Introduction

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A new history of medieval Bruges needs little justification.[1] From the twelfth century, such was the expansion of its commerce and industry that the city became one of the most important in Europe, serving as a gateway for international trade, and as the home of a large-scale export-oriented cloth industry. By the end of the Middle Ages, Bruges had become a 'creative environment' with a flourishing luxury industry, one of Europe's foremost production centres of leatherworks, furs, illuminated manuscripts, tapestries, goldsmiths' work, early printing, and famously of paintings now considered part of a 'Flemish Renaissance'. Bruges had become a metropolis: a major city, a central hub of industry, commerce, and culture, with regional and international significance.

While considerable research has been conducted in recent years on various aspects of Bruges, no full synthesis of the city's history, in all its aspects, has ever been written, as Marc Boone emphasizes. The authors of this book, though, have aimed to produce more than a synthesis. Bruges has been treated from wider theoretical and comparative perspectives. New approaches to urban history have offered alternative views on the medieval city,[2] and an up-to-date history of Bruges has a contribution to make to the study of other towns. Urban history can also offer a 'totalizing' view onto the past: the city may be seen as 'a total phenomenon where the economic, the social, the political, the cultural, the technical and the imaginary are condensed'.[3] The city is both an object and a frame of analysis. By taking a 'total history' approach to one town, and by integrating the specialist research from a range of scholarly fields, a deeper understanding may be reached of the connections between many different aspects of urban life and of society as a whole.

[1] Cf. G. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1969), p. vii: 'A book on Renaissance Florence does not require an elaborate justification.'

[2] For overviews, see for instance, globally: P. Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2013); for Europe: P. Clark, *European Cities and Towns, 400–2000* (Oxford, 2009); for the Netherlands: W. Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee: de geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100–1560* (Amsterdam, 2010).

[3] P. Boucheron and D. Menjot, *Histoire de l'Europe urbaine*, vol. II: *La ville médiévale* (Paris, 2003), p. 8.

The book follows a broadly chronological pattern, starting with the early settlement that became Bruges, based on the latest findings of archaeological research (Chapter 1). It charts Bruges' expansion up to the end of the thirteenth century when the city was struck by economic and political crises (Chapters 2–5); and then turns to the city's 'golden age' (Chapters 6–8), ending with its decline in the sixteenth century (Chapter 10). But the trajectory traced does not follow the classic logic of 'origins, growth, maturity and decay'. From its beginnings to its final decline, Bruges was shaped by wider patterns of urban, rural and European development; and its eventual loss of importance was comparatively a shift from exceptionality to normalcy, from a city unusually positioned and structured in its 'golden age' to profit from circumstances, but which could not ultimately adapt when circumstances changed.

The city is 'a system within systems of cities'.[4] Medieval urban historiography has come to situate towns within wider urban networks and in relation to their hinterlands, emphasizing their 'central-place functions', be they market, industrial, political or judicial.[5] The astonishing economic growth and cultural efflorescence of medieval Bruges has to be placed within the urban networks of northwestern Europe and within a complex set of relations between town and countryside. James M. Murray has called Bruges 'the cradle of capitalism'.[6] Indeed, according to the classic theories of Marx, Weber, Pirenne, Park, Simmel, Benjamin and others, the city is a locus for change, progress, market development, democracy, social and political struggle and polarization, cultural innovation, bourgeois ideology, workers' class consciousness, secularization, individualism and modernity in general.[7] Whether, or rather in what ways, this was the case for Bruges is also an underlying theme of this book. Comparisons are made between Bruges and medieval cities of comparable importance such as Venice, Genoa, Florence, Paris, London, Ghent, Cologne and Lübeck. The implicitly comparative approach adopted in most chapters, whether on demographic, social, political or cultural themes, is drawn out in the final Conclusion.

The city has also been defined as a 'distinctive space of lived and living interaction'.[8] Concepts of social space, as outlined in the works of Henri

[4] The expression was coined by the geographer Brian Berry, quoted in W. Prevenier, J.-P. Sosson, and M. Boone, 'Le réseau urbain en Flandre (XIIIe – XIXe siècle): composantes et dynamique', in *Le réseau urbain en Belgique dans une perspective historique (1350–1850): une approche statistique et dynamique* (Brussels, 1992), p. 157.

