

Knowledge as Property in the International State System

Intellectual property is a historical development of the last five hundred years. In the ancient world, once a machine was developed and gained acceptance, its fate was beyond the inventors' control. Inventions were distinct forms of nonmaterial commodities that did not have a specific value in the marketplace. Neither Greek nor Roman law protected intellectual property, though accusations of theft of knowledge and plagiarism were not uncommon. The value of technical knowledge was embodied in the product. Ancient artisans did not distinguish between the processes and technical skills they used and the goods they made.

Notions of knowledge as a distinct concept representing an economic value emerged in the late medieval period and the early Renaissance. Artisans' guilds played a crucial role in this development. In an attempt to protect their members' power in the emerging market economy, guilds regulated access to knowledge of processes and operation of machinery. By assigning a value to the skill itself, as distinct from the product, the guilds fostered the abstraction of intellectual property. It was not in the interests of guilds, however, to encourage the use of new machinery. The main feature of technical development, after all, is the transfer of functions in the process of