

Jim van der Meulen, *Woven into the Urban Fabric: Cloth Manufacture and Economic Development in the Flemish West-Quarter (1300-1600)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021, 251 pp., ISBN 9782503594552).

Peter Stabel, *The Fabric of the City: A Social History of Cloth Manufacture in Medieval Ypres* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022, 278 pp., ISBN 9782503600512).

Two excellent monographs add new dimensions to the social and commercial history of textiles, the greatest industry of the Middle Ages and early modern periods across Western Europe. Both works seek to challenge traditional and grand narratives surrounding the textile industry of the Middle Ages. These include two narratives in particular. First, the so-called capitalistic nature of cloth producers, textile entrepreneurs and guild organisation of the Middle Ages as characterised by Henri Pirenne and Georges Espinas. In Pirenne's view, the economic and social history of the Low Countries from the thirteenth century onwards was dominated by urban centres in Flanders, Brabant, Liege and Holland. Their rise was due to achieving control over the production of fine luxury textiles, manufactured from English wool and managed by capitalistic entrepreneurs. Both Pirenne and Espinas used the term 'capitalistic entrepreneurs' to explain the individuals who gained control over luxury textile production in the fourteenth century, becoming rich by turning their hands to commerce, participating in town government and creating vast enterprises which for these authors warranted the term 'capitalist'. The second narrative to be challenged is the conceptualisation of pre-modern town-country relations as either simply antagonistic, or the idea that the rise of textile production in the medieval countryside was only as a result of urban need for a rural labour pool.

*Woven into the Urban Fabric*, published in 2021 by Jim van der Meulen, focuses on the textile sector in the Flemish 'West Quarter' (Westkwartier), a subdistrict of the county of Flanders. The main goal of the work is 'to assess how ordinary people in the countryside kept their textile enterprises afloat amidst the slings and arrows of external competition and extra-economic pressure from urban rivals, internal conflicts and evolving political circumstances at a wider regional level' (14). However, this detailed introduction goes even further, setting out what the author sees as the three main contributions of the study. Its first contribution is methodological, seeking to draw together and combine the different analytical models and methodologies of urban and rural history, but also to offer scholars a method by which they might integrate these models and methodologies in practice. This is an important addition of Van der Meulen's work, textile production

and consumption should not be considered as belonging to an urban or rural sphere, and as the author points out: 'these so-called rural entities were essentially part of urban society already' (16). Relations between town and countryside were a 'two way street in this region and period' (22).

The second contribution is the focus on a region, which while important in textile production for the period 1300-1600, has largely been ignored. According to the author, the West Quarter saw a growth of cloth centres in this period. The villages in this region produced relatively high grade cloth, manufactured from Scottish and Spanish wools, that were sold to an important middling sector of consumers, a section of textile consumers that are often largely missed due to a focus on high-end textile production. The third contribution is the focus on the social side to cloth production in the West Quarter, which offers new insights into the factors that drove economic development in pre-industrial European societies. With a spotlight on the women and men who were involved in textile production, Van der Meulen is able to offer crucial insights into an expanding commercial society that was becoming more market orientated, involving all sections of medieval society in ever more complex transactions.

Five chapters deliver the book's goal in an in-depth manner. The first focuses on the ties between agriculture and industry. Interesting points are made here regarding the demographics of those involved in the industry, and the way in which the textile production was interrelated to the region's agrarian economy. As a result of demographic growth, a lack of land drove peasants to engage in cloth manufacture in the region. This is an important fact, particularly in the light of current debates regarding exactly how a 'commercial society' emerged in Western Europe during this period and the ways individuals at all levels of society became engaged and intermeshed in credit relations.

Chapter 2 examines entrepreneurship and industrial organisation. Here the profit driven actions of entrepreneurs are considered, unpicked and requalified, as are historical debates which have for a long time laboured over whether these individuals were market orientated or capitalist. The focus of Chapter 3 is marketing and trade of cloths, circling back to the debate of whether these entrepreneurs might be considered 'merchant capitalists' with an interesting discussion of the merchant-drapers of the West Quarter, their personal relationships, professional partnerships and commercial reputations.

