



Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment

Peter Stabel

To cite this article: Peter Stabel (2004) Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment, *Journal of Medieval History*, 30:2, 187-212, DOI: [10.1016/j.jmedhist.2004.03.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2004.03.003)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2004.03.003>



Published online: 03 Jan 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1414



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment

Peter Stabel*

Department of History, University of Leiden, Postbus 9519, 2300RA Leiden, Netherlands

Abstract

Craft guilds were essential for the organisation of urban society in the late middle ages. They not only had their role to play in structuring the urban economy; in the dense urban system of the Low Countries they very often also had important political, cultural and social functions. Historical research has focused during the past decades on the latter functions in particular, leaving aside a reassessment of the older assumptions of the negative impact of guilds on the urban economy. This paper argues that a multifaceted approach to guild life is necessary, whereby the economic role of guilds is integrated into newly acquired knowledge about guild life. In general guilds functioned as much more open and flexible economic institutions than has been acknowledged by most scholars. Guild regulation, ubiquitous in the documents, must, therefore, be reinterpreted and contrasted with its actual implementation. Moreover, the analysis of artisan careers and of the traditional life cycle (apprentice–journeyman–master) clearly shows how demographic realities such as high death rates and high migration rates cannot but have stimulated the open character of many of the urban guilds, in particular those involved in the export-oriented industries.

© 2004 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Guilds; Artisans; Low Countries; Urban society

1. Guilds: one-sided cliché or multifaceted reality

The opinion of historians on the social and economic role played by guilds in late medieval and early modern cities has changed considerably throughout the last

* E-mail address: p.stabel@let.leidenuniv.nl (P. Stabel).

century.¹ Depending upon the ideological and political background of the historians who have dealt with guilds and corporate organisations from the nineteenth century onwards, these were seen as positive contributions, as symbols of an ideal world of political unity and peaceful social and economic coexistence, where the consequences of class distinction and of harsh economic competition were, although not completely eradicated, easily overcome by systems of self-regulation and social symbiosis, as the early precursors of bourgeois democracies, and as an antidote to class conflict and capitalistic excess. These ‘corporationists’ were often inspired by religious and political ideologies in late nineteenth-century society. Such ideas were particularly popular among church leaders and social moralists, but later on, between the two world wars, also among fascist ideologists and their partisans and even parts of the labour movement.² On the other side of the political spectrum, guilds were considered as an archaic reminder of economic sclerosis, where innovation of products and techniques was sacrificed to the interest of a static rent-seeking elite of small-scale merchants and entrepreneurs. Marxists and Smithian liberals find themselves here in this assessment. In their eyes, guilds became a barrier to progress towards a true capitalistic society. For the former, guilds were an obstacle to the historical process of class conflict towards the ultimate emancipation of the workers, for the latter an impediment to free entrepreneurship and the bourgeois democracy.³

Although such one-sided ideological approaches have by now all but completely disappeared from historical analysis, and although even ideologically inspired assessments have become much more careful in their formulations, guilds and their connotation of archaic, unpractical, and protectionist institutions, which intended to serve group interests rather than entrepreneurial initiatives by concentrating on fair distribution of income, still dominate historians’ views on late medieval and early modern economic organisation.⁴ Guilds are still considered as responsible for a dogmatic focus on the quality of finished goods in an ill-omened policy of protecting both producers’ and consumers’ interests. Hence, labour productivity, com-

¹ Antony Black, *Guilds and civil society in European political thought from the twelfth century to the present* (London, 1984), 3–11; Pascale Lambrechts, ‘L’historiographie des métiers dans les principautés des anciens Pays-Bas: acquis et perspectives de recherche’, in: *Les métiers au moyen âge. Aspects économiques et sociaux*, ed. Pascale Lambrechts and Jean-Pierre Sosson (Publications de l’Institut d’Etudes médiévales, 2nd series, 15, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994), 143–155.

² D. Luyten, ‘Ontstaansvoorwaarden voor het corporatisme. Het model van het neo-corporatisme in het licht van de Belgische ervaring uit de jaren dertig’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 19 (1993), 316–323; Marc Boone, ‘Les métiers dans les villes flamandes au bas moyen âge (XIVe–XVIe siècles): images normatives, réalités socio-politiques et économiques’, in: *Les métiers au moyen âge*, 3–5.

³ Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, tome 3. *De la mort de Charles le Téméraire à l’arrivée du duc d’Albe dans les Pays-Bas* (Brussels, 1912), 220; Walter Prevenier, ‘Henri Pirenne et les villes des anciens Pays-Bas au bas moyen âge’, in: *La Fortune historiographique des thèses d’Henri Pirenne. Actes du colloque organisé à l’occasion du cinquantième de la mort de l’historien belge par l’Institut des Hautes Etudes de Belgique* (Brussels, 1986), 48–49.

⁴ Walter Prevenier and Marc Boone, ‘De sociale geschiedenis van de steden in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en het prinsbisdom Luik van de 13de tot de 19de eeuw: nieuwe tendensen’, *Tijdschrift van het Gemeentekrediet*, 47 (1993), 25–42.

petition, concentration of capital and entrepreneurial initiatives were sacrificed to an egalitarian policy among masters larded with social exclusion, economic monopolies and political grasping. In the end, the labour market and the access to commercial circuits were monopolised by an ever-smaller group of privileged masters.

Historical research after the second world war was, for very obvious reasons, very hesitant in taking into account the various aspects of corporate life in the pre-industrial city—the issue was clearly stained by the fascist experience—and only from the 1960s onwards were scholars again paying attention to guilds.⁵ The new research pointed especially to the social, political, religious and cultural impact of corporate organisations in urban society. On the rebound, guilds were mostly treated as organisations defining social structure, cultural experiences and political dominance. New evidence pointed at the function of guilds in establishing social networks, in defining the festive culture of medieval cities and in creating the framework in which urban elites achieved political dominance.⁶ Economics was kept much in the background of research and when the economic functions were addressed, the Pirenian guild sclerosis was often invoked as an explanatory tool.⁷

And indeed much can be said for a multifaceted approach to guilds and other corporate organisations.⁸ There is no doubt that guilds in the medieval and early modern towns were certainly important in achieving political dominance or at least participation in decision-making processes.⁹ But they were also political bodies with divided loyalties and a very heterogeneous social profile. Guilds were also among the corporate bodies that organised cultural life in the cities and their public ceremonial was crucial for the many urban pageants, civic festivities and religious practices. But the craft guilds were in no way the only organisations, and in the long run not the most important ones to organise this. Perhaps most important of all, guilds were crucial for the establishment and control of social relations and social networks in the cities and for the development of group solidarity and collective identity. But they had no monopoly for all this. Other

⁵ Jean-Pierre Sosson, 'Les métiers, Normes et réalité. L'exemple des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux aux XIVe et XVe siècles', in: *Le travail au moyen âge. Une approche interdisciplinaire*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Colette Muraille-Samaran (Publications de l'Institut d'études médiévales, 2nd series, 10, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1990), 339–348; the classic study on the origins of guilds in the Low Countries remains Carlos Wyffels, *De oorsprong der ambachten in Vlaanderen en Brabant* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten, Klasse der Letteren 13, Brussels, 1951).

⁶ Prevenier, Boone, 'De sociale geschiedenis'.

⁷ Herman Van der Wee, 'Industrial dynamics and the process of urbanization and de-urbanization in the Low Countries from the late middle ages to the eighteenth century. A synthesis', in: *The rise and decline of urban industries in Italy and in the Low Countries (late middle ages–early modern times)*, ed. Herman Van der Wee (Louvain, 1988), 307 ff.

⁸ Richard MacKenney, *Tradesmen and traders: the world of the guilds in Venice and Europe, 1250–1650* (Ottawa, 1987); Stephen A. Epstein, *Wage labor and guilds in medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991).

⁹ Marc Boone and Maarten Prak, 'Rulers, patricians, and burghers: the great and little traditions of urban revolt in the Low Countries', in: *A miracle mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European perspective*, ed. Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (Cambridge, 1995), 99–134.

groups in society created their own formal and informal ways of forming civic identities and sociability. Moreover, organisations like the various corporate bodies or more informally organised networks often overlapped and interacted. People participated most of the time in various different, and sometimes even conflicting, social systems.¹⁰ A few examples may help to illustrate the phenomenon.

