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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

Political background

La boine ville de Bruges, une des milleurs villes marchandes qui soit
 en Chrestienté. *Le livre des mestiers, c.1369*¹

Our story begins with fire and ends with civil war. In August 1280, fire struck the “Belfry,” the seat of civic government and symbol of urban independence, which dominated the south end of the “Grote Markt” – the central market square of Bruges. The building was more than a symbol: in its function of both seat of government and market place for the sale of cloth, it neatly symbolized the economic, political, and social bases of the city. Those who controlled and profited from the buying and selling in the cloth hall were the very same men who dominated the political life of the city. The Belfry fire of 1280 neither completely destroyed the building nor ushered in an era of total social revolution, but it served as a portent of developing and impending change for a city torn between commerce and industry and divided in its social and political allegiances. Our period’s outer boundary is marked by the war of 1379–1385, known to contemporaries and historians alike as the Ghent war, one of the most destructive and disruptive conflicts in Flemish history. It, too, is symbolic of the political and economic changes that had occurred in Bruges in the course of the fourteenth century, changes that turned the city away from its traditional role as a nest of rebels into a pragmatic supporter of the count. Politics and its underlying meaning are the subjects of this introductory chapter.²

¹ Jean Gessler, *Het Brugsche Livre des mestiers en zijn navolgingen*, 6 vols. (Bruges, 1931), vol. 1, p. 14.

² The Belfry (Dutch “Belfort”) was the tower attached to the Old Cloth Hall, or Hallen. It was also known to contemporaries as the “Halletoren”. The fire was often associated with the outbreak of the Moerlemaie revolt, but there is no firm evidence of this. On the general history of Bruges, the recent *Brugge: De geschiedenis van een Europese stad* (Tielt, 1999) written by a team led by Marc Ryckaert and André Vandewalle, is excellent. So, too, is J. A. van Houtte, *De geschiedenis van Brugge* (Tielt, 1982). Both books also offer good bibliographies on the history of Bruges.



Figure 1: Detail of the map of Bruges by Marcus Gerards (1562). At center left is the “Great” market square (Grote Markt) and above it left is the Burg square. At the lower left is the Great Crane and the commercial district leading to the Bourse square at the extreme left.

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The fact that arson connected with political agitation was suspected in the Belfry fire reveals the tense and violent atmosphere then dominating the city. Opposition to the long tradition of social and political oligarchy pitted a group of upstarts – the self-proclaimed “Many” (*Gemeente*) – against the elite membership of the so-called Flemish Hanse of London.³ Political uncertainty was compounded by the recent coming to power of Count Guy of Dampierre (1278–1305), who promised to be the first ruler in generations of Flemish counts and countesses to contest the power of the great Flemish cities of Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres. And the Belfry fire, which destroyed the city archives, including the charter of urban privileges, gave Guy his first opportunity to make his influence felt in Bruges.⁴

The revolt of 1280 entered history under a single name – “Moerlemaai” – yet in fact it occurred in two distinct phases. On 1 October 1280 a group of discontented citizens staged a coup against the incumbent city government, who were deposed, not without some justification, because of fiscal mismanagement and general dishonesty. With the coup came some rioting, plundering, and fires set in a number of houses.⁵ The count seized the opportunity to side with the old urban regime in forcibly restoring order as well as imposing both a hefty fine and a new urban charter to replace the one destroyed in the Belfry fire. Comital “Keuren” (literally privileges) drawn up in a charter functioned as constitutional documents for the city, and the new redaction reduced the power of the aldermen, much to the displeasure of an even larger group of Bruges burghers than had supported the initial coup. In the summer of 1281 a new revolt broke out, now aimed directly at the count’s attempts to limit urban autonomy.⁶ The cycle of violence, reimposition of order, and punishment by the count was repeated,

³ Ryckaert and Vandewalle, *Brugge*, p. 40. The “Gemeente” drew most of its strength from more recently enriched merchants and artisans and disaffected members of the traditional elite. In other words, it was an alternative oligarchy, not a party of democratic reform.

