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Textile entrepreneurs and textile workers in the medieval city

Jeroen Deploige and Peter Stabel

What made the southern Low Countries in the Middle Ages unique in a European perspective was the weight of the region as an export-oriented industrial area. More so still than by trade and commerce, the towns in Flanders, Artesia, Hainaut and Brabant – and later also, but to a much lesser extent, in Holland – were characterized by the mass development of a vast textile sector which specialized in the first place, but not exclusively, in the production of woollen cloths. Textile in Europe was then, after agriculture, the largest economic sector and the concentration of the textile production attracted large streams of workers to the towns. City authorities were moreover thoroughly aware of the sector’s importance. Demands for better or different privileges were invariably founded on the argument that it was the cloth industry that created welfare – and therefore also indirectly tax incomes for the prince. In many towns, large and small, more than half the population was active in, or dependent for their income on, the industry. That industrial expansion determined everything: the size of the towns, the density of the urban network, the economic specialization of the inhabitants, the city’s involvement in regional and international trade flows, and even relations with the surrounding countryside, which became a genuine pool of labourers for the urban industry and also took over some cheaper textile production when the urban industries began to face market difficulties.

Why such a massive industrial development was set in motion in this very region has already been evoked elsewhere in this book. The combination of the following factors, among others, played a role: an available labour reserve, the presence of raw materials (in the first instance, wool), and the easy and relatively cheap connections with trading areas thanks to its location in the river delta. The sector’s endurance in a world that was sometimes subject to fundamental changes can quite simply be described as remarkable and has to do with the decisions of the entrepreneurs and the suppleness with which the industrial infrastructure

could be adapted. Craft guilds in particular, traditionally burdened with the sins of fossilization and decline, played a crucial role in accompanying innovative industrial transformations. But above all, the textile industry left its mark on the urban communities and to a certain extent also on those in the countryside. It led to the presence of large groups of skilled and unskilled labourers in the towns, workers who kept up their own lifestyle and mentality in the urban agglomerations. Initially maligned by the ecclesiastical and worldly elites, they grew to embody the core values of the urban middle classes.

### From manorial to urban industry

The rise of the urban textile industries in medieval Flanders and Artesia is a phenomenon of the eleventh and early twelfth century. In Brabant and large parts of the Prince-Bishopric of Liège, by contrast, the production of cloths remained for some two centuries a rather rural activity, which only met regional needs. Only in the thirteenth century did the cities in those areas join in the export-oriented dynamic of Flanders and Northern France. However, together with Picardy, Artesia had formed since Roman times already a region of sheep rearing and wool processing. From the Carolingian period onward, that sector, as part of a global rural expansion, grew increasingly important, also in Flanders. That is why we must talk of a gradual transition from early medieval manorial production to the urban industry rather than of a sort of birth of the urban economy in the eleventh century.

The production of cloths out of wool and flax in the Early Middle Ages was especially the task of women in the domestic economy in the countryside. Their work was integrated in the typical services that dependent and servile families were expected to deliver to their landlords. Furthermore, there were more specialized textile workplaces on larger monastic and royal domains, the so-called *gynaecaea*, where fabrics were produced on a larger scale and where all successive production phases were concentrated: from the preparation and carding of the wool via the spinning of the thread to the weaving of the textile. Scores of mostly young, unfree women were generally employed in these *gynaecaea*. Archaeological research has shown that they carried out their work in sunken huts – so-called pit houses – but also under lean-tos and in the open air. These women did not enjoy the best of reputations and were often associated in ecclesiastical sources with promiscuity.

It is especially the increase of both market-oriented product innovation and labour organization that provided an important stimulus to the urbanization of the textile industry.

The urban cores of Arras, Douai, Saint-Omer, Ghent, Bruges and Ypres soon took the lead in this respect. The widespread availability of domestic wool, which from the twelfth century onward was massively complemented with imports from England, also benefited the rapid increase in scale and saw to it that the cloths from Flanders and northern France became an export product that was in demand on the international stage.

The urbanization of the textile work also went hand in hand with a clear gender shift. It is sometimes claimed that the masculinization of the profession of weaver was related to a remarkable technological development. From the eleventh century, under the influence of the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world, the older, vertical looms were replaced by heavier, horizontal devices. The famous rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki from Troyes in Champagne, commonly known by his acronym Rashi, was a witness to this process in the second half of the eleventh century. In his commentary on the Talmud he distinguishes between the loom ‘by which men weave with their feet’, that is, horizontal looms with pedals, and the ones used by women that were manipulated with ‘a cane that goes up and down’. Women, however, remained very active in poorly paid labour, such as spinning. It is in particular from those parts of the production process which were dominated from the thirteenth century by the rising and strongly patriarchal craft guilds that women gradually disappeared.

Since hardly any records of the new urban environments survive from the mid thirteenth century, we have very little information on the actual development of the textile industry, let alone the labour organization and the changing production processes. Scarce sources in which market levies are listed nevertheless highlight the important position that cloth production was beginning to occupy in the economy. The oldest known tolls on market goods in Arras date from 1024 and 1036. They were in the possession of the important Abbey of St Vaast, situated in the city, and contain several references to products in the textile sector. Both finished cloths and weaving thread are mentioned as well as dyes. Another rare record in Arras, in which the Flemish count Philip of Alsace and the local bishop recognized one another’s legal competences in 1177, makes mention in passing of the fact that the bishop could adjudicate when quality requirements in the production of cloths were not respected. Next to such rare sources of an economic and legal nature, we sometimes also come across early references in literary texts to the development which the cloth trade and textile industry must have undergone in the Flemish cities. For instance, a remarkable, allegorical poem from the 1070s by the obscure ecclesiastical author Wenrich of Trier has come down to us. Entitled *Conflictus ovis et lini*, it is about the dispute between a sheep and a flax plant. In the course of the argument not only is it imputed to the flax that it is painfully torn out of the ground by

women and then mocked during the processing, but the sheep also extols at one point the materials that are being exported from Flanders:

But while every nation is making these coverings in many colours according to its ability, there is nevertheless this one province which makes extraordinary cloth that is green or blue-green or blue like the sky. These clothes, to be worn by lords, which you, Flanders, export, slightly crispy in the wool, and others more solid.