In the larger Flemish and Brabantine cities craft guilds were able, in the course of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century to gain access to considerable political power. Hence guilds were able to have real influence on the levers of economic policy. They had become powerful lobbies in the urban environment. But the question as to whether ordinary guild members were really involved in these political strategies is more difficult to answer. Extensive prosopographical research has made it abundantly clear that access to political functions was relatively easy within a system that was often built on formal division of power among the main corporate bodies, but that at the heart of the political system an often closely knit urban oligarchy successfully held on to power.¹¹ Hence membership of guilds was sometimes only an instrument for gaining access to political power for influential individuals and families often with very close ties with other, and more elitist, social networks. There is no doubt that guilds could use the strength of their numbers, but also their hold on public ceremonial and their vital role in the domain of urban supply in order to gain significant political influence. But social heterogeneity, the changing relations of political power in the city and the divided loyalties of the various guilds often prevented them from becoming efficient political institutions in the long run.

Even in late medieval Ghent, considered by many historians as one of the cities in Europe where political influence of the guilds was the greatest, the patterns of accessing political power were much more complicated than a simple assessment of the strength of each corporate organisation would suggest. Although a formal distribution of power was put in place during the fourteenth century, whereby the textile guilds (the cloth weavers), the smaller servicing guilds and the urban 'patriciate' (the often formally recognised urban elite of merchants and land-owners) each got their share of political office, the realities of politics were such that a small minority was able to monopolise real political influence.¹² Moreover, members of the urban elites used the clearly identifiable institutional access of guilds to power in the city in order to penetrate the political structure. Therefore, even the alleged hold of the guilds on political power needs to be reassessed in the future: were their representatives in the urban government really

¹⁰ Endogamy within particular guilds was, for example, not a common phenomenon (Claire Dolan, 'The artisans of Aix-en-Provence in the sixteenth century: a micro-analysis of social relationships', in: *Cities and social change in early modern France*, ed. Philip Benedict (London, 1989), 174–194).

¹¹ Marc Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen ca. 1384–ca. 1453. Een sociaal-politieke studie van een staatsvormingsproces* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten van België. Klasse der letteren, 133, Brussels, 1990).

¹² Prevenier, Boone, 'De sociale geschiedenis'.

efficient or even willing advocates for the interests of the corporate organisations? Guild identity was certainly important in various forms of collective action and in the eyes of the authorities some guilds were undoubtedly considered as breeding grounds for dissent and unrest.¹³ And indeed guilds were able to mobilise their members and even more to mobilise parts of urban society by means of ties of solidarity and of *esprit de corps*. But as the trend towards more oligarchic urban magistrates seems to have become inevitable in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when state authority intervened more often in urban politics, guilds stood increasingly on the sidelines of power play.¹⁴ Merchant organisations, urban elites and the central state started to interfere more directly in internal guild affairs.¹⁵

Guilds also contributed to shaping public culture in the pre-industrial cities until deep into the eighteenth century. Public pageants, cavalcades, processions, games, and even theatre and music promoted by the craft guilds, but also more private ceremonies such as funerals, dinners, and investment in works of art for the guild houses, enriched the wide spectrum of cultural life in the towns. Moreover, these often massively attended events were also important for shaping group solidarity in the guild itself. But a closer analysis of sources sheds a new light on the levels of participation by the various social groups within the guild. In particular the guild elites of governors and wealthy entrepreneurs contributed to the festive urban and guild culture: they received gifts and other tokens of honour; they got the more elaborate funerals. Ordinary masters often had to be content with the annual guild meal and the usual solidarity of their colleagues on the occasion of specific celebrations (entry into the guild, weddings, and most often funerals). The ‘honour’ of the guild—individual and collective—was also characterised by social distinction.¹⁶

Moreover, the guilds were certainly not the only organisations to be involved in the festive urban culture, and they lost gradually in the course of the late middle ages and the early modern period much of their lead. The so-called ‘gentrification’ of urban culture from the fifteenth century onwards marginalized their efforts, which were still tolerated by the urban authorities, but which were increasingly restrained within specific margins. The more ‘bourgeois’ corporations (shooting guilds, confraternities, rhetoricians, merchant guilds, etc.) took the lead in the beginning of the early modern period, and even they were gradually pushed aside by the

¹³ Peter Arnade, *Realms of ritual. Burgundian ceremony and civic life in late medieval Ghent* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London, 1996).

¹⁴ James R. Farr, *Artisans in Europe 1300–1914* (New Approaches to European History, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 164–169.

¹⁵ In the fifteenth century, the grain merchants in the market town of Aalst, for example, succeeded in securing a seat in the board of the powerful shippers’ guild (Peter Stabel, ‘Schipppers, wagenvoerders en kruiers. De organisatie van de stedelijke vervoerssector in het laat-middeleeuwse Vlaanderen’, *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis*, 82 (1999), 160 ff.).

¹⁶ On the multiple meanings of an honourable status, see James R. Farr, *Hands of honor: artisans and their world in Dijon, 1550–1650* (Ithaca, 1988); id., ‘Cultural analysis and early modern artisans’, in: *The artisan and the European town, 1500–1900*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (Aldershot, 1998), 59–60.

relentless privatisation of cultural experience in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (theatre houses, academies, salons, etc.).¹⁷

Probably the most striking function of craft guilds in the late medieval towns was their role in the creation, and of course in the control, of social networks and social relations. Guilds defined, often very strictly, the stages of human life from apprenticeship to independent entrepreneurship; they organised social hierarchies and allowed or restricted social promotion. But they never aspired to a monopoly of controlling social relations, nor were they allowed to. Even the nicely cut division of tasks in the workshops (between masters, apprentices and journeymen) must be reassessed because of growing evidence showing much more complex relations.¹⁸ Moreover, guilds functioned often in close collaboration with other solidarities and organisations in the urban fabric: neighbourhoods and urban quarters, religious communities and fraternities, informal groups that organised social and cultural life (for example the so-called carnival associations, but also more loose ensembles, such as neighbourhood charivaris), and in some regions also ethnic groups and their organisations.

2. Guild regulation, litigation and the economic infrastructure of the medieval towns

It must not be forgotten, however, that the guilds were first and foremost organisations which were intended to regulate and define industrial manufacture and commercial exchange.¹⁹ Guilds organised the framework in which production and commerce could take place. Most often in close collaboration with city councils and later on with representatives of the central government, they showed an astonishing activity of regulating exchange and production between merchants and entrepreneurs, between entrepreneurs and their workers, between retailers and consumers, between town and countryside. The analysis of guild privileges and ordinances testifies clearly to a deep concern for regulation. Moreover, seemingly

¹⁷ On the growing impact of bourgeois morality on civic cultural life in the Low Countries: Herman Pleij, *Op belofte van profijt. Stadsliteratuur en burgermoraal in de Nederlandse letterkunde van de middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam, Prometheus, 1991), 8–51.

¹⁸ Gervase Rosser, 'Crafts, guilds, and the negotiation of work in the medieval town', *Past and Present*, (1997), 154; Stephan R. Epstein, 'Craft guilds, apprenticeship, and technological change in pre-industrial Europe', *The Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), 684–713.

¹⁹ Research has focused on the early modern period in particular, see: *Werken volgens de regels. Ambachten in Brabant en Vlaanderen 1500–1800*, ed. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (VUB press, Brussels, 1994); Lis and Soly, 'Corporatisme, onderaanneming en loonarbeid. Flexibilisering en deregulering van de arbeidsmarkt in Westeuropese steden (veertiende-achttiende eeuw)', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 20, (1994), 365–390; Piet Lourens and Jan Lucassen, 'Gilden und Wanderung: die Niederlande', in: *Handwerk in Europa vom Spätmittelalter bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Knut Schulz, Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien 41, Munich, 1999), 65–80. For the late medieval period, see: Wim Blockmans, 'Regionale Vielfalt im Zunftwesen in den Niederlanden vom 13. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert', *ibidem*, 51–64.

endless disputes dealing with the economic territory of specific guilds were taken before the urban and guild authorities.²⁰ Yet, are these often very hard fought over disputes so important? If one considers the amounts of energy and money invested in them, a positive answer seems obvious. Here is the evidence to support Pirenne's thesis of guild sclerosis. But do the conflicts only suggest sclerosis? Are the conflicts between the various guilds representative of the real economic relations between pre-industrial urban craftsmen and retailers?

If one takes a closer look at the realities of guild membership—and prosopographical studies are still a sad gap in guild historiography in the Low Countries—one cannot help but notice that guild membership was not yet an exclusive thing in the late medieval city and that craftsmen often belonged to several guilds at the same time. The bitter conflicts of interest between the fine leather workers and the purse-makers in fifteenth-century Bruges must certainly be reassessed when very often the same artisans are active in both sectors at the same time; or when a tanner and a butcher, or a draper and a dyer form a cartel in order to secure the supply of raw materials, and this despite repeated and unequivocal urban and guild ordinances that such cartels were strictly forbidden.²¹ Associations within the same trade were usually limited as well. Hence butchers, fishmongers, and fruit dealers were not allowed to draw lots together for a stall, and masters were most of the time not allowed to share their workshop with other entrepreneurs, but there are clear indications that various types of collaboration between artisans and retailers were the rule rather than the exception.²² Individual manufacturing and marketing strategies seem to get the advantage over guild directed rules and ordinances.