⁴ J. A. van Houtte, *Bruges, Essai d'histoire urbaine* (Brussels, 1967), pp. 30–31.

⁵ A good summary of the events leading up to the revolt is David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 180–185; earlier publications by Carlos Wyffels, “Nieuwe gegevens betreffende een xiii^e eeuwse ‘democratische’ stedelijke opstand: de Brugse ‘Moerlemaai’ (1280–81),” *BCRH* 132 (1966), 37–142, and idem, “Kanttekening bij de Brugse ‘Moerlemaai’ 1280–1281,” *Album Albert Schoutet* (Bruges, 1973), pp. 253–258. A revisionist look at the revolt in Bruges and Ypres is Marc Boone, “Social Conflicts in the Cloth Industry of Ypres (Late 13th–Early 14th Centuries): The Cockerulle Reconsidered,” in *Ypres and the Medieval Cloth Industry in Flanders* (Ypres, 1999), pp. 147–155; another is Agatha Ann Bardeel, “The Urban Uprisings at Bruges, 1280–1. Some New Findings about the Rebels and the Partisans,” *RBPH* 74 (1994), 761–791.

⁶ The count’s imposed changes were a £400 parisis fine for damages and a perpetual rent, a removal to the count’s court of most cases involving violence, and abolition of customs; the making of new law was also reserved to the count alone. One change that survived was the requirement of an annual audit of the city’s accounts by the count and representatives of the Bruges commons; for this see Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 182.

this time with executions of some of the leaders of the October uprising.⁷ A tense, armed truce ended the violence for the next decade.

Count Guy in turn faced more than the opposition and resistance of his three leading cities to a revival of comital power. Flanders had for centuries enjoyed semi-autonomy from its chief liege lords, the Capetian kings of France. Even the exception to this general Flemish freedom, the civil war that ensued after the murder of Count Charles the Good in 1127, tends to prove the rule, since the French king's candidate for count was ultimately defeated and killed by the candidate who gained the lasting support of Bruges, Ypres, and Ghent. Bruges in this case had been the first of the three cities to shift allegiance to Thierry of Alsace and against the king of France.⁸ Guy, however, faced a French king and kingdom vastly strengthened by a century and a half of successful action against the autonomy of royal vassals. And within his own county, extremely close economic and political bonds had developed with England as ever larger quantities of English wool were woven into cloth on Flemish looms. Yet the growing dependency on this crucial English raw material came just as the epic feud between France and England was gathering force. The clash of shifting and conflicting allegiances and interests across political, social, and economic lines is a constant feature of the period from 1280 to 1390.

The preliminary sparring among the French, English, and Flemings turned to war through a complex series of diplomatic and dynastic actions that occurred between 1294 and 1297.⁹ For Bruges this meant virtual conquest and occupation by a French force in the summer of 1297, as well as a deep polarization of the urban populace into pro- and anti-French camps, or Lilies and Claws (so called after their symbols – the fleur-de-lis and the Lion rampant).¹⁰ Many of these social and political fissures were not new, but were reformulated around support for either the king or count with the additional factor of the newly organized urban guilds. These groups had taken form in the second half of the thirteenth century without receiving voice or vote in urban government, although some of their demands brought forward in the 1280 conflict were fulfilled.¹¹ Now

⁷ Bardoel, "Urban Uprisings at Bruges," 765. The amount of physical damage to the city from the 1281 revolt was apparently much greater than in the earlier outbreak; see Ryckaert and Vandewalle, *Brugge*, p. 40; see also Maurice Vandermaesen, "Vlaanderen en Henegouwen onder het Huis van Dampierre, 1244–1384," in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, second edition, vol. II, pp. 403–404.

⁸ Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186–190. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹¹ For the general history of guilds, see Carlos Wyffels, *De oorsprong der ambachten in Vlaanderen/Brabant* (Brussels, 1951) and the essays contained in Pascal Lambrechts and J. P. Sosson (eds.), *Les métiers au moyen âge* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994). For Bruges in particular see J.-P. Sosson, *Les travaux publics de la ville de Bruges, XIVe–XVe siècles* (Brussels, 1977).

