

## The Rise of Cities in North-West Europe

For more than fifty years, since the works on the rise of cities in north-west Europe by Fernand Vercauteren, François-Louis Ganshof and Hans Van Werveke were published, no synthesis which systematically examines the growth and development of cities in north-west Europe has been written. Adriaan Verhulst takes as his subject the history of urban settlements and towns in the region between the rivers Somme and Meuse from the late Roman period (fourth century) to the end of the twelfth century. This region comprises Flanders and Liège, two of the most urbanized areas not only in the southern Netherlands but in north-west Europe as a whole until the twelfth century. Fifteen towns are studied in all, and Professor Verhulst provides rich details of the impact of political, military and ecclesiastical as well as social and economic factors on the developing towns, as they were transformed from regional markets to centres of industry and international commerce.

ADRIAAN VERHULST is Professor Emeritus at the University of Ghent. He has written many books, including *Rural and Urban Aspects of Early Medieval Northwest Europe* (1992), and has contributed articles to journals such as the *Journal of Medieval History*, *Past and Present* and the *Economic History Review*.

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Adriaan Verhulst



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## Editor's preface

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Written by one of the most distinguished historians of medieval Europe, this volume is important for four reasons. First, it brings together and presents in a coherent, wide-ranging argument a great deal of the recent research on the southern Netherlands by French, Dutch, Belgian and German scholars; some of this work has been hidden in local or regional publications. Secondly, the book mobilizes the discoveries and insights not just of a diversity of historians (political, religious and agrarian as well as urban), but of archaeologists and numismatists. This gives a methodological richness to the study and puts it at the forefront of writing in the field. Thirdly, Professor Verhulst offers a powerful critique of much of the earlier writing on the rise of European cities in the high Middle Ages. In particular, the influential views of Henri Pirenne, a previous professor at Ghent, are finally given a decent funeral. Rather than being the flagship of European long-distance trade, as Pirenne argued, the major towns of the southern Low Countries had a much more complex evolution. Enjoying only limited continuity from the Roman era, their upsurge from the ninth century owed much to the patronage of increasingly buoyant abbeys and churches. In the next century there was the further stimulus provided by the backing of the Count of Flanders and by the breakdown of the manorial system. Growing regional market activity and the drift of industrial crafts to towns provided a springboard for the surge of long-distance trade.

The fourth reason for the importance of this book is that it focuses on one of the two most developed and successful urban networks in medieval Europe – along with that of northern Italy. Though more explicit comparison with the Mediterranean urban system might have been ventured, we get a clear sense of that complex interaction of political, locational, agrarian and other factors which contributed to the virtual invention of a new urban world in the southern Low Countries, one which, unlike in Italy, owed little to the infrastructure and urban design (if more to the urban concepts) of the Roman past. It was a dynamic urban system that

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despite regional shifts of power (from Flanders to Brabant) proved amazingly resilient, not only through the upheavals of the late Middle Ages, but over subsequent centuries.

Peter Clark



## Preface

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This book was prompted by the publication in 1991 of *Towns in the Viking Age* by Helen Clarke and Björn Ambrosiani. The fact that that book scarcely mentions the towns in the southern Low Countries and is chronologically restricted to the Viking Age – however broadly based, from the seventh to the ninth centuries – led to the realization that, apart from a number of valuable contributions in the old (1950) and new (1981/2) *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, there is no recent work which provides a clear view of the urban history of the southern Low Countries from the late Roman period to the first burgeoning of the towns in the twelfth century.

Though they still have the capacity to fascinate, the works of Pirenne in this area are outdated, as is the work of Edith Ennen, *Frühgeschichte der europäischen Stadt* (1953), which deals with the southern Low Countries at some considerable length. Since then, and especially since the major overview in the form of an article by Franz Petri, *Die Anfänge des mittelalterlichen Städtewesens in den Niederlanden und dem angrenzenden Frankreich* (1958), much research has been carried out into the urban history of the whole of the southern Netherlands and into the emergence and earliest history of many individual towns in this area. I recently compiled and reprinted a collection of the most important of these studies in *Anfänge des Städtewesens an Schelde, Maas und Rhein bis zum Jahre 1000*, which appeared in the series *Städteforschung*, vol. A/40, produced by the Institut für vergleichende Städtegeschichte in Münster (1996). It can serve as a sort of reader for the work under consideration here. However, this book is based not purely on the studies dating from 1958–86 which were reprinted in the above-mentioned compilation, but also and in particular on studies which have since been published by myself and others, historians and archaeologists, about the history of numerous individual towns or groups of towns between the late Roman period and the end of the twelfth century.

Geographically, I have chosen the area between the River Somme and the River Meuse as a framework because this area comprises both the

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county of Flanders, which reached almost to the Somme, and the prince-bishopric of Liège, whose leading medieval cities lay on the banks of the Meuse. The two areas were among the most urbanized regions not only in the southern Netherlands, but in north-west Europe as a whole, until into the twelfth century. The twelfth century has been chosen as the chronological cutoff point because that was when the cities under consideration really flourished for the first time, while in the second half and especially at the end of that century new developments began, from both a socio-economic and a politico-institutional point of view which would come to fruition in the thirteenth century. I have taken the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century as the chronological starting point for the work, i.e. the commencement of the late Roman Empire, which signified a break in the urban history of the Roman period larger and more consequential than the migration of the Germanic peoples and the fall of the Roman Empire. The book has a chronological structure, and each of the five main chapters corresponds, I believe, to a specific period in the urban history of the southern Low Countries.