The reasons for this litigation seem to lie in the relative weight of each guild in society and in fiscal policies (because of a high number of members, because of financial strength, and social and cultural prestige). Guild regulation was often the result of harsh negotiation between the guild masters on the one hand and the urban authorities and the merchants on the other hand, and hence more a compromise than a political programme of one group. Depending on the conditions of the labour market, the requirement of product innovation and the

²⁰ Marc Boone, 'Les gens de métier à l'époque corporative à Gand et les litiges professionnels (1350–1450)', in: *Statuts individuels, statuts corporatifs et statuts judiciaires dans les villes européennes (moyen âge et temps modernes). Individual, corporate and judicial status in European cities (late middle ages and early modern period)*, ed. Marc Boone and Maarten Prak (Studies in urban social, economic and political history of the medieval and modern Low Countries, 5, Leuven/Apeldoorn, 1996), 23–48; Harald Deceulaer, 'Guilds and litigation: conflict settlement in Antwerp (1585–1796)', in: *ibid.*, 171–208.

²¹ Peter Stabel, 'Markets in the cities of the late medieval Low Countries: retail, commercial exchange and socio-cultural display', in: *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione delle economie europee. Secoli XIII–XVIII*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Istituto di Storia Economica F. Datini 32, Florence, 2001), 797–817.

²² Examples for early modern Italian cities in Simona Cerutti, 'Group strategies and trade strategies: the Turin tailors' guild in the late 17th and early 18th centuries', in: *Domestic strategies: work and family in France and Italy 1600–1800*, ed. S. Woolf (Cambridge, 1991), 102–147; Carlo Poni, 'Local market rules and practices: three guilds in the same line of production in early modern Bologna' in: *ibid.*, 69–101.

outlets to new (export) markets, merchants had a lot to gain from promoting the segmentation of the market or, on the contrary, the concentration of production. It is, therefore, not a surprise that in the late medieval Low Countries—a densely urbanised region dependent on the international market for textiles—guilds remained very open institutions, where social promotion was no doubt linked to social thresholds, but where often very flexible solutions could be found for tight labour markets.

The only exceptions before the sixteenth century were only those few guilds, which were involved with the urban food supply (butchers, fishmongers).²³ Here, guild identity, the use of urban space and economic activity were defined by a formal system of hereditary membership. Other examples of such closed circuits in the late medieval towns were more related to general political conditions: the shipping guilds in two Flemish towns (Ghent and Aalst, two centres of regional grain trade) were even able to make membership not only hereditary, but also to extend their transport monopoly to a substantial part of the river system in Flanders. Both guilds were very influential in urban politics as well. But, as a rule, entrepreneurs favoured a structural policy of attracting guild members. In several guilds of late medieval Bruges often more than three quarters of all new masters were either foreigners or local newcomers in the guild, only one quarter were masters' children.²⁴ This did not, of course, prevent tendencies of concentration in particular economic activities. On the contrary, those tendencies were everywhere in the urban economic organisation. Markets were subdivided; access to particular activities was mediated through particular, mostly informal, but once in a while also formally implemented systems, which favoured settled entrepreneurs. In particular Jean-Pierre Sosson in his works on the building craft in Brussels and the metal crafts in Brussels has pointed at such mechanisms. Yet such systems also existed outside the guild system and they are much more influenced by access to political influence and the ability to mobilize large amounts of capital in order to acquire markets, than they are by guild regulation and guild organisation.²⁵

Furthermore, access to the market was mediated through membership and skill of course, but also through a multitude of fiscal systems whereby non-guild members or non-town-dwellers could also participate in economic exchange by paying certain duties to the guild or the city. So despite guild regulation, it was only very

²³ Hans Van Werveke, *Ambachten en erfelijkheid* (Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten, Klasse der Letteren, 4, Brussels, 1950).

²⁴ Peter Stabel, 'Apprentices and the city: social and economic aspects of apprenticeship', in: *Apprenticeship in Europe (Middle ages—20th century)*, ed. Hugo Soly, Laurence Kaplan and Marc Jacobs (in press).

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Sosson, 'Quelques aspects sociaux de l'artisanat bruxellois du métal (1360–1500)', *Cahiers bruxellois. Revue trimestrielle d'histoire urbaine*, 6 (1961), 98–122; id., *Les travaux publics de la ville de Bruges XIVe-Xve siècles* (Brussels, 1977). See also the more general remarks in Willem P. Blockmans, G. Pieters, Walter Prevenier and Remy W.M. Van Schaik, 'Tussen crisis en welvaart, sociale veranderingen 1300–1500', in: *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 4 (Bussum, 1980), 42–60.

rarely a strict monopoly of burghers or of guild members, not even in those retailing guilds, which were most strict in their regulation. If foreigners were tolerated in the production and retailing system, however, they usually had to stand on specific spots on the market or they had to wait until noon before they were allowed to buy. In other sectors non-burghers could only trade in large quantities, leaving the smaller quantities and thereby the actual retailing to burghers. The same restrictions were valid for guild-membership. In order to participate in market transactions, craftsmen and retailers had to be guild members, but exceptions were the rule. Non-guild-members were often allowed to join market activity, or to be integrated in manufacturing strategies of recognised entrepreneurs, when they paid a tax to the guild in question and contributed in the guild's efforts of controlling market exchange. In other cases, there were strict limitations about the conditions of manufacture and trade. Only at a later stage, in the course of the sixteenth century, but for most guilds only during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, other segments of the guild system than the urban supply became increasingly closed to newcomers, mainly because of increasingly high entrance fees. This trend towards greater exclusiveness (of mastership) coincided also with a much tougher moral interpretation of guild restrictions. Hence associations of journeymen and the place of women and children as workers (both inside and outside the family workshop) came under closer scrutiny.²⁶ Financial, social and moral thresholds were erected in order to regulate every aspect of the members' social and economic activities.²⁷ A side effect of these policies was further market segmentation while at the same time the labour market was shielded from undesired competition.

Individual and collective merchant and entrepreneurial strategies can explain the open structures of late medieval guilds. Merchants stood to gain a lot from enhanced competition between many small commodity producers while the guilds and their controlling mechanisms were nonetheless able to force those producers to stand by the necessary standard quality of export commodities. Further research into entrepreneurial networks needs to be undertaken in the near future, but the involvement of merchants in textile production in some smaller centres proves that they understood the usefulness of guild structures as negotiating partners while

²⁶ Martha Howell, *Women, production, and patriarchy in late medieval cities* (Chicago, 1986).

²⁷ Xavier Rousseaux, 'Sozialdisziplinierung, Civilisation des mœurs et monopolisation du pouvoir. Éléments pour une histoire du contrôle social dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux 1500–1815', in: *Institutionen, instrumente und akteure sozialer Kontrolle und Disziplinierung in frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. Heinz Schilling and Lars Behrisch (Frankfurt, 1999), 251–274; Merry Wiesner, 'The religious dimensions of guild notions of honor in Reformation Germany', in: *Ehrkonzepte in der Frühen Neuzeit. Identitäten und abgrenzungen*, ed. S. Backmann, H.J. Künast, S. Ullmann and B.A. Tlusty (Institut für europäische Kulturgeschichte der Universität Augsburg, Colloquia Augustana, 8, Berlin, 1988), 223–233; Robert Muchembled, *L'invention de l'homme moderne : sensibilités, mœurs et comportements collectifs sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1988), 136 and the bibliographical survey in Farr, *Artisans*, 156–158. The Bruges producers of rosaries were among the first to stress the moral implications of guild life: Jean A. Van Houtte, 'Ambernijverheid en paternostermakers te Brugge gedurende de 14e en 15e eeuw', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge, Société d'Emulation*, 82 (1939), 149–184.

deciding industrial output.²⁸ In the early modern period, however, the dependence of the urban economies on export industries was clearly diminished. In the sixteenth-century Flanders textile production had shifted to the countryside or to semi-urban industrial centres such as Hondschoote, while luxury and refining industries that were more reliant on investments in raw material and on highly specialised labour were concentrated in the larger cities and some smaller towns.²⁹ So the urban guilds in the southern Low Countries became increasingly responsible for these luxury industries and for urban and regional supply, and they were less involved with mass-produced export commodities. Hence the possible objections against more closed guilds became irrelevant, and the corporate authorities, stimulated by the masters' desire for protection, tended to limit access to the guilds.