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they saw a chance to realize their ambitions of sharing power in the city by backing the count and his struggle against the French king and his faction in Flanders. Nonetheless, the count's party (Claws) was not uniformly drawn from the artisans, but contained disaffected elements from the urban patriciate as well as wealthy merchants of humble social backgrounds.¹² On the other hand, the Lily party of Francophiles was more uniformly drawn from the urban patriciate, a fact true across Flanders, although the urban elite of Bruges seems to have been more evenly divided between Claws and Lilies than was the case elsewhere.¹³

The French king, Philip IV, struck first. He outmaneuvered count Guy by goading him through a series of humiliating actions, including imprisonment, forfeiture, and a mock trial in Paris, into an alliance with the English by early 1297. Relying on Edward I of England's promise of armed support, Guy renounced his oath of fealty, thereby opening Flanders to attack. This came in an unopposed invasion by French forces in June, 1297, which Guy, deserted by the English, could not resist. Bruges, together with all western Flanders, was overrun and occupied, and a treaty divided Flanders, allotting Bruges and its surrounding territory to direct administration by French royal officials. This was replaced in 1300 by direct annexation to the crown lands of France.¹⁴ For the city the most visible change was a new set of walls and defensive works that enclosed a vastly larger space than the old twelfth-century walls.¹⁵ Though ordered built by the king, the city alone bore the cost. The fiscal burden resulted in increased tension between the Lily and Claw factions, with the ascendant Lily faction held responsible both for the construction costs and for the growing unpopularity of the French occupiers among Brugeois. Anti-French feelings only grew after the triumphal progression of Philip through pacified Flanders in May, 1301.

Discontent became action in the wake of a failure of French officials to lighten the tax burden for Bruges as they had for Ghent by lifting consumption taxes on drink and other commodities. Two charismatic leaders of the Claw party emerged to organize opposition, the weaver Pieter de Coninc and the butcher Jan Breydel, and the defection of at least five sons of prominent Lilies to their party was one sign of their success.¹⁶ The growing threat posed by the Claws led to the incarceration of de Coninc and Breydel, from

¹² Walter Prevenier, "Motieven voor leliardsgezindheid in Vlaanderen in de periode 1297-1305," *De Leiegouw* 19 (1977), 273-288; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 190.

¹³ Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 191.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192 and F. Funck-Brentano, *Les origines de la guerre de cent ans. Philippe le Bel en Flandre* (Paris, 1897).

¹⁵ See below chapter 2 and Ryckaert and Vandewalle, *Brugge*, p. 38.

¹⁶ *Algemene geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 409.

which they were quickly freed by a mob of their supporters. The two Claw leaders and their followers took over the city government, but were forced to yield upon the approach of a French army led by the count of Saint-Pol. De Coninc and many of his followers were banned from the city, and most humiliating of all, they were ordered to begin dismantling the recently completed city walls.¹⁷ A mob inspired by the absent de Coninc was able to stop the demolition work prior to his return to the city in March 1302. His party succeeded in regaining control of city government, with guildsmen making up a majority of aldermen for the first time. They and the count's sons, John and Guy of Namur, who had managed to escape French captivity, began plotting a counteroffensive. This "Prague Spring" was brought to an abrupt end, however, as the Gentenars refused to follow Bruges's lead in organizing resistance to the French. This resulted in a second exile for de Coninc and his followers and the occupation of Bruges by the royal lieutenant, Jacques Châtillon, and his troops in May 1302. Pacification and restoration of the Lilies to power seemed all but certain.¹⁸

The Claws moved quickly to reverse the fortunes of their enemies. Exploiting the chaos in Bruges and the gaps in the partially dismantled city walls, de Coninc and his followers slipped back at dawn on Friday, 18 May, fanned out through the city and upon a prearranged cry ("Schild en Vriend!") burst into the houses of the French occupiers and Lily supporters.¹⁹ What emerged from the slaughter was a renewal of the "popular" government and a reinvigoration of the pro-count, anti-French alliance. The Bruges counter coup was quickly dubbed the "Good Friday."²⁰ Throughout West Flanders villages and cities rallied to de Coninc's cause, with Ghent remaining as a lone holdout supporter of Philip IV. Likewise new urban governments came to replace the old oligarchies throughout Flanders, and these new *populares* moved to confiscate the property of their now exiled Lily opponents. The energy and ardor of the triumphant Claws failed to cool even with an invasion of the French and a new, almost nationalist ferocity that now entered the struggle.²¹ A Flemish militia began to

¹⁷ Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 192.

