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978-0-521-39415-4 - Lille and the Dutch Revolt: Urban Stability in an Era
of Revolution 1500–1582

Robert S. Duplessis

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Cities and the Dutch Revolt

Looking at the Netherlands as a whole, they appear a veritable land of towns.¹

With the possible exception of parts of Tuscany and Lombardy, no other area of sixteenth-century Europe could boast such a high proportion of city dwellers nor so vibrant and diverse an urban civilization as the Low Countries.² Although never constituting sovereign republics like those found in medieval and Renaissance Italy, cities formed the most developed political entities in the Netherlands. Armed with extensive privileges, they enjoyed considerable power over the urban populace in addition to a significant degree of autonomy from the Habsburg state, whose central institutions were as yet but weakly developed.³ Cities dominated the representative estates of the core provinces of Flanders, Brabant, and Holland and had a powerful voice even in more rural areas. Because the Estates-General was little more than a meeting of delegates from the provincial bodies, the towns also carried a great deal of weight in national politics.

Antwerp was the greatest commercial and financial center of the age, “the outstanding cosmopolitan town of the century.”⁴ Amsterdam, chief among a host of lively ports in Holland and Zeeland, was coming to

¹ Pieter Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands*, 2nd ed. (London, 1958), pp. 44–5.

² According to the most recent estimate, in 1550 some 19.5% of the population of the present-day Netherlands and Belgium lived in towns of at least 10,000 inhabitants. The corresponding figure for northern Italy was 15.1%; for Europe as a whole, 6.3%. See Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), table 3.7, p. 39 and passim.

³ Cf. J. W. Smit, “The Netherlands Revolution,” in *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Robert Forster and Jack P. Greene (Baltimore, 1970), p. 28: “The real loci of power were the noble dynasties and the towns.”

⁴ J. A. Van Houtte, *An Economic History of the Low Countries 800–1800* (New York, 1977), p. 183.

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predominate in the important Baltic trade. Woolen textiles and luxury crafts brought renewed prosperity to many other cities. Towns were also home to a flourishing humanist culture, propagated by numerous printing presses and by chambers of rhetoric, uniquely Netherlands institutions that sponsored public literary contests and dramatic presentations. Particularly in the southern provinces, cities teemed with great cathedrals, parish churches, and religious houses. Yet already by the 1520s, Lutherans were to be found in many towns, and other reforming movements later proselytized and organized there with great success.

The grievances and aspirations of the aristocracy contributed importantly to the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt in 1566, and nobles remained central to the military operations mounted over the next eighty years. But as Tibor Wittman has noted, “the Netherlands Revolution was above all an urban phenomenon.”⁵ Cities were the principal foyers of rebellion and cities experienced the most radical changes.⁶ Urban centers were the sites of sustained popular mobilization and they repeatedly underwent violent political and religious struggles. Not surprisingly, then, Spanish military and diplomatic efforts focused on subjugating towns, although they met with only partial success. A combination of force and guile did result in the reconquest of an area corresponding to much of present-day Belgium. But in the republic that emerged in the northern provinces, cities reigned supreme in nearly every aspect of economic, social, political, and intellectual life.

This book is intended as a contribution to our understanding of urban behavior during this momentous upheaval. My focus is the city of Lille, now in northern France but in the sixteenth century the chief town of one of the seventeen provinces that composed the Habsburg Netherlands.⁷ A local study can usefully illuminate the causes, course, and outcome of the revolt for two related reasons. First, a sturdy particularism characterized life in the early modern Low Countries, and nowhere more visibly than in the cities, marked as they were by distinctive

⁵ Tibor Wittman, *Les Gueux dans les “bonnes villes” de Flandre (1577–1584)* (Budapest, 1969), p. 239.

⁶ The events described in this book form part of what is most often called the *Dutch Revolt*, although in the Netherlands the term *Eighty Years’ War* is commonly employed, and recently some scholars have begun to refer to the *Netherlands Revolution*. Each tag carries with it a distinctive interpretation and set of ideological presumptions, although these are rarely made explicit.

⁷ From west to east and south to north, the provinces were Artois, Cambrai, Hainaut, Namur, Flanders, Walloon or French Flanders, Tournai and the Tournésis, Brabant, Mechelen, Zeeland, Holland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, Drenthe, Friesland, and Groningen and the Ommelanden.