I am greatly indebted to my former collaborators at Ghent University, Dr Frans Verhaeghe and Dr Georges Declercq, now professors at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, for the help they offered in a number of areas in the preparation of this work. Dr Arent Pol of the Koninklijk Penningkabinet in Leiden provided valuable information about the monetary history of a few places along the Meuse in the sixth–seventh centuries and kindly made corrections to what I thought I knew. I had an interesting and fruitful exchange of ideas on various aspects of the subject with Dr Derek Keene, Director of the Centre for Metropolitan History in London.

I wish to thank Professor Peter Clark of Leicester University for encouraging and making a critical assessment of my initial plans for this book and for introducing my definitive proposal at Cambridge University Press. I would also like to thank Richard Fisher, Publishing Development Director at Cambridge University Press, and his collaborators and referees for their interest in and commitment to the publication of this book, and to thank more especially Frances Brown for her accurate copy editing and her remarks, corrections and suggestions. Alison Mouthaan-Gwillim provided a careful rendering of my Dutch text into English and I am indebted to her for her work. Hans Rombaut was of great help in drawing up the maps. Luc Pareyn, Director of the Liberaal Archief in Ghent, allowed me to use a whole range of facilities that enabled me to prepare my manuscript for publication. I am also most grateful to Nancy Criel, a staff member at the Liberaal Archief, for all her typing work. Finally, my thanks must go to the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research

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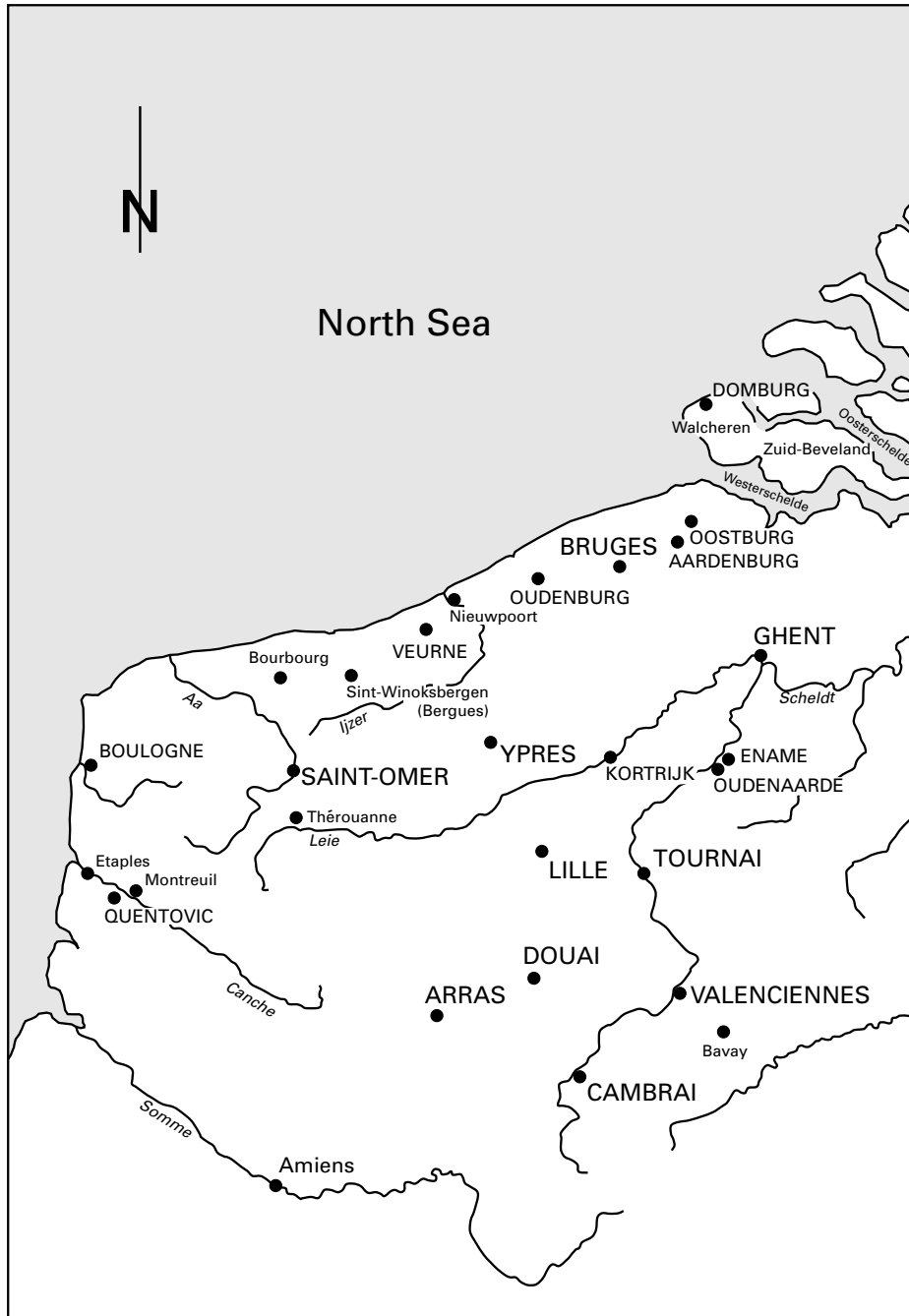
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(NFWO, now FWO-Flanders) which awarded us the funds for the project ‘Historical, archaeological and topographical research into the emergence and the earliest development of the Flemish Cities (late Roman period–twelfth century)’, thereby facilitating the realization of this work and making the English version possible.

### **A Note on place-names**

Names of Flemish cities are given in their official Dutch form and names of French and French-speaking cities in their French form, except where a generally accepted English form exists, e.g., Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Brussels.



Map 1 Cities and towns between the Somme and the Meuse/Rhine delta up to the twelfth century. *Legend:* big capitals – cities individually treated at length; small capitals – cities treated briefly; big roman – geographical reference only; small roman – cities and places mentioned briefly