¹⁸ Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, 6 vols. (Brussels, 1909–1926), vol. 1, pp. 418–419; *Algemene geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 412.

¹⁹ The war cry (meaning "Shield and Friend") was a shibboleth containing two consonant sounds proper to the Germanic Flemish spoken by most Brugeois, but very difficult for speakers of Romance languages.

²⁰ It only later became known as the Bruges Matins: F. Verbruggen, "De Goede Vrijdag van Brugge, 18 mei 1302," *Het Brugs Ommeland* 17 (1997), 115–131.

²¹ Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 193. The Ghent annalist reported terrorizing of citizens only when French troops entered Flemish speaking areas; see Hilda Johnstone (ed.), *Annales Gandenses: Annals of Ghent* (London, 1951), pp. 27–31.

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gather with the Bruges levy at its core for the march south to lay siege to the castle of Kortrijk (Courtrai) recently captured by the French.²²

The battle that ensued pitted Flemish foot soldiers (aided by only a few knights) against a large army composed mostly of mounted knights and had the (for the Flemish) miraculous outcome of a total victory. So staggering was the slaughter that five hundred pairs of golden spurs (symbolic of knighthood) were stripped from the French dead and given as near-holy relics to the church of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw in Kortrijk, conferring the name “Golden Spurs” on the battle, which entered into legend.²³ Contemporaries compared it to the greatest victories in history, worthy to be numbered with the taking of Troy, or King David and the Israelites’ triumph at Gilboa, or Scipio Africanus’ crushing of Carthage.²⁴ All hyperbole aside, the Flemish victory was the first major battle of the Middle Ages in which infantry defeated cavalry, and it ensured in the long term that “Germanic” Flanders would never be ruled directly from Paris. In the short term, however, there was a good deal of confusion and indecision among the Flemish rebels that enabled Philip IV to mitigate the decisiveness of the battle.

It is well at this point to reject the largely nineteenth-century image of Flemish nationalists led by Bruges capitalizing and pressing on their victory over the French in a surge of unity and brotherhood. The events prior to 1302 had shown that all sides in all cities were open to the blandishments of either count or king, and that many commoners joined the struggle to realize limited and largely intramural political goals. In Bruges the events of 1302 brought changes in privileges and government that went some way to realizing the hopes first expressed in the revolts of the 1280s. These were embodied in the count’s new city privilege, issued on 4 November 1304, which granted the right to trade freely or to exercise a profession to all residents of Bruges and not just the members of the *poorterij*, as the corporation of the traditional elite was called. The count coupled this with an exemption from all comital tolls throughout Flanders. Moreover, guildsmen finally received political emancipation through the grant of seats on the city’s benches of aldermen.²⁵ Last but not least, the count gave up

²² Events of the battle are given up-to-date treatment in Kelly DeVries, *Infantry Warfare in the Early Fourteenth Century: Discipline, Tactics, and Technology* (Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, NY, 1996), pp. 9–22.

²³ J. F. Verbruggen, “De Historiografie van de Guldensporenslag,” *De Leiegouw* 19 (1977), 245–272. The picturesque name – Golden Spurs – was not attached to the battle until the eighteenth century. To contemporaries it was the Battle of Kortrijk or Groeninge; see *Algemene geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 412.

²⁴ DeVries, *Infantry Warfare*, pp. 10–11; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 193.