The famous poet Chrétien de Troyes delivered one of the earliest descriptions of genuine labour division in the urban textile industry. In his popular romance *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*, written in the 1180s by order of Count Philip of Alsace, we find a colourful depiction of the fictional town of Escavalon, for which a place like Ghent could have served as a model. The place is teeming – for the twelfth-century reader no doubt very recognizable – with money changers and all sorts of craftsmen: ‘some fulled cloth, while others wove it / and others combed it and others sheared it’. Such lines may in themselves only contain summary information, and we must wait until the years 1220--1230, when the embryonic guilds also manifest themselves, before all sorts of professional groups involved in cloth production (weavers, fullers, dyers, etc.) are mentioned for the first time in the records of the urban administrations themselves, such as those of Douai and later also of other places. And yet even then, the Old French and Middle High German literary texts remain a lot more telling in their praise for the skills of the dyers of Ypres, for the pants from Bruges, the precious green woollen cloths from Ghent, the scarlet materials from Saint-Omer, Douai or Lille. Thanks to the fairs of Lendit near Paris and those in Champagne, and thanks to the trade with the Rhineland, all these products enjoyed an international reputation that inspired many writers.

#### Image and self-image of the earliest weavers

Although hardly any information has come down to us about the production process or industrial organization for the first centuries in the history of the urban textile industry, it is especially thanks to ecclesiastical sources that we have relatively reliable information on the way in which the growing group of textile workers was perceived. It should not come as a surprise that that perception was not particularly favourable. The religious and aristocratic elites of the Early and High Middle Ages did not have all too high an opinion of *opus*

*manuum* or manual labour, which they considered inferior to spiritual work and military or administrative responsibilities. When manual labour subsequently also began to escape the control of the traditional manorial economy and new forms of employment were introduced in the emerging towns, suspicion only increased. The chronicle of the Abbey of Sint-Truiden, for instance, contains the vivid account of an event in which weavers play a leading role. According to the chronicle, those people ‘whose craft it is to weave cloth from linen thread and wool’ were considered as ‘the most presumptuous and arrogant of all labourers’. For that reason they were allegedly subjected to a particular humiliation ritual in 1135. At the time, a ship on wheels was rolled into town, one which already had a long journey behind it. Under penalty of confiscation, the local weavers were forced to watch the ship night and day, after which, to the dismay of the Benedictine chronicler, the rest of the town’s population allegedly had a bacchanal festival around it that lasted twelve days. This would ultimately have been the cause of much of the town’s later misfortune.

From the 1130s, however, the tone in many texts becomes a lot more furious, and the weavers are increasingly going to figure in the discourse of persecution of ecclesiastical authors as the driving forces in the development of all sorts of radical religious movements considered heterodox. Written in about 1133, the chronicle of the Abbey of Saint-André in Le Cateau-Cambrésis relates how Ramihrdus, a reform-minded preacher seen as heretical, was burned alive in a hut in 1076, and adds: ‘To this day there are in some towns still many members of his sect, and it is thought that those who make their living by weaving belong to it.’ Some twenty years later, the ecclesiastical authorities in Arras were concerned about the impact of heretical members. The acts of a council that was held shortly thereafter in 1157 in Reims specify that it was:

[...] the most wicked sect of the Manichaeans, who hide among most shameful folk and under the veil of religion labour to lead the souls of simple people to their doom, spread by the wretched weavers who move from place to place, and often change their names and carry with them women burdened by sin.

In about 1163, threats of heresy also began to surface in the Rhineland. The abbot of Schönau, Eckbert, one of the persecutors of the small groups that were seen as heterodox and were discovered among others in the region of Cologne, wrote on this subject in his anti-heretical sermons:

Among us in Germany they are called *Cathars*, in Flanders *piphles* and in France *texerant*, because of their connection with weaving [...] and they claim that the true faith of Christ and the true worship of Christ can only be found in their gatherings, which they hold in cellars, in weavers' huts, and similar underground hideouts. They say that they lead the apostolic life.

Eckbert compares the phenomenon with a crab that knows how to crawl over long distances and with the contagiousness of leprosy that can spread widely. In Oxford too, soon after, in 1166, some thirty heretical men and women, who had been discovered in Worcester, were sentenced to death. In contemporary letters of Bishop Gilbert Foliot of London, they are called 'weavers' and the later chronicler William of Newburgh claims that they were of 'Teutonic' origin, by which he possibly meant from Flanders or Brabant.

No matter how tendentious and biased those texts are, and no matter how they switch to clichéd comparisons that are difficult to verify between heretics and weavers, at the same time they also implicitly reveal that among the new, self-conscious groups of workers who visited the cities, distinct group feelings were being cultivated, which could also be underpinned religiously. It does not seem like a coincidence that Eckbert of Schönau denounced the so-called apostolic life of the heretical weavers. The New Testament, in particular the epistles of Paul, supplied many arguments to support a new work ethic. Was it not written in I Thess. 4:11--12 that: 'And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with our own hands, as we commanded you. That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing'?

