

## A DAY'S SHOPPING IN THIRTEENTH CENTURY PARIS

Donald F. Dixon, Penn State University

### ABSTRACT

A description of the activities of the street vendors of thirteenth century Paris is taken from contemporary documents, including a poem about a consumer-buyer and one about a retailer. The cries of the vendors describe the goods offered, extol their virtues, and announce the terms of sale. Both new and used goods are sold, and various repair services are offered. Neither buyer nor seller is satisfied with his fate.

Paris became an important commercial, administrative, and educational center in the thirteenth century. With a population of roughly 80,000, Paris was one of the largest cities in the Christian world, rivaling the Northern Italian cities of Florence, Genoa, and Venice, and the Flemish cities of Bruges and Ghent. The city had been founded by the Romans at a point in the Seine where the river divides to form an island. This island became the "Ile-de-la-Cité" that remained the core of the growing urban area. It was here that the royal palace and court of the Capetian kings, and the great Notre Dame cathedral were built.

The expansion of trade in the twelfth century stimulated the growth of Paris because northern France was the crossroads of a communications network connecting Flanders, the greatest industrial area in northern Europe, with northern Italy, the Mediterranean's commercial center. The city's location on the Seine became especially important with the establishment of the Champaign fairs. In the thirteenth century the annual fairs at Troyes, Lagny, Provins, Brie and Bar-sur-Aube were Europe's largest. Paris also was located on the land route, linking Flanders with the Rhone and Loire valleys, that provided a means of reaching the Mediterranean. The city's academic prominence arose from the ecclesiastical education centers founded to provide the jurists, notaries and scribes needed for the administration of public and private business.

Thirteenth century Paris was a walled city, forming a circle encompassing both banks of the Seine, with the Cité at its center. The major streets branched out from the Cité toward the city gates like spokes of a wheel. The wall was constructed as a means of defense against the English, but it also performed the everyday function of controlling access to the city. The gates were guarded during the day, and closed at night. Travelers were intercepted at the gates so that the taxes that provided a significant part of the city's income could be levied on goods carried by merchants. Markets arose immediately inside the gates where sellers arriving from outside the city could bring their goods most conveniently.

Paris was divided into three areas, the town, the Cité, and the university, each specializing in one of the city's functions. The university section was located on the left bank; The University of Paris and the Sorbonne, both founded in the thirteenth century. The left bank was connected to the Cité by



the Petit Pont. The town was the commercial center, on the right bank, connected to the Cité by the Grand Pont, that led to the Rue Saint Denis, the main north-south artery.

One hundred and one trade guilds were registered in Paris. In mid century Etienne Boileau, the "Provost of merchants" under Louis IX, compiled an official Book of Trades, recording the customs and regulations of the city's trade guilds (Boileau, 13th c.). These guilds are listed in the Appendix. The division of labor is extensive; hat makers, for example, form six different guilds, distinguished by the material used in manufacture. However, the assortments sold by some guilds are very wide. The saddle makers sell plain and decorated saddles, riding clothes, pillows, and curry-combs. Buckle makers also sell blinders, bits, reins and bridles for horses.

Goods are sold in shops, by street vendors, and in specialized markets. The meat market is near the Grand Châtelet, the fortified tower guarding the northern approach to the Grand Pont. The bread market is in the Place Maubert, on the left bank. Flowers and eggs are sold near the Petit Pont. The herb market is on the Ile-de-la-Cité. On Saturdays, when most of the shops are closed, goods are sold at the great Halles market on the northern edge of the right bank. In the Halles each trade has its own area, as do merchants from the surrounding provincial towns.

The typical shop, as described by Viollet le duc (1867), is a room on the ground floor of the shopkeeper's house. The side of the room facing the street is enclosed by two horizontal shutters, spanning the entire width of the room, and opening outward. The upper shutter, hinged at the top, opens to form an awning. The lower shutter is hinged so that when lowered it forms a shelf for displaying goods. When the shop is open the craftsman works in full view of passers-by. Some guild regulations specify this arrangement as a means of assuring that the craftsmen does honest work.

Customers do not enter the shop, but remain standing in the street, while the shopkeeper remains inside. The streets are narrow, approximately five meters wide near the wall, and three meters wide in the Cité. Since adjacent shops sell similar goods in such a congested space, it is not surprising that guild regulations forbid shopkeepers to attempt to entice customers from other shops. Moreover, the shopkeeper is limited in his use of criers; if he keeps a crier he can have only one; some trades require that the crier be the master himself, or his wife.

