1 City and Society in the Low Countries: Urbanisation and Urban Historiography

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Ever since the eleventh century, no other characteristic has been as typical of the Low Countries as the size of their urban network. Around the middle of the fifteenth century, the first point at which more or less consistent statistics became available, approximately one in three inhabitants of the Low Countries reportedly lived somewhere in a (small) town. Impressive as it is for an agricultural economy, this urbanisation gains even more in significance when regional differences are taken into account. In the county of Flanders well-nigh 36 per cent of the inhabitants lived in an urban environment. In Holland, Overijssel and even Guelders to a lesser degree, that figure was higher than 40 per cent, amounting to almost half the population. Conversely, in heavily wooded Luxembourg only 15 per cent of the population lived somewhere within town walls. After northern and central Italy, the Low Countries – even the least urbanised regions in them – ranked at the top of urban Europe, according to European standards. The Low Countries, therefore, can rightly be called a country of cities and towns. Unlike in the twentieth century, when European historical towns had to battle the centrifugal forces of suburbanisation and urban decline, the town in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries was still the most dynamic, if not the ultimate, force in society.

It is not surprising, then, that successive generations of historians have been fascinated by the phenomenon of the city in this region. In addition to purely academic work on this topic, countless books have been dedicated to the more general public. Narrating the history of one specific town, the genre of the 'town biography' was and remains very popular. Frequently it is a town with which writers and readers can immediately identify, and the publication itself contributes somehow towards enhancing that town's urban identity. For many the ties with their own town and its many *lieux de mémoire* were and are more concrete than those with any principality, province or country. The urban world experienced from day to day is, after all, more tangible than that of more abstract and distant territorial connections. The walls that enclosed urban society,

Figure 1.1 This recently discovered fragment is the earliest known printed topographical map of the Low Countries. The south-east is at the top. The map extends from approximately Calais to Trier in the south and from Vlieland to Marburg in the north. The towns are depicted as densely built-up areas in the landscape. The major rivers (Rhine, Maas, Scheldt) are quite prominent, forming a delta that empties into the North Sea at the bottom. The map was printed by Herman van Borculo in Utrecht in 1557. Its cartouche is in Latin to give the map scholarly cachet, but the names of the towns are all in Dutch.

its gates that drew a clear boundary between citizens and outsiders, the towers that made its self-awareness visible from a great distance – all these structures set in stone the differences in the *modi vivendi* between burghers and rural inhabitants. In addition, cities also do much today to highlight what is special about their own identity. Cultural strategies of 'city marketing' and 'city branding' serve as economic levers for municipal authorities in their attempts to put their towns on the map and on the market. Much can be said for the idea that the recent narrative summaries of the history of individual towns also contribute to that urban identity, even when they harbour the express intention of critically dealing with the past.

Whatever the case may be, histories of towns and paeans to specific towns were already being written in the Middle Ages, as well as during the early modern era. When history subsequently became a discipline with more pronounced scholarly ambitions over the course of the nineteenth century, this development had consequences for the way in which a town's past was seen. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, new states came into being, each of which felt the need to legitimise its existence historically with source editions and 'national' histories. Dusting off and polishing up their own pasts also implied that, along with the past of their own nation, region or principality, the history of the town was rediscovered. In the southern part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–30) – which became the Kingdom of Belgium from 1830 – the illustrious medieval past was put into service as the subject of novels, paeans, stage plays and operas, but also of more sober historiography. All this writing was also strongly influenced by a Romantic look at the pasts of principalities, such as the county of Flanders, the duchy of Brabant, the prince-bishopric of Liège and so forth, as well as of the cities that were the obvious nuclei of those principalities. Over the course of the nineteenth century the first historical societies came into being in many towns. The task of these organisations was to unlock and publish sources for urban history, as well as to dig up new insights concerning the pasts of their own towns. The earliest among these associations was the 'Société d'émulation', established in 1838 in Bruges.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the development of a more scholarly practice of history owed much to influences from both Germany – at that time the pre-eminent country guiding the practice of scholarship – and France. The central figure in this development was the historian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), who was educated in Liège and taught at the University of Ghent between 1886 and 1930. Pirenne was heavily influenced by his studies in Germany and France at the

beginning of his career. These influences drove him forcefully in the direction of urban history. In the introduction to his doctoral dissertation of 1883 concerning the constitutional history of Dinant on the river Maas, he reveals this inspiration: 'I have sought to do for a Belgian town that which has been done for so many German and French towns in recent years.'[1] Pirenne's influence on urban history in Belgium cannot easily be overestimated. To a more general public he is probably better known as the celebrated author of the seven-volume *Histoire de Belgique* or of a challenging posthumous work, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. Yet one of the most incisive (and early) analyses of the figure of Pirenne and of his work, from the pen of Jan Dhondt, rightly presents him as 'historien des institutions urbaines'.[2]