The weavers who had had to gather around the famous ship on wheels in Sint-Truiden allegedly also claimed, imploringly, that they were only ordinary, simple folk:

[...] living from the work of their own hands in accordance with the righteous life of the ancient Christians and apostolic men, labouring night and day to feed and clothe themselves and their children [...] there were many other professions practiced by Christians that were more despicable than theirs, although they would not call any of them despicable as long as a Christian could practice it without sin.

We also find echoes of such complaints later, for instance in about 1175 in a letter which Lambert li Bègue, a priest from Liège, had addressed to Antipope Callixtus III, after he had briefly been incarcerated because of his all too reform-minded preaching to simple folk. 'I am

rebuked', claimed Lambert, 'because I was born of humble people and because my preaching is heard by weavers and tanners rather than princes, as though guilt resided not in sin, but in the arts necessary to mankind.' Nevertheless, even the urban elites continued to consider the manual labour of weavers and others as 'repugnant' until deep in the thirteenth century.

### Declining labour mobility

What also emerges from the ecclesiastical and anti-heretical texts discussed above is the observation that textile workers – and weavers in particular – were often described at the time as a relatively mobile professional group. It is plausible that, depending on the availability of work and labour conditions, they moved from one location to the next, which simultaneously facilitated the dissemination of their sometimes problematic religious and social beliefs. The case of the carnivalesque ship on wheels from Sint-Truiden also points to that mobility.

According to the chronicle of Sint-Truiden, that ship on wheels was initially built by a farmer from Kornelimünster near Aachen who wanted to play a trick on the weavers from his region. Weavers had subsequently pulled it to Aachen, Maastricht, Tongeren and Borgloon, before ultimately reaching the market of Sint-Truiden. It is no coincidence if this trajectory also coincided with part of the major overland trade routes that connected the Rhineland with the North Sea and along which therefore fabrics were also traded on a regional scale.

We have already mentioned the assumed presence of Flemish weavers in England in the mid twelfth century. It is certainly so that when after the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the victory of the Norman duke William the Conqueror, a wave of colonization was set in motion across the Channel, many descendants of the Flemish aristocracy settled there. In addition there are also countless traces of genuine new settlements by Flemings, among others also in Wales, from the time of King Henry I (1100--1135). The late twelfth-century chronicler Gerald of Wales wrote about those Flemish colonies that they settled members that were very skilled in wool processing and in commerce, and that they were a strong people, both with the plough and with the sword. Whether textile workers from the Low Countries emigrated systematically to England and also to Germany, as was often assumed in earlier research, is now open to question. What is clear is that shortly before 1200, a number of influential historiographers started to depict the Flemish soldiers, who were frequently mobilized in English conflicts in the twelfth century, disparagingly as plundering labourers. About 1180, Jordan Fantosme compared the Flemish, Picard and French mercenaries, who in the years

1173--1174 went into battle against the English king Henry II (1154--1189), with weavers who did not know how they had to bear arms like knights and who were only keen on English wool. And shortly before 1200, Gervase of Canterbury described the Flemish warriors who a half century earlier had fought for King Stephen (1135--1154) as hungry wolves who 'proceeded energetically to reduce the fecundity of England to nothing' and who had 'left behind their native soils and their jobs of weaving'. But although this is a deliberate, denigrating act of stereotyping, Gervase's description still seems to confirm the prejudices about the weavers – uncultivated, greedy, mobile – and the reputation of the Flemish industry. At the same time, we also find within the Low Countries clear indications of the fact that the princely and urban authorities were making efforts to attract good labourers for employment in the textile sector. A telling illustration in this respect is an order issued by the Flemish countess Joan of Constantinople in 1224 in aid of the development of the textile industry in Kortrijk. She had it recorded that the first fifty men who came to settle in Kortrijk to process wool would be exempt for life from comital tax and other duties. It is perhaps no coincidence that the counts and countesses at the time, also making use of all sorts of other measures, gave smaller towns in the county a push in the back since they could offer a counterweight to the increasingly powerful big cities.

In the early thirteenth century, a colony of Flemish immigrants must also have developed in Arras, who had found work there in the flourishing textile industry. Particularly colourful information on this can be found in the burlesque poem *Prise de Neuville*, which also offers a nice illustration of the rich literary life that developed in this town from the late twelfth century, among others thanks to the presence of two literary brotherhoods in which patricians and urban minstrels could develop their lyrical talents. The poem forms a parody on the well-known genre of the *chanson de geste*. It pokes fun especially at the integration problems that Flemings must have experienced in Arras. The poem is written in Picard French which, to reinforce the parody, is peppered with Middle Dutch words and with diminutive suffixes such as *-kin* and *-quin*, and scatological double entendres. It recounts how the immigrant Flemish weavers are preparing to storm the fictive castle of Neuville: they gather under the slogan *Esquietin!* (alderman) and they sound the *banklok* (tocsin); they arm themselves in a clumsy way, take their leave of their loved ones, receive presages and ready themselves for battle. The actual battle is not described, but the text does focus on the, in the eyes of the poet, ridiculous political ambitions that the weavers were starting to develop. The stake of the battle was namely urban involvement and respect for the profession, as the poet puts the words in



the mouth of the leader Simon Banin: 'Yes, today the honour of the weaver is saved [...] I shall be alderman before the feast of St John'.