Shops selling similar goods are grouped together, in different parts of the city. Booksellers, illuminators and scribes are located on the left bank in the university area. The apothecaries, who sell confections as well as medicines, are found in the Cité, near the cathedral of Notre Dame. Money changers and goldsmiths are found on the Grand Pont, which is the most secure part of the city because it is protected by the Grand Châtelet. Contemporary illustrations of these, and other shops, are found in the illuminated manuscript of the Life of St. Denis (Egbert, 1974). The leather sellers also are found on the Grand Pont. Butchers and fish sellers have their shops close to the Seine, on the right bank near the Grand Châtelet. The drapers also are located near the Grand Châtelet on a street parallel to the Seine. Mercers, saddlers and stirrup makers are near the Rue Saint Denis. Dealers in old clothes and furniture are further from the river, near the Saint Martin gate. The weavers are near the Temple gate. The bow makers, who also sell arrows, spears and slings,

are located near the Saint-Dennis gate. Coopers, curriers, and potters are found on streets surrounding the Halles. (Halphen, 1909)

The streets of thirteenth century Paris are busy and noisy. Shopkeepers cry their wares, not depending on their signs to attract customers. Crying is the only means available for the street vendors to attract customers. A vendor's cry, somewhere between speech and song, typically remains unchanged for many years, and is passed on from one generation to the next. The cry becomes a mark of distinction analogous to a shop's sign. But a cry may contain more information than a sign; it can describe the assortment offered, special characteristics of particular goods or services, and the terms of sale.

This paper focuses on the Parisian street vendors and their cries; illustrations of some of these criers also are found in The Life of St. Denis (Egbert, 1974). The framework of the paper is suggested by a thirteenth century poem written "because poverty commands it." (Villeneuve, 13th c.) The poet, Guillaume, complains that he is penniless because the criers have enticed him to spend all his money. The poem describes these vendors and their cries:

For I will tell you in what guise  
And in what fashion go those  
Who have wares to sell,  
And who think of making their profit,  
Who certainly will not cease to cry,  
In the streets until night.

Some additional information is derived from the Dictionarius of John de Garlande (13th c.) who taught at the Universities of Paris and Toulouse early in the thirteenth century. This work, designed to help students learn their Latin vocabulary, describes the sights that one sees in the streets of Paris, including the shopkeepers and street vendors crying their wares, and the goods and services offered. A detailed description of the offerings of one type of street vendor, the mercer, or seller of "small wares," is drawn from a poem describing the mercer's stock and cries. (Anon., 13th c.)

Our guide, Guillaume, begins his poem with the opening of the public baths early in the morning:

Hear them cry at the break of day,  
Sirs, go then to bathe,  
And stew without delay:  
the baths are warm, its no lie.

Immediately afterward, Guillaume's attention turns to food. The cries resound:

Of those who sell fresh herring.  
While others cry live eels.  
Herring sour and white, freshly salted,  
Take our herring that we wish to sell.

Sardines, "fish from the ponds of Bondy," and "good whiting, fresh and salted" are also offered.

Pie makers sell meat pies made of pork, chicken and eels, with pepper added, and tarts stuffed with soft cheese and eggs. Butchers sell ox meat, horse meat

and pork, to the naive provisioners of student lodgings. Apparently student fare is meager. However, the pork butchers are held in high esteem by the students; sausage and tripe are enjoyed by this "robed rabble."

Cookshops purchase fresh meat from butchers and sell roast and broiled meats. They also offer geese, doves, and other fowl roasted on hazelwood spits:

Birds, pigeons and salted meat,  
Fresh meat very well dressed  
And garlic sauce in great quantity.  
Then honey, God give you good health.

On fasting days cookshops offer fish and vegetables. One shop offers vegetable and pea soup; next door, hot beans may be purchased.

Guillaume also finds pastries and hot cakes, as well as

Hot pancakes, scalding hot,  
Rissoles -- the very foodstuffs to throw dice for.

Sellers of butter, cheese and milk are found in the Pierre-au-Lait, crying:

I have good Champagne cheese,  
There is also cheese from Brie,  
Don't forget my fresh butter,  
Or milk, her neighbor.

Grocers sell both hard and soft cheeses, displayed near sulfur burning candles so that they will ripen better.

There are many sellers of household provisions:

I have prime red apples,  
Like rubies as I hear it.  
I have chestnuts from Lombardy,  
Figs from Malta in abundance,  
I have raisins from Damascus, raisins.  
I have leeks, and I have turnips,  
I have peas in the pod, all new.  
Others cry new beans;  
And measure them out in bowls.  
I have ginger, I have garingaut,  
To strengthen and clear the voice.  
Garlic and onions of lasting odor.