Furthermore, it would be a mistake to see guilds and their concerted action with city authorities in regulating production and exchange, as mere defenders of their own interests and privileges. In defining circumstances of exchange and manufacture—guidelines that could be negotiated and renegotiated in light of political and economic circumstance—they had to take into account the economic interests of producers, merchants and retailers, but also of consumers, local, regional and central authorities. *Zunftzwang*, the enforcement of guild monopoly, was paramount in these negotiations, but it was also subject to limitations in the context of an international and regional economy. Boundaries of guild regulation were incessantly discussed, which in the end led to very heterogeneous and often contradictory sets of rules. Depending on the balance of power (and this was only rarely in favour of the small guild masters, who disposed of very little capital; journeymen and apprentices had almost no role to play at all) regulation could go either way.³⁰ On the whole, regulation aimed mainly at implementing a moral framework. But despite the egalitarian rhetoric and the ideology of guild solidarity (or rather the illusion of solidarity among guild members), there is no doubt that regulatory systems were functioning in an economy which allowed and stimulated various forms of competition.

²⁸ Hans Van Werveke, 'Die Stellung des hansische Kaufmanns dem flandrischen Tuchproduzenten gegenüber', *Beiträge zur Wirtschafts- und Stadtgeschichte. Festschrift für Hektor Ammann* (Wiesbaden, 1965), 296–304; Peter Stabel, *De kleine stad in Vlaanderen: bevolkingsdynamiek en economische functies van de kleine en secundaire stedelijke centra in het Gentse kwartier (14de–16de eeuw)* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten van België. Klasse der letteren, 156, Brussels, 1995), 122 ff; Robert S. DuPlessis, *Lille and the Dutch Revolt: urban stability in an era of revolution 1500–1582* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); Denis Clauzel and Silvain Calonne, 'Artisanat rural et marché urbain: la draperie à Lille et dans ses campagnes à la fin du moyen âge', *Revue du Nord*, 72 (1990), 531–573.

²⁹ Van der Wee, 'Industrial dynamics'; Peter Stabel, 'Ambachten en textielondernemers in kleine Vlaamse steden tijdens de overgang van Middeleeuwen naar Nieuwe Tijd', in: *Werelden van verschil. Ambachtsgilden in de Lage Landen*, ed. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (VUB press, Brussels, 1997), 79–98; Emile Coornaert, *Un centre industriel d'autrefois. La draperie-sayetterie d'Hondschoote. XIVe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1930).

³⁰ Hans Van Werveke, 'De medezeggenschap van de knapen in de middeleeuwse ambachten', *Mededeelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schoone kunsten van België. Klasse der letteren*, 5 (Antwerp, 1943).

Employment and urban supply were paramount in keeping social equilibrium in the city, while profit and price formation were essential for merchants and retailers. Therefore, price formation on the market had to be transparent, and prices for food and industrial goods had to be kept relatively accessible for city-dwellers and country folk. The urban supply was not to be put in danger. The urban market, which formed the essence of urban functions, had to remain a viable undertaking. Transactions were mostly restricted to the halls and to specific spots on the market. There were clear topographical restrictions between the various retailers and, for example, entrepreneurs selling to merchants (drapers should in no way be confused with *lakensnijders*, sellers of cloth by the yard, or any other market dealers in textiles). Just as happened in the production chain, market segmentation was paramount to guarantee the standard quality required, but at the same time the interests of entrepreneurs and merchants were protected against possible competition from the small retailing guilds.³¹

There seems to have been a world of difference between rules and realities.³² In most guilds, the procedures of transaction and production were clearly defined. This was particularly so when it concerned the commercial exchange between manufacturers of export textiles and their customers, the international merchants. In the cloth towns, the arrival of merchants was often announced when the hall officials tolled a bell. This allowed the drapers to assemble their woollens and bring them to the cloth hall. In most towns, sales could only start when everybody was present. The woollens had to be piled and presented following the customs of the drapery. The merchants usually only had a limited period of time to purchase the goods. Opening hours of the cloth hall and days when transactions were allowed were clearly defined. There were also restrictions as to the number of woollens the drapers were allowed to sell, although these quantities were many times larger than the actual output of one draper. When buying woollens, merchants or their brokers were not allowed to give false information to their colleagues, in order to avoid false rumours concerning quality and price. Information concerning a particular transaction could only be passed on once the transaction had been concluded. One can, however, doubt that such measures promoting equality and solidarity among drapers were very efficient. The fact remains, as we shall demonstrate, that they did not prevent the concentration of both production and trade.

Discrimination and guild control seem ubiquitous, but there seems to be little evidence of actual monopolies if the proper taxes were paid and if the guild authorities gave permission, which they were inclined to grant, because they had a financial interest in doing so. Hence, there were many exceptions to guild monopoly. Moreover, barriers, which divided occupations and guilds, were often easy to breach. People were able to change their occupation rather easily. In fourteenth-

³¹ Peter Stabel, 'Urban markets, rural industries and the organization of labour in late medieval Flanders: the constraints of guild regulations and the requirements of export oriented production', in: *Labour and labour markets between town and countryside (middle ages—19th century)*, ed. Bruno Blondé, Eric Vanhaute and Michèle Galand (Corn Publication Series 6, Turnhout, 2001), 140–157.

³² Sosson, 'Les métiers', 339–348.

and fifteenth-century Ghent for example fur makers and dealers had to choose each year whether they wanted to work with old furs or new ones. Moreover, lots of old fur dealers also seemed to have been members of the guild of dealers in old clothing or they worked in close partnership with dealers in old clothing. And these examples can easily be multiplied. Special cases were the guilds that developed in the course of the middle ages towards a hereditary system. This was usually linked to the ownership of stalls in a hall, the traditional reward for subsidising the sales infrastructure and the hall itself. The number of fishmongers and of butchers was fixed and stalls were inherited. But this heredity did not prevent the presence of outsiders in the market if urban supply required this. The conclusion seems obvious. In many aspects, guilds were mostly only able to enforce their desire for equality in the details of marketing and production procedures, but the true economic flows in the export economy of the Low Countries were often decided on a very different level. Not only was guild regulation itself likely to be open for negotiation, its actual implementation was even more dependent on the balance of political and economic power in the cities and towns.

3. Urban demography, artisan careers and the realities of guild life

Urban society was characterised by very specific demographic realities. The gaps caused by high mortality, in particular infant and child mortality, had to be compensated by constant streams of immigrants. These migration flows remain of crucial importance for explaining urban demographic patterns, but they were also important for establishing social networks, for developing political organisation or for deciding economic opportunity. Unfortunately urban migration patterns in the late medieval cities of the Low Countries can only partially be understood as only the urban middling groups of skilled artisans, local traders and wealthy landowners could gain any real benefit from purchasing citizenship of a town (burghership)—and the registers of new burgesses are the only dynamic source to assess migration.³³ Burghership was sometimes a condition in order to enter a craft guild

³³ For a general survey on the conditions of acquiring burghership: Philippe Godding, *Le droit privé dans les pays-Bas méridionaux du 12e au 18e siècle* (Brussels, 1987), 58–59. Some towns demanded an entrance fee, the cost of which would rise during the late middle ages and would eventually become a significant social threshold. In other towns, there was only a limited registration fee, usually amounting to no more than a couple of daily wages for a skilled artisan. This fee played an important role in the attraction of different towns. After the revolt of the city of Bruges against Philip the Good in 1436–38 and the ensuing period of economic turmoil, the city's aldermen successfully attracted Flemish migrants by lowering the entrance fee (Marc Boone and Peter Stabel, 'New burghers in the late medieval towns of Flanders and Brabant: conditions of entry, rules, reality', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, Beiheft 30 (*Neubürger im späten Mittelalter. Migration und Austausch in der Städtelandschaft des alten Reiches (1250–1550)*), ed. R.C. Schwinges (Berlin, 2002), 317–332; Erik Thoen, 'Immigration to Bruges during the late middle ages', in: *Le migrazioni in Europa secc. XIII–XVIII. Atti della Venticinquesima settimana di studi, 3–8 maggio 1993*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Istituto internazionale di storia economica F. Datini Prato, Pubblicazioni. Serie 2: Atti delle settimane di studio e altri convegni, 25, Florence, 1994), 453–491.

or it was an advantage because guild entrance fees were usually much higher for non-burghers. For unskilled workers, temporary migrants and outcasts of society, however, it was an unnecessary luxury. Numbers of new burghers are, therefore, indicative of the migration of skilled and semi-skilled labour and reflect not so much the demographic, but rather the economic attraction of towns.

