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Source: *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1929), pp. 20-40
Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Economic History Society
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2589871

THE PLACE OF THE NETHERLANDS IN THE ECONOMIC HISTORY OF MEDIÆVAL EUROPE[1]

THE place which the Netherlands have occupied in the economic history of Europe is explained, like that which they have held in its political history, by their geographical position. Situated at the extremity of the " commercial axis " of France and also at the extremity of the great plain of Northern Germany, and fronting England along the whole length of their coasts, they form the meeting-place of the great lines of communication of the West. They are a place of junction and of crossroads, and if they have been the battlefield of Europe they have also been a peculiarly active centre of commercial attraction, while the convergence of transport routes upon them gave rise to an export industry from very early times. Whether viewed from the point of view of exchange or from that of production, their economic history exhibits a distinctly international character, and it is this feature, indeed, which gives it its unique interest.

I.

Before the Roman conquest it was through the Netherlands that the tin imported from Britain took its way to the port of Marseilles. On the other hand, the golden coins of the Belgian tribes, struck, like those of the Celts in Gaul, in imitation of the Macedonian staters, bear witness to the existence of relations between these tribes and the Mediterranean. The annexation of the country by Rome (57-51 B.C.) naturally introduced, together with security, the practices of a developed economic life. The soil was cleared and cultivated to a considerable extent, and the area cultivated seems to have remained unchanged from this period until the end of the eleventh century. Roads were constructed from the reign of Augustus onwards, and linked the whole region with the South; and by them it came in contact with Mediterranean civilization. There were, indeed, at this period, nothing but small provincial towns in the country which later was to become so

[1] The word Netherlands is used in this article in its geographical and not its political sense—*i.e.*, to indicate the basins of the Scheldt, the Lower and Middle Meuse and the Lower Rhine which are now divided between France, Belgium and Holland.

decidedly urban. Tongres, Tournai, Bavai, Cassel were only secondary administrative centres, incapable of rivalling the towns on the banks of the Rhine and the Moselle. The population was mainly rural, but it lived in plenty. The excavations of the many villas discovered in Hainault, Brabant, Luxembourg and in the district of Namur have brought to light a style of furnishing which abounds in " objets d'art " of Italian or Oriental manufacture, and marble imported from Illyria and Africa was used in decoration. The raising of cattle was a considerable occupation, and the hams and geese of Belgium were the delight of Roman " gourmets "; while the sale of cereals was assured, thanks to the military administration which bought them for victualling the legions encamped along the Rhine. By the side of such purely agricultural pursuits there existed a rural industry which appears to have been particularly active. The brass manufacture was carried on on the banks of the Upper Meuse, while forges were plentiful between the Sambre and Meuse, and glass works around Namur. Pottery was made with such skill that its products can be acclaimed as the most perfect produced in any Roman province. Finally, in the plains by the coast, where the woollen industry was to flourish so greatly in the Middle Ages, cloaks (*sage*) and mantles (*birri*) were already being manufactured and exported to the other side of the Alps. All this evidence leads to the conclusion that Belgium, undoubtedly, owes the beginnings of her industrial life to Rome. Commerce was carried on both by land to Gaul and Italy, and by sea to Britain. Boulogne, where the routes from the Mediterranean met the sea, was an important traffic centre, and at Domburg, at the mouth of the Scheldt, the remains of a temple to the Celtic goddess Nehallenia, patron of navigation, have been discovered. The *Classis Germanica*, which had its workshops at Mayence, had established branches at Nimwegen, at Leyden, at Katwijk, and at Rumpst on the Rupel.[1]

It is a very significant fact that the Frankish occupation of the Netherlands in the fifth century did not destroy this economic life. No doubt the troubles and the rapine inseparable from an invasion must have given it some serious shocks, but it is noticeable that its principal features reappear in Merovingian Gaul from the reign of Clovis. In spite of the scanty evidence, we know for certain that up to about the year 700 Mediterranean commerce was still spreading all kinds of Oriental spices over the country.[2] Papyrus, imported from Egypt, was so plentiful that it could be regularly bought at the market

[1] F. Cumont, *Comment la Belgique fut romanisée*, xxvi. (Brussels, 1914).

[2] H. Pirenne, " Un contraste économique, Mérovingiens et Carolingiens," in *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* (1923), 223 *seq.* See also *Mediæval Cities*, 18 *seq.* (Princeton, 1925).

of Cambrai, and no doubt in many other places. Shipbuilding and seafaring must have retained their importance at Maestricht and at Duurstede near Utrecht; and so must the brass industry at Huy, to judge from the large number of coins struck in these districts in Merovingian times. It is certain also that the woollen weaving, which was so flourishing in the ninth century, cannot have disappeared in the course of the preceding centuries.

II.

The serious crisis caused by the irruption of Islam into the Mediterranean basin, which coincides with the beginning of the Carolingian period, had an immediate repercussion in the Netherlands. Closing the Mediterranean along the coast of Gaul, and severing the relations of the latter with Syria and Egypt, it dried up the stream of commerce from Marseilles which had not ceased, even after the fall of the Roman Empire, to reach and vivify the districts of the north. From the reign of Charlemagne onwards clothes cease to be made of silk and the spices and wine of Gaza disappear from the list of foodstuffs. Just as the latter no longer includes anything but indigenous commodities, so none but linen or woollen garments are any longer worn. This alteration, imposed by external forces on the habits of the people, seems to have turned to the advantage of the woollen industry in which the ancestors of the Flemings had already been long engaged. It is certain that from the beginning of the ninth century this industry enjoyed an extraordinary popularity. It was the only one which was vigorous enough under the Carolingian Empire to carry on an export trade. The so-called Frisian cloths (*pallia fresonica*) mentioned in the writings of the period were undoubtedly woven in Flanders,[1] but, as often happens in commercial history, they have been named from the people who transported them, and it was in Frisian ships that they were carried from Duurstede and Utrecht down the valley of the Rhine. These cloths, made by the peasants on the coasts or by the women in the women's working houses (*gynecea*) of the great estates of the Scheldt basin, were not only beyond the reach of competition for their quantity, but also for their fineness and beauty of colour. It was Frisian cloth which Charlemagne chose to offer to the Caliph Haroun al Raschid in return for his gifts. It must be supposed that it was thanks to the preservation of Gallo-Roman technique, and in particular of the processes of fulling and dyeing, that the Flemish cloth industry from that time onwards exhibited all the characteristics of a luxury