At the time of the *Prise de Neuville*, political participation was perhaps still seen as a foolish utopia – 1302 was still a long way away – yet it is clear that the textile workers were beginning to rebel more and more frequently in the first half of the thirteenth century. In Arras, that climate of revolt, accompanied by tensions between the bench of aldermen and the weavers about 1242, must have led to the abolition of the earliest local weavers' guild. But in Valenciennes (1225) and Douai (1245), among others, rebellions and strikes broke out at which textile workers made themselves heard. Dominated by mercantile elites, entrepreneurs and landowners, the city authorities riposted heavily, but were at the same time increasingly anxious about the mobility of the labour supply on which the urban economies relied. Of significance in this light are the agreements which the bailiff and the aldermen of Antwerp concluded first in 1242 with the city authorities of Mechelen, and then in 1249 with some nine other key towns in Brabant and Liège to prevent rebellious weavers, fullers and other craftsmen from finding asylum there. Whoever offered them shelter or sold them food could expect to be fined; whoever employed them lost the right to practise his craft for a year.

### Climax in the thirteenth century

In terms of production volumes, the thirteenth century was undoubtedly the climax of the cloth industry in the major towns of Flanders and Artesia, and the period also heralded the start of the expansion of the industry in the Duchy of Brabant, especially in Mechelen, Leuven and Brussels. Cloth halls mushroomed in the urban landscape, with as a climax indeed the at times gigantic scale of the sales infrastructure – especially in Ypres, Bruges, Douai and Ghent. In these places the cloth industry also symbolized the city as political organ. The urban belfries, the ultimate symbol of the political independence gained by the urban commercial and landowning elites, towered high above the very down-to-earth commercial infrastructure. Woollens from Flanders, Artesia and gradually also Brabant were exported to all corners of Europe and they targeted virtually all layers of society. The cheaper, so-called dry drapery, which in Flanders was also called 'say', developed in Bruges in particular. Besides ordinary quality, Ypres and Ghent produced in the first instance more expensive, 'greased' woollens. But the towns of French Flanders and of Artesia such as Douai, Saint-Omer, Lille and Arras also competed with one another to conquer the markets of Southern and Central Europe.

Social relations in the urban cloth production could simply be described, after Henri Pirenne, as industrial-capitalist. Important and wealthy merchants, who were fully involved in the trade of both raw materials – gradually especially English wool and dyestuffs (mostly locally grown madder for red and woad for blue) – and finished textiles, dominated the production process as well. At the same time, they also controlled the political sphere. The textile workers seem have been subordinate to them in everything. Although the various production phases were organized in the first instance in the houses of the workers themselves and, as more expensive luxury cloths were also manufactured, especially the core tasks of weaving, fulling and dyeing increasingly demanded a technical and organizational know-how of the workers themselves, the textile workers remained politically incompetent for now, and they did not manage to take it up against the wealth of the big entrepreneurs.

The archetypal example of such a big entrepreneur was undoubtedly Jean Boinebroke, a merchant and textile manufacturer in the French-Flemish industrial city of Douai. Boinebroke was a member of the small group that dominated the town's political arena, and he made good use of his political connections and of his access to capital and foreign markets to control also the manufacture of woollen cloth. That he repeatedly violated the values of his own group in doing so is clear from the voluminous complaints file that possibly was drawn up at the settlement of his will. The file shows how universal Boinebroke's economic activities were. He traded not only in English wool and finished woollens, but he also contracted out the wool to spinsters in the town and its surroundings, he controlled the successive production phases by supplying the raw materials to the weavers, and was moreover even active in the production, especially in the finishing of the cloth with a sizeable company of his own. In other words, he controlled the production process from start to finish, and combined that with a central role in the logistics and in trade. In addition, he was not averse to otherwise tying his own employers and independent workers who accepted assignments from him to himself by renting them houses and lending them credit.

Given the scarcity of sources, it is unclear how widespread entrepreneurs such as Boinebroke actually were, and whether there was always talk in the industry of such proletarianization of the textile workers. In any case, the 'patriciate' in the thirteenth century had unlimited access to power, and the political dominance of a handful of families in towns like Ypres, Ghent, Bruges or Mechelen also seems to point to their economic dominance. However, the great social inequality inevitably led to tensions in a dynamic economy. In the 1240s, as mentioned above already, and especially about 1280, there was a wave of strikes and revolts against the urban elites, and indeed large numbers of textile workers played a crucial role in these

protests. But new elites also knocked more emphatically on the door of political power and gradually craftsmen would increasingly also unite in guilds.

The latter was a slow and fiercely contested process. The first craft guilds were therefore not necessarily industrial guilds. They often united other, wealthier professions involved in retail, such as butchers. The first textile guilds started out moreover without exception as religious associations. They initially devoted themselves to the organization of group devotion and internal solidarity. Their designation as *charités* or *cariteyten* (charities) emphasizes that solidarity precisely. Ideas of brotherhood were, since the emergence moreover of the cities as political municipalities, common, and the embryonic guilds logically also adopted that model. Common meals and religious rituals such as burials and processions served to foster the group spirit on regular occasions. In the sixteenth century it is still striking how guild members continue to call each other 'brother' during conflicts. To a certain extent, the association assumed the function of an artificial family. But early on, from the second half of the thirteenth century already, economic affairs occupied a far more central place in the guilds, something which the elites, probably under great social pressure, tolerated only reluctantly. What is striking is that in that process, the initial bonds of solidarity had to be formalized out of necessity. Solidarity simply did not stand in the way of economic inequality in the craft. Mostly in the fifteenth century, even specific organs of social security, the so-called *bussen* (boxes), were established in order to organize solidarity with masters who were sick or unable to work (whether limited to the masters in the guild or not). At the time, group solidarity was clearly a lot less natural already than in the initial phases of the guilds.

