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Who's who in late medieval Brussels

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Abstract

Historians face many difficulties when plumbing the depths of the very dynamic and heterogenic population structures of pre-modern towns, especially because very few sources encompass the various layers of the urban population. In this paper I argue that it is necessary to collect and unlock larger amounts of data in databases, which in turn allow to compose multi-faceted biographies of townspeople and finally pave the way for urban prosopography. That is exactly the aim of the current *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database project, which unlocks biographical data on people who worked, lived or stayed in Brussels before 1600. In this paper I will shortly explain the configuration of the database and take it as a case study for balancing some of the methodological issues and present some research perspectives.

Keywords: databases, prosopography, urban history

1. Introduction

Without any doubt pre-modern towns were characterised by very dynamic and heterogenic population structures. Historians face many difficulties when plumbing the depths of this complex phenomenon, especially because very few sources encompass the various layers of the urban population. Indeed, most documents focus on specific socio-professional groups (e.g. the town's magistracy, members of craft guilds and confraternities, town and state officials, urban nobility, the clergy, families, poor people, widows, orphans, artists) or on people who are carrying out similar activities (e.g. merchants, immigrants, criminals, landowners, benefactors). Historians mainly pay attention to the general demographic evolution of the entire town (for Brussels, e.g. Cosemans, 1966; Baerten, 1981) or study the socio-economic profiles of people belonging to very specific urban groups and communities, of whom the majority have to be included with the elites (for Brussels, e.g. Vandervelde, 1958; Sosson, 1961; Sosson, 1962; van Parys and de Cacamp, 1971; Paquay, 2003; Roobaert, 2003; Deligne, Billen and Kusman, 2004; Sleiderink, 2014). Without any doubt such a 'narrow' viewpoint is necessary to by-pass the complexity of population structures, but it also leads to a fragmented image of urban society as a whole. Yet, the path of life of most people was not fixed in advance, and it seems hazardous, then, to link people to one and the same social group. Various biographies (for Brussels, e.g. Maesschalck and Viaene, 1985; Roobaert, 2002; Sleiderink and Vannieuwenhuyze, 2012) indeed show how people changed their lives and networks regularly.

The situation is even more complex for the pre-modern capital cities. Thanks to their status and importance, these cities housed and attracted particular people: the landlord

and his court, state officials, court suppliers, different types of fortune seekers, etc. Yet, the complex population structures and social evolutions of these cities contrast with their biased representation as prosperous court cities, both by the contemporary people and by the historians. Brussels, for instance, is often considered as « the princely capital of the Low Countries », and we notice that historians do not hesitate to use this epithet as a *pars pro toto* for the whole late medieval and early modern period. More importantly, social characteristics and changes are often explained by referring to the city's function as a seat of lordly power. But apart from the magnificence of the court, the development of Brussels was also due to its function as a local market-place, to the opportunities offered by its topographic situation, to the blooming of particular industries (especially the textile industry) and to the power of the civic government and ecclesiastical authorities. Without any doubt the characteristics and evolutions of population structures were tributary to a whole range of factors too.

It is of course very difficult – not to say impossible – to make an all-embracing and in-depth study of the pre-modern urban population. However, the question remains if it is possible to obtain a more nuanced view. In this paper, I argue that this goal can only be achieved by collecting, unlocking and studying larger amounts of data in databases, since it allows to compose multi-faceted biographies of townspeople and finally pave the way for urban prosopography. That is exactly the aim of the current *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* project, which unlocks biographical data on thousands of people who worked, lived or stayed in Brussels before 1600. Of course, such an undertaking requires serious efforts. In this paper I will explain the configuration of the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database and take it as a case study for balancing some of the methodological issues and present some research opportunities (for more

details and background information, see also Vannieuwenhuyze, 2014).

2. The *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database

The configuration of the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database dates back to the start of an individual doctoral research project on the topographic development of late medieval Brussels in 2003 (see Vannieuwenhuyze, 2008). The initial ambition was to collect and link information on topographic features and on people living in Brussels up to 1570, in order to analyse the socio-topographic patterns and evolutions of the late medieval and early modern city. Unfortunately, this project was too ambitious because of the huge mass, complexity and heterogeneity of the source material, including transaction deeds, land books, urban edicts, princely ordinances and privileges, accountancy, maps, and so forth. However, both the topographical and the people's database were realised and regularly updated afterwards; they now contain respectively 12.261 and 40.314 entries (situation on 29 May 2015).