[1] H. Pirenne, " Draps de Frise ou draps de Flandre," in *Vierteljahrschrift für Social und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1909), 308 *seq.*

industry which it was to keep until the end of the Middle Ages. Its curious prosperity in this period is all the more remarkable because of the striking contrast which it forms with the essentially agricultural civilization to which the closing of the Mediterranean had reduced Western Europe. Except in Italy and in the Netherlands the economy of that period was a self-sufficing economy. It realized its classic form in the organization of the great estates after the type laid down in the *Capitulare de Villis*. In the absence of markets, none of them produced more than sufficient for the needs of their proprietors and of the *familia* of serfs who cultivated the ground, and in consequence each made a point of producing everything necessary to its own subsistence. In these conditions the circulation of money was reduced to the strictest minimum. Not only were silver coins substituted for gold from the reign of Charlemagne, but rents were almost always paid, and feudal dues of all sorts rendered in kind. Nothing is more certain than that the Netherlands were forced to adopt this retrogressive economy. The fact that nearly all the monasteries in this region, where the cultivation of the vine is impossible, made a point of obtaining estates in the vine-growing countries, either in the valleys of the Rhine and Moselle or in that of the Seine, as gifts from their benefactors, proves that they were unable to obtain wine by ordinary commercial means.[1] The privileged situation of the Netherlands prevented them, however, from being entirely confined to this marketless economic system. In spite of everything a certain commercial activity continued to manifest itself, not only among the Frisians at Duurstede and Utrecht, but also at Quentovic (Estaple) on the Canche, which was a very active port. The extent of the relations between these places and the North is most positively attested for us by the discovery of their coins in England and even on the shores of the Baltic. It is characteristic also that the only gold coins minted by the Carolingian kings besides those of Uzès were struck in Friesland.[2] The influence of maritime commerce was naturally felt in the interior, and its repercussion developed river transport. *Portus*, that is to say depôts and staples, existed on the banks of the large rivers, and Tournai and Valenciennes on the Scheldt and Maestricht on the Meuse had become or had continued to be important agglomerations of merchants and shipbuilders. Thus, although the Netherlands had ceased to be the most distant point of focus for Mediterranean traffic as they had been during the Roman and Merovingian periods, yet, thanks to their woollen industry and to their

[1] H. van Werveke, " Comment les établissements religieux belges se procuraient-ils du vin au haut Moyen Age," in *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* (1923), 643 *seq.*

[2] M. Prou, *Les Monnaies carolingiennes*, xxxiii. (Paris, 1896).

commerce on the rivers and the North Sea, they still presented an aspect which could not be paralleled north of the Alps. If they had escaped the catastrophe which brought upon them the inroads of the Northmen in the second half of the ninth century, they might have gradually extended their commercial activity around them and have considerably hastened the economic renaissance of Western Europe.

The cause of the sudden descent of the Northmen on England and the Continent in the ninth century is still unknown. It is extremely probable that it may be considered from some points of view as a consequence of the invasion of Islam. What is known of the commercial relations which the Swedes maintained with Mohammedan Asia by way of the Volga and the Caspian Sea, as early as the eighth century, leads us to believe that they had considerably developed the navigation of the Baltic. Impelled by their example, the Danes and Norwegians in their turn set out on those expeditions of commerce and piracy which were naturally directed towards the British Isles and the shores of the continent facing the North Sea and the Atlantic. Whatever the truth may be, the disasters which they inflicted on these districts were immense. The Netherlands, which the large river estuaries laid widely open to the enemy fleets, suffered more from their ravages than any other country. All its monasteries and all its ports were pillaged or reduced to ashes. Quentovic disappeared: Duurstede was ravaged four times in succession. It was only after the victory won by Arnoul of Carinthia at Louvain in 891 that the barbarians ceased to attack a country which was by this time in a state of complete exhaustion and no longer offered them a sufficiently tempting spoil. It is needless to remark that during these years commerce and industry disappeared for the time being, but they were not slow in reviving. The geographical situation of the country was too favourable for their eclipse to last long, and they recovered after the Norman invasion of the ninth century just as they had done after the Frank invasion of the fifth century.

III.

It may even be asked if the Normans themselves did not contribute to the revival. Their invasions had only been the violent prelude to the period of maritime supremacy which they exercised in the North Sea and in the Baltic, before they were dispossessed in the twelfth century by the Teutonic Hansa. As soon as they began to substitute more peaceful pursuits for military activity, they appear as merchants along those rivers of the Netherlands which they had visited, in the first place, as pirates. It is known for certain that in the tenth century they were carrying on trade at Utrecht and in Flanders. It was

probably through their agency that the coins struck in a number of places in the Netherlands began, from this time onwards, to penetrate into Sweden, to the isles of Götland and Öland and even as far as Poland.[1] The inhabitants of the country, for their part, soon began again to utilize the means of communication which nature had put so generously at their disposal. The inhabitants of the valley of the Meuse may be traced, descending the river to its junction with the Rhine, ascending the latter to Cologne and thence travelling to Goslar to provide themselves with the copper which they needed for the metal industry, now reviving at Huy and Dinant. On the other side of the country, on the coast of Flanders, commerce sprang up again between Bruges, which was beginning to grow at the base of the gulf of Zwin, and the Thames estuary. The market tariff of London (991-1002) mentions the merchandise sold there by the Flemings, and also names the men of Liège, Nivelles, and Huy.[2] It is almost certain that the latter came to buy the tin which they needed for their brass manufacture. As to the Flemings, no doubt they imported cloth and exported in return cargoes of that fine English wool which was soon to become the main raw material of their industry. The international character of economic life thus reappeared with its revival. The commerce which the Netherlands carried on with foreign countries, exporting the produce of the national industry and importing raw materials, presents a very different appearance from the petty chaffering round a local market, which, according to a far too prevalent theory, proceded the economic revival of Europe. In reality, both in the Netherlands and in Italy, this revival was brought about by long-distance commerce.