Influential ideas have a chance of making a permanent impact only when they are formulated at the right moment and land in a fertile medium. At the end of the nineteenth century historians sought and found harbingers of the appearance of a successful bourgeoisie in medieval and early modern towns, who took the first steps in a long process of modernisation. First of all, as an apparent precursor to subsequent industrial revolutions, there were economic innovations in sectors that had been emancipated from agriculture. Additionally, there were political manifestations: the creation of their institutions, constituted from below, and an autonomous right to decision-making, based directly on properly understood collective and individual concerns of the townspeople. In the history of the towns of Liège and the medieval county of Flanders, Pirenne – the son of a successful textile entrepreneur from Verviers – saw a foreshadowing of what made a liberal Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century into one of the most progressive and prosperous countries in the West, even if that applied only to those who made up part of the economic and political elites. Max Weber (1864–1920), Pirenne's coeval, would come to very similar findings in his observations concerning the medieval town, whereby he considered above all the towns of northern and central Italy as well as the Low Countries. This ensemble of views was in line with what in pretty much all late nineteenth-century historical traditions was 'bon ton', typified by

[1] 'J'ai cherché à faire, pour une ville belge, ce qui a été fait, pendant les dernières années, pour tant de villes allemandes et françaises.' Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de la constitution de la ville de Dinant au Moyen Age* (Ghent: Clemm, 1889).

[2] Jan Dhondt, Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines, *Annali della fondazione italiana per la storia amministrativa*, 3 (1966), 81–129 (re-edited and expanded with a critical introduction by Wim Blockmans in the collection of Dhondt's essays: *Hommes et pouvoirs. Les principales études de Jan Dhondt sur l'histoire du 19e et 20e siècles* (Ghent: Fondation Jan Dhondt, 1976), pp. 59–119).

Peter Clark as 'town history with a boosterism quality', whereby towns were the physical sites in which modern society acquired its 'Gestalt'.[3] Until the cataclysm of World War I, the aura of modernity remained elevated above any doubt.

The direct students and successors of Pirenne – Hans van Werveke and François-Louis Ganshof in Ghent, Guillaume Des Marez in Brussels, Ferdinand Vercauteren in Liège – have treated the urban-historical topics of their teacher with much respect for his views. In so doing, that treatment has revolved, respectively, around the workings of the urban middle class, the importance of the textile industry and financial history (in the case of van Werveke); around the earliest history of the towns and their territorial development (Ganshof); around municipal institutions and property rights within towns (Des Marez); and around the workings of municipal institutions and repeated uprisings (Vercauteren). Above all in Brussels, too – where Pirenne, out of displeasure at the University of Ghent being turned into a Dutch-language institution, went to teach at the Université Libre for the last five years of his life – attention was focussed on the topic of urban history by Pirenne's first student, Guillaume Des Marez, and the latter's successor, Félicien Favresse. In the following generation analogous topics came up for discussion among historians at Leuven as well. Taking centre stage there were two works that have had an impact as models for their genre: Raymond Van Uytven's dissertation about finance and economy in Leuven, published in 1961; and Herman Van der Wee's three-part study that came out two years later, concerning the Antwerp market as an anchorage in the stormy evolution that the European economy experienced in the long sixteenth century. In that same decade Belgium's Gemeentekrediet bank – the banking institution set up precisely a century beforehand as a bank for municipal governments – set up a historical commission called 'Pro Civitate', which would develop this tradition very actively. At the instigation of its first president, Fernand Vercauteren (from 1960 to 1977), this committee gave direction to comparative research in urban history by way of prizes, the organisation of colloquia, focussed source editions and exhibitions. In 1996 the Gemeentekrediet bank was absorbed into the larger Dexiabank. The same year the last 'Pro Civitate' colloquium was organised, concerning, ironically enough, the topic of urban demolition.

