

# Economics of History Activity

**networks**

## The Rise of Christianity

### Lesson 3 *A Christian Europe*

## The Economic Life of Christian Monasteries

### Background Information

Beginning in the A.D. 300s, Christians in the eastern part of the Roman Empire began forming religious communities. Monasteries were communities where men could devote themselves to a life of prayer and study. The men who lived in monasteries were called monks. Women had their own communities, known as convents, where they lived as nuns. Monks and nuns did not spend all of their time inside their respective communities. Many of them also worked in nearby towns and cities where they set up schools and hospitals to serve people in need.

Within the monasteries, monks had to work hard as well as study and pray. Many monasteries had their own orchards and fields for growing crops. They might also have pastureland for herds of sheep or other grazing farm animals. The economic survival of monasteries partly depended on the labor of monks to plant and harvest the crops, shear the sheep, or pick the fruit.

Some monasteries found ways to increase their wealth even while individual monks accepted a life of poverty. For instance, a wealthy outside patron or visitor might donate money, land, or goods to a monastery. Farmers could rent fields from a monastery and pay their rent in the form of money or goods. Monasteries that raised farm animals could sell or trade products like milk, cheese, wool, or meat in neighboring towns and villages. Other monasteries might be located near a quarry, a river, or a forest. A monastery could then charge a fee for outsiders to use these resources, provided they were on monastery property.

Over time, monasteries developed a variety of economic ties with local towns or villages. These ties helped connect monasteries to the social and economic life of surrounding nonreligious communities.

**Directions** Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

**1. Explaining** Why were monasteries set up?

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## Economics of History Activity *Cont.*

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**2. Describing** How did some monasteries grow wealthy?

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#### Critical Thinking

**3. Analyzing** Why was economic activity important for monasteries?

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**4. Evaluating** Defend or oppose the following statement:  
"Monasteries made a positive contribution to their local communities."

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