²⁵ The charter is edited by L. Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Coutumes des pays et comté de Flandre. Coutume de la ville de Bruges*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 1874–75), vol. 1, pp. 308–332; Ryckaert and Vandewalle, *Brugge*, p. 41; van Houtte, *Bruges, Essai*, pp. 36–37. Of thirteen aldermen and thirteen counselors chosen annually, nine in each body came from the guilds and four from the *poorterij*.

his right to make the final appointments to the city benches from among nominated candidates. Taken together these reforms pushed the city a considerable distance along the path to democracy. Yet power sharing within a small (if expanded) oligarchy was still not democracy, as ordinary laborers, women, and apprentices and journeymen were effectively excluded from participation. This was not the “democratic revolution” in the modern sense proclaimed by early twentieth-century historians.²⁶

The violent expulsion of the French brought no return of peace, and the period after 1302 was also one of continual unrest and occasional uprising. Even the victory at Kortrijk led to a series of Flemish defeats and standoffs, which severely strained the unity of the three leading cities. At the battle of Mons-en-Pévèle in 1304, for example, the militias of Ghent, Ypres, and Kortrijk deserted the field at a crucial point. The disappointing outcome of victory for the Flemings was the treaty of Athis-sur-Orge, sealed in 1305.²⁷ The treaty’s terms were humiliating: a huge war indemnity and a perpetual rent to be paid to the king, who would also be provided with an army contingent of 600 men. The fortifications of all Flemish cities were also to be destroyed. Bruges not only had to pay the largest share of the fine, it was also forced to send some 3000 citizens on expiatory pilgrimages for the “Good Friday” massacre.²⁸ More galling was the order to restore the confiscated property to the Lilies and pay them damages. Victory had come to resemble defeat, much to the bitter surprise of the townspeople, who refused to honor many of the treaty’s conditions. A decade of intermittent war with the French resulted, ending in exhausted stalemate in 1320.²⁹ But the French kings’ desire to bind Flanders and its count more closely to France ultimately prevailed, although Bruges remained the most staunchly anti-royal of Flemish cities.

Internal political struggles continued in Bruges, sharpened by the disruptions and disorder caused by war and famine. In 1315–1316, in the midst of the French wars, a famine broke out in West Flanders and throughout northern Europe, causing chaotic migrations of starving peasants to Bruges and other cities, who together with some of the urban poor literally starved to death in the streets and alleys of the city.³⁰ Despite the extraordinary

²⁶ Raymond van Uytven, “Plutokratie in de ‘oude democratieën’ der Nederlanden,” *Handelingen Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- Letterkunde en Geschiedenis* 16 (1962), 373–409.

²⁷ For the battle see DeVries, *Infantry Warfare*, pp. 32–48; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 193.

²⁸ Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 195.

²⁹ Hans van Werveke, “Les charges financières issues du Traité d’Athis (1305),” *Revue du Nord* 32 (1950), 81–93; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 195–197.

³⁰ Hans Van Werveke, “La famine de l’an 1316 en Flandre et dans les régions voisines,” *Revue du Nord* 41 (1959), 5–14, esp. 6–7, reprinted in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia: Verspreide opstellen over economische*

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measures taken by the city government to buy grain and distribute it to the city's bakers, thousands perished. While the effects of the mortality were still being felt in Bruges and elsewhere, a new crisis occurred with an interfamily squabble over succession within the comital house. This pitted the eldest son and heir of Count Robert of Béthune, Louis I of Nevers, against his younger brother Robert of Cassel, in a war of influence over their enfeebled and failing father.³¹ Robert acted against the decision to grant the succession to his nephew, Louis II of Nevers, refused to be satisfied with a grant of an apanage, and organized his own power base. He and his party succeeded in gaining enough influence with Count Robert to enable the arrest of Louis I on "criminal" charges, with imprisonment and finally banishment to France as the result. Louis I died an exile shortly before his father in 1322.