In the Netherlands all this went on in a strikingly similar way: there, too, interest in urban history had already been aroused early on, albeit

[3] Peter Clark, 'The city' in Peter Burke (ed.), *History and Historians in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 38.

with the chronological emphasis falling not on the Middle Ages but rather on the Golden Age (*Gouden Eeuw*) of the United Provinces, dominated as they were by the representatives of the regent class in the major towns, with Amsterdam in first place. Just as in Belgium, the danger of a teleological reading of urban history was real: the town, the workings of its institutions and the activity of its elites were seen as precursors to the triumphant society of burghers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this particular conceptualisation, the values and norms of the modern bourgeoisie found their origin in the political, cultural and moral actions of urban elites from the past. Ideas of this sort continue to survive in current debates about the 'Dutch Miracle' or about the so-called 'polder model', in which the separate trajectory of the Netherlands is presupposed, frequently without critically questioning its path-dependency upon the legacy from the southern Low Countries. In the Netherlands today, however, the approach of the city has been generally opened up by injecting historical research across time periods with innovative studies on architecture and urban planning, as well as insights from the social sciences. Beginning in 2006, the research programme entitled 'Urbanisation and Urban culture' ('Urbanisatie en Stadscultuur') ran under the direction of the Groningen professor Ed Taverne, subsidised by the NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research), and resulting in the collection of essays entitled *Nederland Stedenland* (*The Netherlands: A Land of Towns*, 2012). Another recent publication on urban history, in which the accent lies on developments in the northern Low Countries, is the collection *Living in the City: Urban Institutions in the Low Countries, 1200–2010* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), edited by Leo Lucassen and Wim Willems.

Parallel to these developments in Belgium and the Netherlands, practitioners of urban history from the Low Countries met up with each other more and more often in international committees, such as the Commission Internationale d'Histoire des Villes, set up in 1955, and the especially rapidly growing European Association for Urban History, active since 1989. In the latter the input of historians from the Low Countries has always been quite important – and it remains so, as the biennial conventions of the organisation demonstrate (in 1992 in Amsterdam, in 2010 in Ghent). It is not an exaggeration to state that urban history is firmly anchored in the university world of Belgium, above all. Since 1986, therefore, the field has been a topic central to incentive programmes launched by the federal administration of the sciences in Belgium, which creates consortia of excellence under the designation of

the Interuniversity Attraction Poles (IAP).[4] In 2002, within the framework of the long-term programme dedicated to urban history, Claire Billen put forward the idea of jointly writing a broadly accessible summary. The book in your hands is the long-sought-after result, after much consideration and adaptation, of that bold ambition.

Geographical and Chronological Markers

The historical territory of the Low Countries coincides approximately with what are today the Netherlands and Belgium, with the addition of Luxembourg and a large chunk of northern France. In the Middle Ages it revolved around a patchwork quilt of large and small principalities and seigneuries, the names of which survive with more or less accuracy in current provinces, sometimes even in a region (Flanders) or country (Luxembourg). There was no genuine political unity among these areas, although the unification of most of the principalities under the Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty, beginning in the late fourteenth century and lasting until the middle of the sixteenth century, comes fairly close. The development of towns was strongly influenced by the political context, to be sure, though it was never entirely defined by it. For example, except for a few years (1468–77) the prince-bishopric of Liège never belonged to the Burgundian-Habsburg complex, though contacts with the towns of Liège on the river Maas were close.

The territory was also characterised by major regional differences and developments. The contrast between, on the one hand, Namur and Luxembourg and, on the other hand, Holland and Zeeland could hardly be any greater. With their rugged terrain and expansive forests, the first two regions still contained large chunks of unspoilt nature. Towns there remained few in number and of modest proportions. In the other two principalities, because of the imminent threat from water, inhabitants found themselves obliged first of all to drain the majority of the territory, and then to protect it by means of increasingly complicated systems of water management. Since around 1300 there has been barely a patch of land here that has not been shaped by human hands. The low productivity from agriculture provided a genuine ecological challenge, which led

[4] The programme IAP P7/26, 'City and Society in the Low Countries (ca. 1200–ca. 1850). The condition urbaine: between resilience and vulnerability', brought together the following partners: Universiteit Gent (co-ordinator), Universiteit Antwerpen, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Université de Namur, Royal Library of Belgium, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Universiteit Leiden and Universiteit Utrecht.

Figure 1.2 Principalities in the Low Countries.

to nearly half the people migrating to the numerous towns and triggered creative economic responses.