### Revolution and triumph of the middle classes

The textile guilds had the wind in their sails, however. Paradoxically enough, the international economic climate helped them significantly in that respect. Thanks to the growing competition, which brought about an increase in the scale of textile production in more and more European regions, the textile entrepreneurs in the main towns of Flanders, Artois and even the rising Brabant lost market shares. In particular, cheaper textiles could be sold locally, without high shipping or transaction costs. The textile entrepreneurs in the major cloth towns were therefore increasingly forced as it were to specialize and to deliver woollens cloth industry of a greater quality, a niche in which competition with other regions was a lot less pronounced. Just as German luxury cars easily reached a middle class clientele in recent

decades in Europe, so too did the expensive, heavy Flemish and Brabant woollen cloths become status symbols, the local elites in Eastern and Central Europe purchasing them eagerly. In this process of industrial conversion, technical knowledge, a sense of fashion and more expensive raw materials (wool, dyes) became increasingly important. Organized in craft guilds, the small producers were pre-eminently suited to keep these industrial processes under control. The social consequences were, however, of particular significance. The merchants were indeed still controlling the regional streams of goods, but they were increasingly withdrawing from international commerce and also left their own direct involvement in cloth production to the *drapiers* or cloth manufacturers, who can increasingly be identified with the small guild masters. These became the key figure of industrial organization, and to a large degree their economic success determined the prospect of the towns of Flanders and Brabant in the Late Middle Ages.

These social transformations grafted themselves onto the political developments happening in the towns. The monopoly on power of the traditional elites of merchants and landowners was challenged more and more by the so-called new men, namely newly wealthy craftsmen and entrepreneurs who also sometimes used the guilds as a vehicle through which to realize their political aspirations. The textile guilds, and especially the numerically important guilds of weavers and fullers, were crucial in this development. They also supplied the largest contingents of militia members to the Bruges troops which in 1302 at the Battle of the Golden Spurs in Kortrijk withstood the coalition of the traditional administrative elites of merchants and landowners (the so-called *Leliaards*) with the French king. The latter wanted to keep the rich County of Flanders under tighter control. After the initial success, the conflict resulted in a trench warfare of sorts, in which the Flemish count could only retain power by making humiliating concessions to France. French Flanders was lost and the Northern French regions of the large textile towns of Douai, Lille, Saint-Omer and Arras would only revert to the complex of lands of the Count of Flanders at the end of the century, when the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Bold, a younger descendant of the French dynasty of Valois, became the new Count of Flanders at the death of his father-in-law. But the social transformations in the towns of Flanders and almost simultaneously also in Mechelen and in the towns of Brabant could no longer be undone. The power relations in the towns had namely been fundamentally altered by the altered economic organization.

The result is well known. The craft guilds carried the day and they got their say in the administration of the towns – and therefore also of the principality – and their central role in the urban economy was thereby only reinforced. And they did so not only in the city of

Bruges, the victor of 1302. In virtually all the major towns of Flanders and Brabant, politicians appointed by the guilds entered the municipal governments. Even in towns where the traditional commercial elites held their ground politically or where, after sometimes bloody conflicts, the clock could partly be turned back, alternative organs of power were often set up in order to make the political voice of the guilds be heard.

### Perceptions of work and social order

We have already read elsewhere that the political involvement of the guilds in large part stimulated the transformation of the urban economies into a knowledge economy and helped make possible the spectacular growth of the urban middle classes in the Late Middle Ages. The new power relations also meant a reversal of the social relations in the cities and of the perceptions about work and workers. In the so-called Gruuthuse manuscript, a famous compilation of songs from Bruges dating from the late fourteenth century, love is often presented as 'labour', and other stories and plays were also increasingly imbued with the middle-class values defended by the guilds, the values of diligence and profit. From phenomena disapproved of by clerics and landowners, working and making a profit became the touchstone of a civil identity.

The growth of the cloth industry and the emancipation of the craftsmen, with the result that the latter could in many places also accede to political power, was not without consequences for the image and self-image of the textile workers. Because their work was key in their group formation in the guilds, it was certainly no coincidence that the construction of their social identity was also based on the values of work, trust and solidarity. Not that this identity prevented inequality. On the contrary, like the merchants of the thirteenth century, the guild masters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not hesitate at all to discriminate against certain groups in the production process or to restrict their economic activities. Women especially were systematically kept down in supporting or poorly paid activities in the work process. The same also happened with male workers in specific production phases. Masters tried to discipline their skilled workers, the so-called journeymen, and their workers in training, the apprentices, and to deny them the political instruments in the craft guild. But tensions also flared between various professional groups. In towns like Ghent and Mechelen, for instance, weavers and fullers locked horns over domination of the production process. In Ghent, the weavers even stripped the fullers of their political rights after a long and bloody

battle. Moreover, the industrial organization varied so strongly from one production phase to the next that this also inevitably had consequences for the self-image of the male and female workers involved. The mostly female workers in the preparatory phases of the wool processing (especially spinning) handled wool on an individual basis at a piece rate. There was no talk of any self-organization among them and the sector was entirely organized by the town and the leading drapers. Things were quite different for the master weavers and fullers, who were very sympathetic to the hierarchical structure of the labour market. They employed a number of skilled and unskilled labourers in their workplace. The dyers, by contrast, were for their part active in a highly capital-intensive sector where the high cost price of certain dyes also determined access to the sector. Shearers or cloth finishers were, certainly in sixteenth-century Antwerp, active in larger production units, dominated by rich entrepreneurs and merchants. In all sectors, moreover, there were hierarchical relations of subcontracting between the small entrepreneurs, which enabled certain master weavers, fullers and dyers to enlarge substantially the scale of their enterprise and to assume a position in the production chain that began to look like that of the thirteenth-century merchants.

