



# Metropolis and Hinterland?

## A Comment on the Role of Rural Economy and Society in the Urban Heart of the Medieval Low Countries<sup>1</sup>

TIM SOENS, ELINE VAN ONACKER AND  
KRISTOF DOMBRECHT

Urbanity was a distinguishing feature of the medieval Low Countries, but even in its most urbanised core a majority of the population continued to live outside the city walls. In his new and encompassing synthesis of the history of the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages, Wim Blockmans emphasises the fundamental intertwining of urban and rural societies in this region, but also the existing historiographical gap between urban and rural historians. This contribution pleads for a reconsideration of the impact of urbanisation and urbanity on rural society as a whole, exemplified for instance, by the role of urban demand as a driving force in the rural economy or by the spread of an ‘urban-modelled’ civic life beyond the city walls. Although every village community was in one way or another connected to the urban world, villages were not entirely shaped by the latter and striking regional differences in both economic development, social cohesion and political organisation persisted well beyond the medieval period. In order to explain these differences the endogenous dynamics of rural societies have to be taken into account.

### Introduction: the urban shadow

With his recent book, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee*, Wim Blockmans truly has created a monument for the urban society of the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages. According to Blockmans, ‘urbanity’ became the dominant feature of this region. It was urban, merchant capitalism that steered its economy, always looking for higher profits and favourable market conditions.

Politics were increasingly shaped and staged in the cities. The impressive artistic production originated in a permanent dialogue between town and court. In the cities of the Low Countries a highly original type of society was developed, based on personal liability, legal certainty and participation. This urban way of living even had a ‘pacifying’ and ‘civilising’ impact on society as a whole. In short, the Low Countries developed into a region where urbanity became predominant in all aspects of life, even including the sexuality of its inhabitants.

What place is there left for the countryside in this urbanised world? Blockmans does stress the importance of agrarian production for the rise and growth of cities, and admits that two thirds of the population continued to live outside the city walls.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the countryside seems to lack agency of its own: economically, rural production specialises and intensifies in function with the growing urban demand. Politically, village communities were crushed in the power struggle between cities and territorial princes. Without doubt the impact of the dense urbanisation on the countryside was important, especially in the core regions Flanders, Brabant and Holland, on which Blockmans focuses in his book. For each of these regions, studies explicitly focusing on the interaction between town and countryside remain rare.<sup>3</sup> Urban historians tend to conceive the countryside as the urban hinterland, whereas rural historians generally speak of town dwellers as a new group of surplus extracting landlords.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, we will question the iconic image of the ‘urban Low Countries’ by formulating some comments on the impact of urbanity on the rural population, on urban demand as the driving force in the rural economy, and on the spread of the urban way of life beyond the city walls.

### Urban demand and the endogenous dynamics of the rural economy

In his analysis, Blockmans explicitly uses a Braudellian-Wallersteinian model, based on shifting urban cores – Arras, Bruges, Antwerp, Amsterdam – in

1 This contribution was realized thanks to the FWO Flanders Research Project G075709N ‘Haantjesgedrag’.

2 Wim Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100-1560* (Amsterdam 2010) 379.

3 Among the recent exceptions: M. Limberger, *Sixteenth-Century Antwerp and its Rural Surroundings: Social and Economic Changes in the*

*Hinterland of a Commercial Metropolis (ca. 1450-ca. 1570)* (Turnhout 2008); and B. van Bavel, *Manors and Markets: Economy and Society in the Low Countries 500-1600* (Oxford 2010).

4 P. Stabel, ‘Old Regions and New Regions in the Economic History of the Medieval Low Countries: A Comment on the Notion of Economic Change in Bas van Bavel’s “Manors and Markets”’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 8:2 (2011) 114-116.

permanent interaction with peripheral regions. Each shift in the core implied an increase in scale and economic efficiency. Whereas regional soil fertility and production of food and industrial resources is considered important in order to explain the initial development of cities, further evolutions are primarily driven by the 'capitalist search for profit by urban traders' continually searching to increase profits and to economise on production costs.<sup>5</sup> Even apart from the question whether medieval merchants were invariably driven by a capitalistic pursuit of profit<sup>6</sup>, it often remains unclear to what extent urban entrepreneurs really steered rural production or simply took advantage of endogenous dynamics within the rural economy. The proto-industrial development of textile industry in the villages of inland Flanders offers a good example. First of all, these activities originated in the thirteenth century and continued well into the nineteenth century, largely untouched by the successive shifts in (urban) economic cores. The long-term success of the rural textile production in this region can only be understood by taking into account the permanent demographic pressure and the fragmentation of peasant holdings, which in its turn was influenced by divisible inheritance and the secure – but not absolute – property rights of the peasants on their holdings. In combination with highly productive but labour intensive arable production, proto-industrial textile production secured the survival of peasant smallholding for centuries.<sup>7</sup> Eventually the textiles reached the urban (and international) markets, via larger farmers acting as middlemen.<sup>8</sup> Neither fluctuating prices nor the initiative of urban entrepreneurs, but the long-term institutional and social dynamics of the rural economy of inland Flanders seems to explain the secular success of market-orientated textile production in this region.