A clear positive correlation seems to have existed between economic and demographic growth on the one hand and the volume and direction of migration on the other hand. The increasing demand for specialised labour in the growing urban economies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries strengthened the flow of skilled migrants. Despite the preponderance of regional country folk among immigrant workers, there was always an important group of newcomers coming from more distant regions. Increasing numbers of immigrants also came from other towns as the urban economy grew. The fact that Bruges was an international commercial city during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is clearly reflected in the origin of its new burghers in the same period.³⁴ In contrast to the origin of new burghers in the small and secondary towns, most of whom came from the immediate hinterland of the town, Bruges recruited its immigrants mainly from a distance of more than 35 km. In the heyday of the city's commercial development, a very significant share of the immigrants came from foreign principalities.³⁵ In Oudenaarde new burghers were mainly recruited within the county itself (80%), but when the industrial town boomed in the first years of the sixteenth century, the proportion of foreigners and townsmen among its new burghers was actually equal to that reached in the commercial metropolis of Bruges a century before. With increasing distance, migration also became more inter-urban.³⁶

This highly mobile world of skilled artisans provided the recruiting ground for the urban guilds. High numbers of new guild members could not but originate from other towns or from the surrounding countryside. In fact resident artisans who lived for generations in the same town and were employed in the same business must have been only a minority, be it a very influential minority, if one considers their hold on offices within the guild and the urban governing bodies. The same holds true for the social networks of individuals and relatives. These must have been less fixed and static than generally accepted. A recent survey of the presence of family members in the urban social fabric in the Low Countries has shown that, except for some dynasties of merchants, rentiers and artisans, individuals

³⁴ W.P. Blockmans, 'The creative environment: incentives to and functions of Bruges art production', in: *Petrus Christus in Renaissance Bruges: an interdisciplinary approach*, ed. M.W. Ainsworth (New York/Turnhout, 1995); Blockmans, 'The Burgundian Court and the urban milieu as patrons in fifteenth century Bruges', *Economic history and the arts*, ed. M. North (Cologne, 1996), 15–26.

³⁵ Thoen, 'Immigration to Bruges', 340 ff. See also Jan Verbeemen, 'Immigratie te Antwerpen', in: *Mededelingen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring voor Leuven. Lustrumuitgave. De Brabantse Stad* (Leuven, 1965), 81–100.

³⁶ On other towns in Flanders: Peter Stabel, *Dwarfs among giants: the Flemish urban network in the late middle ages* (Studies in urban social, economic and political history of the medieval and modern Low Countries 8, Leuven/Apeldoorn, 1997).

rarely could rely on the presence of an extended family in their home town; instead families tended to live scattered in the various towns and in the countryside. Hence other networks—that very often tended to be less engaging and less durable—were organised within the corporate organisations and within the neighbourhood. They replaced more and more the traditional relations of the so-called ‘vrienden en maghen’ (friends and relatives).³⁷ Urban society was indeed a much more anonymous world.

Little quantitative data exist about the realities of apprenticeship and mastership in the cities of late medieval Europe. Recent research on the social profile of new masters and apprentices in some Bruges guilds, however, seems to confirm the enormous impact of newcomers in the urban craft guilds.³⁸ The material, which involves data for the coopers’, the bowmakers’ and the painters’ guilds in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Bruges, offers striking figures on the background of apprentices and masters. It becomes clear that the great majority of the apprentices, trained in the urban guild, for one reason or another never made it to becoming master. Between 1385 and 1550, 358 apprentices (masters’ sons did not need to be registered as apprentices and most of them seem to have received their training within their own household anyway), and 267 masters were registered by the bowmakers’ guild, but only 79 of the listed apprentices—less than one quarter—became, in the same period, masters. The others possibly had died, emigrated, they lacked capital, lost interest or they found other types of employment, but they never achieved the status of an independent entrepreneur in Bruges. Assuming every apprentice respected the prescribed training period of four years, it took an average of more than seven years after the end of the apprenticeship before an apprentice could achieve promotion to mastership. Only one apprentice became master immediately after his training period was over, but several succeeded after only one or two years; the longest period was 32 years, but most apprentices needed between five and seven years. As the industry got into difficulty because of declining outlets in Flanders and abroad, mastership tended to close down even more for locally trained apprentices.

Similar data exist for the coopers’ guild in Bruges. In a commercial metropolis such as Bruges, the coopers provided an essential service, in particular for the

³⁷ Myriam Carlier, ‘Solidariteit of sociale controle? De rol van vrienden en magen en buren in een middeleeuwse stad’, in: *Coeur et marge dans la société urbaine au bas moyen âge. Core and periphery in late medieval urban society*, ed. Myriam Carlier, Anke Greve, Walter Prevenier and Peter Stabel (Leuven/Apeldoorn, 1997), 71–91.

³⁸ Stabel, ‘Apprentices’. Data for the painters’ guild are published in Peter Stabel, ‘Organisation corporative et production d’œuvres d’art à Bruges à la fin du Moyen Âge et au début des Temps Modernes’ (in press). See also Jean-Pierre Sosson, ‘Une approche des structures économiques d’un atelier d’art: la corporation des peintres et selliers de Bruges Xve–XVIe siècles’, *Revue des Archéologues et Historiens de l’Art de Louvain* (1970), 91–100; id. ‘A propos des aspects socio-économiques des métiers d’art aux anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux XVe–XVIe siècles’, *Revue Belge d’Archéologie et d’Histoire de l’Art*, 51 (1982), 17–25; id., ‘Structures associatives et réalités socio-économiques dans l’artisanat d’art et du bâtiment aux Pays-Bas (XVe–XVIe siècles). Perspectives de recherche’, in: *Artistes, artisans et productions artistique au moyen âge. I: Les hommes*, ed. Xavier Barral I Altet (Paris 1986), 111–121.

trades of wine and beer. In the very same way as for the bowmakers, the economic success of the coopers was, therefore, dependent upon the trade cycle in north-western Europe. But in contrast with the bowmakers, they also performed a vital function for the local and regional economy. Between 1375 and 1500, no less than 966 apprentices and 685 masters were registered in the coopers' guild. Only 164 of the 966 apprentices eventually made it to the ranks of master in the guild, a poor 17%. Again it must be stressed that apprentices trained within their own family were not registered. The chances for becoming master were best in the early fifteenth century (in particular in the 1400s, 1410s and 1420s: a period of relative wealth in Bruges), but opportunity declined in a drastic way in the 1430s (a period of political turmoil in that city) and towards the last quarter of the fifteenth century (when Bruges' international function was in full decline). A cooper trained in Bruges needed an average period of almost 10 years to become master in the same city, although an important minority (one-third) needed less than six years, and some apprentices even worked for a period of 20 years and more, perhaps as a journeyman in the guild, before they eventually made it to the ranks of the masters in the guild in the autumn of their career.³⁹

Trends in the painters' guild (a very heterogeneous corporation of painters, mirror-makers, glaziers, saddle-makers, etc.) more or less point to the same phenomenon. Only 102 apprentices or 22% of the total number eventually made it to the mastership, but the direct link with the general trend of the Bruges market seems to be less important than for the other occupational groups. Perhaps the painters were able to redirect with more success their output to the growing Antwerp market. Differences between the different branches in the painters' guild are very pronounced: the saddle-makers were a much more closed organisation than the painters and glaziers. The average time span between the end of apprenticeship and the start of a career as independent master was about nine years (but the period was remarkably longer for glaziers, almost 12 years), but a minority (10%) of the apprentices needed 18 years and more. For some painters, we know from biographical data that they worked in the meantime for other master painters in Bruges, in other cities or elsewhere (for example at European courts), but a great number of them must have been engaged as well in other occupations (many painters had other occupations, even bakers and innkeepers were among those).⁴⁰

The impressive figures for dropouts must, however, be put in perspective. The figures compare two moments of entry, that of the apprentice and that of the master. But many things may have happened in the meantime. As many studies on guilds in the early modern period in particular demonstrate, for various reasons a lot of apprentices did not finish their period of training (high death rates for young adolescents; people often switched to other occupations; apprentices left their

³⁹ See also Jean-Pierre Sosson, 'La structure sociale de la corporation médiévale. L'exemple des tonne-
liers de Bruges de 1350 à 1500' *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 44 (1966), 457–478.

⁴⁰ Till H. Borchert, 'De mobiliteit van kunstenaars. Aspecten van de cultuuroverdracht bij de overgang
van de late Middeleeuwen naar de Nieuwe Tijd', in: *De eeuw van Van Eyck 1430–1530. De Vlaamse
Primitieven en het Zuiden* (Ghent/Amsterdam, 2002), 32–45.

masters before the end of the contract), while on the other hand once a journeyman many were not able to become master and preferred, probably because of lack of a starting capital, to remain in service.⁴¹ Also, during the often very long period between apprenticeship and mastership artisans must have been confronted with many choices and difficulties. Moreover, even after childhood and adolescence, adult death rates were still very high. In the Low Countries the yearly adult urban death rate can be estimated between 34% and 40%.⁴² This means that of a group of 100 apprentices, after 12 years (a good average between the start of the training period and mastership) already one-third had died. Skilled artisans probably belonged more to the middling groups in urban society and death rates may have been slightly lower than for the average town dweller, but death already explains a substantial part of the low success rate of apprentices. The high geographical mobility comes as an obvious second explanation. There was, as the data demonstrate very convincingly, no strong impediment for achieving social promotion to mastership in other towns.