In order to save the mass of collected data and the many efforts that have been done, the province of Vlaams-Brabant and the Flemish heritage institution of Brussels funded a small scale heritage project in order to unlock the people's database on the internet. This will be achieved with the support of the Belgian State Archives,

different fields. Unfortunately not all fields and crosslinks could be incorporated. At this moment, some 33.000 records have been delivered to the State Archives and should be available online soon (situation on 29 May 2015).

The *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database includes data on individual people who worked, lived or stayed in Brussels up to 1600. The names of these people are registered and linked to the source which provides the information (both historical records and scholarly literature). Yet, people are only registered if these sources provide additional biographical data (e.g. a profession or an office, a title or degree, the membership of an association or a social group, the names of family members, etc.) or inform us about his/her connection to topographic features and/or activities inside the city. Unfortunately, it is not always clear whether a person was effectively present in Brussels or not. For some people, their presence inside the city is explicitly mentioned in the records (e.g. a person who bought a house, a traveller who visited the city, a merchant who sold his goods on a market-place, a person holding a public office, a criminal who was punished by the aldermen, etc.), but for others it is not. Their presence in the city can, however, be presumed, as is for instance the case for the hundreds of state officials, noblemen and subcontractors who worked for or followed the court. In short, all people in the database can be traced and classified by applying two sets of filters: 'spatial/topographical filters' (presence in the city and/or link with a particular topographic feature) and 'biographical filters' (family ties, professional situation, social groups).

Instead of creating 'personal files' – in other words: arranging all data on a particular person in one single entry –, each reference to an individual person is registered separately. Consequently, for some persons the database contains more than one entry. The famous, fourteenth-century 'urban hero' and alderman *Everard T'Serclaes* (†1388), for instance, is registered eighteen times. Various stages of his life and various activities are registered and can be found back separately. In this respect, the database mirrors the complexity and heterogeneity of both the source material and pre-modern urban society. Arguably, this important choice might seem rather unpractical from a user's perspective. From the designer's perspective, however, it is the only way to make good progress with the work, since it is a very time-consuming operation to check for each person whether he or she is already registered or not.

However, this choice allows to avoid some awkward identification problems. It is commonly known that late medieval and early modern texts are not always consistent with regard to the orthography and translation of proper names. A person called *Hendrik de Smet* could likewise have been mentioned as *Heinrec de Smedt* or *Henric Smeets*. In the few French documents and in the abundant French scholarly literature, his name would be translated as *Henri le Forgeron*, while Latin scribes would have written *Henricus Faber*. Secondly, identification of late



Figure 1: Homepage of the *Zoeken naar Personen* online search robot of the Belgian State Archives.

who are currently integrating the database into their central online search robot *Zoeken naar Personen/Rechercher des Personnes*, which actually contains not less than 26.641.512 entries (situation on 29 May 2015; see Figure 1).¹ Logically, the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database had to be adapted in order to integrate it into the State Archives' system, especially by standardising and/or reducing the content of the

¹ For more information, see the project's website: <http://search.arch.be/nl/zoeken-naar-personen>.

medieval townspeople is seriously hindered by the fact that different persons bore the same name. It was a common practice to name one of the sons after the father or grandfather and one of the daughters after the mother or grandmother. But even apart from family ties people were often called the same way, as Table 1 clearly shows. It seems that in the second half of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century, different persons called *Jan van Laken* lived or worked in Brussels. We might suppose that the four stonecutters named *Jan van Laken* were one and the same person, although they also could be fathers and sons. We certainly may not identify them as the priest *Jan van Laken*, nor as the baker *Jan van Laken*. It remains however unclear how we should identify the three (other?) persons called *Jan van Laken* without indication of occupation.

Original text	Year	Profession - office	Social group
<i>Johanni</i>	1292	/	/
<i>Johannis de Laken</i>	1321	/	/
<i>her Jans [...] van Laken priesters prochiaen wilen was in Senter Claes prochie vors.</i>	1361	priest <i>parochiaan</i> of St Nicholas' parish	
<i>Johannis de Laken</i>	1364		
<i>Jan van Laken</i>	1392	stonecutter sworn man of the stonecutter's guild	stonecutter's guild
<i>Jan van Laken</i>	1393	stonecutter sworn man of the stonecutter's guild	stonecutter's guild
<i>Jan van Laken</i>	1394	stonecutter sworn man of the stonecutter's guild	stonecutter's guild
<i>Jan van Laken</i>	/		stonecutter's guild
<i>Jan van Laken beckere</i>	1408	baker	confraternity of St Jacob's
<i>wilen Jans van Laken beckers</i>	/	baker	
<i>Jan van Laken riemakere</i>		<i>rietmaker</i>	confraternity of St Jacob's

Table 1: Men called *Jan van Laken* in late medieval Brussels.