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political regimes, economic activities, social structures, and cultural configurations. Second, as recent scholarship has argued, the Dutch Revolt ought to be considered not a single phenomenon with unitary origins and a common development, but a congeries of multiple rebellions. These rebellions converged at times but sprang from diverse causes, pursued distinct objectives and often followed divergent paths.⁸

In his *Description of All the Low Countries*, published in 1567, the Italian merchant and long-time Antwerp resident Lodovico Guicciardini praised Lille as “a beautiful and rich city.” Filled with handsome civil and religious edifices, it was inhabited by “great nobility,” “a large number of great merchants,” and “many industrious artisans.”⁹ Home to the provincial administration, and customary meeting place for the provincial Estates, Lille was, in Guicciardini’s words, “the chief [town] and capital of all Flanders known as Walloon.”¹⁰

The town that Guicciardini celebrated covered about a hundred hectares at a spot where the Deûle River, flowing roughly north toward its confluence with the Lys some fifteen kilometers downstream, divided into a number of channels. The small islands thus created gave the city that arose on them no later than the eleventh century its name. As Lille grew, the branches of the Deûle were canalized, and additional canals

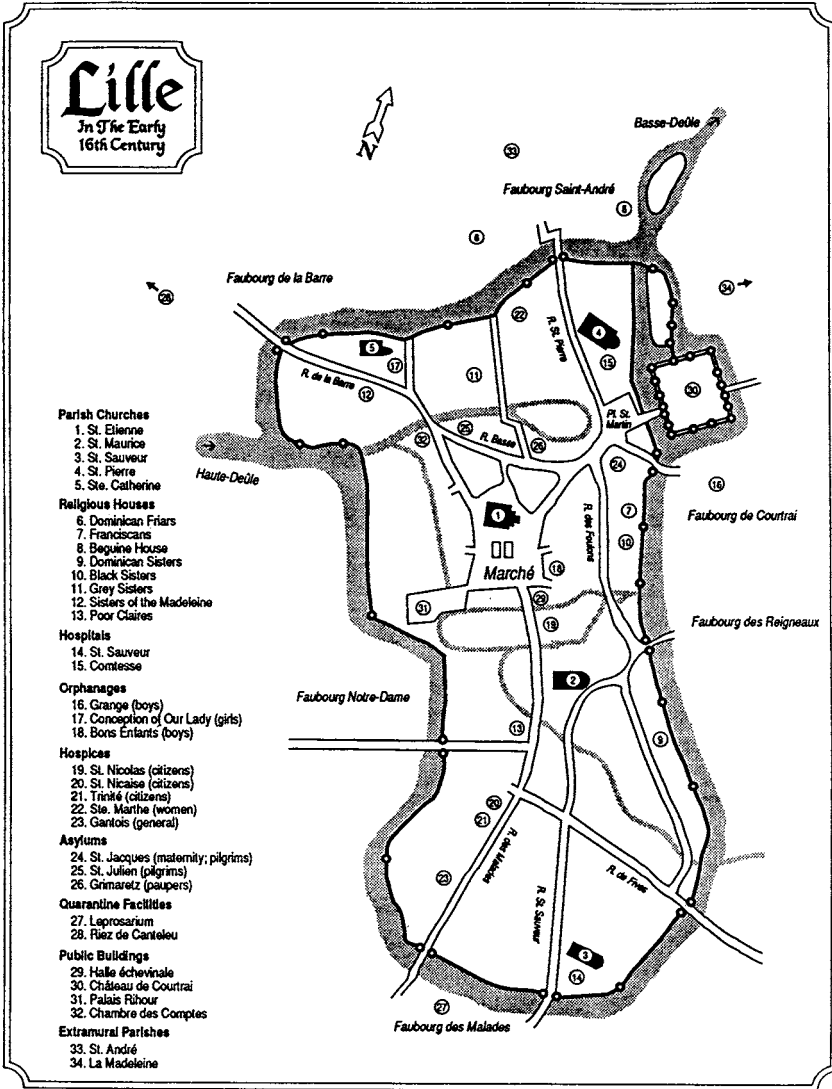
⁸ Cf. J. W. Smit, “The Present Position of Studies Regarding the Revolt of the Netherlands,” in *Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. J. S. Bromley and E. H. Kossman (London, 1960), p. 28: “There were a number of revolts, representing the interests and the ideals of various social, economical and ideological groups: revolts which sometimes run parallel, sometimes conflict with one another, and at other times coalesce into a single movement.”