And of course, there is wine. A guild of official wine "crieurs" is employed by the royal provost to verify the opening of kegs and the payment of taxes. Some of the guild regulations are unique. A crier may choose to cry for any tavern that does not already employ a crier, whether or not the tavern owner wishes. Criers visit the taverns each morning to learn what wine is available, and walk through the streets carrying a wooden pot of wine for tasting. This procedure is repeated a second time each day, except on Fridays, Sundays, during lent, and the eight days of Christmas. On these days wine is cried only once.

The wine criers attract attention both by crying and by beating on their pots with sticks. The prices of various measures in which wine is sold also are announced:

Shall we cry the wine of King Louis?  
Let us cry it in several places.  
Good strong wine at thirty-two  
And at sixteen, at twelve, at eight.

Terms of sale are sometimes included as part of the street vendor's cry. Coal, for example, is one sou per sack, and tanning bark is two oboles per bundle. Sometimes vendors consider their wares to be expensive:

Now here are more expensive goods.  
Hymn books, with many great songs.  
I have whole pomegranates,  
But they seem to me very dear,  
Nevertheless I can easily sell them,  
Receiving either money or its worth.

Payment is not always in money. The mercer sells belts, for which he asks three sous or an egg. Other cries suggest additional means of payment:

Come forth, dame, come,  
Come forth, pay  
With egg, or with iron, or with money  
I will exchange needles for old iron,  
For I will sell that very cheap.

There is a ready market among the vendors for used items taken in exchange for their goods. For example, worn or damaged items made of metal, such as kitchen pots and pans, can be melted down and reused:

Who has old iron to sell, bring it here,  
Others have other news to tell  
Who sells old pots and frying pans?

Many other sellers compete for Guillaume's attention. One, carrying a sack on a stick to hold his goods, is wearing tippets attached to his hood, bows and buckles, leggings and knee socks, along with jingling bells.

If one is searching for household items, there are various offerings:

There are mats and little mats  
Candle with wick of cotton, candle  
Which lights more than any star!  
I have needles for sewing;  
I have thimbles for seamstresses

Toilet articles also are available: fine soap from Paris, and boxes in which to put it, combs, rose water, and for the women, cotton for putting on rouge, and powder. The many medicinal products include sulfur for restoring hair to bald heads, and ointments to cure the gout.

Household items can be obtained from the mercer, who also offers clothing and jewelry. Certainly he is very anxious to make a sale:

I am a mercer, and carry mercery,  
Which I would sell willingly,  
For I am in want of money.  
Now, if it please you to listen,  
I can easily describe  
the mercery that I carry;  
But I find them very heavy.

The mercer's assortment is very broad:

I have fine gloves for little damsels;  
I have leather purses with buttons,  
I have all sorts of purses,  
Both of silk and leather,  
Which I would very willingly sell;  
And I have some also of linen.  
I have handsome kerchiefs for ladies,  
And fine lace for the hair,  
That I shall sell to the pretty maids  
I have beautiful silver pins,  
As well as brass ones,  
That I sell to the pretty women.  
I have brass clasps and rings,  
And very fine belts and fallois,

Furthermore, if it isn't in stock, you should ask for it:

I don't know what I should tell you more;  
In the world there is no mercery  
Which men or women can buy,  
That I cannot now find for them.

There seems to be some channel conflict. There is criticism of men who usurp the sales of items such as napkins, kerchiefs, and shawls, that traditionally were sold by women.

One does not always buy new products; sometimes repairs are required:

Who has a coat or leather-lined mantel  
Should bring it to me to mend!  
Coat and overcoat I will mend,  
And the washtub I will refasten;  
Bread box and bench I also know how to mend,  
I do right well what I know how to do.  
I will polish tin pots,  
I will mend your tankards.

Silver wire is used to repair tankards made from maple, and brass wire for those made from inferior wood. Unfortunately, some of those who offer to perform repairs do shoddy work. And there are other questions of business ethics as well. Despite guild regulations, clothiers sometimes sell shoddy garments. Buyers also are cheated when cloth is woven with defective wool and

cotton. The eggs in the tarts sold by the pie makers sometimes are spoiled.

University students seem to be special targets of unscrupulous sellers. Grocers sell to students at prices that are higher than they should be. Glovemakers deceive students by selling them gloves made of inferior material. Booksellers also take advantage of students "by buying too cheaply and selling too dearly and thinking up other frauds" that make books too expensive. The Convent of the Friars requires booksellers to swear that "in receiving books to sell, storing, showing, and selling the same in their other functions in connection with the university, they will conduct themselves faithfully and legitimately." Students and teachers are prohibited from dealing with any bookseller who violates university rules. (Regulations of Booksellers, 1275)

For entertainment Guillaume can obtain loaded dice:

I have large and small dice,  
From Paris, Chartres, and Rheims;  
And I have two (I am not joking)  
Which when tossed, fall upon the aces.