But despite these diverse work circumstances, a collective identity nevertheless gradually emerged, in the first instance indeed in the groups that had come together in craft guilds. As argued elsewhere too, the guild authorities put a lot of effort into the development of a craft 'ideology' by means of communal activities (meals and pageants, the burial of members, chapels, fraternities and processions, etc.), or else internal solidarity was strengthened by the introduction of militia duty in countless towns or by establishing so-called *bussen* (boxes) for the organization of an internal social security for guild members that were ill, elderly or unable to work. In public events and even in moments of individual need, for instance when appearing before a court of law, the guild members presented themselves without fail as hardworking and modest craftsmen, for whom brotherly solidarity in the guild and social justice in the urban community were not idle words.

Perhaps this remarkable social reversal is articulated nowhere more tellingly than in the statutes of the cloth industry in Mechelen. As in Flanders, the craft guilds also managed in Mechelen to get access after 1302 to the town authorities and as in the major cities of Flanders and Artesia, in Mechelen too the production of woollens constituted the leading economic sector by a large margin. Thanks to a large number of preserved statutes which had to regulate the organization of the cloth trade and production before and after 1300, it is possible to identify the sensitivities of the textile workers and their employers at that crucial turning point. Before 1300, the association of merchants, the so-called guild of the 'wool work'

(*wollewerck*), was the dominant force in the industry. Everyone who wanted to be involved in the sector also had to be a member of the merchants' guild and it was the guild itself which controlled the production of cloth. The grip of the traders on the producers was virtually unlimited. As mentioned already, that had already come to light in the 1240s, when in a period of social difficulties, the Mechelen town authorities too participated in the lock-out of the travelling, striking textile workers. The merchants' abhorrence of the manual labourers in general also incited them to ban the most crucial professions in the production chain, the weavers and the fullers, from entering the guild of the wool work, or later only to tolerate them in the guild if they paid double the entrance fee of ordinary Mechelen residents. Membership of the merchant guild thus remained the key to entrepreneurship in the town. The guild members even described the activities of the textile workers as *fallacis officii* or 'repulsive professions'.

And yet the statutes that were issued after 1270 make clear already that the 'repulsive professions' were gradually taking on an identity of their own in Mechelen. The move towards more expensive woollens and superior quality had begun in Mechelen as elsewhere in Flanders or Brabant. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the craft guilds slowly but surely demanded their own place in society. At the issuance of the cloth privilege of 1270 by the town authority and the merchants' guild, representatives of the weavers' guild were already present as witnesses. Yet the merchants still unambiguously determined the labour relations. Weavers were banned from striking. So as not to impede the industrial production of the cloth entrepreneurs, they were not even allowed leaving their workplace once they had accepted work, and they were obliged to present themselves every Monday at the about market. Moreover they could not take out credit to increase the scale of their business and if they were unfit for work due to illness, they could only call once on the solidarity of their colleagues. For virtually everything, the authorization of the merchant guild was necessary, but – and that was new – the craft guild authorities themselves were given nonetheless an increasingly important role to supervise the quality and to regulate work relations between the small entrepreneurs and their employees.

The growing economic significance of the guild masters continued in the following period and in Mechelen too the merchants increasingly seemed to withdraw from the actual work process. While in 1270 already a real collective identity of textile workers came to the surface, a turning point was reached in about 1300. That identity was on one hand based on a hierarchical organization of the labour market and on the other on the great importance of a 'moral economy', whereby the textile workers evoked more and more emphatically the values

of solidarity and decency, which were already to be found in the communal ideology of the High Middle Ages. It is certainly no coincidence that already in the weavers' statutes of Mechelen of 1270 training and socialization within the guild were linked with a good reputation and impeccable behaviour of the members of the craft guild. Against the wealth of the merchants, the guild members increasingly posited a moral integrity. The honour and reputation of the craftsman could guarantee the quality of his end product, and therefore also the price that corresponded to that quality. That is why craftsmen were fined when they were not dressed decently, when they led a debauched life, had too many debts, were too drunk or lived with a prostitute. But these values were also mobilized to segment the labour market depending on the needs of the craft masters, who came to form a genuine middle class of small entrepreneurs with growing political ambitions. Even apprentices were disciplined within the craft ideology and indeed the temporary employees of the craft masters, the skilled journeymen, had to be brought into a position of dependence themselves. Attempts by the journeymen to establish their own associations were successfully thwarted in most towns. From being the repressed, the craft masters – and by extension the middle classes organized in guilds – increasingly became the dominant group in the urban community.

#### A hierarchical labour market

The instrument in the hands of the craft masters in the textile industry was the regulation of the labour market. The industrial organization mentioned above incited the weavers to an efficient mobilization of the available labour. A small-scale master weaver, fuller, dyer or shearer generally required about three workers, their wealthier colleagues many more. Cloth had to be sold on a highly competitive export market and the labour cost had to be reined in as much as possible in order to compensate the expensive and ever rising prices of the raw materials. At the same time, skill and trade knowledge had become crucial. The expensive materials were not to be damaged in the production process. That is why the daily wages, the *dagelijcse hure*, at the same time had to draw quality workers, but on the other hand wages could not be that high so that the entrepreneurs on the export markets would still be able offering competitive prices. An average workshop had an apprentice in training who could be used as a cheap worker, a number of skilled workers or journeymen, and a series of unskilled labourers, mostly relatives or domestic personnel. In times of high demand, successful masters could also have other masters work for them through a system of subcontracting. The



authorities often looked on this practice with a suspicious gaze, since it disrupted the guild's internal hierarchy and the clear work relations between employers and employees.