⁹ The quotations in this section are my translations from the French version, Lodovico Guicciardini, *Description de tout le Païs-Bas autrement dict la Germanie Inferieure, ou Basse-Allemagne* (Antwerp, 1567), pp. 330–3.

¹⁰ Originally part of the country of Flanders – Lille was important enough to sit as one of the five “members” of the Flemish Estates from 1180 to 1304 – the Walloon section had been detached during the early fourteenth-century Franco-Flemish wars and administered directly by the French crown between 1304 and 1369. Upon its cession to Burgundian control, the area retained its political autonomy and was endowed with a governorship and Estates. An asymmetrical rectangle 25 to 40 km. wide, the province stretched some 60 km. from the Lys valley north of Lille – where from Armentières to Halluin villages producing woolen cloth crowded the riverbanks – to a swampy farming district south of Douai. Situated approximately in the middle of the present Département du Nord, it was bordered by the Lys River on the northwest toward Flanders and on the south by the Scarpe, tributary to the Scheldt (in French, Escaut). The irregular boundary with Artois on the west lacked distinguishing natural features, as did the eastern border with the Tournésis. Including enclaves on the east bank of the Scheldt north of Tournai, along with a few settlements south of Douai (other provinces likewise had enclaves of their own inside Walloon Flanders), the province measured about 1,450 sq. km., thus occupying only 2% to 3% of the total land area of the Netherlands. But its mid-sixteenth-century population of 140,000 to 150,000, living in some 190 hamlets, villages, and towns, constituted 7 or 7.5% of the 2 million inhabitants of the seventeen provinces.

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Map 1. Lille in the early sixteenth century

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dug, bringing boats up to busy quays where their cargoes were unloaded for sale or transshipment, providing water for a host of industrial uses from mills to tanneries, and irrigating the moats that entirely surrounded the town walls (see Map 1).

With at least 30,000 residents in the mid-sixteenth century,¹¹ Lille likely ranked among the half-dozen largest cities in the Netherlands.¹² Five varied parishes lay within its walls. St. Etienne, the largest with some 1,100 houses in the 1560s, was home to Lille's richest merchants as well as many professionals and prosperous artisans. Located in the center of town on the western side of the *Marché*, it faced the seat of municipal authority, the Halle échevinale. In a late sixteenth-century drawing (Plate 1), this asymmetrical building awaits its forthcoming demolition huddled next to the handsome mannerist New Hall (1594) that took its place. On the second floor of the old Halle is the *bretesque*, a bay window with a pointed roof, from the windows of which all city ordinances and regulations were read and thereby officially published. Towering above the Halle is an ungainly belfry, where the town clock and bells hung. These were rung to mark the beginning and end of the workday, and also to summon citizens in an emergency. At the right side of the drawing can be seen the wooden houses with high gables that predominated in Lille well into the eighteenth century, whereas at the left, next to the New Hall, stands a brick building with stepped gables, still a rarity in sixteenth-century domestic architecture.

To the east of the *Marché* was the parish of St. Maurice (1,060 houses), Lille's most occupationally diverse, and at the very east of the city lay the parish of St. Sauveur, with 1,030 houses lived in mainly by textile artisans. The parish of St. Pierre, housed in the collegiate church of the same name, included 300 houses in the northwestern corner of the city, whereas to the southwest was Ste. Catherine (400 houses), fully incorporated within Lille as recently as 1415 and home to many artisans, a significant proportion of whom seem to have been Flemish-speaking immigrants. As Map 1 shows, numerous religious congregations, hospitals, hospices, asylums, and orphanages were scattered throughout the city. Several institutions were also situated outside the walls – the Do-

¹¹ See Appendix A.

