

The Medieval Low Countries
4 (2017)

The Medieval Low Countries

An Annual Review

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Editors

Manuscripts may be directed to:

Dr. Hildo van Engen
Streekarchief Langstraat Heusden
Altena Postbus 79
5256 ZH Heusden
The Netherlands
hvengen@salha.nl



Book reviews

Dr. Nico Lettinck
nlettinck@kpnmail.nl

Please send books for review to:
The Medieval Low Countries
Fryske Akademy /
Prof. dr. Johannes A. Mol
PO Box 54 8900 AB Leeuwarden
The Netherlands

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Anne-Laure van Bruane, Bruno Blondé and Marc Boone (eds), *Gouden eeuwen. Stad en samenleving in de Lage Landen, 1100–1600*. Gent: Academia Press, 2016. 344 pp., ill. ISBN 978-90-38225-89-0. € 34.99.

Gouden Eeuwen is what the editors consider an accessible synthesis of the urban history of the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages (p. 12), and it is a good one. In three hundred pages divided in seven chapters, the collection offers an overview of urban societies by means of a satisfactory and various range of topics and themes concerning the city and its economical, societal, and cultural aspects. Despite a few shortcomings – basically an exponent of the editorial choices – the book is very usable as an introduction for the broader public, and as handbook for future urban and medieval historians.

By means of a short historiography, Anne-Laure van Bruane, Bruno Blondé, and Marc Boone place the edited volume in the long-term tradition of urban historical conduct in the Low Countries, especially at the Belgian universities. Although it is not suggested that the following contributions intend to offer paradigm-changing new theses, the authors successfully incorporate modern scholarly views and alternative approaches whilst remaining accessible. This is all intended to diverge from a development perspective and to give attention to historical actors instead of institutions only. Just as the editors promise, necessary aspects such as the spatial dimension and urban identity are taken into account, seeing the different towns the book covers as laboratories of knowledge and practice. As a result, this book is certainly no simple repetition of what we know about late medieval city life, but expands the strategies of how to address an overview of medieval urban history.

In the first chapter, Wim Blockmans, Bert de Munck, and Peter Stabel depart from the more traditional economic explanation of why the medieval Low Countries were highly and consistently urbanised. The first chapter itself informs about the relevant demography and economy that influenced or was the result of not only the development of the city, but as well the urban network and the dynamics between town and countryside. An important note the authors make is that ‘regional complementarity’ is certainly not always accelerated by maximisation of profit or free will, but simultaneously by people forced to migrate. On the other hand, and slightly contradictory, the overall solid overview remains foremost an economic analysis of shifting and relative stable constitution and power of cities and their networks. The formation of a city-landscape is a logic framework before being able to zoom into specific cities, but it is unclear why this topic is divided between two chapters, namely, chapters 1 and

5. The latter, concerning urban space, deals with the location of cities in no less than ten pages, before moving on to space of the built town. If the first chapter could have incorporated this element it would have offered a more complete image of where, when, and why cities developed in certain places.

Subsequently – and in a smooth overflow, a quality that remains throughout the entire book – Bruno Blondé, Frederik Buylaert, Jan Dumolyn, Jord Hanus, and Peter Stabel discuss the social layers of towns. The picture of Pieter Brueghel (*De grote vissen eten de kleine*, 1556, p. 77), which is examined first, gives away that the authors underscore the inequality of urban society in contrast with the articulation of an urban communal ideal. The growing corporation of the new middle classes indeed changed the organisation of the city but eventually reproduced the contrasts between the cities' inhabitants, it is argued. Following this, the chapter focusses on family life. It is both obvious and applaudable that gender-aspects are integrated in the text; it is a more comprehensive alternative than a separate chapter would have been. Due to this approach, we encounter medieval people in the contexts of their class and family, and how society as a whole challenged the plague, hunger, wars, poverty, and organised social care. Although the agency of the variety of social actors remains somehow under the surface – also a recurring aspect in all chapters – the honesty of the authors is motivating to conduct further research: they agree that it is sometimes simply still unclear how members of social groups interacted, positioned themselves, considered friendships, worked, visited a tavern, and so on.

The interaction between actors also concerned governance, political culture, and disciplining, as Marc Boone and Jelle Haemers explain in the third chapter on the *bien commun*. Addressing Norbert Elias' civilising process, they offer nuance to the theory but rightfully do not explicitly position themselves in the debates. However, the decision to use the word 'discipline' to value political and societal organisation resonates continuously, as if there were no recurring debates amongst contemporaries about why they would use the institutions that were growingly offered to them. Cities are indeed laboratories of the use and challenging of different groups that underscored their impact and influence on the 'common good'. Boone and Haemers decently inform about aspects that were part or results of these discourses, such as the use of the written record and city protests. As such, the authors offer a nuanced and quite complete image of city identity and how different interests shaped societal organisation. Seen from a overly disciplining perspective, however, the implications this had for the different historical actors and their agency is not sufficiently studied. Reasons as to whether they chose to use, for example, the administration

of justice by the aldermen and what topics were important for them are unquestioned, even though it was definitely not only protests but also 'normal' daily acts that challenged authorities.