In the absence of exact information, the status of the travelling merchants and navigators of the tenth century admits only of hypothesis. There is nothing which would lead one to see in them the servants to whom certain monastic houses entrusted their provisioning, and who gradually emancipated themselves and carried on trade on their own account. The general arguments against this view are all the stronger in the case of the Netherlands because merchants acting for monastic houses are unknown there. Everything which can be gathered about the early *mercatores* of the Netherlands obliges us to consider them as independent of manorial power. From what class did they come? If that is a question which cannot be answered with certainty, all the evidence, at any rate, points to the fact that they must be looked for among those *vagantes*, those *pauperes*, in brief those

[1] Al. Bugge, "Die Nordeuropäische Verkehrswege im frühen Mittelalter," *Vierteljahrschrift für Social und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1906), 227 *seq.*

[2] Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, i., 232.

vagabonds who, lacking land, wandered about society in search of a living. Some lived on alms, others took service in the army, others, no doubt, took the chances involved in entering upon the career of a wandering trader. They must be regarded as bold and enterprising adventurers. Capital they had none. Among them we cannot trace a single landowner selling his property to realize capital wherewith to enter trade. Very primitive forms of credit must have sufficed for their operations. Others may have been enabled by some lucky chance to build up a basis from which to start. But above all, and this is particularly important, they did not work singly. Nothing could have been less individualistic than their method of trade. It was only carried on thanks to the possibility of association, which multiplied the results of their efforts by uniting them. The merchant gilds, which appear as already solidly established in the eleventh century, must be as old as the revival of commerce; for this commerce, whether by land or sea, was a commerce of caravans. It was in armed bands, rigidly disciplined, headed by a chief (the *doyen*), and flying each its own flag that the *mercatores* appeared at the markets. Whether they called themselves gilds, hansas, or charitable associations (*caritas*), their aspect and object was always the same. As commercial activity became more intense they began to specialize. In the twelfth century all the Flemish groups which carried on trade in England were federated in a vast association bearing the name of the " Hansa of London."[1]

The territorial rulers were lavish of support to these merchants who, by paying the transit dues (*teloneum*) which were so frequently charged along the roads and rivers, contributed largely to their finances. They took them under their especial protection, and the laws which they promulgated inflicted punishments, even up to the death penalty, for offences against these useful travellers. Further, the merchants had direct access to the royal court—*i.e.*, to public jurisdiction. The manor courts could not summon them; for the merchant, wherever he went, was treated as a freeman, though many were certainly the younger sons of serfs who had left their fathers' *mansus* to seek adventure. Who could tell outside the manor where they were born ? Their wandering life wiped out all traces of their origin and no one knew their civil status, so that they had to be treated as freemen; for the status of serfdom could not be presumed. It must be noticed therefore, and it is an observation of the highest importance, that, from its very beginning, commerce developed under the régime of personal liberty.

It goes without saying that the wandering life of the merchants made indispensable a certain number of fixed posts around which they

[1] H. Pirenne, " La hanse flamande de Londres," in *Bullet. de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, Classe des Lettres (1899), 65 *seq.*

gravitated. Such a life could not dispense with permanent centres which could serve as winter quarters, as depôts for the collection of goods, and for shelter to ships and waggons. It is obvious, moreover, that the situation of these places must correspond to the needs of commerce—*i.e.*, that they must be fixed on those spots where the lie of the ground, the course and depth of the rivers, and the height of the banks naturally provided opportunities for passage and for an assemblage of people. Thus, in the course of the tenth century, concentrations of merchants grew up, for example, at Ghent at the junction of the Lys and the Scheldt, at Bruges at the base of the Zwin estuary, at Cambrai where the Scheldt ceases to be navigable, at St. Omer on the Aa, at Lille on the Deule, at Douai on the Scarpe, at Maestricht where the road from Cologne to the sea crossed the Meuse, at Liège at the junction of the Meuse and the Ourthe, and higher up the Meuse at Huy and at Dinant.[1] These collections of merchants have a characteristic name, that of *portus*—*i.e.*, ports, depôts, bases for merchandise. The name well indicates their essentially commercial character. It is the original of the Flemish word *poort* which means town, and, even if all the other evidence did not point in that direction, it would need nothing more to prove that the towns of the Netherlands owed their origin to commerce. While in France and on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube the revival of town life took place, almost without exception, in the ancient Roman cities, in the Netherlands, on the contrary, the oldest and most active centres are generally to be found in new towns. Only Tournai and Cambrai are earlier than the Middle Ages. Everywhere else the merchant group which formed the germ of the town is completely cut off from the ancient tradition. But that was not because the towns were built on virgin soil. Wherever the *portus* grew up there was already a fortified enceinte, built after the invasions of the Northmen, to serve as a refuge for the people of the neighbourhood, and it was around the walls of these "burgs" that the merchants collected. But it would be quite incorrect to believe that the "burg" had given birth to the town. The town was in its immediate neighbourhood, but it did not develop out of it. The contrast between the two is as clear cut as possible, for the "burg" was intended for military purposes only; its garrison of knights lived on the revenues of the neighbouring soil, and its size remained stationary. The *portus*, on the contrary, lived only by commerce, and, growing in proportion as its increasing activity attracted newcomers, it soon surrounded the ancient feudal fortress with its new quarters, shut it in on all sides,

[1] H. Pirenne, "Les villes flamandes avant le XIIe siècle," in *Annales de l'Est et du Nord* (1905), 9 *seq.* G. Des Marez, *Étude sur la propriété foncière dans les villes du Moyen-Age et spécialement en Flandre* (Gand, 1898).

and finally absorbed it. Even by the twelfth century this process had taken place. The now useless walls were demolished and turned into building land. The merchant *portus* had assimilated the feudal *burg* and finished by appropriating its name. Originally the merchant settlement was surrounded with a palisade which sheltered it from robbers, and soon this wooden defence gave way to a wall, always extending in size, built of solid stone ramparts edged with ditches. From thenceforth the *portus*, in the centre of which the old *burg* was falling to ruins, became itself the *burg*; and from the end of the eleventh century its inhabitants bore the new name of burgesses (*burgenses*), so that by a curious change of meaning the " bourgeosie," born of commerce, are designated by a name borrowed from feudal language.[1]

IV.

