

## Medieval Bruges

Bruges was undoubtedly one of the most important cities in medieval Europe. Bringing together specialists from both archaeology and history, this 'total' history presents an integrated view of the city's history from its very beginnings, tracing its astonishing expansion through to its subsequent decline in the sixteenth century. The authors' analysis of its commercial growth, industrial production, socio-political changes and cultural creativity is grounded in an understanding of the city's structure, its landscape and its built environment. More than just a biography of a city, this book places Bruges within a wider network of urban and rural development and its history in a comparative framework, thereby offering new insights into the nature of a metropolis.

Andrew Brown is Associate Professor at Massey University in New Zealand and a historian of late medieval religion and society. His books include *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges, c. 1300–1520* (Cambridge, 2010).

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# Medieval Bruges, c. 850–1550

*Edited by*

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*In memoriam*

*Yann Hollevoet*

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## Foreword

MARC BOONE

When in the 1970s I began to investigate the social history of Flemish cities during the (late) Middle Ages, focusing mainly on my native city of Ghent, the city of Bruges inevitably entered the frame. Within the exceptionally urbanized county of Flanders, Ghent and Bruges (as well as Ypres) dominated the late medieval urban landscape in such a way that no history of any one of these cities could afford to overlook what happened in the other two. I therefore had to have some grasp of the history of late medieval Bruges on many an occasion. Strange and remarkable as it may seem, somebody looking for a global overview of the history of Bruges still had to reach for a publication dating from 1910, *Bruges, histoire et souvenirs*, written by a local erudite canon Adolphe Duclos (1841–1925), which was a goldmine of details.<sup>1</sup> Duclos was of course a man of his age, and that age was particularly propitious for the study of urban history. The golden period of the *fin de siècle* and the start of the twentieth century was characterized by a general boom in the economy and culture, a process in which cities appeared to be the harbours of modernity. Urban history therefore became a highly successful field of study for which German and French historians had paved the way. In Belgium the historian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), who taught from 1886 at the University of Ghent, had embarked upon an intellectual journey that would reveal to the outside world the historical significance of the cities of the former Low Countries.<sup>2</sup> Pirenne set the tone of research for many generations of historians to come. Almost all the authors of this book belong to the tradition he set in motion in Ghent or came into contact with his successors.

Although Duclos' work was therefore embedded in a broad intellectual interest that was gaining ground in the years of its publication, it was inspired

<sup>1</sup> On Duclos, see J. Dumolyn, 'Een strijdbare Vlaamse kanunnik over de Brugse Metten', in *Uit de korf van de Emulatie: Baanbrekende historische bijdragen gepubliceerd in 175 jaar Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge* (Bruges, 2014), pp. 35–9.

<sup>2</sup> The medievalist Pirenne obtained his doctorate in history at the university of Liège under the direction of Godefroid Kurth. All of his writings on urban history have been collected in a posthumous publication: H. Pirenne, *Les villes et les institutions urbaines*, 2 vols. (Paris and Brussels, 1939). On Pirenne see: S. Keymeulen and J. Tollebeek, *Henri Pirenne, Historian: A Life in Pictures* (Leuven, 2011).

more by local interests than by a specific research agenda. Nevertheless, his book proved to be a great success: it was reprinted in 1913, became much sought after, and therefore ranked high in bibliophile fairs. A reprint by the Westvlaamse Gidsenkring (association of tourist guides of Western Flanders) was put on the market in 1976 and sold out in no time. In 1972 another guide organization had already published a new overview on the history of Bruges, under the direction of several Bruges-based academics, the best known being the Ghent professor Egide Strubbe (1897–1970). One had to wait until 1982, however, for the emeritus professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, Jan Arthur van Houtte (1913–2002), to publish his magnum opus *De geschiedenis van Brugge* (The history of Bruges). On the frontispiece of the book he enthusiastically cites a sixteenth-century humanist and professor in Louvain, Adrianus Barlandus: ‘Pulchrae sunt Ganda, Antverpia, Bruxellae, Lovanium, Mechlinia, sed nihil ad Brugas!’ Twelve out of the eighteen chapters of his book deal with the medieval history of Bruges, not only because Van Houtte himself was a medievalist by training, but as he stated in his introduction, after the Middle Ages Bruges never played the same pivotal role in the political, economic, and cultural history of Europe as it had during that period. Van Houtte originated from Bruges and in his long and prolific career published prolifically on the history of his native town. Despite the fact that Van Houtte’s monograph was generally welcomed as a much needed aggiornamento of Duclos,<sup>3</sup> it was never translated into another language and its content therefore remained confined to a relatively restricted group of readers able to read Dutch.