Robert of Cassel, once the political stage was cleared, missed no opportunity to exercise the count's power in his father's name. He provoked a rebellion in Bruges by arresting a supporter of his brother's faction there, violating all the city's privileges. According to a memorandum of 1322, he was also guilty of corruption and attempts to profit from a monopoly he sought to impose on the sale of alum. Further, he was guilty of failing to advance the best interests of the county by opposing peace with France and ignoring urban privileges. Meanwhile bloody riots broke out in the city, and Robert was given a free hand to crush them. Instability within the comital house thus reinforced and redoubled political strife within Bruges. And when Robert moved to pay for his military operations by levying a tax on the use of the Ghent-owned Lieve canal, Ghent joined Bruges in violently opposing his actions. For whatever reason, by the time of his death in September 1322, Robert of Béthune had confirmed his grandson, Louis II, as his successor, buying off his son Robert with a large cash payment and a grant of some territories. After his father's death, Robert tried to renege on his promise and began organizing resistance to his nephew; but, weary of his megalomania, the Flemish cities supported Louis II's accession in return for grants of privileges and other favors.³²

The honeymoon was brief between urban Flanders and its new teenaged count. In an astonishingly short time he managed to alienate his Flemish

en sociale geschiedenis van de Middeleeuwen (Ghent, 1968), pp. 326–338; for the edited sources, van Werveke, "Bronnenmateriaal uit de Brugse stadsrekeningen betreffende de hongersnood van 1316," *BCRH* 125 (1959), 431–510; for Flanders in general, Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 206–208; and for Europe as a whole, William C. Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996).

³¹ *Algemene geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 419; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 209–210.

³² *Algemene geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 420; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 210.

subjects by meekly giving in to French demands that he observe the terms of all previous treaties, particularly the financial penalties from the hated peace of Athis-sur-Orge. More serious for Bruges's interests were the thoroughgoing pro-French and anti-English sentiments of Louis II, whose loyalty to the French crown transcended any consideration of the close economic interdependence of Flanders and England. Last but not least was his inability to control the actions and ambitions of his relatives, John of Namur and Robert of Cassel. John in particular secured from the count a grant of "lordship" over ships entering the Zwin, Bruges's access to the sea.³³ The intention was to benefit the growing towns along the Zwin's banks, especially Sluis, which John held in fief. This was a direct provocation, striking at Bruges's traditional monopoly over trade goods entering the Zwin and threatening the careful control Bruges exercised over its "outports."³⁴

After John of Namur garrisoned Sluis with troops in order to enforce his claims, the Bruges militia took up arms. Nearing the walls of Sluis, the Brugeois attacked and destroyed the column of John's men that had marched out to meet them. Louis was forced to be a powerless witness to the two-day sack and destruction of Sluis at the hands of the Bruges militiamen (31 July to 1 August 1323). John of Namur was captured and imprisoned in the Steen, Bruges's unsavory prison, and avoided execution only through the entreaties of the count. His eventual escape from prison and departure from Flanders for a well-deserved exile cooled the tensions, as did Louis's uncharacteristic wisdom in imposing no penalties on the Brugeois for their actions.³⁵ But new reasons for revolt awaited.

Though a commercial city, and, as we shall see, one that catered to long-distance trade and traders, Bruges still maintained a close if somewhat troubled relationship with the castellany for which it served as governmental seat. This "Franc" or "free district" of Bruges consisted of the coastal areas wrested from the North Sea through three centuries of land reclamation as well as inland areas with numerous small towns and villages. This history had resulted in a populace famed for its independence and relative affluence whose political will could develop unblunted by a relatively weak and

³³ The count's "officer of the water," or waterbailiff, enforced the count's sovereign rights over shipping traffic in the Zwin. John's energetic exercise of these rights could obstruct free passage of ships to Damme and Bruges. On this see Jacques Sabbe, *Vlaanderen in opstand, 1323-1328* (Bruges, 1992), pp. 18, 96, n. 60.

³⁴ For the outports see chapter 2; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, pp. 212-213; *Algemene geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 421.

³⁵ Nonetheless, the count lost considerable face and authority as a result of the Sluis affair; see *Algemene Geschiedenis*, vol. II, p. 421; Sabbe, *Vlaanderen in opstand*, p. 20; Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders*, p. 213.