At the beginning of the twelfth century a new and external impulse affected the economic activity of the Netherlands. Just as the closing of the Mediterranean by Islam had put an end to their relations with the Southern countries, so these were renewed with the revival of navigation there by the Christian countries. The Netherlands became that meeting-place for the commerce of Italy and of the North which they were to remain until the end of the Middle Ages. Before 1127 Lombard merchants were attending the Flemish fairs, and it was their presence which gave these fairs, established at Thourout, Ypres, Messines, Lille and Douai, the importance of which the famous fairs of Champagne were to rob them in the thirteenth century. But the transformation of the latter into international centres of European commerce did nothing to diminish the intensity of the relations between Flanders and Italy. It rather benefited both by putting them in contact with the movement of European commerce of which they were the centre. The Italians came to Flanders to buy cloth for which payment was made by " fair letters " on the fairs of Champagne.[2] On their side the Flemings came to sell their stuffs at Troyes, at Provins, at Lagny and at Bar-sur-Aube, and this made them a more and more popular item in the general stream of commerce. The fairs of Champagne served the Flemish merchants at once as a clearing-house, if one may use such a word of that period, and as a new market for their trade.

The increase in economic activity in the twelfth century resulted in the creation of a considerable number of very rich men among the merchant class. We know, from the account of a certain Werimbold,

[1] What is said here of the part played by the " *burgs* " applies equally to the places where the *portus* of merchants attached itself to the fortified seat of an episcopal *civitas* as at Tournai, Cambrai and Liège.

[2] G. Des Marez, *La lettre de foire à Ypres au XIII^e siècle* (Brussels, 1901).

given in the *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium*, the way in which a large fortune was acquired, and the nature of capital investments. Werimbold, beginning with nothing, entered the service of a rich bourgeois and was given the superintendence of his business, met with marvellous success and ended by marrying his master's daughter. The gains which he made in commerce he invested in purchases of land and in urban rents, and thus became a great landed proprietor.[1] His story is that of many others. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, in fact, the land belonged entirely to a class of rich merchants, new men, to whom the texts give the characteristic name of *homines hereditarii*. Not all, moreover, limited themselves to investing their trade profits in real property. Many, like William Cade of St. Omer,[2] or Simon Saphir and Salomon Rinvisch of Ghent, or the Louchards of Arras, devoted themselves particularly to finance.[3] They lent considerable sums to the King of England, to the Count of Flanders, to feudal lords and to towns in search of loans. It was no doubt to obtain forgiveness for these transactions, which were entirely condemned by the Church under the name of usury, that they vied with each other in charitable foundations. Werimbold redeemed the duty which oppressed the citizens at one of the gates of Cambrai, others built hospitals for the sick, asylums for the aged and infirm, and so on. Towards the middle of the thirteenth century the improved processes of exchange and credit which the Italians introduced into the Netherlands made it possible for the latter to take the place of the native financiers, and from that time onwards the capitalists of the country only meddled sporadically with finance, which was entirely annexed by the Italians, who were known in current language as Lombards or *Cahorsins*, though merchants of Cahors seem to have been exceedingly rare on the shores of the North Sea.

While Italian moneylenders abounded in Flanders and shortly afterwards in all other parts of the Netherlands, Jews, on the contrary, were very scarce. It is curious to notice that the more active, economically, a region showed itself the less the Jews appeared in it. They seem hardly to have taken part in business at all, and to have confined themselves exclusively to petty moneylending transactions. In 1261 the Duke of Brabant, Henri III., ordered their expulsion from the

[1] *Gestes des évêques de Cambrai de* 1092 *à* 1138, ed. Ch. de Smedt, 122 *seq.* (Paris, 1880).

[2] H. Jenkinson, "William Cade," in *English Historical Review* (1913), 209 *seq.* *Cf. ibid.*, vol. xxviii., 522 and 730, and "A Moneylender's Bond of the Twelfth Century," in *Essays offered to Dr. Poole* (1927), 190 *seq.*

[3] G. Bigwood, "Le régime juridique et économique du commercè de l'argent dans la Belgique du Moyen Age," in *Mém. in* 8vo *de l'Acad. Royale de Belgique*, second series, vol. xiv. (1921).

duchy in his will; but his widow, the Duchess Aleyde, did not carry out this measure, but consulted St. Thomas Aquinas about the proper treatment to apply to them.[1] In a word, the part they played was negligible. A case of sacrilege in 1370, in which a Jew was accused, brought about their expulsion from Brabant, and from that date they are hardly mentioned in the Netherlands. They only reappear under entirely different conditions, first at Antwerp and then at Amsterdam, in the course of the sixteenth century.

All that has been said above of the commercial movement proves how intimately it was linked with industry. No doubt it was not the latter which had called it into being, for the geographical situation of the district was bound to attract it; but it is none the less evident that the country's industrial life hastened its appearance and contributed largely to its progress. Thanks, no doubt, to the preservation of Roman technical methods, manufactures were, indeed, distinguished for their excellence. It has been seen above that this was the case with the cloth of Flanders, and the superiority of the brass goods made in the valley of the Meuse is attested by the introduction of the word "*dinanderie*" into commercial language. If the soil of Belgium produced no commodity such as wine or salt which compelled the foreigner to come and buy, this disadvantage was largely compensated by the products of her industry. Thanks to them she could even supply an export trade, the growth of which was increasingly accentuated from the tenth century onwards. We must notice, further, that the nature of the native industry made it necessary to import raw material from abroad. The country produced neither the tin nor the copper necessary for the metal-workers of Huy and Dinant, and they were forced to get them from Germany and England. The woollen industry, though probably it originally employed native wool, soon abandoned it for the finer and silkier English wool of which Flanders was the principal consumer to the end of the Middle Ages. Thus Belgium, as early as the twelfth century, exhibits the same characteristic features as mark her to-day—those of an industrial country dependent on foreign countries for her raw material, and for that very reason unable to maintain herself except by export.