It was mainly so-called ‘coffee-table books’ on the (art) history of Bruges that were published after then, with two notable exceptions. First, Marc Ryckaert’s seminal *Historische stedenatlas van België: Brugge* (Historical Atlas of Belgium: Bruges) was published in 1991 in a series of historical atlases edited by the financial bank institution, the Belgian state bank ‘Crédit communal – Gemeentekrediet’ (which for more than a century had acted as a Maecenas for local history, until it was swallowed up by a French group in 1996 to continue its existence as Dexia and finally disappear in 2011, in the aftermath of the financial crisis).<sup>3</sup> Ryckaert’s book, however, still stands as a most original contribution, looking at the history of his native city from the angle of spatial history and the history of urban development, long before these topics became fashionable. The same author, together with the city’s

<sup>3</sup> On the role of this bank and the development of urban history in Belgium in general, see C. Billen and M. Boone, ‘L’histoire urbaine en Belgique: construire l’après-Pirenne entre tradition et rénovation’, in *Città & Storia*, 5/1 (2010), 3–22.



archivist André Vandewalle, coordinated a general overview, *Brugge: De geschiedenis van een Europese stad* (Bruges, the history of a European city) which was published in 1999, simultaneously in Dutch and French versions. The publication was evidently part of the preparation for the year 2002, when Bruges adopted with pride the title of Cultural Capital of Europe. In addition, though, the book wanted to bring to the fore the historiography of the city since Van Houtte's publication seventeen years before. It also reflected the fact that writing a comprehensive history of a city was no longer conceived as being the work of a single author, but one that had to rely on several specialists of different periods and approaches (historians, art historians, archaeologists, and the like). The five principal authors – all of them members of the city's historical and cultural institutions – therefore received the support of twenty-four specialists who wrote limited contributions on very specific topics or highlights of the history of Bruges.

The following book, edited by Andrew Brown and Jan Dumolyn, has to be seen with this prehistory in mind, for only in such a perspective does it become clear how much it was needed and how valuable it will prove to be.

First of all, it is written in English, today's global language of communication in science, an extremely laudable effort since it will allow a much broader field of interested readers to participate in the historical knowledge concerning one of Europe's leading commercial metropolises. Second, although it does not aim at a general public in the first instance – and thanks to the abundant references to existing literature and for some topics directly to unedited sources, its state-of-the-art research will be of primary interest to fellow historians – it will nevertheless also appeal to a wider audience, interested in medieval and/or urban history, and indeed to the general public, whose serious desire to be well informed in the best way possible has to be acknowledged. Third and foremost, it brings together a team of authors who have clearly reflected on the larger topics they were invited to write about. The chapter on art and culture, for instance, stands out in this respect as it assembles insights and visions that transcend the traditional boundaries between literary history, art history, musicology, and the like. But the other chapters do so as well. Particularly innovative are the many recent insights that (urban) archaeology has yielded over the last decades and which are bound to offer, as the first two chapters illustrate, new insights into how the city came about, and into urban space in general. Space, following in the footsteps of Henri Lefebvre and the historiographic realization of his writings, is an important aspect of urban history, and as a topic it is very well served in this book. Paradoxically, the chapters on economic history may seem