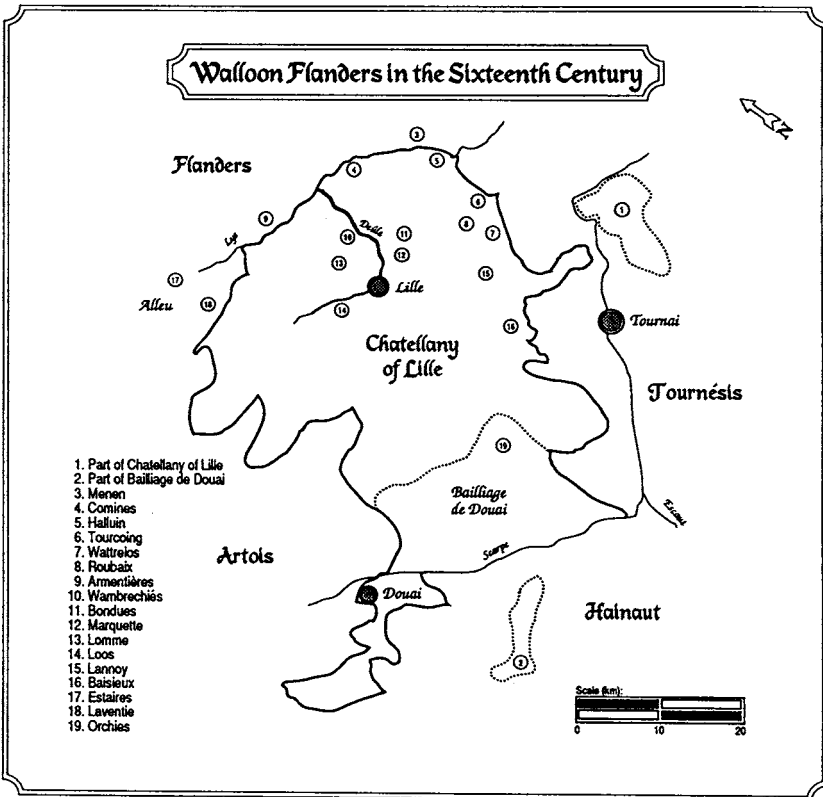
¹² In the mid-sixteenth century Antwerp counted about 90,000 inhabitants, Ghent perhaps 50,000, Brussels 40,000, and Bruges 35,000. Amsterdam was approximately the same size as my calculation for Lille, while Utrecht, Mechelen, and Tournai (each with 25,000) and 's Hertogenbosch (23,000) were slightly smaller. See de Vries, *European Urbanization*, pp. 271–2, 292–4.

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Map 2. Walloon Flanders in the sixteenth century

minican monastery, the Beguine house, an orphanage, the Riez de Canteleu where some citizens chose to lodge in makeshift barracks during epidemics, and the citizens' leper house, which lent its name to the faubourg des Malades, the suburb that had grown up around it. Other suburbs crowded near many of the city gates. Finally, there were two small extramural parishes, St. André and La Madeleine, both of which had predominantly poor and laboring populations.

As Guicciardini noted, Lille could boast some fine public buildings. Unfortunately, only a very few have survived, and these are truncated and much altered. Contemporary views, however, help recreate them. Before the revolt, a traveler coming from Flanders would initially have

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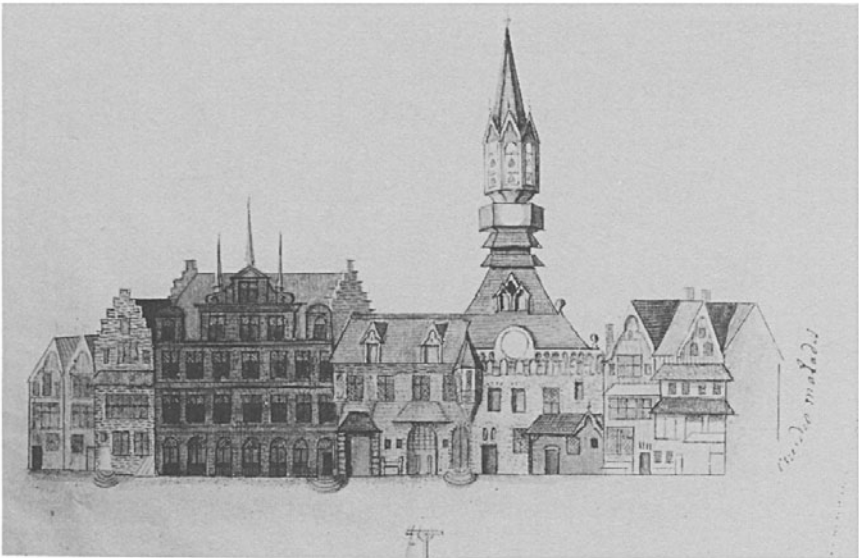
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Plate 1. The Halle Echevinale. Drawing from the late sixteenth century. Lille, Musée de l'Hospice Comtesse.

spied the imposing mass of the many-towered Château de Courtrai, built about 1298 by King Philip the Fair of France (Plate 2). Sitting on a separate islet, and surrounded entirely by its own massive fortifications, the castle – or rather, the garrison within – became a source of friction during the Dutch Revolt. Resentful of repeated incidents between soldiers and townspeople, and fearful that the troops might pour out one night and – as happened elsewhere – perpetrate a massacre, in 1577 the municipal government gladly paid handsomely for the right to demolish the citadel.