The social profile of masters also points to the extremely high mobility of skilled artisans within the guild economy, in particular in periods of economic growth.⁴³ Of all master coopers in Bruges in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, fewer than one quarter were apprenticed in Bruges (as a newcomer in the guild), fewer than one quarter were masters' sons, while more than half (53%) were immigrants to the city (and had received their training in other privileged places; only a tiny minority was granted mastership without any prior training at all).⁴⁴ Furthermore clear chronological shifts can be recognized. Bruges-trained apprentices had the best opportunities in the first half of the fifteenth century of becoming master, and masters' sons were well represented throughout this period, but they seem to be very numerous in particular in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. But paradoxically, the decline of the Bruges market did not prevent newcomers from entering the coopers' guild on a massive scale in the 1470s, 1480s and 1490s, when both masters' sons and Bruges apprentices became very rare. The locals probably had a more correct appreciation of Bruges' declining needs for the services they provided. Although the source material is less clear, similar trends can be recognized for the bowmakers' guild where only 40% of all masters were apprenticed in Bruges (the

⁴¹ For the early modern Low Countries, recent research on clothing guilds by Bibi Panhuysen, *Maatwerk. Kleermakers, naaisters, oudkleerkopers en de gilden (1500–1800)* (IISG, Amsterdam, 2000), 137–142 and 169–171; Harald Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen en een verschillende snit: sociaal-economische, institutionele en culturele transformaties in de kledingsector in Antwerpen, Brussel en Gent* (IISG, Amsterdam, 2001), 261–290 offers a general introduction to the position of apprentices in the guild curriculum.

⁴² Stabel, *De kleine stad*, 54–62; Erik Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late middeleeuwen en het begin van de moderne tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst (eind 13de-eerste helft 16de eeuw)* (Ghent, 1988), 64–93; David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch, *Les Toscans et leurs familles. Une étude du catasto florentin de 1427* (Paris, 1978), 454–455; Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, *Vivre et mourir en Lyonnais à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris, 1981).

⁴³ Thoen, 'Immigration'.

⁴⁴ Alfred James, *Brugse poorters*, vols. 1–3 (Handzame, 1974–1990); R.A. Parmentier, *Indices op de Brugsche poortboekken* (Geschiedkundige Publicatiën der Stad Brugge, vol. 2, Bruges, 1938).

others were either master's sons or immigrants). In the painters' guild, surprisingly, the local element in the recruitment of masters is much greater: only one quarter of all Bruges painters in the last quarter of the fifteenth century were immigrants who had got their training elsewhere; one quarter were masters' sons, and half of the painters were newcomers in the guild who were apprenticed in the city itself. The great painters of the Renaissance in fifteenth-century Bruges, who often came from other towns inside and outside the Low Countries (Jan Van Eyck, Gerard David, Hans Memlinc, Petrus Christus), were, therefore, atypical in their own guild. Only in periods of relative decline did the profile of new master-painters resemble more that of the coopers and bowmakers (but with a greater share of masters' sons). The demand for paintings must still have been important, so sons of masters were still inclined to follow their fathers' footsteps.

Research about the careers of journeymen is still lacking for the late medieval cities of the Low Countries. The success rate of journeymen bowmakers (or rather those craftsmen who entered the guild after having enjoyed training in other 'free' cities, as Bruges apprentices did not have to register after their training period in order to become a journeyman) was even worse than that of the young apprentices: only about 7% eventually became master in the guild. The few immigrant-journeymen, who achieved the status of master, needed a slightly shorter period than the apprentices (an average of 6.7 years); but the more successful journeymen, however, became master after serving only one year as a journeyman, which suggests that they must have already had some capital when they entered their new hometown. Therefore, we must assume that the many immigrants who entered the guild as masters were doing this immediately after their arrival in the city. Hence, they must have had enough capital or access to capital on arrival to set up an independent business.

All this leads us to conclude that apprenticeship and years of service as journeymen offered no guarantee whatsoever of entering the guild elite of masters. They were merely steps in a guild career. Only masters' sons were more secure in their prospects for the future. After their apprenticeship they could usually enter the mastership quite easily. Missing starting capital could be advanced from within the former household of the father or mother. Non-masters' children could remain in the city, start off as journeymen and eventually after a shorter or a longer period, depending on their social background, save enough money for the entrance fees and for the starting capital necessary for having their own workshop. In some guilds, such as the painters, they stood a better chance; in other guilds, such as the coopers, opportunities to become master were only slight. After the necessary conditions were fulfilled, they could become master in their own city, or as the quantitative data seem to show, very often also in another city. For most accomplished apprentices, however, such an issue would never be an option: they were forced to remain journeymen or to switch their occupation.

The world of skilled artisans and of guild regulated labour in the late medieval city was structured as a very complex social system. Various systems of social mobility, social exclusion and labour organisation existed at the same time and in the same place. The conditions of apprentices, journeymen and masters were only

marginally influenced by fixed guild regulation. Regulation was too scarce and not specific enough. Instead guilds preferred social custom and contract negotiation as more decisive elements in establishing personal and occupational relations between apprentices, journeymen and masters. Hence a very diversified system became possible. The regime of social mobility enjoyed by masters' children (of course in particular masters' sons) was completely different from that of foreign apprentices or journeymen. The first group was a stable group, forming the core of guild organisation and political life within the guild. Sons seem to have got their training most of the time within their own household or in workshops owned by close relatives,⁴⁵ and once trained and independent, master's sons were quickly able to find their own workshop, avoiding in this way the bottleneck of journeymanship. Many of them could also enter the political organisation of the guild (some could eventually even hope to enter urban politics).

People who were apprenticed outside their own household or outside their immediate social networks had much less chance of becoming master. The overall majority, sometimes even more than 90%, remained journeymen after an initial training. They changed jobs or they moved away to stand a better chance in another town. The influx of newcomers, apprentices, journeymen and masters, followed the same pattern. Incoming apprentices and journeymen stood little if any chance of becoming masters themselves. The only successful newcomers were those who had already experienced training elsewhere and who had gathered enough capital to buy a mastership and start off their own workshop. These new masters, foreigners in the city who surprisingly constituted a very substantial part, sometimes even the majority of all guild masters, could develop their own networks within the guild system, in the same way as masters' sons, although these had of course the important advantage of having these networks already established at the moment when they became master.

4. Export industries in the Low Countries: the constraints of guild regulation?

Even a very brief analysis of guild regulation already points to the many difficulties which the traditional image of guilds as regulating economic bodies encoun-

⁴⁵ This contradicts, at least for the Low Countries, the statements on the urban household economy in Ad Knotter, 'Problems of the "family economy". Peasant economy, domestic production and labour markets in pre-industrial Europe', in: *Early modern capitalism. Economic and social change in Europe 1400–1800*, ed. Maarten Prak (Routledge, London/New York, 2001), 135–160 (based on German examples studied by Michael Mitterauer). See also Mitterauer, 'Grundtypen alteuropäischer Sozialformen: Haus und Gemeinde in vorindustriellen Gesellschaften', *Stuttgart, Kultur und Gesellschaft: neue historische Forschungen*, 5 (1979), id., 'Familie und Arbeitsorganisation in städtischen Gesellschaften des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit', in: *Haus und Familie in der spätmittelalterlichen Stadt*, ed. A. Haverkamp (Städteforschung. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für vergleichende Städtegeschichte in Münster, Reihe A, Darstellungen, Cologne/Vienna 1984), 18, 1–36 and id., 'Servants and youth', *Continuity and Change*, 5 (1990), 11–38.

ters. Although the general philosophy is clearly one of redistribution of wealth and the solidarity of guild members, the many exceptions and nuances in guild regulation suggest a much more diverse institution which allowed in many ways entrepreneurs and merchants to organise flexible systems of manufacture and marketing. Furthermore, the many cases of guild litigation and the endless number of violations of guild regulation show the realities of a much more creative economic system, which sought to evade restrictive regulation. The question should be asked whether such violations were rather normal practice than exceptional fraudulent behaviour. Moreover, the small commodity production system was a much more flexible system of organising manufacture than is traditionally assumed.⁴⁶ Therefore, restrictions as to the size of each production unit are not so much the result of *egalitarian policies* of the guilds and a liability for entrepreneurial initiative, but rather a pragmatic economic response to demand and to the necessity of producing a standard quality within the constraints of pre-industrial urban economy.⁴⁷

