Directions: Examine the documents below and discuss and answer the questions that follow.

Merchant Class Shifts the Social Order

The merchants and craftspeople of medieval towns did not fit into the traditional medieval social order of noble, clergy, and peasant. At first, towns came under the authority of feudal lords, who used their authority to levy fees, taxes, and rents. As trade expanded, the burghers, or middle-class town dwellers, resented this interference in their trade and commerce.

Source: “Changes in Medieval Society”, Roger Beck, World History: Patterns of Interaction, McDougall Littell

To avoid fees, merchants appealed to kings for special charters (written documents of royal permission) for new towns. These charters allowed the merchants to run towns in any way they wanted. In return, they paid taxes to the king. Towns grew quickly under the leadership of merchants. In the High Middle Ages, more people than ever before were migrating to European cities. By 1300, Paris and Rome each had about 100,000 residents while London and Florence each had about 75,000. In time, these towns began to be referred to as cities.


1. How did the growth of towns change and broaden the social class norms of Medieval European society?

New Opportunities for Peasants (Choose two group members to act out the scene)

Frederick: John, is that you?
John: Frederick! What are you doing in town? It's so good to see you!
Frederick: Likewise, old friend! My God, how long has it been? Six years?
John: Just shy of seven actually.
Frederick: So what have you been doing all these years? The last time I saw you, you were fleeing from our Lord's Manor!
John: Frederick, I just could not take it anymore, living as a serf, bound to the land. So I fled, and I came to this town. How it's grown since then! I was told that, according to the town charter approved by the king, any person residing in this town for one year and a day would be free from serfdom, and so I stayed.
Frederick: But what do you do for work?
John: I'm an apprentice with the mason’s guild
Frederick: You're a what now?
John: A guild is an organization of workers practicing the same occupation, like bakers, blacksmiths, textile manufacturers, or in my case, stonemasons, the people
who build our beautiful churches and other stone structures. An apprenticeship is kind of like a training program. I work every day on building projects with the members of my guild. The guild master, who is the most skilled mason among us, has taught me so much about stone building construction.

Frederick: Do they pay you well?
John: Right now, I work for free, just to learn the skills of my trade. But by next year, my apprenticeship will be finished, and I will be a journeyman. That means that I am fully trained, and I can get a paying job as a mason.

Frederick: That is wonderful! I congratulate you on your great success.
John: Thank you, but wait, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be back on the manor working the fields? As a serf, you are bound to the land!

Frederick: Well, things have really loosened up since you left all those years ago. I might still be a peasant, but I am no longer a serf!
John: I don't understand. How?

Frederick: Well, a few years ago, our Lord decided to go on a crusade, but he needed money to pay for it. At first, he was taking the crops we grew for him and having them sold at market so he could get some cash. But then he realized that he was more interested in money than crops, so he changed the rules and said we have to pay him in money instead of labor and crops.

John: So that's why you’re here in town? Selling your surplus crops to get money to pay the landlord?

Frederick: Precisely! At this point, you could call us tenant farmers. We pay the lord for the right to use his land for farming, but we no longer belong to the land. Plus, if we work hard and grow extra crops, we can keep some money for ourselves. I have a nice savings already!

John: My, how things have changed! You know, with all that money, you could move into a town yourself. I hear there are some men here planning to open a shop, and they are looking for business partners. Are you interested?

Frederick: John, that sounds like exactly what I’ve been looking for! It looks like you’ve got a new neighbor!

2. What is a guild?

3. What is an apprentice?

4. What is a journeyman?
5. Why were guild masters important to the growth of towns?

6. What is a tenant farmer? How is it different from a serf?

7. What new opportunities were available for peasants in the Late Middle Ages?

8. In addition to training apprentices in a particular craft, what other services did guilds provide to members and to the community of the town in general?

9. Very often, merchant or craft guilds served as the local governments for towns. Does this surprise you? Why do you think that would be?
10. Look closely at the details of this image of a medieval town. What types of activities are taking place?

11. In the distance, far from the town, you can see a castle. Who do you think lives in that castle? Imagine he could see what is going on in the town. What emotion do you think he would feel? Why?

12. In general, how was life in towns different than life on manors?

**New Opportunities for Women**

Women who lived in the countryside continue to perform the same kinds of tasks that their ancestors tended to in the early Middle Ages: household chores, weaving, and the care of domestic animals. But medieval towns and cities offered fresh opportunities for women as well as for men. In the patriarchal society of medieval Europe, few routes to public authority were open to women, but in the larger towns and cities women worked alongside men asked butchers, brewers, bakers, candle makers, fishmongers, shoemakers, gemsmiths, innkeepers, launderers, moneychangers, merchants, and occasionally physicians and pharmacists. Women dominated some occupations, particularly those involving textiles and decorative arts, such as sewing, spinning, weaving, and the making of hats, wigs, and fur garments.
Most guilds admitted women into their ranks, and some guilds had exclusively female memberships. In thirteenth-century Paris, for example, there were approximately one hundred guilds. Six of them admitted only women, but eighty others included women as well as men among their members. Despite the persistence of patriarchal social structures, the increasing prominence of women in European society illustrates the significance of towns and cities as agents of social change in medieval Europe.

Source: “Economic Growth and Social Development”, Jerry H Bentley, Traditions and Encounters, McGraw Hill

13. How did the growth of towns impact the lives of women in Medieval Europe? Would you consider this a major change or minimally significant? Explain.

14. According to the chart, how would the growth of trade benefit kings?

15. Considering the information on the chart and what you have learned, how would the growth of trade harm lords and undermine the feudal system? Explain the chain of causation.