A more recent addition to the city was the Palais Rihour (Plate 3), which lay south of the Marché, across the city from the Château de Courtrai. This sizable brick and stone building was erected between 1453 and 1473 for Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy and count of Flanders, who spent much time in Lille, his favorite city. As Brussels increasingly became the permanent seat of Netherlands government, however, his successors visited the palace less and less. In the sixteenth century, it fell into disuse, save the largest wing, on the right side of the

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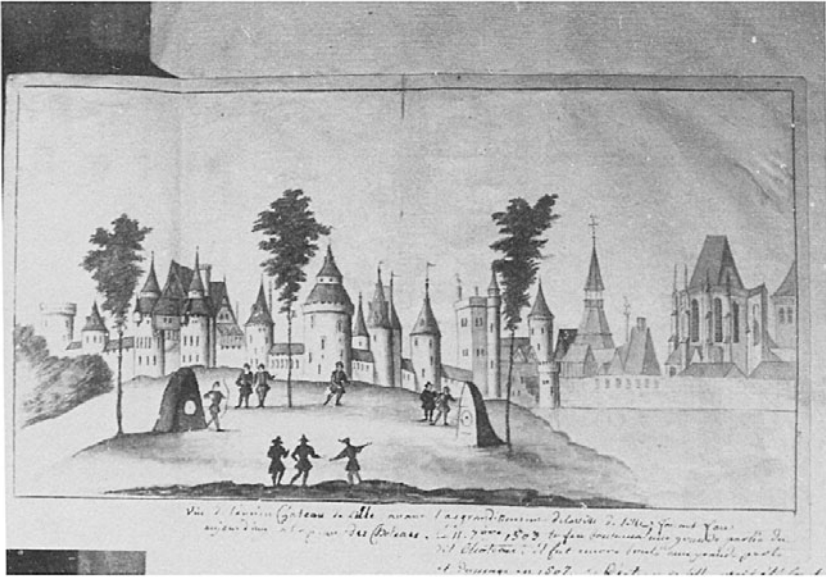


Plate 2. The Château de Courtrai. At the right, the choir of the Collegiate Church of St. Pierre. Copy of a late fifteenth-century miniature. Lille, Musée de l'Hospice Comtesse.

picture. This housed the *Gouvernance*, where the governor of Walloon Flanders lived and the members of his staff had their offices. If no longer a favorite princely residence, however, Lille remained the seat of an important *Chambre des Comptes* that handled royal revenues for nearly half the Netherlands.¹³ Since 1413, the chamber had been located in an old *hôtel* at the end of the rue Esquermoise, thus contributing to the spatial dispersion of the institutions of the central government.

“Because,” Guicciardini reported, “of the commerce and industries that are practiced there,” Lille “is considered the principal city of these Low Countries behind Antwerp and Amsterdam.” Its merchants dealt in dyestuffs, grain, cattle, and many other items from Walloon Flanders, which the *Description* characterized as “both good and beautiful,” blessed with fertile soil and “fair and ample” pastures, if “hardly of great extent (see Map 2).” But their fortunes were made by extensive and broad-based

¹³ Walloon and Flemish Flanders, Artois, Hainaut, Tournai and the Tournésis, Namur, and Mechelen all were subject to the Chamber of Accounts at Lille.