[5] On the historiography of this, see Conclusion below.

[6] J. M. Murray, *Bruges, Cradle of Capitalism, 1280–1390* (Cambridge, 2005).

[7] Cf. Clarke, *European Cities and Towns.*

[8] H. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris, 1974).

Lefebvre and others,[9] have partly guided the structure of this book and informed many of its chapters' themes: how the city's markets and 'central-place' functions (Chapters 3, 6) and its power relations (Chapters 4, 7) developed within the changing cityscape; how religious practices (Chapter 8) emerged in and related to the urban environment; how text, sound and visual art (Chapter 9) were shaped by – and also shaped – the particular morphology of the city.

The history of Bruges is thus grounded on an understanding of the landscape and its built environment. The proximity and influence of the sea, and the liminal space that, according to the signs of early settlement, the locality occupied between coastal and inland Flanders, provide the keys to Bruges' initial development; and indeed the hydrography of the city and its access to the sea remained of prime importance to its inhabitants throughout the medieval period. Chapter 1 considers Bruges' origins, and revisits controversy on the rise and definition of towns, so much associated with the work of Henri Pirenne. It offers a more nuanced approach to the importance of *castrum* and *suburbium* as key nuclei in urban development. The early character of Bruges in the ninth century as a military and even spiritual stronghold of the counts of Flanders, and as a 'proto-urban' centre with portuary functions, was also determined by the early development of another nucleus of settlement that may well have served as an agrarian market, linked to the castle economy and the wider region. Economic take-off in the eleventh century has also to be set in a wider perspective of population growth and rural development, particularly cloth production. Chapter 2 examines the spatial evidence in landscape and building for the phenomenal expansion of Bruges' capacity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to produce textiles and other artisanal goods, to serve as a market for regional and international commerce, and to meet new social and spiritual needs that accompanied unprecedented immigration into the city. By the end of the thirteenth century, an entirely different urban environment had been created, in which the earlier nuclei of settlement had been subsumed into a more complex and diversified pattern of buildings, habitation and functionality. The city reached its greatest areal extent at the end

[9] See for example: P. Arnade, M. C. Howell and W. Simons, 'Fertile Spaces: The Productivity of Urban Space in Northern Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002), 515–48; C. Goodson, A. E. Lester and C. Symes (eds.), *Cities, Texts and Social Networks, 400–1500: Experiences and Perceptions of Medieval Urban Space* (Farnham, 2010); M. Boone and M. C. Howell (eds.), *The Power of Space in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Cities of Italy, Northern France and the Low Countries* (Turnhout, 2013); M. Cohen and F. Madeline (eds.), *Space in the Medieval West: Places, Territories, and Imagined Geographies* (Farnham, 2014).

of the thirteenth century, but even in the later Middle Ages, as Chapter 5 shows, the urban landscape was continually reshaped, to become at one level more socially diversified still, but at another, increasingly consolidated into a more coherent unit. The new city walls built after 1297 to contain the sprawling population came to encompass a space that was no longer the sum of its initial nuclei, nor one divided, as it had been in the thirteenth century, between older centre, newer suburbs and lordly enclaves, but one more clearly managed, judicially, administratively and ecologically, as a single whole.

Spatial developments were the result of interactions between environment and various agencies. The economic, demographic and social changes that moulded city space are examined in two chapters. Chapter 3 places the period of urban expansion from 1100 to c.1300 within its rural, demographic and political context, to explain how it was possible for the city to develop its industrial and commercial capacity. Agricultural development in the region was underpinned but was also altered by the rapid urban expansion, particularly in cloth production. Bruges grew from a regional trading centre into an international business centre, as Flemish trade shifted from an 'active' to a 'passive' phase. In many ways, the staggering growth of Bruges in the later Middle Ages as a centre of luxury production, banking and international commerce (Chapter 6) would seem to be a natural progression from these earlier signs of expansion. Yet this ignores the massive structural conversion of the local economy that was required in the process, particularly the shift away from cloth production towards clothing and luxury industries that began to occur in the early fourteenth century, in a period of recession and demographic reversal. The same conversion also accounts for the structural weaknesses behind Bruges' phenomenal success in the fifteenth century. The glamour of high living was built on fragile ground: trade, demand and consumption of added-value commodities, were ultimately vulnerable to market forces beyond the metropolis' control.