It is especially the labour by journeymen and apprentices that drew the attention of the craft guilds. Apprentices were disciplined in the workplace. In Mechelen, the relationship between an apprentice and his master was already strongly formalized from the late thirteenth century onward. Through the training, the master not only passed on his craft knowledge, but that training also ensured that the values of the guild as the cornerstone of the urban community were spoonfed to the trainee. Yet that did not mean that the training offered any guarantee of a successful career as an independent entrepreneur. In late medieval Bruges, only a quarter of all apprentices ordinarily became masters themselves. In addition, the sons of masters were often strongly privileged: they enjoyed all sorts of discounts, but inherited above all from their parents or from other relatives better access to the local capital markets and to the all-important social networks. The greatest threshold to independent entrepreneurship remained financial: setting up a small business of one's own was often particularly expensive, if only because of the expensive raw materials cloth entrepreneurs normally used. The guilds themselves did not form an absolute impediment, however, for outsiders. Many new masters had ultimately also grown up in the town or were city dwellers without immediate antecedents in the sector, and the regulatory framework of the guilds was like a Swiss cheese: a way out could always be found to get around the imposed limitations, while sufficient structure was offered to guarantee quality and therefore lasting access to the export markets.

The quality control of work, raw materials, finished products and market procedures was always the central argument in the regulations. Sometimes there were limits to the growth possibilities of the small businesses, whereby statutes could limit the number of employees or the number of looms or fulling tubs. And yet those limits did not prevent some weavers or fullers from securing most assignments. The rhetoric of the guilds appealed in the first instance to equal chances, but did not strive for equality. On the market of Bruges, still the central market for textile products about 1500, a handful of entrepreneurs from Menen, Kortrijk and Wervik managed to sell the lion's share of the urban cloth output. In order to achieve such a concentration, not only were large workshops necessary, but also complex systems of subcontracting.

The battle for time

It is remarkable that many concerns in the textile production had to do with the control of time. It was perhaps not a coincidence that public time, namely the fixed time that was communicated to burghers visually by means of public clocks and sonically through bells, spread rapidly from the thirteenth century especially in the commercial and industrial towns of the Low Countries. As a consequence, besides religious time, which marked the liturgical moments of the day, there also emerged a public secular time, which enabled the merchants to manage their time more efficiently. Market times announced by specific bells indicated when trade could take place or when meetings could be arranged. For the important cloth industry, the fixed hour division and the bells made it possible also to regulate work time more efficiently. Prior to the second half of the thirteenth century, when the craft guilds were still in their infancy, working hours were only determined very roughly. Although each large industrial town had its own work bells – sometimes with melodious names like the *verdeclocke* (peace bell) in Saint-Omer – people worked roughly from sunrise to sunset and there were no fixed times set aside for breaks. That was the theory. In practice, all sorts of provisions were decided to make it possible to work by candlelight. In most towns, the merchant-controlled bench of aldermen set the working hours, and the bells for the matins and the vespers were considered as marking the start and end of the workday. Only on liturgical feastdays and on Sundays did a general exemption from work apply, although here too transgressions could regularly be made. This vagueness about working hours was perhaps typical of an industry that was dominated by a specific group of wealthy employers. As textile manufacture evolved into a luxury industry and the guild masters assumed an increasingly central position in the work process as drapers, this relatively important flexibility no longer sufficed. Within about half a century, working hours became a lot more complex. The regulation of time had to enable small entrepreneurs to organize the work in their workshops. This initially appeared to mean shorter hours. From the 1280s a lunch break was provided for in many places, announced by what in Douai was tellingly called the *cloques du mengier* (the bells for lunch). It is possible that the social tensions of the day in, for instance, Douai, Ypres and Bruges had led to these concessions. But at the same time a tightening took place of the working hours of day labourers. Journeymen were generally hired by the guild masters on a weekly or even a daily basis. All sorts of provisions were soon integrated in the fourteenth-century, guild-influenced statutes which were intended to guarantee the integrity of the working day. Journeymen had to hurry to the master's workshop, they were not allowed to leave their work unless the bells sounded a general pause, and so on. Opposing interests between employers and employees resulted in a tug of war

about all sorts of aspects of the working hours such as working before the morning bell and after the evening bell (in the statutes of Ghent described as *de clocke up te gane en vander clocke af te gane*), specific work hours in busy times right before the fairs, the cancellation of feast days, and so forth. It is striking that the guild masters, once they had gained access to political power, applied the regulation of the working hours a lot more stringently, possibly because as small-scale entrepreneurs they had less leverage of their own to force their employees into specific work rhythms.

The regulation of time thus also became a reflection of changed social hierarchies. The fourteenth-century statutes of the large cloth towns, but as time passed also of the small ones, not only introduced a flexible time for the master, who had to be able to adapt his small workshop as good as possible to the economic circumstances, but also a lot stricter time for the journeymen, the skilled workers who were hired by the masters at the labour market. These labour markets were generally organized at a central spot in the city, usually on a market square or near a centrally located churchyard. In Mechelen it was organized near the church of St Rumbold before the morning work bells work bell had rang out. Market transparency took precedence in this respect. All potential employees had to present themselves at the agreed time. If there was a shortage of good journeymen, guild masters could not bid against one another by offering higher wages or better work conditions, and journeymen indeed could not make deals with several masters simultaneously. In Mechelen they could not even approach a master to ask him to offer him work. After the closing of the labour market, everyone had to go immediately to the workshops. In Ypres, a second bell was even sounded after the bell of the labour market, and this was the moment at which all workers had to be present at their work. Occasionally, for instance in Oudenaarde, the labour market was not only used as a place to hire employees, but also to agree on subcontracting other masters.