less innovative, or at least less exciting to read, because of recent and decades-long efforts to focus on the economic role of Bruges as a centre of commerce. Yet the deconstructive reading here allows the traditional image of Bruges as a unique commercial centre (a true ‘image d’Épinal’ in itself) to be replaced by a much more realistic view of a city that throughout the medieval period also remained an important centre of industrial (textile) production. This, combined with an emphasis on the development of an early service economy, is of great value. There are more surprising insights, some of which deserve particular mention: the role of the communal movement in medieval Flanders; the attention given to ecological history through the lens of water management, an issue of perennial concern in the Low Countries; and the view on the gradual decline of Bruges in the first half of the sixteenth century. A much quoted principle in economics, indeed, states that what goes up, must come down. For all its uniqueness, medieval Bruges was no exception to this.

*Marc Boone*

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## Acknowledgements

The book began life as an idea in 2008, when we met up in Edinburgh; but it was never conceived as a project we could undertake alone. Collaboration between us has required the support of many institutions, our own universities, Ghent and Massey, as well as others. In 2008 Jan was a visiting fellow at the University of Glasgow on the invitation of Graeme Small and supported by a grant from the Caledonian Research Foundation; we were able to meet for a longer period of collaboration in New Zealand in 2014, thanks to a visiting fellowship supported by the School of Humanities and Massey University Research Fund. We are also very grateful for the collaboration of so many colleagues who have become co-authors of chapters in this book: without their commitment and time the book could not have been written.

The help of graduate and postgraduate students in correcting footnotes, inserting the bibliography, and drawing up maps and the index has also been invaluable: our thanks go to Ward Leloup, Alexander Linsingh, Wout Saelens and Joppe Vermeyen. We are grateful too for the professional cartographic assistance provided by Hans Blomme, historical cartographer of Ghent University Department of History, and by Dr Jan Trachet of the Department of Archaeology.

Apart from Ghent University Library, the research for this book essentially took place in Bruges institutions. Bruges has a very fine tradition of local history, which has formed a strong basis for work on this book, not all of which can be directly acknowledged here. We have benefited greatly from the Public Library and the many archives of the city, including the State archives. We thank all staff members of those institutions, and particularly the entire staff of the Bruges City Archives where we have spent months and months in total. Much thanks is owed to Dr Noël Geirnaert, Dr André Vandewalle, Jan D'hondt, Isabelle Debie, Bram Vanaelst, Willy Timmerman, Pieter Kerckhove, Véronique De Schepper, Peter Bultinck, Jan Anseeuw, Peter Goetghebeur and Eddy Costenoble for creating the efficient, generous, and also very pleasant work environment for which the Bruges City Archives have an international reputation.

The book is dedicated to the memory of Yann Hollevoet (1962–2012), archaeologist of early medieval Flanders and co-author of this work.

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Abbreviations

ADN	Archives départementales du Nord, Lille
AGR	Archives Générales du Royaume/Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels (General State Archives)
BAB	Bischoppelijk archief, Bruges (Episcopal Archives, Bruges)
BO	<i>Brugs Ommeland</i>
BTFG	<i>Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis</i>
GVS, <i>Cartulaire</i>	L. Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed.), <i>Cartulaire de l'ancienne estaple de Bruges</i> , 3 vols. (Bruges, 1904–6)
GVS, <i>Coutume</i>	L. Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed.), <i>Coutume de la ville de Bruges</i> (Brussels, 1874–5).
GVS, <i>Inventaire</i>	L. Gilliodts-Van Severen, <i>Inventaire des archives de la ville de Bruges</i> , 7 vols. (Bruges, 1871–85)
HGG	<i>Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis</i>
HKZM	<i>Handelingen van de Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis</i>
HMG	<i>Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent</i>
JMH	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
OBB	Openbare Bibliotheek, Brugge (Public Library of Bruges)
OCMW	Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn
RAB	Rijksarchief, Brugge (State Archives of Bruges)
RN	<i>Revue du Nord</i>
SAB	Stadsarchief, Brugge (City Archives of Bruges)
TG	<i>Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis</i>

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