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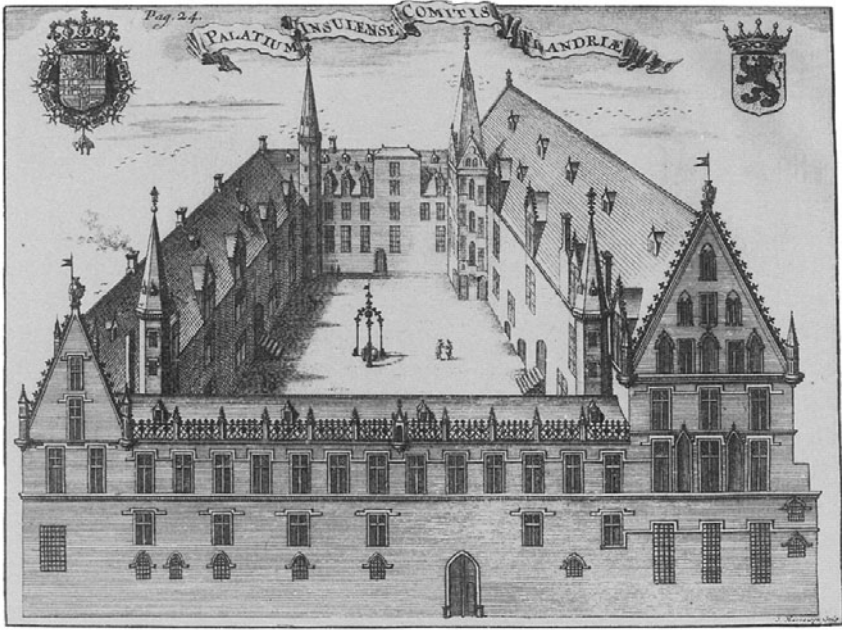
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Plate 3. The Palais Rihour. Christoph Butkens, *Supplément aux trophées tant sacrés que profanes du duché de Brabant*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1726), vol. 1, facing p. 24. University of Michigan Library).

international trade in grain, wine, cloth, and much more besides, conducted largely through Antwerp. Hundreds of artisans, ranging from painters to pastry cooks, from glovemakers to goldsmiths, plied their trades in Lille. Every other craft paled, however, in comparison with textiles – tapestries for a prince or the Medici, expensive wool *draps* for civic officers and wealthy churchmen, but most of all a continuing profusion of cheap woolens and mixed stuffs dispatched in enormous quantities to nearly every corner of Europe and on to Spanish America.

As we shall see, the trade and textiles of Lille generally prospered up to and through the period of the revolt, and they continued to grow, often dramatically, until the early seventeenth century. After that point, to be sure, the city's economy felt the effects of growing rural and foreign competition, rising mercantilist barriers, and disruption due to annexation by France in 1667. Yet all across the eighteenth century, Lille

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remained a leading woolen-cloth center, and it subsequently transformed itself into a great cotton and linen producer. The primacy of textiles has waned in recent years, but as late as 1970 spinning, weaving, and associated trades formed the largest single sector of the urban economy in terms of employment, and the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing conurbation boasted the strongest concentration of textile activity in Western Europe.

For a number of historiographical reasons, Lille ought to be of considerable interest to the student of the Dutch Revolt. In his early twentieth-century *Histoire de Belgique*, still the paradigmatic account, Henri Pirenne argued that explosive strains in Netherlands urban society, generated by profound changes during the reigns of Charles V (1506–55) and his son and heir Philip II (1555–98), ultimately if unwittingly produced rebellion. In their efforts to build a centralized state, the Habsburg rulers frequently intervened in local political quarrels, re-fashioned urban magistracies, and enhanced the authority of the prince's administrative and judicial officials. Thus, despite consistently deployed obstructionist tactics, municipal institutions lost ground to a dynamic, progressive, and increasingly powerful centralized regime. At the same time, the crown's infringement of jealously guarded civic liberties and its growing financial demands bred intensifying conflict between sovereign and cities. The process of state formation also endowed urban elites, like their noble and ecclesiastical counterparts, with a national consciousness. As a result, Pirenne believed, they proved able to put aside the localism that had bedeviled all previous revolts and rise in unity against the alien, authoritarian dynasty superimposed upon, but increasingly estranged from, the nation it was bringing into existence.

Cities were also, according to Pirenne, marked decisively by the impressive economic growth that animated the sixteenth-century Netherlands. The emergence of capitalist trade and industry – most notably in the woolen textiles of the southern provinces – bred both entrepreneurs who sought power and status commensurate with their new wealth, and a proletariat experiencing downward social mobility. The price revolution that had begun around 1500 sharpened the effects of the social changes that had resulted from the expansion of capitalism. Entrepreneurs, merchants, and speculators of every ilk benefited from inflation, but rentiers and particularly the ever-expanding mass of wage earners faced a declining standard of living.