Furthermore, no direct link between urban demand and rural specialisation can be established. In some regions, the on-going economic and political unification of Flanders, Brabant, Holland and Zeeland stimulated market-oriented specialisation, but in others specialisation diminished. In Flanders for instance, regional specialisation in specific crops or products seems higher in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than in the subsequent period when large parts of Flanders chose again a more diversified production of cereals and foodstuffs, sometimes combined with proto-industrial production.<sup>9</sup> In the coastal homelands of the count of Flanders for instance, market orientated production was already important before 1100, with

5 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 86, 578, 651-653.

6 In this respect see, M.C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge 2010).

7 E. Thoen, 'A Medieval "Commercial Survival Economy" in Evolution: The Flemish Countryside and the Transition Debate', in: P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. van Zanden (eds.),

*Peasants into Farmers?: The Netherlands and the Brennerdebat* (Turnhout 2001) 120-122.

8 R. Vermoesen, *Markttoegang en 'commerciële' netwerken van rurale huishoudens. De regio Aalst 1650-1800* (Gent 2011).

9 A new publication on this topic is currently prepared by E. Thoen and T. Soens.

the large-scale wool-production of the *bercaria* (sheep-farms) as its most characteristic feature. Specialised production for the urban market continued in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries exemplified for instance, by the cultivation of madder, used as red dye in the textile industry, although no longer on large estates, but rather on peasant smallholdings, which became increasingly numerous in this period. Subsequently, these smallholdings collapsed again in the later Middle Ages and were replaced by middle-sized tenant farms. The latter tended to concentrate on the production of a broad range of cereals, meat and dairy products, even re-introducing sheep-breeding, although on a much smaller scale than in previous centuries.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the proximity of Bruges might have stimulated this declining specialisation: as Blockmans himself mentions, well-to-do citizens preferred a non-market access to basic foodstuffs, whenever possible cultivated on their own lands in the countryside.<sup>11</sup> The least we can say is that the link between urban demand, agrarian specialisation and rural commercialisation appears highly complex.

For other regions, we mostly ignore the impact of urban demand on the rural economy. The Campine area in the duchy of Brabant is a good example. Following Van Uytven, Van der Wee and Limberger, Blockmans mentions the export of Campine woollen textiles via Antwerp and Hanseatic merchants to the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>12</sup> However the available evidence on Campine wool and textile production is based mostly on the estate-based and atypical production of the few large Campine abbeys, with their huge flocks of sheep and their production directed at the urban market. Other sources appear only in the sixteenth century when in a Campine village like Alphen (Noord-Brabant), 243 inhabitants owned 2,619 lambs, which supposes a flock of more than 5,000 animals. Only five of these inhabitants owned more than 25 lambs, with a maximum of 34.<sup>13</sup> The joint output of wool must have been considerable and without doubt sold directly or indirectly at an urban market. However, for the individual Campine farmer the wool production was probably a small-scale activity providing some additional income and perfectly fitting a non-specialised agricultural model, based on extensive common heath-lands. The Campine population had increased substantially in the course of the later Middle Ages and the average size of holdings had declined. Increased market participation through wool or textile production ensured the viability of the smallholdings, but in our opinion it did not change the structures of the Campine society.

10 In 1509-1510, 137 farmers in Dudzele north of Bruges, owned 1678 lambs, with a median of 10: State Archives Bruges, Kerkfabriek Dudzele, inv. nr. 408.

11 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 560. This is further elaborated in the on-going PhD-research of Lies

Vervaeet (University of Ghent) on the relations of St John's Hospital in Bruges with its tenant farmers.

12 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 247-248, 576.

13 Archives Abbey of Tongerlo, Registers, inv. nr. 688. *Decima agnorum* in Alphen, 1514.

## Solidarity, liability, and participation: an urban phenomenon?

Of course, the urban character of the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages exceeds the economic field. In Blockmans' opinion a strong link existed between personal freedom, commercial expansion, social and cultural developments. All of these would have converged in the larger cities.<sup>14</sup> Once again, we can question the impact of this highly modern 'urban way of life' on the countryside, as well as the autonomous occurrence of similar developments in rural communities. With regard to modern principles of solidarity, participation and individual liability, Blockmans acknowledges their existence on the countryside, but only in the specific context of water management in the northern Low Countries, where the collective struggle against the water would have engendered a dynamic closely comparable to what happened in urban settings elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

In this respect two objections can be raised. First of all, we can doubt whether the 'horizontal' and 'participatory' characteristics of water management in the coastal wetlands have not been exaggerated. Research for the Flemish coastal plain has stressed that the water management organisation reflected and even reinforced the existing hierarchies and social inequalities, especially when water management became institutionalised through the creation of 'water boards' in the course of the thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, similar degrees of participation in local decision-making and political autonomy can also be found outside the coastal wetlands. As a matter of fact, the best organised, most coherent and most autonomous village communities are not to be found in the coastal wetlands, but rather in the sandy, eastern provinces of the Netherlands, in the Campine area or in some parts of southern Belgium.<sup>17</sup> There village communities – just like their urban counterparts – profited from the power struggle between local lords and territorial princes, and were rewarded with far-reaching political and juridical autonomy. The strongest village communities are to be found in regions with elaborate common fields – collective arrangements for arable cultivation – or extensive common waste lands, inducing processes of collective decision making and the bottom-up design of institutional arrangements. Although far from egalitarian, a substantial part of the (male) householders of these villages was involved in public life, either through local office holding, negotiations

14 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 445.