The progress of industry had the further result of centralizing it in the towns. During the Roman period, as well as in Merovingian and Carolingian times, the woollen industry was carried on in the country, and in those days it was an occupation for women, relegated to the peasant's wife or to the female serfs (*ancillae*) of the manorial

[1] H. Pirenne, "La duchesse Aleyde de Brabant et le 'de Regimine Judaeorum de St. Thomas d'Aquin,'" in *Bull. de l'Acad. R. de Belgique*, Classe de Lettres (1928), 43 *seq.*

gyneceum. In proportion, however, as the demand for its products grew, production began to migrate towards the *portus*, where the merchants who bought it resided, and men took the place of women in the manufacture of cloth from the day when it became a specialized occupation. At the same time its technique was modified. The pieces had at first been only of the small size (*pallia*) suitable for making cloaks. It was found more practical to increase their length to facilitate packing and transport. The ordinary length of a piece of cloth is, even today, imposed by the demands of commerce, and, while we are not able to fix exactly the first appearance of this practice, it is extremely probable that it goes back to the twelfth century. At this period the concentration of the woollen industry in the towns was an accomplished fact. Outside them, only a few weavers survived in the flat country; and from the end of the twelfth century the continuance of even this slight competition was forbidden. Every town reserved for itself the monopoly of weaving and of all the complicated operations connected with the manufacture of woollen goods. Only one of them, spinning, was carried on outside the walls. The urban clothiers gave out wool to the peasant women of the neighbouring country who returned it as yarn, and the female weavers of an earlier period are now transformed into spinners.

By the middle of the thirteenth century the Netherlands had acquired the appearance which they were to retain throughout the whole of their subsequent history. They had become *par excellence* a country of towns. Nowhere, north of the Alps, are towns so numerous, so rich or so active. In this respect the Flemish plain recalls the Lombard plain. The urban movement developed from two centres—one the basin of the Meuse, the other that of the Scheldt. In the first, as one descends the river, are Dinant, Huy, Namur and Liège, all engaged in the metal industry; then the commercial towns of Maestricht, Utrecht and Dordrecht. The second area, assisted by its situation on the seacoast, shows a denser agglomeration. Valenciennes, Cambrai, St. Omer, Lille, Douai, Ypres, Ghent and Bruges were, from the middle of the twelfth century, extraordinarily active centres, where commerce and the woollen industry developed together and reacted on each other. Between the district of the Meuse and that of the Scheldt relations were at first few and far between. The latter turned towards the sea, the former towards the Rhine and Germany. But in the course of the twelfth century the vigorous vitality of the Flemish area attracted the commerce of the districts bordering on the Meuse; its magnetism made itself felt as far as the Rhine, and all the commerce of the Netherlands converged more and more upon it, or, more properly speaking, upon the port of Bruges, the importance of which grew astonishingly in the

course of the thirteenth century. Thanks to the commercial current from the Meuse to the sea, Brabant, situated between the two, revived, and in its turn became covered with towns. About 1150 Antwerp, Malines, Brussels and particularly Louvain, began to compete with their older rivals in the East and West. At the same period secondary towns grew up, in increasing proximity to each other, round all the centres where urban life had first sprung up, along the roads and rivers which penetrated the country. They were so numerous in Flanders and in Brabant, that in the course of the thirteenth century the urban population may be said to have been as large and perhaps larger than the rural. What is quite certain is that in number of inhabitants the principal towns of these areas were not equalled by any elsewhere in Western Europe. Their growth was so rapid between 1100 and about 1350 that their walls had to be enlarged every thirty years. Contemporary observers, struck with their magnificence, have naïvely exaggerated the importance of their population. It is absolutely impossible that Ypres in 1247 should have had 200,000 inhabitants, but serious evidence permits the belief that the total of 50,000 may have been reached about this time by Ghent and no doubt by Bruges, and that, by what is known of population in the Middle Ages, is an extraordinarily high figure. It is almost certain that at this period the areas in the basin of the Scheldt already possessed the character which they bear today of being the most densely populated region in Europe.[1]

The feeding of such large urban populations was a very delicate problem. The products of the soil in the neighbourhood could not suffice, and indispensable supplies had to be brought from a distance. It was, no doubt, this necessity, as well as the desire to assist commercial transport, which led to the numerous canal undertakings carried out in Flanders in the course of the thirteenth century.[2] Even so, the towns could not be fed without recourse to foreign supplies. As Count Guy de Dampierre stated in 1297,[3] "*la Flandre ne se peut suffire si d'ailleurs ne lui vient,*" and from this time onward she depended for food on the corn from Artois and from the Baltic which was brought to Bruges in the course of commerce. Generalizations must not be drawn from the state of Flanders. Brabant was in a similar condition, but Hainault in the South and Holland in the North cannot be compared

[1] Naturally there are no precise figures except for the end of the Middle Ages. See H. Pirenne, "Les dénombrements de la population d'Ypres au XV^e siècle," in *Vierteljahrschrift für Social und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1903), 1 *seq.*, and the intro uction by J. Cuvelier in his edition of *Dénombrements des foyers en Brabant au XIV^e et au XV^e siècles* (Brussels, 1912).

[2] *Essays in Mediæval History presented to T. F. Tout*, 139 *seq.*

[3] Kervyn de Lettenhove, *Histoire de Flandre*, ii., 560.

with it. Hainault had only two important towns, Tournai and Valenciennes, while in Holland, up to the fifteenth century, Utrecht and Dordrecht were of much less importance than the towns of Flanders and Brabant, and Rotterdam and Amsterdam were still fishing villages. The economic expansion of the Northern Netherlands only began in the Burgundian period, and throughout all the Middle Ages it was surpassed in all branches by that of Belgium.

