues linked to the political, social and cultural aspects of guilds, while the following three, concerning quality control, human capital and innovation, are closer linked to the occupational aspect of the guilds.

Chapter 2 argues that guilds were not private-order institutions, but obtained their exclusive rights by offering services to governments and states, thus furthering their (limited) membership's interest rather than whole communities' interest. Next Ogilvie finds that guild's entry barriers benefitted their members by

ensuring exclusivity and imposed further costs on non-members (170). The following chapter explores how guilds' used their privileges to manipulate markets and limited access from various social groups to general detriment of the economy (230). In the fifth chapter Women's relationship with guilds is queried, which, like the chapter on entry barriers, finds that guilds' did not promote or uphold the economic status quo of women. Instead, they placed limits on the economic choices of women and as a result harmed women, families and the economy as a whole (306).

Examining the occupational aspects of guilds more closely, chapter 6 argues that guild certification was less to do with quality control and more connected with the manipulation of markets to enhance members' profit (335). In the seventh chapter, Ogilvie argues that guilds did not generally further human capital formation and finds that there was no positive relationship between guild training and economic outcomes. Instead, they enabled a privileged, primarily male minority to obtain skills at the expense of wider society (437). The penultimate analytical chapter follows along similar lines by examining guilds' role in innovation. Ogilvie concludes that innovations also took place in guild-free areas and occasionally innovated at a greater rate. It would in other words be wrong to conclude that guilds had a special role innovating crafts (509). The final analytical chapter challenges the link between guilds and growth in various European countries. Summing up the previous findings, this chapter concludes, that European countries with relatively weak guilds, like England and the Low Countries saw (comparatively) rapid economic growth from the late medieval era onwards. Simultaneously, countries with moderate or strong guilds stagnated economically (563). Over 500 pages, Ogilvie argues consistently and stubbornly against beneficial effects of craft guilds.

The book's impressive coverage – covering most of Europe and more than 600 years of history – is also one of its downsides. By comparing developments across Europe during such a long period – and homogenizing guilds' practices across time and space – the view of guilds, governments and individuals' practices cannot help but become static. In a number of cases, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent the trends outlined in the tables are describing anomalies – exceptional cases – rather than representative cases. For instance, in table 5.11 (256) Ogilvie investigates what limits guilds' placed on what widows could do. The dataset holds 262 occurrences of guilds' limiting widows' practices in the period 1268-1829. Concerning the size of widows' workshops, the dataset only has two examples (0.8% of all occurrences noted in the table), which both were found in France. What can be extrapolated from this? Is it fair to claim that guilds decided the size of widows' workshop across Europe for 600 years based on two instances in France? The answer might be yes, but it requires more detailed area studies to be certain: synthesizing data will not provide the information.

The book will undoubtedly divide historians depending on their point of departure geographically and specialization-wise. In any case, *The European Guilds* is a timely reminder to question accepted truths concerning monopolized wealth and economic development in historical perspective as well as in contemporary society. Ultimately, Sheilagh Ogilvie has written a book that should become the starting point for discussions of guilds' economic performance as well as their social and cultural impact on society. It will become the natural starting point for future studies of the roles of guilds in economic growth and encourages further comparative studies based on new data, methodological approaches or revisions.