Another important methodological choice concerns the standardization of the data. It is commonly known that accuracy and clearness are not the strong points of late medieval and early modern texts. In many cases the content, the aim or the date of the record remain vague, and (parts of) texts are sometimes difficult to understand due to missing fragments, damage, bad copying, or the use of abbreviations, translations and incomprehensible terminology. Yet, a digital database that aims to be searchable, offers little room for uncertainties. For that reason there is a clear distinction between the fields which contain well-defined, standardized data (e.g. name and

surname, type of the source, date, occupation(s) or office(s), title(s), names of family members) and those fields where it is allowed to indicate interpretation problems and difficulties (e.g. the field with the original text transcription, the field with comments) (see Figure 2). As a result, it is possible to search and filter the database quite efficiently, without losing the possibility to verify the original text fragment and check the references.

Figure 2: Example of an entry of the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database.

Obviously, the quality and quantity of the data differ from source to source. Some only indicate the occupation, while others provide lots of biographical information and evoke the activities, networks, behaviour, thoughts and emotions of people. It is of course not easy to register all these data and date them precisely. Sometimes, they can be dated precisely, but very often, the sources refer to things that happened during a longer time span in the past or will happen in the future. The chronological problem, for instance, manifests itself when the documents mention people who have died earlier, which is the case for some 900 persons registered in the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database. In other words, they appear in documents that were created and dated much more recently (especially property lists, transaction deeds, *obituarialia*, etc.). Unfortunately, the standardization rules of the database do not allow to furcate the dating or to provide *termini ante quem* or *post quem*, since this kind of data is hardly searchable. Hence, users should always bear in mind that there can be a significant difference in time between the editing or promulgation of a document and its content (in this case the mentioning of a person). This situation can of course influence search results and filter operations, although the margin of error remains, after all, quite small.

3. Research perspectives

The *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* project was initially funded in order to unlock the data through the *Zoeken naar Personen* search robot of the Belgian State Archives. Logically, the second aim is to enhance new scholarly research on the pre-modern population structures and evolutions of Brussels. Since the unlocking of the database is still in progress, it is not yet possible to

present the results of new fundamental research projects here. Therefore, I am obliged to confine myself to some small cases, which hopefully show the potential of the database.

First of all, the database will be of incalculable value for establishing new or completing existing biographies of people who lived, worked or visited Brussels in the late medieval and early modern period. In addition, new prosopographical research will also benefit from data taken from the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* project, especially since it is possible to search and extract larger amounts of data for people who belong to the same professional groups, social networks or families. In this respect, it would for instance be possible to make an in-depth study of the social profiles of the city officials, as has already been done for smaller towns elsewhere (e.g. Van Steensel, 2006; see also Prevenier, 1972), or to define which craft guilds succeeded in gaining political power in the fifteenth century, by surveying the craftsmen who took up the office of councillor. Recently, scholars have made use of the data provided by the database for studying female agency with regard to real estate (Bardyn, 2014) or for prosopographical research on the chamber of rhetoric *de Korenbloem* (Sleiderink, 2014).

The database will also be of great value for new research on late medieval and early modern immigration to the city of Brussels. At the moment, the only available data for this neglected field of study are provided by the lists of new citizens (Godding, 1962; Caluwaerts, 2010). After all, these lists are quite scarce. Moreover, citizenship was only available to those who could meet the legal conditions and pay the registration fee. The large group of immigrants who moved to Brussels without paying the fee, is much more difficult to capture in the sources, especially because their names were never listed together. The database can offer help in three ways: 1/ in some documents the birthplace or origin of people is mentioned, and this information is registered (respectively 43 and 578 entries); 2/ the titles of the nobles who only resided temporarily in the city or just followed the court, can give an indication of their possessions and origins; and 3/ many surnames refer to the origin of the person (or one of his ancestors). Although these data may certainly not be used thoughtlessly, they make it possible to indicate trends (e.g. the existence of immigration waves, the mapping of the origins of Brussels' immigrants), which subsequently can be checked by in-depth research.