V.

The birth of towns naturally exerted a profound influence on the country. It brought about there an entire transformation which became the more rapid and complete as urban life developed. The economic system of the manor was, as we have seen above, a system devoid of markets. Production was directed towards subsistence only because there were no buyers. It was not principle but necessity which gave it that self-sufficing character which current theory has fixed upon as a natural and primitive characteristic. In reality, far from being a primitive system it was a decadent system. Its only cause was the weakening of commerce, and its disappearance was bound to result from commercial revival. The régime of large estates, which had become more and more common from the end of the Roman period, had had the result of reducing the peasants to a state of serfdom. On both lay and ecclesiastical manors there were only serfs liable to services and to irredeemable dues fixed by custom for their lord's profit. The two essential features of the manorial economy were thus the absence of production for the outside world and a state of serfdom for the inhabitants. Both disappeared under the influence of the towns. The collection within their walls of an increasing population which must live on provisions brought from outside provided the country producers with the markets which they had previously lacked. The peasants did not fail to profit by the certainty of being able to sell their produce. They no longer worked only for themselves; the surplus which they produced at their *mansi* was sold to the inhabitants of the neighbouring town. The rent of land went up considerably, and the methods of cultivation improved, but instead of benefiting from this new situation the proprietors of the soil suffered from it. While their serfs grew rich they grew poor. The rising price of provisions, due not only to increase in demand but also to the fall in the value of money, caused by the fact that commerce was making money plentiful, brought about a crisis in which they were the only people to suffer; for their customary revenues remained fixed, while the cost of living rose incessantly. To deal with this deplorable situation, they

resorted to two obvious expedients—one was to give up the old manorial system, to free their serfs, and to modify the system of tenure which had persisted hitherto so as to bring it into relation with the new conditions; the second consisted in increasing their resources by enlarging the area of cultivated land. These transformations were facilitated by the growth of the rural population after the disasters caused by the invasions of the Northmen. This growth may be observed from the end of the eleventh century, and evidence for it may be seen in the establishment of a number of men from Flanders and the neighbouring districts in England after the Conquest of 1066, and the extensive participation of the Belgians in the First Crusade.[1] In the twelfth century this movement towards emigration was particularly directed to Germany, where Dutch and Flemish colonists went to cultivate the marshes on the banks of the Lower Elbe.[2] But the increasing population found work to do within the country. The princes and large landowners gave them an outlet in the draining and dyking of the inundated regions on the coast and in the clearing of forests and heaths. In the course of the twelfth century the first *polders* were established along the coast and the Lower Scheldt, while many new towns (*villes-neuves*) were founded in Hainault, in the south of Luxembourg and in the sandy *landes* of the Campine; and it was from that date that the extent of the cultivated area began to exceed its dimensions in Roman times. At the same time freedom began to prevail among the rural classes. The old system of servitude was abolished in favour of the immigrants who came to settle in the regions which needed clearing, and little by little the traces of serfdom which persisted on the large estates disappeared. At the beginning of the fourteenth century the sheriffs (*échevins*) of Ypres declared "that they had never heard tell of any of the status of serfs."[3]

VI.

This end of the thirteenth century may be considered as the moment when the economic evolution, which had begun with the commercial revival about 300 years earlier, reached its culminating point. All its implications had been realized and it had transformed the organization of society. Now appeared a phenomenon analogous to that which occurred after the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century; new problems arose, and a period in which the question of distribution

[1] R. H. George, "The Contribution of Flanders to the Conquest of England," in *Revue Belge de philol. et d'hist.* (1926), 81 *seq.*; G. T. Lapsley, "The Flemings in England in the Reign of Henry II.," in *English Historical Review* (1906), 161 *seq.*

[2] J. W. Thomson, "Dutch and Flemish Colonization in Mediæval Germany," in *American Journ. of Sociology*, vol. xxiv. (1918).

[3] Beugnot, *Les Olim.*, ii., 770.

became acute succeeded one of continuous increase in wealth. The question appeared all the more pressing, because progress had been so great, and the particular acerbity with which it was contested in the Netherlands bears witness to the fact that they had obtained an advantage over neighbouring countries similar to that which England had obtained over the rest of Europe in 1830. In this respect, only Italy presented a similar spectacle in mediæval times. But the resemblance is only in fundamentals; the details in the two cases were very different, and to understand those of the earlier period it must be remembered that the industry of the Netherlands was essentially an export industry. Only a very small part of the copper of Dinant, the cloth of Flanders and of Brabant was intended for local consumption. They were manufactured for export, and the result was that their importance continually increased as the export trade developed. From Bruges foreign merchants carried them more and more widely through Europe, and they were among the commodities to be found at all the markets in the interior and at all the ports from Smyrna to Dantzig. It may easily be understood what a contrast such a situation created between the artisans of the great manufacturing centres of the Netherlands and those of almost all the other towns of Western Europe. Instead of working, like the latter, for a clientèle restricted to the bourgeoisie and peasants of the neighbourhood, the workers of the Netherlands produced for international commerce. Elsewhere, the number of industrial workers was forcibly limited by the narrow limits of the markets; in the Netherlands, on the contrary, the market knew no bounds, and the number of artisans grew incessantly. From the end of the thirteenth century the number of men employed in the woollen industry in the principal cities of Flanders, weavers, millers, shearers, dyers, etc., much surpassed the total of those engaged in all the other crafts; and if account is taken of their wives and children they represented more than half the total population. These towns, therefore, present an appearance foreshadowing that of the English industrial towns at the end of the eighteenth century. The greater part of the workers were completely unlike the classic type of mediæval artisan, the small independent master selling his clients' goods manufactured from raw material which he owned, and keeping the profit for himself. They must, on the contrary, be regarded as mere wage-earners, working at home for a master, who provided them with raw material and received it back in manufactured form. No doubt these wage-earners differed from those of modern times by their grouping in craft associations (*corporations*). They were not isolated in face of their employers, but that did not prevent the export industries from presenting a clearly capitalist character, and the artisans depended closely on the merchants