Although already mentioned in earlier chapters, the presence of clergy and religion in the town deserves the attention of Guido Marnef and Anne-Laure van Bruaene who, by means of an excellent chapter, connect civic identity with both individual and collective beliefs and religious practices. Not only do they introduce urban convents and religious groups such as beguines, but they also introduce the religious components in daily city life, devotional changes, rhetoricians, and the rise and expansion of Protestantism. This is supplemented by illustrative examples of the urban religious culture like processions and passion plays. The religious culture in cities is complex and often intertwined with social repertoires, as the authors argue. As such, they carefully consider civic religion: the religious influence with regard to city identity (and the other way around).

The first topic of Claire Billen and Chloé Deligne on urban space in chapter 5 – the site of towns – is already mentioned and discussed in this review. Except for these first ten pages, they subsequently offer, as promised, a history of urban space that is more than just a story about bricks. Although they do not neglect important architectural aspects of buildings such as the cloth hall and town hall, and the organisation and location of markets, the main emphasis is placed on their functions, without being functionalistic. The competition within the urban network determined the development of public buildings too, with the additional distribution and exchange of plans, patterns, and artisans. Accordingly, architects, builders, and artists became translators and accelerators of new styles and the artistic rivalry. On the other hand, constructions were definitely connected to the organisation of the city, if only that walls could create physical borders and in- and exclusion dynamics. The latter is also analysed by means of examples such as hospitals. Billen and Deligne conclude that the different interests and initiatives in the city were the foremost determining aspects of the urban infrastructure, especially with regard to *caritas*.

What is more absent in the chapter discussed above are the social actors who were swarming throughout the preceding contributions. It is exactly this that Inneke Baatse, Bruno Blondé, Julie de Groot, and Isis Sturtewagen compensate for by discussing homely life within the city walls and its material cultures. This chapter is definitely a significant complement, introducing the reader – after the book already addressed the cultural and spatial turn – with the quite recent material turn. Indeed, what people consider a home is influenced by how they live, but also by what objects they used indoors. Although the story of the

medieval house is not easy to discover, scholars have found creative ways to use sources that illustrate examples of medieval houses. (This involves sources such as inventories discussed during divorce. Not included in the bibliography, but very relevant for these kind of topics is the recent work of the historian Daniel Lord Smail, *Legal Plunder. Households and Debt Collection in Later Medieval Europe*, 2016). In line with the material turn, the authors underscore that a focus on objects and material explains that the medieval household was much more than just a roof above the head and what 'home' could have meant for the diverse domestic situations. Objects like wooden cases, for example, were not only artistic storage and decoration, but also very helpful in the frequent moving from house to house by many families. It is refreshing that the young scholars who worked on this contribution take into account how objects and material trends in the Low Countries moved beyond social status, and how they influenced and illustrate values and standards in societies.

Compared to the rest of the book, the step from the material to the intellectual elements of urban history in the last chapter is somewhat abrupt. But the contribution of Bert de Munck and Hilde de Ridder-Symoens on education and knowledge in the urban context does certainly complete the circle of cities as laboratories, as this book consequently emphasises. The chapter shows that intellectual trends such as humanism influenced, for example, legal administration, and, at the same time, that town inhabitants stimulated knowledge by means of training and the establishment of schools and universities. By focusing both on crafts and science, the attention to the growing availability of books and high literacy informs about a strong human capital in urban life. The demand of academically educated authorities was not significantly high in the later Middle Ages, but with regard to the crafts more specialised training developed rapidly. The innovative changes of observation and experiments were increasingly incorporated in the scientific world. De Munck and De Ridder-Symoens argue that in the urban context scholarship and craftsmanship became more separated, whereas, at the same time, scholars at universities brought new international and scientific perspectives into urban mentality.

Recapitulating, all contributions together indeed make an accessible synthesis of the Low Countries' medieval urban history, touching upon many phenomena of city life. However, the editors could have taken the publication to a higher and more comprehensive level. The insights of scholars who work on towns in Europe and beyond (the Middle East) are practically excluded (also in the bibliographies). This is quite an open door, but it is necessary to understand towns and urban life in a broader perspective, if only to place and value urban developments in the medieval

Low Countries. This could have motivated readers and students to ask more questions about what cities are exactly, and when or why certain practices take place.

Of course, writing an urban history overview leads to certain editorial tactics of how to present such an extensive analysis, which the editors maybe could have elaborated upon a little more in the introduction. However, bringing up these points also underscores the fact that this work is in itself rich and motivating and actually deserves a page-to-page read instead of picking the relevant cherries (as the authors opt to do). Some more cross-references, with page numbers, and a register with themes and subjects next to the existing ones with names of towns and persons would be nice additions to future editions. Notwithstanding these issues, this work is definitely a sufficient starting point that inspires its readers to pick up a theme and engage the questions the authors raise.

Nathan VAN KLEIJ
University of Amsterdam