The period of crisis which struck the traditional Flemish export industries in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is an ideal period for assessing the flexibility of guild organised economies. Urban economies were forced to adapt to changing market conditions and growing competition from abroad. They did so by specialising in luxury fabrics, leaving the lower and middle range woollens to the secondary urban centres and to the rural industries. This conversion in towns, where often more than half the population depended directly upon the manufacture of cloth, caused serious social problems. But in the end the urban economies did surprisingly well. A new equilibrium was reached in the fifteenth century and the cities and towns were able to adapt in two directions. The growing rural economy was integrated in the commercial network of the towns, and cities attracted new industries, while, at the same time, they capitalised on the know-how and capital, which were already present. Instead of a whole range of quality woollens, the focus was placed on the highest qualities of woollens and on other textiles, which had a high added value in common, such as tapestries, fine linens, mixed fabrics, silks, etc. Changing commercial axes triggered the decline of Bruges as an international commercial gateway, but this was more than compensated for by the new role of Antwerp from the late fifteenth century onwards. A very functional distribution of manufacture in town and countryside was achieved. This did not happen without difficulty and much resentment among urban entrepreneurs, but in the end commodities with high added value were manufactured in the cities; the others, where wage levels were more important for price formation than technical skill, were transferred to the countryside. The final production stages of the rural textiles, however, often remained an urban monopoly. In general, the involvement

⁴⁶ The classic study on small commodity production remains Robert S. DuPlessis and Martha C. Howell, 'Reconsidering the early modern urban economy: the cases of Leiden and Lille', *Past and Present*, 94 (1982), 49–84, but recently many nuances have been added (a general survey of literature: Farr, *Artisans*, 45–94).

⁴⁷ Denis Morsa, 'Les métiers aux temps modernes, reflets de situations médiévales?', in: *Les métiers*, 232–233.

of urban entrepreneurs in the rural industries seems very important. From antagonism, the urban–rural relations had developed into clear osmosis and collaboration.⁴⁸

Even within the urban industries, there were clear structural differences between the export industries and the service industries, both in the organisation of manufacture and enterprise and in the marketing of the finished commodities. In the service industries, there was often no distinction between industrial and commercial functions. Craftsmen sold their own manufactured goods in their workshops or market stalls; guild regulations created clear barriers against non-members or foreigners conquering the markets, and, if not, guild members in general still received clear preferential treatment in retailing activities. In the export industries, the relation between entrepreneurs and merchants was much more complex. Most industries depended on investments, on the supply of raw materials, on the finishing of textiles, and sometimes merchants were even involved in the actual manufacturing process, and craftsmen had become mere wage earners. In other industrial activities, the small-scale craftsmen remained in control of their entrepreneurial activities. The complete dependence on the international market was without doubt the weakness of the industrial organisation, but it was at the same time a constant stimulus to adapt production according to the needs of the merchants. This is clearly reflected in the development of guild regulation. The massive export of textile commodities required standardised production and hence the strong regulation of quality and manufacturing processes. This regulation could only be guaranteed by the urban guilds.⁴⁹ It had guaranteed the survival and conversion of the traditional cloth industry; now it provided the conditions for the success of the new industries in an international market.

Even the proto-capitalistic organisation of the manufacture of tapestries in the town of Oudenaarde and its surrounding countryside during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries could not be achieved without tight guild control.⁵⁰ In fact urban guild regulation was able to penetrate in the countryside, where rural weavers worked as wage earners for urban entrepreneurs. In contrast to the manufacture of rural linens and coarse woollens, this industry demanded high investments for the raw materials. The expensive tapestries were not only manufactured in urban centres of production (Tournai, Brussels, and in Flanders Aalst, Geraardsbergen and, of course especially Oudenaarde, famous for its *verdures*), but an important part of the total output of smaller and less refined goods were produced by rural tapestry weavers. In contrast to the rural weavers in the linen industry, these were integrated into urban systems of manufacture. Commercial networks were put in place to tighten contacts between the countryside and the

⁴⁸ The following is based on: Stabel, *De kleine stad* and id., *Dwarfs among Giants*.

⁴⁹ Van der Wee, 'Industrial dynamics' and various contributions cited in Boone and Prevenier, 'Sociale geschiedenis'.

⁵⁰ Henri Pirenne, 'Note sur la fabrication des tapisseries en Flandre au XVI^e siècle', *Vierteljahrsschritte für Sozial- und wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 4 (1906), 644–656; Martine Vanwelden, *Het tapijtweversambacht te Oudenaarde 1441–1772* (Oudenaarde, 1979).

town of Oudenaarde, and entrepreneurs and merchants also established links with the firms in the gateway-cities of the Low Countries. Some entrepreneurs were able to establish very important enterprises. In 1541 each master employed an average of 29 artisans, but among them there were many small-scale tapestry entrepreneurs, so a minority must have controlled the output of hundreds of weavers and dyers. Entrepreneurs often leased out looms and provided the artisans and journeymen with the raw materials. The latter depended sometimes for the rest of his career on a particular entrepreneur, because of various debts and financial obligations. Various systems of subcontracting were readily being used: new masters could still carry out work for others as long as all their obligations towards their former employer were fulfilled. Moreover, the larger scale of tapestry enterprises avoided the general use of subcontractors, a practice that existed in many of the urban cloth industries.

Solutions for the growth of enterprises were therefore not only sought within the traditional guild system, but they were created by capitalistic systems of controlling the labour market (refined systems of *putting-out*). The rural tapestry-weavers were in fact mere wage earners, supplementing their agricultural income with ad hoc weaving activity. The high cost of raw materials and the very labour-intensive production process effectively prevented the concentration of the means of production in their hands. They often received only piece-wages, which depended on skill and the quality and quantity of the work; mostly they did not own their looms, which were leased out by urban entrepreneurs, who also supplied them with the raw materials. The ties linking rural artisans to the urban industry were kept very close. Rural weavers had to be members of the urban guild of tapestry weavers, without, however, enjoying the same advantages as the urban master-weavers. They were not allowed to have apprentices (and thereby they were robbed of an obvious way of hiring cheap labour), and most of all there were strict limitations as to their capacity to be involved in trade. Rural weavers were subordinated to the jurisdiction of the urban guild. The dominance of the urban entrepreneur seems to have been complete. Urban and rural weavers had to comply with the guild regulations concerning quality and labour conditions; working for two entrepreneurs at the same time was forbidden. They could only use the raw materials and designs provided by the entrepreneur. Moreover, they could not work for their own account.

In the traditional exclusively urban industries as well, more flexible systems of organising manufacture were introduced: various types of putting-out and a continuing development of commercial capitalism in the gateway cities of the Low Countries. These developments had already profoundly influenced the structure of the medieval cloth industry; they would now define the organisation of production and commerce in the new industrial centres as well. The small commodity producer remained often a crucial figure in the traditional methods of production of the cloth industry. In the new industries (light cloth, tapestries, linens) his role was taken over by the merchant, the brokers and the large-scale entrepreneur. The census of 1541 in the cloth- and tapestries-producing town of Oudenaarde is revealing. It shows the impact of the rising tapestry industry and the still surprisingly great role of the more traditional cloth manufacture:

they employ 75% of the total population, while the servicing industries and retail employ only one quarter. Yet only one quarter of all guild masters was active in textiles: the workshops of small tailors, shoemakers, cobblers, cabinet-makers, and bakers were much more numerous. These masters employed one or two apprentices and/or journeymen (the smallest workshops can be found in the arts and crafts, the metalworkers and in food processing). The situation was completely different in the export industries. Only 41 tapestry weavers, as already mentioned, employed 1187 apprentices and journeymen: 42% of the total labour force or 29 for each master. Even higher figures can be found for the traditional cloth industry: 19 masters with 603 employees or 32 for each master for the weavers, six masters with 155 employees or 26 for each master for the fullers. Chronicles even mention masters employing hundreds of artisans in both town and countryside. Probate inventories reveal petty commodity producers besides large-scale entrepreneurs in both the cloth and tapestry business. Only in the finishing industries (dyers) was the average size of an enterprise much smaller: seven master dyers employed an average of only three apprentices and journeymen.