who provided them with raw material and fixed their wages.[1] The dependence was all the greater because the merchants not only dominated the workers by their economic superiority, but also ruled them by their political authority. In every town the municipal government was exclusively in their hands, and it was, therefore, the class which gave out work which made the rules for the regulation of industry, and that so effectively, that, both in law and in fact, labour was subordinated to capital. Such a situation could only be maintained by force. It lasted so long as the *bonnes gens*, the wealthy men who had usurped the power and used it to their own advantage, succeeded in retaining the monopoly of it. But from the beginning of the thirteenth century this class had to struggle with a continually fiercer opposition. In all the manufacturing towns of the Netherlands there was a struggle between two parties—the common people (*het gemeen*) and the aristocracy, the "small" and the "great," the "bad" and the "good." Everywhere, round the workers in the large industries who were the leaders of the movement, was formed a group of all those whose opposition had been aroused by the increasing exclusiveness of the aristocracy. The artisans in the smaller crafts, and even a section of the richer citizens and merchants whom the dominant class had deprived of all voice in commercial business, supported the efforts of the wage-earners. Political motives thus reinforced the opposition based on social grounds, for it was social and economic grievances above all which kept up the resentment felt by the industrial workers. They complained of the insufficiency of their wages, of the abuse of power by their masters, of frauds in payment and of truck; and strikes broke out among them, of which the earliest are mentioned under the name of *takehans* at Douai in 1245.[1] In 1274 the weavers and fullers of Ghent, in exasperation at the regulations laid down for them by the *échevins*, left the town and retired to Brabant, where the common people and the aristocracy were also at daggers drawn.[2] In the neighbourhood of Liège the same struggle was going on between the "big" and

[1] G. Espinas, "Jehan Boine Broke, bourgeois et drapier douaisien," *Vierteljahrschrift für Social und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1904). The sources for the history of the Flemish woollen industry have been collected by G. Espinas and H. Pirenne, *Recueil de documents relatifs à l'histoire de l'industrie drapière en Flandre* (Brussels, 1906-24), 4 vols. For Holland must be added N. Posthumus, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van de Leidsche Textielnijverheid*, vol. i. (1333-1480), The Hague, 1910. *Cf.* N. Posthumus, *De geschiedenis van de Leidsche Laken-industrie*, vol. i., The Hague, 1908, and G. Espinas, *La draperie dans la Flandre française au Moyen-Age*, Paris, 2 vols., 1923; G. Des Marez, *L'organisation du travail à Bruxelles au XV^e siècle*, 186 *seq.*, Brussels, 1904. See also *ibid.*, "A charter of Louvain dated 1290," where "textoribus et aliis operariis pro mercede diurna operantibus" are mentioned.

[2] Espinas and Pirenne, *Recueil*, ii., 21, 92, 94, 379 *seq.*

the "little," and at Dinant in 1255 the copper beaters rose against the wealthy class.[1]

The greatness of the danger may be appreciated from the means taken to deal with it. The *échevins* of the aristocracy defended themselves with a vigour as great as that with which they were attacked. They forbade the weavers and fullers to bear arms or even to carry their tools into the streets, to meet in an assembly of more than seven, or to meet at all for any other reason than the business of the craft. They were prodigal of the severest punishments—banishment and death. They concluded agreements between towns, under which they stipulated for the extradition of artisans who had taken refuge in another town after engaging in a conspiracy at home. These measures only increased social bitterness, and vague ideas of communism spread among the poorer people who were threatened by them. In 1280 a general rebellion broke out in almost all the Flemish towns, as the result, perhaps of a concerted movement, perhaps of the swiftness with which the contagion spread to Bruges, Ypres, Douai and Tournai. The intervention of the King of France accentuated the crisis. One night in 1302 the common people of Bruges massacred the French knights whom the aristocracy had called to their aid, and a few months later, on July 2, the army, which Philippe le Bel had sent to avenge this insult, was defeated under the walls of Courtrai by a Flemish army, composed for the most part of woollen workers. This unexpected triumph gave the industrial workers a knowledge of their power, and provoked a general rebellion in Flanders, Brabant and the district of Liège. It was the starting-point of a period of unrest, which did not terminate until the beginning of the fifteenth century, and which ended the plutocratic régime which up to that time had prevailed in the towns. In spite of reactionary movements on the part of the aristocracy, undertaken in the hope of restoring the past, the arrival of the common people at municipal power was accomplished more or less completely and rapidly in all the districts where an export industry was carried on. It was only rarely, and for a very short time, that the artisans succeeded in obtaining exclusive possession of power. Generally the government was divided between the craftsmen and the aristocracy in constantly changing proportions, and almost everywhere a system was arrived at which gave a place to each social group of which the whole body of citizens were composed, and which approximated fairly well to what might be called a representation of interests.

It must further be noticed that this system nowhere succeeded in assuring a stable and peaceful equilibrium between the parties. No

[1] H. Pirenne, *Histoire de la constitution de la ville de Dinant au moyen-age*, 37 *seq.* (Ghent, 1889).

period was more disturbed than that during which the urban democracy triumphed. The cause of this unrest must be sought in the heterogeneous composition of the "common people." Not only were the interests of the small craftsmen (bakers, butchers, blacksmiths, etc.) different from those of the artisans in the export industries, but even the latter were divided into rival groups, and there was perpetual strife between weavers and fullers which periodically resulted in sanguinary conflicts. The wage question had not been settled by the fall of the aristocracy, and the democratic revolution had not deprived industry of its capitalistic organization. Nor had the attainment of political power given the artisans economic independence; they were still wage-earners. The very fact that they produced not for local consumption but for export put them at the mercy of those crises affecting international commerce which they were equally unable to prevent or to understand. They were freed from the domination of the aristocracy, but they were still dependent on the capitalist merchants who provided them with work.[1] They tried at least to reserve the monopoly of such work strictly to themselves. They made every effort to crush outside competition as completely as possible. Ghent, Bruges and Ypres laid their surrounding neighbourhoods under an extraordinary régime of industrial exclusiveness. Military expeditions were organized to search the villages and destroy any tools for the manufacture of cloth. The industry of the small towns was strictly controlled by the large ones, who in the name of pretended "privileges," which were only an abuse of force, prevented them from imitating their own species of woollen goods. The same scene was witnessed on the Meuse, where Dinant and Bouvigne struggled violently over the industry of copper beating.

