

*This comes from a popular book on medieval Europe by a well-known and respected author. It weaves a secondary commentary with evidence gleaned from a noteworthy and colourful primary source. It attributes the spiritual revival at the end of the tenth century to economic factors. It goes on to look at the economic stagnation of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries to the economic decline that arguably followed the Black Death and then the economic recovery that was to characterise the early modern and modern periods. It also says something interesting about the sources available to the economic historian working on this period.*

A profound change took place in Europe in the later decades of the tenth century and the early years of the eleventh. There was a popular superstition that the Christian era would last for a thousand years. There is no evidence that such pious folklore inhibited economic life, but there nevertheless a burst of activity in the years which followed the year one thousand. Raoul Glaber [chronicler and monk who died around 1047] described the new spirit:

So on the threshold of the aforesaid thousandth year . . . it befell almost throughout the world, but especially in Italy and Gaul, that the fabrics of churches were rebuilt, although many of these were seemly and needed no such care; but every nation of Christendom rivalled with the other, which should worship in the seemliest buildings. So it was as though the very world has shaken herself and cast off her old age, and were clothing herself everywhere in a white garment of churches.

*The use of the term 'economic base' and the overt link made by Pounds to the 'superstructure' of the 'spiritual revival' is revealing and is suggestive of a Marxist approach or at least an approach that places great value on economic forces.*

No such spiritual revival can occur without an economic base. Churches were built from the profits of agriculture and trade, and monks were supported by the slender surplus produced by the peasant. The tenth century had seen the recovery of western and central Europe from the depredations of successive waves of invaders and the rebuilding of its decimated population. During the eleventh a surplus began to accrue. This was, in part, invested in stones and mortar; in part in the building of social and political institutions, and in part in an outward thrust, driving the Muslims from Spain and Italy, conquering parts of the Levant, and establishing an expanding frontier of settlement in central and eastern Europe.

The turning point in the European economy came at different times in different parts of the continent, and was earlier in Italy than in France, and earlier in much of France and the Rhineland

than in the rest of Germany. The last areas to be touched by the expansive economy of the high Middle Ages were Scandinavia, east-central Europe and the interior of the Balkans. Almost everywhere, however, economic growth, whatever indices and measures we use, was apparent well before the year 1000. It was at this time that it became visible in the landscape of Burgundy, where the monk Glaber lived the greater part of his life.

It has come to be accepted that a period of economic stagnation followed the ending of the Empire in the west. This gave place in the tenth or eleventh century to one of growth, which lasted until the end of the thirteenth or early fourteenth century. On this there is complete agreement. There was some kind of economic decline in the middle years of the fourteenth century, associated in the common view, with the spread of the Black Death. Sometime in the fourteenth century – the date is a matter of conjecture – the European economy again took an upward turn.

N.J.G. Pounds (1994), *An Economic History of Medieval Europe*, pp. 91–2.