The agents effecting and affected by these changes in the urban landscape and society become more visible in the documentary record from 1100 onwards. Behind urban expansion were the counts of Flanders protecting and profiting from 'market peace'; ecclesiastical bodies; noble elites and merchant-entrepreneurs, and other elite groups like the hostellers who began to service the influx of foreign merchants. Yet of particular importance was the appearance of the 'commune' that became the urban authority over the expanding territory of markets and collective properties. How and when this communal agency arose, and who held sway over it, are the questions asked in Chapter 4. By the thirteenth century, for all its ideals

of community, the commune was in effect dominated by the class rule of great merchants; but not without tensions. Growing polarization is apparent between elite merchant groups and the proletarianized labour force behind industrial growth. Social division was tempered by the appearance of middling groups and craft organizations by the late thirteenth century, but these groups had also begun to claim a place within communal politics. In the context of crisis in the textile industry, tensions spilled over into outright revolt by the 1280s and into the 'revolution' of 1302. The changes that resulted were to determine the logic of Bruges' turbulent politics for the next two centuries. As Chapter 7 shows, guild power assumed a new ascendancy after 1302, as did the corporate ideals that guildsmen claimed to represent – even though guilds and corporatism were constantly challenged by a commercial elite who also populated the civic magistracy; and by the rise of comital and state power, driven after 1384 by the Valois dukes of Burgundy and after 1477 by their Habsburg successors. These broad outlines of change need refining though. The categories historians use to describe these social groups (such as 'classes', 'elites', 'patricians', 'middling guildsmen'), need further scrutiny in order to understand social mobility and political office-holding. So too does the influence of networks created by faction, family ties, commerce or work. The importance of other social groups, and the role of women in the economy, also demand attention for a fuller picture of urban society to emerge.

The urban landscape, society and politics shaped cultural practices and values; but these practices and values also framed perceptions of the urban environment. Late medieval religion in Bruges (Chapter 8) reflects the city's social complexity, competition and wealth; and it could serve the interests of powerful lay people. Bruges' annual Holy Blood procession, beginning in the early fourteenth century, in which so many guilds, magistrates and clergy participated, expressed communal ideals and defined city space as sacred by its itinerary around the new walls. But the relationship between religion, society and authority was complex. The Holy Blood procession emerged in a period of divisive turmoil within the city; religious institutions and currents of spirituality could corrode social aspirations and secular power. 'Civic religion' may not be the most useful term to describe the city's religious practices, especially as the clerical presence within Bruges remained strong. Religion was also part of wider cultural practices: were these distinctively urban or peculiar to Bruges? Chapter 9 examines the texts, images and sounds produced in the city. The conditions that favoured the production of art, music and literature were the result of supply and demand: artisanal skill, the

networks and markets within and beyond the city; but also the diverse needs of a wide range of patrons. Courtly, noble, merchant and municipal investment in cultural capital served power or particular social and political needs; but some texts – even those produced by rhetoricians in the pay of city magistrates – reveal frictions in urban society, while other cultural activity sought more subversive ends. The complex interplay in Bruges between local patriotism and cosmopolitanism, 'civic' and 'court' culture, opulence and social tensions, together shaped a vibrant and distinctive cultural environment.

The final Chapter 10 takes up the many threads of Bruges' spatial, economic, social, political and cultural history in order to explain its dwindling fortunes in the sixteenth century. How was it that an international metropolis could be reduced to a town that was, according to one ageing citizen in 1590, little more than a 'retail shop'? Was it the result of structural flaws, hydrographical and economic, or of changing circumstances? The city's decline – or rather the process by which an exceptional city became a more normal one – has to be viewed from a European context of profound change; just as the city's longer history should also be set ultimately (see the Conclusion) within a broader comparative framework.