VII.

This protectionism gone mad did not, however, prevent the industry of the towns from falling into decay. The high scale of wages raised the price of cloth and gradually diminished its sale. At the same time English wool grew scarcer and rose in price, from the day when England, in the course of the fourteenth century, became in its turn a woollen-manufacturing country. To meet this formidable competition it was obviously necessary to reform the industrial régime, obtain wool from Spain and adopt new methods of manufacture, but the artisans saw salvation only in a more and more fervent system of protection. They trusted in nothing but privilege, and, as the situation became more critical, they made it worse by the continually more exclusive regulations by which they tried to ensure for themselves the work which was leaving them. Towards the end of the fourteenth century it was obvious that

[1] H. Pirenne, *Belgian Democracy, Its Early History* (1915), 162 *seq.*

this short-sighted policy was condemned. Favoured by the capitalists and protected by the Count of Flanders, the rural woollen manufacture, in spite of the protests of the large towns, began to develop to their detriment. Free from " privileges " and from control, it grew in freedom, substituted Spanish for English wool, was content with lower wages and devoted itself to the manufacture of " says," light, cheap stuffs, which gradually took the place which had been held in commerce by the old-fashioned goods made in the towns.[1] From the end of the twelfth century the transformation of commerce was parallel to that of industry. Bruges became more and more an international port, where traffic was concentrated in the hands of the foreign merchants who gathered there from North and South. Besides the Italians, who played the principal part, Britons, Gascons, Basques and Spaniards were to be met there, and there, too, the German Hansa had established its most important base, through which trade relations were kept up between the North Sea and the Baltic on the one hand and the Mediterranean on the other.[2] On the other hand, Flemish shipping, which had still been numerous in the thirteenth century, had given way in the port to foreign vessels. The galleys of Genoa and Venice, which, from the beginning of the fourteenth century, arrived direct through the Straits of Gibraltar, met there the *coggen* of all the German towns from Dantzig to Hamburg. All the " big business " was now done between the cosmopolitan clientèle which met at Bruges. The natives themselves hardly took part except as commission agents. Their trade, the size of which was now beyond their ability to carry on, clearly assumed a passive character.[3]

At the beginning of the fifteenth century Bruges reached the zenith of its splendour, but afterwards she began to show signs of decadence. The silting up of the Zwyn, at the base of which the city was built, had become gradually worse since the twelfth century. The harbour was continually being moved further downstream, first to Damme, then to Hoek, to Monikereede, finally to Ecluse. But Ecluse itself was

[1] H. Pirenne, " Une crise industrielle au XVI[e] siècle, La draperie urbane et la nouvelle draperie en Flandre," in *Bullet. de l'Acad. Royale de Belgique*, Classe de Lettres, 1905, 489 *seq.*

[2] W. Stein, *Die Genossenschaft der deutschen Kaufleute zu Brügge* (Berlin, 1890); K. Bahr, *Handel und Verkehr der deutschen Hanse in Flandern während des XIV Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1911). For the relations between Bruges and the southern countries see Gilliodts van Severen, *Cartulaire de l'ancien Consulat d'Espagne à Bruges* (1280-1550) (Bruges, 2 vols., 1901-1902); and *id., Cartulaire de l'Ancienne estaple de Bruges* (Bruges, 1904-1906), 4 vols.

[3] Neither Bruges nor any other town in Flanders or the rest of Belgium was a member of the German Hansa, with the sole exception of the Walloon town of Dinant, which was affiliated to it in order to participate in the privileges which the German merchants enjoyed in England. See H. Pirenne, *Dinant*, 97 *seq.*

affected, and large vessels had to stop at Rammekens on the coast of Zeeland and land their cargoes in small boats. Besides these deplorable material conditions, there prevailed an outworn economic organization, which fidelity to tradition prevented the citizens from changing. They were just as incapable of adapting themselves to new conditions in commerce as were the manufacturing towns to those in industry. Instead of trying to make up for the disadvantages of their situation by a more liberal and pliable régime which would induce foreigners to remain, they thought only of exploiting the trade by which they lived in proportion as it declined. They remained faithful to the economic system which had made them great in the Middle Ages, and failed to understand that times had changed, and that, in proportion as the volume and intensity of commerce increased, its continued limitation under a worn-out system of regulation became impossible. They tried to force foreign merchants to frequent Bruges, and obtained from the Dukes of Burgundy a decree imposing the obligation of continued residence in the city. But though the Dukes gave them the decrees they asked for, it was with continually less personal interest in the matter; their personal activity was devoted in the utmost degree to encouraging the growing prosperity of Antwerp, where, in striking contrast to Bruges, the economic liberty which was ensuring the success of the country woollen manufacture in Flanders exercised a continuous attraction for foreigners. The excellent situation of the port, deeply land-locked and far removed from the dangers of North Sea pirates, added another advantage to those which already combined to seduce them from Bruges. The contrast between Antwerp and Bruges is one between the past and the future, between privilege and equal rights, between protection and free trade.

The Dukes of Burgundy, who had just united under their sceptre the various principalities of the Netherlands (1419-1477), facilitated the transition from mediæval to modern economic organization. They undertook the struggle against both political and economic privileges, and rightly proclaimed themselves the defenders of "common good" against "private good." It was no longer local but general interests which inspired them. In Holland they energetically upheld against the German Hansa that movement towards maritime development which was destined to succeed so brilliantly. They created a common monetary system for all the provinces, and protected both the country woollen manufacture against the protests of Ghent and Ypres, and the commerce of Antwerp against the opposition of Bruges. Their accession marks the end of the mediæval period of Netherlands history and the beginning of that modern period which saw the rise to fame first of Antwerp and then of Amsterdam.

H. PIRENNE.