The average size of a textile enterprise in Oudenaarde seems to be exceptional, even when compared with the growing gateway-city of western Europe, Antwerp, where an entrepreneur in export textiles had an average of only 4.4 employees. Most workshops in Antwerp were, however, active in the finishing industries, which were also smaller in Oudenaarde. In the traditional cloth towns of Flanders, there are no indications that similar enterprises existed. Even in the most successful cloth industry in sixteenth-century Europe, the manufacture of light woollens at Hondschoote, production was organised within the framework of the small workshop. In the few remaining traditional cloth towns, such as Poperinge and Menen, there were only craftsmen with very small workshops. Nonetheless, even this did not prevent concentration of production. This can be clearly acknowledged for the Menen cloth industry. Menen drapers manufactured among the most expensive Flemish black cloth destined for Mediterranean consumers (in the early sixteenth century the Florentine firms of Frescobaldi and Gualterotti traded in Menen woollens). As in other traditional cloth industries of Flanders, entrepreneurs were not only responsible for the industrial production, they were also involved in the marketing of their woollens towards the community of international merchants in Bruges and Antwerp. Weavers, fullers or dyers were often also drapers, who were able to control the various stages of production. This enabled some entrepreneurs to get hold of the commerce in raw materials and finished goods, and so also to concentrate production, despite the traditional guild regulation which forbade concentration of more than two looms or fullers' tubs. Several options were possible to achieve concentration. One was to intensify links with rural spinners and weavers, thereby maximising profit margins by using cheaper labour. There were, however, limits to this, because the manufacture of a luxury cloth required a lot of skilled urban labour. A second possibility lies in monopolising commercial outlets and in the general use of subcontracting.

As the account-books of the late 15th-century Bruges broker Wouter Ameide show, only a handful of cloth entrepreneurs controlled the output of woollens in the gateway-cities, and were able at the same time to control the trade in wool from the staple market to the industrial centre.⁵¹ The figures are overwhelming: in the early sixteenth century 10% of all drapers present in the gateway market of Bruges were selling over a quarter of all woollens, while some small entrepreneurs were only selling a handful of woollens, barely enough to survive. The same group of rich entrepreneurs also controlled the bulk of the wool supply. This points to the existence of elaborate systems of subcontracting: small drapers who, despite guild regulation, had become mere wage earners working for rich entrepreneurs. The drapers were not a homogeneous class of cloth entrepreneurs. Undoubtedly such polarisation was caused by the high investment necessary to acquire the expensive raw materials (wool, dyes): hence the hold on supply mechanisms was a catalyst for industrial concentration, notwithstanding the guild bans on larger workshops. Larger entrepreneurs had easier access to market systems, but they were also able to adapt in a much more flexible manner their industrial output. If and when required, they could subcontract to more or fewer craftsmen, and hence run a much smoother business.

Mechanisms of social polarisation and concentration were very important in the industrial landscape of late medieval and early modern towns. The rhetoric of guild equality proved no match for the realities of economic exchange. The possibilities at the disposal of large entrepreneurs and merchants, having access to the market for raw materials, were numerous. They could choose, depending upon the quality and the cost structure of producing industrial commodities (the relative impact of labour, raw materials and marketing), between several options. A first option was to invest in rural industries. To do this, merchants concentrated on the control of market mechanisms instead of the actual manufacture. They could also enhance the scale of an enterprise and distribute production among urban and rural manufacturers, such as happened in the Oudenaarde case. Or they could maintain the traditional urban ways of production within the guild framework of small-scale workshops and develop systems of subcontracting in order to develop advantages of scale. These entrepreneurial strategies could be chosen very pragmatically.

⁵¹ Peter Stabel, 'Entre commerce international et économie locale. Le monde financier de Wouter Ameide (Bruges fin Xve-début XVIe siècle)', in: *Finances publiques et finances privées au bas moyen âge*, ed. Marc Boone and Walter Prevenier (Leuven/Apeldoorn, Garant eds., 1995), 75–99; Clauzel, Calonne, 'Artisanat rural', 531–573, *Recueil des documents relatifs à l'histoire de l'industrie drapière en Flandre. Deuxième partie. Le sud-Ouest de la Flandre depuis l'époque bourguignonne*, ed. Henri De Sagher, Jan De Sagher, Hans Van Werveke and Carlos Wyffels (Commission royale d'Histoire, Brussels, 1951–1965); Octave Mus, 'Wouter Ameide, een Brugs waard-makelaar op het einde van de 15de eeuw', in: *Album Albert Schouteet* (Bruges, 1973), 117–132.

5. Concluding remarks

From recent surveys of the functions of guilds in early modern Europe, one can easily acknowledge that there was no such thing as a universal guild system.⁵² Guilds could differ fundamentally from one city to another, and even within the same city there were often huge differences. The few examples of guild careers, of urban manufacture and of commercial exchange in the late medieval cities of the Low Countries clearly point to the fact that the guild system was not a monolithic system. Differences could be the result of economic organisation, political power, social polarisation and cultural prestige. Guild organised economies were capable of very flexible systems of production and exchange, a flexibility that was required by an international market and by the impact of mercantile capitalism.

This analysis clearly adds a lot of nuance to the traditional models of historical progress. Hence product innovation, possibilities for rapid increase of production, a differentiated system of manufacture, including the small commodity production described by Bob DuPlessis and Martha Howell (small-scale artisans as production units with their own means of production and small-scale labour: family and journeymen), but also various systems of economic dependence, polarisation via subcontracting, putting-out, urban–rural collaboration, existed at the same time. Depending on economic and political circumstances, the ingredients of this cocktail could be changed. Product innovation and a potential to enhance if necessary the scope of production units and productivity by adapting the organisation of the workshop to changed circumstances were paramount. Hence in the industrial and commercial cities of the Low Countries, the regulatory environment for actual production and market exchange remained very vague throughout the late middle ages, and rules and regulations were often even contradictory, more particularly about the integration of vertical and horizontal organisation of manufacture and about the integration of non-guild labour or of journeymen in production processes. Requirements of huge investment into production, especially raw materials, inevitably led to polarisation, either in the hands of merchants or of the more important entrepreneurs (in particular in the new textile industries). Guild regulation was explicit about the conditions of commercial exchange and about the relations between masters and apprentices; it was, however, very quiet about the actual organisation of the workshop, about subcontracting or various systems of putting-out. This ‘loud’ silence points to the level of flexibility required by entrepreneurs and merchants alike. Even the often very disturbed relations between manufacture in towns and in the countryside were only mere skirmishes. Guilds had never been able to stop the dialectic process of dislocation of industrial activity, even if they wanted to.

⁵² For the Low Countries: *Werelden van Verschil. Ambachtsgilden in de Lage Landen*, ed. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (VUB Press, Brussels, 1997), and in particular their introduction to the volume ‘Ambachtsgilden in vergelijkend perspectief: de Noordelijke en Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 15de–18de eeuw’, 11–42.

Guilds were for a long time open institutions. Numbers of entries were relatively high, and entrance fees low. Women and children had an important role in the chain of production and of exchange. In an international economy, dominated by mercantile capitalism, which wanted to increase competition to keep production costs low, such a system had to remain open. It was paramount for merchants and entrepreneurs that wages were kept relatively low, in particular during a period when there was a constant upward pressure on general wage levels. Moreover, the cost advantages of concentrating production in larger units were, except for a few specific industries such as tapestries in the Oudenaarde region, not yet important enough to endanger competitiveness. On the contrary, a subdivision of the labour market in tiny production units guaranteed competition and low prices for the merchants and those entrepreneurs who controlled the trade of raw materials and finished goods. High geographical mobility further enhances this very dynamic pattern of fragmentation. A lot of masters (and undoubtedly also many apprentices and journeymen) were coming from elsewhere, and only a minority of newcomers in the guild (mostly master's sons and people trained by close relatives) could rely on already established social networks to develop their economic and political strategies. Therefore, internal hierarchy and different social, economic and cultural backgrounds formed not only the essence of urban society as a whole, but also of the so-called closely knit social fabric within the guilds.

Often rivalry among artisans was even stimulated. Sometimes guilds were even forced to allow hierarchical entrepreneurial networks, where the labour market could be segmented even further, and the manufacture of particular goods was shifted from one guild to another. Litigation and inter-guild conflict can be analysed in such a framework. They show, much more than tight guild control and jealous defence of guild interest, the fluidity of boundaries, both for production and commerce. New guild statutes and regulation are continuous negotiations among the guilds, but also among town and regional governments and merchant organisations. But even in retail there were only a few exceptions, where guilds quickly developed into closed communities where membership was inherited and economic activity monopolised. The cliché of closed guilds does not apply to the late middle ages and the beginning of the early modern period. The complexities of the late medieval urban economy in the Low Countries did not allow this, and guild regulation never succeeded in implementing strict economic hierarchies. Guilds formed the core of a formally organised economy, and they were very efficient in making this 'economy of scarcity' more performing. But outside the formal economy, there was a wide range of other economic activities organised outside or at the margins of the corporate framework. Guild masters had to take into account these activities that were often very close to their own industrial or commercial enterprises.

Peter Stabel is researcher at Leiden University (Netherlands). He taught medieval history at the universities of Ghent and Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) and at the Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale (Boulogne-sur-Mer). He published on urban history in the medieval and early modern period and on social and economic history of the late middle ages, in particular on textile industries and on commercial

organisation. Among his publications are *Dwarfs among giants. The Flemish urban network in the late middle ages* (Leuven, 1997). He is currently finishing a book on marketing procedures in the late medieval town.