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Origin of Towns Henri Pirenne YouTube Lecture Handouts Geography

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About Henri Pirenne & His Ideas

- Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade (1927) based on a series of lectures of 1922
- Les villes du moyen age (1927) subtitled “Essai d’histoire economique et sociale”
- Article - “The Stages in the Social History of Capitalism” (1914)
- Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe (1933)
- Two-volume *A History of Europe: From the End of the Roman World in the West to the Beginnings of the Western States* (1936)
- Posthumous Essay on *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937)
- influential historian of Belgium – studied history of towns
- He expanded especially the discussion of Italian and Russian towns.

Contribution

- Towns developed as the result of the revival of commerce in the tenth and eleventh centuries and that their original nuclei were settlements of merchants
- Article “The Stages in the Social History of Capitalism” (1914) , which aroused great interest in international historical circles
- In his famous essay on Mohammed and Charlemagne (1937) he propounded the “Pirenne thesis” stressing the continuity of Roman civilization in transalpine Europe after the fall of Rome, arguing real change in Europe came from the rise of Islam, not barbarian invasions. It stressed origins of the Middle Ages in reactive state formation and shifts in trade
- Pirenne maintained his view that profound, long-term social, economic, cultural, and religious movements resulted from profound underlying causes, and this attitude influenced Marc Bloch and the outlook of the French Annales School of social history.

Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade

- Pirenne was also the author of *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (1927), a book based on lectures he delivered in the United States in 1922. In this book, he contends that through the period from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, Europe reclaimed control of the Mediterranean from the Muslim world, and opened up sea routes to the Orient. This allowed the formation of a merchant/middle class and the development of that class's characteristic abode, the city.
- His "Merchant Enterprise School" opposed Marxism but shared many of Marx's ideas on the merchant class. Pirenne's theory of a commercial renaissance in towns in the 11th century remains the standard interpretation.
- Book appeared in English translation before being published in French in 1927.

Why European Cities Declined & Later Revived?

- Henri Pirenne argues that it was not the invasion of the Germanic tribes that destroyed the civilization of antiquity, but rather the closing of Mediterranean trade by Arab conquest in the seventh century. The consequent interruption of long-distance commerce accelerated the decline of the ancient cities of Europe.
- the origins of medieval cities to the revival of trade, tracing their growth from the tenth century to the twelfth – role of middle class
- Model of the rise and decline of feudalism in Europe formulated in great detail by the Belgian historian of the 1920's and 30's was important.
- Pirenne had displaced the dominant stereotype of European feudalism as lord-vassal relationship and substituted in its place, one that had much wider and deeper range of consequences for society. He postulated that 'grand trading' i.e., long distance trade in Europe across the Mediterranean, had allowed European economy, society and civilization to flourish in Antiquity until its disruption by the Arab invasions of Europe in the 7 century.
- Disruption of trade led to the economy's 'ruralisation', which made it inward, rather than outward looking. It also resulted in what Pirenne called 'the closed estate economy'.
- The closed estate signified the unit of land held as estate by the lord (10,000 acres on an average) and cultivated by the peasant, where trade was minimal and almost everything the inhabitants of the estate required was produced within. These estates, in other words, were economically 'self-sufficient' units.
- The picture changed again from the 11th century when the Crusades threw the Arabs back to the Near East; this led to the revival of trade and cities and the decline of feudalism. Pirenne thus posited an irreconcilable opposition between trade and urbanization on one hand and feudalism on the other.

Centrality of Sea

- It was the sea itself which provided a space and a means by which the varied peoples communicated, exchanged, allied and conflicted with each other.
- Mediterranean World ceased to be a distinctive region and civilization unto itself and henceforth would be a borderland where multiple civilizations would intersect. The very cognition of the region's geography was fundamentally transformed.

What is City?

- City was a purely economic entity based on long distance trade
- Cities to be the islands of capitalism in a feudal world
- For Henri Pirenne, the city was a purely economic entity based on long distance trade, originating after the Muslims allegedly closed the Mediterranean to trade in the seventeenth century.
- Feudal crisis or challenges denote an unpleasant phenomenon characterizing decline in the rural population, extent of arable land, quantum of produce and yield of land revenue. It was triggered by several factors which the scholars explain in their own ways. Whereas Maurice Dobb attributes it to "internal crises", Henri Pirenne views the growth of trade and towns as its fundamental cause

Rise and Fall of Feudalism in Europe

- R. S. Sharma essentially emulated the model of the rise and decline of feudalism in Europe formulated in great detail by the Belgian historian of the 1920's and 30's,
- Pirenne had displaced the dominant stereotype of European feudalism as lord-vassal relationship and substituted in its place, one that had much wider and deeper range of consequences for society. He postulated that 'grand trading' i.e., long distance trade in Europe across the Mediterranean, had allowed European economy, society and civilization to flourish in Antiquity until its disruption by the Arab invasions of Europe in the 7 century. Disruption of trade led to the economy's 'ruralisation', which made it inward, rather than outward looking. It also resulted in what Pirenne called 'the closed estate economy'.
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Rise and Fall of Feudalism in India

- R. S. Sharma copied this model in almost every detail, after including its terminology, on to the Indian historical landscape. He visualized the decline of India's long distance trade with various parts of the world after the fall of the Guptas; urbanization also suffered in consequence, resulting in the economy's ruralisation.
- A scenario thus arose in which economic resources were not scarce but currency was. Since coins were not available, the state started handing out land in payment to its employees and grantees like the Brahmins. Along with land, the state also gave away more and more rights over the cultivating peasants to the new class of 'intermediaries' .
- The increasing subjection of the peasants to the intermediaries reduced them to the level of serfs, their counterparts in medieval Europe.
- The rise of the class of intermediaries through the state action of giving grants to them is the crucial element in R. S. Sharma's construction of Indian feudalism.
- In other words land grants to the brahmanas were the most striking development in this direction. Another factor was the custom of giving land grants to the military officers for their administrative and military services. R. S. Sharma considers the Agrahara as something similar to the manor of European feudalism.
- The existence of forced labour and serfdom indicates the existence of feudal structure in ancient India.
- The crucial process of land grants to intermediaries lasted until about the 11th century when the revival of trade reopened the process of urbanization. The decline of feudalism is suggested in this revival.

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