15 *Ibidem*, 44, 569.

16 T. Soens, 'Polders zonder poldermodel? Een onderzoek naar de rol van inspraak en overleg in de waterstaat van de laatmiddeleeuwse Vlaamse kustvlakte (1250-1600)', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 4 (2006) 3-36.

17 See W. Blockmans, J. Mertens and A. Verhulst, 'Les communautés rurales d'ancien régime en Flandre: Caractéristiques et essai d'interprétation comparative', in: *Les communautés rurales. Cinquième partie: Europe occidentale (II) et Amérique* (Paris 1987) 223-247.

with neighbouring communities, collective manifestations and of course, an agricultural practice strongly dependent on collaboration and responsibility of the individual villagers.<sup>18</sup> As a result, it seems quite possible that the possibilities of people to intervene in the day-by-day regulation of life, as well as the participation in community life and the commitment to a local identity, were greater in a fifteenth-century village in Drenthe or the Campine Area than in a Flemish or Brabantine metropolis.<sup>19</sup>

This does not exclude some rural regions during the later Middle Ages witnessing the spread of an urban-modelled civic life, including fraternities, cross-bow guilds and chambers of rhetoric. In a village like Dudzele north of Bruges, a long-bow guild appears in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, having some ninety members at the turn of the fifteenth century, and actively participating in shooting events both in town and countryside. In their internal organisation, discourse and imagery they are difficult to distinguish from their urban counterparts.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, here again the impact of the city is not uniform: chambers of rhetoric were very popular in some regions of rural Flanders – in the surroundings of Ypres and Oudenaarde for instance – but not in others.<sup>21</sup> This unequal spread cannot be explained by the absolute distance to the city, but rather by the existence of commercial contacts, and above all by the presence of a village elite using these kind of manifestations to show their status and enhance their social and cultural capital.

The persuasive and imaginative narrative developed by Wim Blockmans on the profoundly urban character of the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages will rightly inspire many generations of historians, including many rural historians. Blockmans shows convincingly how the Flemish, Brabantine and Holland cities turned into focal points of economic, political and cultural life and cradles of societal innovations. He also raises the question of the impact of this wave of urbanisation on the countryside. In this contribution, we tried to show that the ‘urban shadow’ generated by the *Metropolen aan de Noordzee* was both intense and deceiving – intense because the urban impact was important, albeit characterised by regional divergences that cannot be explained by geographic proximity, transport infrastructure or urban demand. It is deceiving because the urban preponderance tends to hide the endogenous dynamics of the countryside. Whether dealing with proto-industrial

18 As for instance, is reflected in the tax accounts of the fifteenth century village of Rijkevorsel: State Archives Antwerp, Oud-Gemeentearchief Rijkevorsel, inv. nr. 3244-3256.

19 Compare to C. Dyer, ‘The Political Life of the Fifteenth Century Village’, *The Fifteenth Century* 4 (2004) 135-157.

20 State Archives Tournai, Errembault de Dudzeele, inv. nr. 24-27.

21 A.-L. Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)* (Amsterdam 2008).

development, agrarian specialisation or the spread of shooting guilds, a proper rural dynamic can be noted, conditioned by economic strategies of ordinary peasants and village elites, by institutional path-dependencies and long-established power relations. These rural worlds are connected to the urban world but not shaped by it. The respective agency of both the great metropolises of the medieval Low Countries, the minor towns and the rural communities that surround them certainly deserves further historical attention. ◀

**Tim Soens** (1977) is Senior Lecturer in Medieval and Ecological History at the Department of History, University of Antwerp. Three recent publications: T. Soens, 'Floods and Money: Funding Drainage and Flood Control in Coastal Flanders (13th-16th Centuries)', *Continuity and Change* 26:3 (2011) 333-365; T. Soens and E. Thoen, 'Vegetarians or Carnivores?: Standards of Living and Diet in Late Medieval Flanders', in: *Le interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale. Secc. XIII-XVIII: Economic and Biological Interactions in the Pre-Industrial Europe from the 13th to the 18th Centuries* (Prato 2010) 495-527; T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Gent 2009). Email: tim.soens@ua.ac.be.

**Kristof Dombrecht** (1987) is Researcher at the Department of History, University of Ghent, specialised in the rural and social history of the late Middle Ages. Email: kristof.dombrecht@ugent.be.

**Eline Van Onacker** (1986) is Researcher at the Department of History, University of Antwerp, specialised in the rural and social history of the late Middle Ages. Email: eline.vanonacker@ua.ac.be.