This book starts with the first strong wave of urbanisation, which got underway in the eleventh century, albeit in different phases depending on the region. It was this round of urbanisation that transformed the natural landscape in the Low Countries into one that was (re)arranged primarily as a function of the needs of an urban market economy. Sketched schematically, one can speak of a slow geographic shift in this case: the towns in Artois and Flanders took the lead, but in the fifteenth century were superseded by urban nuclei in Brabant, whereas over the course of the sixteenth century the main focus shifted towards Holland and Zeeland. At the end of the sixteenth century, the political division between the northern and southern provinces as a consequence of the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648) added a new twist to the diversity of the regions. In the south it initially led to mass emigration and demographic stagnation, although the resilience of the urban system in the centuries that followed is striking. The fact is, however, that the relative focus of urbanisation, economy and military power shifted to the north in the seventeenth century. Having been frequently described already, this divergence, as well as the impressive further urbanisation of Holland in the seventeenth century, gave sufficient occasion for the authors of this book to place the end of their analysis around 1600. Even so, it will not escape the attentive reader that – in spite of the mantra of a 'Dutch miracle' – much can be said for the proposition that there is first and foremost a great continuity hiding behind this geographic shift.

The fact that the river Rhine has its delta in the Low Countries contributes to a considerable degree to the strategic position of the entire region. Its very expansive hinterland is connected along this trajectory to the North Sea and England, a route that has remained of enormous importance throughout the ages. An entire series of towns owe their flourishing to the land route from Cologne to Bruges, which goes back to Roman highways for the most part, specifically to river crossings, namely, Sint-Truiden, Zoutleeuw, Tienen and Leuven. In the north the role of Nijmegen, Arnhem and above all Dordrecht was closely connected with their importance in river trade, which to a large degree included the exchange of products from the central Rhine region with those from the Low Countries and from overseas. Towards the north this situation also applied to a lesser degree to towns along the river IJssel, such as Zutphen, Deventer and Kampen, where contact could be established with north German trade routes. Thus, much more than political boundaries, this network of rivers was strategic for the definition of a certain degree of unity in the Low Countries. Moreover, the linguistic boundary

ran across the region in the south: Flanders, Hainaut, Brabant, Liège and Luxembourg had both Germanic and Romance linguistic communities. In regular dealings, however, that caused no problems worth mentioning: familiarity with, and in many cases even command of, multiple languages constituted an important trump card that burghers could play in their business dealings.

In the Low Countries the geography exhibits a multiplicity of large rivers (Rhine, Maas, Scheldt) and small ones which, as a consequence of the minor fall in topography, run a diffuse course over an expansive territory. This pattern is entirely different from that of one dominant, very long waterway like the Rhône or the Danube: those have delineated valleys that sometimes formed a narrow corridor of towns but frequently penetrated less deeply or broadly into the hinterland. Formulated in political terms: though it was still possible to control shipping along the valleys from a few strategic points because there was no other way through, in the Low Countries many options to evade such controls existed; controlling people and levying tolls on shipping – or practising outright extortion – were a lot more difficult. Moreover, the rivers did not form any outer boundaries of the Low Countries, and only on certain trajectories did they function as boundaries between principalities. Thanks to the lower cost of river transport, large groups of people were able to take part directly or indirectly in movement and exchange between towns. The rivers were thus an important factor in the economic, social and cultural openness of the Low Countries.

Probably for the same reasons there was no one specific capital in the leading provinces. The medieval princes were almost continually travelling from one of their residences to another, so as to reinforce their authority through their presence. Brabant had four chief towns – Leuven, Brussels, Antwerp and 's-Hertogenbosch – each of which was the largest town and the judicial capital of one of the districts into which the duchy had been subdivided. In twelfth-century Flanders the seven largest towns dominated, of which Arras and Saint-Omer were absorbed in stages by the county of Artois formed at the end of that century. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Walloon Flanders was placed directly under the French crown, as a result of which Douai and Lille were also separated from the three remaining chief towns of Dutch-speaking Flanders, namely, Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. They, too, exercised diverse forms of administrative and judicial dominance within their districts. When Walloon Flanders reverted as a dowry to the counts of Flanders from the Burgundian dynasty in 1384, it nevertheless retained its separate administrative status, in which Lille was the capital. In the county of Holland, Dordrecht was indeed the oldest town, but it still did not