## Endgame

In 1575--1576, a list was released on the Antwerp market of all fabrics that were still available for sale in this time of crisis. The revolt against the Spanish authorities was in full swing already, although the situation looked rather dire for the rebels. Governor Luis de Requesens had driven them back into a few towns of Holland, which immediately explains why the products of the still blooming Holland cloth industry in Leiden or Delft did not reach the Antwerp market at the time. In any case the list makes clear that the manufacture of

woollens of Flanders and Brabant hardly resembled the massive industry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With a few exceptions, the major towns of Flanders, Brabant and Artesia had withered as textile centres, and even the smaller towns in Flanders, Brabant and Holland, such as Diksmuide, Aalst, Oudenaarde, Kortrijk, Wervik, Eeklo, Herentals, Diest, Delft and Haarlem, which in the Late Middle Ages had competed against the larger towns with mid-market woollens, had lost a lot of ground to French and especially English fabrics. It is true that many English woollens England were still finished in Antwerp by hundreds of local cloth finishers, but the manufacture of the cheaper and even very expensive cloth textiles took place in England itself at the time.

Yet textile remained key in the industrial fabric of the Low Countries, but the industry had changed thoroughly in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With their extremely expensive luxury woollens, cities like Mechelen and Ypres could remain active on the export market, be it at a very low level. A few textile towns in the Leie region that were still dynamic, such Armentières in French Flanders and Menen, managed to expand their market shares successfully for the mid-market. But many weavers in the major cities, swaying on the trend of luxury industries, had retrained themselves for other sectors, for instance the manufacture of woven tapestries that decorated the walls of rich clients locally and abroad. Especially in Brussels and in and around Oudenaarde, the tapestry industry grew into an important sector. Others found work in the luxury industries which met the consumer needs of the still blooming urban middle classes in the larger cities: gold leather in Mechelen, painting in Bruges, Antwerp, Brussels and Mechelen, miniatures in Ghent, Bruges, Antwerp and even Oudenaarde, printing and books in Antwerp, and so forth. And yet export-oriented textile appeared to be a stayer in specific regions. In the countryside of Interior Flanders, the Campine region and Hainaut, the small farmers, who had to provide for their families with only a small plot of land, complemented their all too meager income by processing flax and weaving linen. In a number of rural areas, such as Duffel and the villages of the Flemish Heuvelland, a cloth industry also emerged. Some towns also managed to secure the success of their linen manufacture. In Kortrijk especially, which was also an important transit market for the linen that was manufactured in its hinterland, entrepreneurs managed to bring historiated or damasked napkins and tablecloths onto the market. A handful of smaller towns also managed to meet the growing demand for mixed fabrics, although they could never price the Southern German fustians out of the market. The production of silk also grew in importance from its base in the important trading city of Antwerp.

It is remarkable that the initiative for these economic changes came entirely from almost capitalist merchants and entrepreneurs. The tapestry industry, in both the countryside and the city, was once more entirely dominated by wealthy entrepreneurs who sometimes employed hundreds of proletarianized weavers. Like thirteenth-century Jehan Boinebroke, they again controlled the raw materials, the market for finished products and parts of the production process itself. Expansion, the lesser importance of high standard quality for the fashionable woollen and linen materials, and, in the case of the tapestry weaving industry, the control of the raw materials and the designs that formed the basis of the tapestries, had increasingly set the guild masters against one another. When the city of Bruges had largely lost its role as a European textile market, the town authorities, inspired by the enormous success of Hondschoote as a textile centre, stimulated not unsuccessfully the reintroduction of the manufacture of 'say' fabrics, cheaper, lighter textiles. However, it was now poorer textile workers, who often were not even organized in guilds, who kept the new industry going. They were clearly not able to follow the example of their predecessors, who had been organized in craft guilds, many of which had entered the urban middle classes effortlessly as drapers and some of which had even managed to acquire political power. The urban middle classes did not disappear, however, but from now on they were recruited among the retailers and small commodity producers focused on the local and regional market instead of among a group of textile entrepreneurs focused on the international market.

However, the low wages and high prices of food and consumer goods, which at the time brought a lot of textile workers back to a level of or even below subsistence, and the social degradation, whereby textile workers even more than before ended up among the lowest layers of society, generated an explosive mix. Dissidence and social unrest— which has always been a characteristic of the social history of the textile workers – nestled themselves in their ranks. Rising Protestantism thus found a favourable breeding ground in the textile regions and cities of Flanders. In this regard it is striking that the level of literacy and cultural involvement in those textile regions was very high: nowhere in the middle of the sixteenth century, for instance, was the concentration of rhetoricians greater than in the textile region of Western and Eastern Flanders. Drapers from Nieuwkerke and tapestry weavers from Oudenaarde rushed to the meetings set up by Calvinist preachers. Repression after the restoration of Spain's Catholic authority was in proportion, and many textile workers then chose to emigrate to other places in Holland, England or Northern Germany. The Golden Century of the Republic of the United Netherlands was not only built on the capital of merchants from

Antwerp who had fled the south, but also on the work and expertise of Flemish textile workers.

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