There also is a serious side to life. Guillaume often meets beggars asking for alms:

I tell you, on these streets,  
The throngs of these poor people are great,  
Listen to the crying though these streets:  
Beggars, Ye Gods; Who calls me?  
Come here, empty this bowl.  
These go crying in the morning,  
Bread for the Sachetin Friars, for the Carmelites,  
For the poor prisoners, locked away.

And sometimes there is a funeral:

When a man or woman is dead,  
You hear cries, pray for his soul,  
By ringing a bell through these streets,  
Then you hear other poor people  
Cry out loud tears of anguish.

At night, after curfew, criers offer pastry cones, wafers and meat pies for sale from wicker baskets suspended from leather shoulder-straps:

In the evening, hear without waiting any longer,  
In a loud voice without delay,  
Ye Gods, who is calling, the wafer-seller?

It also may be in the evening that sellers and buyers review their daily activities. The mercer is not at all satisfied with his trade:

I never could obtain any property with it,  
And never from any thing that I carried  
Did I gain enough to eat.  
Therefore I will set my pack down,  
I will not meddle any more with it.



Thus I return to the bilet, [a game of chance]  
Which I know better how to employ.  
Pray God that he will give me profit.

And Guillaume is even more unhappy:

Help, God of Majesty!  
What a misfortune that I was born.  
How I am misdirected!  
There are so many goods to sell,  
I cannot stop myself from spending.  
The little I have, I have spent,  
So that poverty has mastered me.  
Finally I had to sell my clothes,  
Gluttony ruined me:  
So that I no longer know what will become of me.

Although the modern marketing structure differs markedly from that of the thirteenth century, it seems that human nature has remained unchanged.

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## APPENDIX

### List of Trade Guilds, Paris, Thirteenth Century

Bakers  
Millers  
Corn Dealers  
Measurers - corn  
Criers of Wine  
Measurers - liquids  
Tavern keepers (wine sellers)  
Brewers and sellers of beer  
Dealers in bread and salt  
Dealers in Fruit and Vegetables  
Workers in precious metals  
Pewterers  
Makers of rope  
Tin workers  
Blacksmiths  
Makers of knife blades  
Makers of knife handles  
Locksmiths - iron  
Locksmiths - Brass  
Metal workers  
Buckle makers - iron  
Buckle makers - brass  
Drawers of wire - iron  
Drawers of wire - brass  
Nail makers  
Chain mail makers  
Makers and sellers of bone rosaries  
Makers and sellers of coral rosaries  
Makers and sellers of amber rosaries  
Crystal and precious stone cutters  
Beaters of gold and silver filaments  
Beaters of gold and silver leaf  
Beaters of tin  
Braid makers  
Spinners - large spindles  
Spinners - small spindles  
Lace makers  
Workers in silk cloth  
Makers of breeches  
Silk merchants  
Metal founders and casters  
Makers of brass clasps  
Makers of buttons and shoe buckles  
Weavers - silk  
Lamp makers  
Coopers  
Carpenters  
Masons

Makers of wood bowls and plates  
Weavers - wool  
Oriental tapestry makers  
Domestic tapestry makers  
Fullers  
Dyers  
Hosiers  
Dress makers  
Linen makers  
Dealers in hemp and yarn  
Dealers in canvas  
Pin makers  
Statuette and crucifix makers - sculptors  
Statuette and crucifix makers - decorators  
Dealers in cooking oil  
Dealers in candles  
Makers of jewel cases  
Decorators of jewel cases  
Dealers in combs  
Dealers in ivory, bone, ebony  
Cooks  
Poultry sellers  
Dice makers  
Button makers - brass  
Caretaker of public baths  
Potters  
Haberdashers  
Dealers in old clothes  
Purse makers  
Saddle makers  
Carpenters  
Blazoners  
Harness makers  
Makers of nails and small iron objects  
Leather dressers  
Shoemakers  
Shoemakers - sheepskin  
Cobblers  
Curriers  
Glove makers  
Hay sellers  
Hat makers - flowers  
Hat makers - felt  
Hat makers - cotton  
Hat makers - peacock feathers  
Hat makers - fur  
Hat makers - embroidery  
Surgeons  
Sword furbishers  
Bow and arrow makers  
Fishermen  
Sellers of fresh-water fish  
Sellers of salt-water fish