Research based on the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* project can also lead to a more nuanced view on the distinction between the city elites, assembled in seven lineages (*geslachten*), and the craftsmen, represented by the guild associations (*ambachten, natiën*). For Brussels, the traditional scholarly literature on this topic makes a very clear distinction between both milieus (e.g. Des Marez, 1905-1906; Bonenfant, 1920-1921; Favresse, 1932; Baerten, 1985). Exceptionally, social promotion is noticed, for instance when a rich craftsman succeeded in joining the ranks of one of the lineages (e.g. by marriage)

or acted as powerful moneylenders (e.g. some members of the butcher's craft guild, see Deligne, Billen and Kusman, 2004). But logically, the opposite movement also took place. Let us, for instance, take the case of the *T'Serclaes* family, which clearly belonged to the lineages: the majority of the 271 members of the *T'Serclaes* family who are registered in the database, can be identified as lords and knights, or held public offices that were reserved for members of the lineages. However, at least three men named T'Serclaes did not belong to these lineages. *Heinric T'Serclaes* and *Jan T'Serclaes* became member of the masons' craft guild, respectively in 1435 and in 1439, which undoubtedly means that they were (or had become) craftsmen. It is probably not a coincidence that this happened in a period of heavy economic crisis. Perhaps both men became impoverished and decided to seek their fortune in the building sector. *Jooris T'Serclaes* was born in 1433 as the bastard son of *Wenceslas T'Serclaes*. He got involved in the revolt against the emperor Maximilian of Austria in the 1480's and was even imprisoned and banished from the city. Later he was somehow rehabilitated, because he obtained a master's degree and became a city clerk. Anyway, the three cases show that downwards social mobility also took place among the lineages.

Finally, I want to stress that the database can enhance the study of phenomena that until now remain unknown or unstudied (at least for late medieval and early modern Brussels), such as the informal networks between people, associations and institutions. Logically, this phenomenon is very difficult to capture because of the intangibility of the subject. Needless to say that we do not have official lists of the informal networks at our disposal. The database can offer help, since it allows for instance to trace straw men that acted 'on behalf of' charitable and ecclesiastical institutions. On 29 July 1553, for instance, the city's secretary *Franchois vander Baren* acted on behalf of the chapter of St Gudula's church. It seems that the ecclesiastical institution not always relied on its own staff of clerics for editorial work, but also hired city officials. It remains a question whether this only happened on special occasions or much more frequently and why. Another case is much more intriguing: on 2 March 1439, the cleric *Arnoldus de Lyra* (*Arnold* or *Aert van Lier* in Dutch) acted on behalf of the St Gorik's church with regard to a property transaction. Unfortunately, the document does not inform us about the relationship between the cleric and the church. Other documents from the early fifteenth-century however identify Aert van Lier either as a dyer or as guardian of the St Jacob's hospital, but it remains unclear if all these references relate to one and the same person. The *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database contains no less than 381 examples of this kind of straw men and can offer a solid ground for studying this intriguing phenomenon more profoundly. It seems that the majority of these straw men acted on behalf of ecclesiastical and charitable institutions, but also (and surprisingly) on behalf of the landlord (the duke of Brabant) and the city's

administration. This is all the more intriguing, since we may logically expect that, in normal circumstances, these institutions delegated one or more of their administrators or clerks in order to defend their rights. Further research is needed in order to identify these unofficial representatives, to unravel their relationship with the institutions they represented and to understand the underlying incentives.

4. Epilogue

The compilation and unlocking of the *Who's who in late medieval Brussels* database was (and still is) a long-term project. Anyone who is seeking information on people who lived, worked or stayed in late medieval Brussels can benefit from the large amounts of data that are now available online. I hope to have shown in the preceding paragraphs that the database has a big potential, both in gathering dispersed data and in opening new lines of research. Yet, the data should always be used with caution, since they are manipulated in order to make them searchable.

Secondly, I hope that this project will urge other scholars to launch similar projects or to unlock their datasets too, both for the scholarly world and the wider audience. The *Who's who in medieval Brussels* project is surely extendable to other pre-modern cities, towns, villages and regions, especially because it relies on a wide range of source types that are also available elsewhere. Hopefully this paper has enhanced some kind of knowledge transfer with regard to methodological questions and heuristic choices that are inextricably related to the configuration of people's databases for the pre-modern era.

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