The centre of Nieuwekerke takes the stage in Chapter 4 to examine the urban characteristics of textile centres. Interesting results are presented here, about the blurred boundaries between urban and country residents, the mobility of people and the ways in which local elites of Nieuwekerke expressed their ambitions spatially, and how their ambitions also effected its urbanisation. In the final chapter, titled 'Collective action and industrial expansion', Van der Meulen undertakes a 'sort of micro analysis' of the internal interactions in the Nieuwekerke cloth corporation from 1300 to

1600. In this manner, he tries to understand the cyclical development of the cloth trade, from the boom to the decline by the second half of the sixteenth century, a phenomenon that quite rightly for Van der Meulen resists a historic interpretation of a 'grand narrative towards modernity' for the economic development of the Flemish West Quarter p. 22.

The second monograph, *The Fabric of the City*, published in 2022 by Peter Stabel, examines the social history of cloth manufacture in medieval Ypres. The urban centre of Ypres as an internationally renowned place of high-quality textile production in the Middle Ages is well-known and well-attested. However, as Stabel points out, until now there has been no focused history of the cloth history of Ypres, and historiography on textile production in this period more generally has tended to take an economic focus. As he states, there is 'surprisingly little on the social organisation of the greatest industry of the Middle Ages' (20-21). Stabel's introduction emphasises the importance of Ypres in the Middle Ages as an urban centre, and its economic foundations were founded on cloth. For him, Ypres is quite simply the 'quintessential industrial city' of the European Middle Ages (17). Its cloth entrepreneurs and indeed its textile products reached across Europe, from Novgorod to Italy, England to Constantinople. Ypres wollens had perhaps the highest reputation in Western Europe, references to them are ubiquitous in contemporary literature at the time as markers of high quality products. The city itself was organised around the cloth trade, in the thirteenth century the suburbs became a 'giant factory' and almost all its population from aldermen, merchants, and clothiers, both women and men, were in some ways engaged in and affected by its cloth production.

Stabel makes clear why there has been no complete study of the cloth trade in Ypres: its extensive archives were destroyed in World War I, which has constrained the ambitions of scholars. However, a good amount of these archives were published before destruction, by scholars such as Georges Espinas, Henri Pirenne and Guillaume Des Marez, including *lettres de foire* and city accounts. Stabel's book aims to collect these materials and presents the city as a laboratory for changing social organisation in the textile trade. Through chapter case studies Stabel provides an analysis of the industrial cycles of production and explore the role of individuals in the manufacture and trade.

Ten chapters deliver the aims of this book. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on cloth and its markets and cloth and technology. Here the cycles of growth and decline in the textile industry are considered, from the heyday of Ypres involvement in the Champagne fairs and access to Mediterranean markets, to its decline into the sixteenth century. An interesting focus is taken on the technology of Ypres cloth production, reminding the reader of the wide range of wollens produced and the ways in which they demanded complex manufacturing processes. Stabel is at pains to remind the reader that changes in technology or a refusal to accept new technologies should not be thought

of in terms of conservative protectionism. They are rather rational choices made by informed and experienced individuals to benefit their commercial situations and their products.

The emphasis in chapters 3, 4 and 5 is on the social profile of the city, elite merchants and cloth entrepreneurs. Here the way in which the industrial focus of the city on cloth affected its social fabric is considered. During the height of cloth production, the city spilled over the city walls and created gross inequalities. Single women lived in large numbers in the inner city, and profits remained in the hands of an elite class. Chapters 4 and 5 delve deeper into these elite individuals and address the historiography around the possible 'capitalistic' nature of cloth production. Chapters 6, 7 and 8, focus on the organisation of the guilds and the individuals in and outside guild structures, and note the ways in which, despite guild organisation, much of the work in cloth manufacture was undertaken by unskilled workers. Here Stabel takes an important focus on women workers in the Ypres industry, emphasising their important contributions, despite lower pay and eventual loss of access to cloth markets and production in later periods.

The final two chapters of the book focus on the issues of cloth and revolt and possible 'roads of capitalism'. Ypres was a hotbed of often violent revolt throughout the medieval period and the textile guilds were a force of revolt during this period, fueling clashes between textile workers and the elites of the city, despite the risk of harsh repression. The conclusion to the book, titled 'Roads of Capitalism', places the textile history of Ypres within a wider European perspective through a comparison with Florence and an explanation on why textile production was largely abandoned by the city in the early modern period.

These two books are very valuable contributions and provide new insights and methodologies for scholars to develop for further studies on the medieval and early modern textiles industries. In particular, both books make similar efforts to dig below 'grand narratives' of historical change, debates on pre-modern moves towards capitalism and to unpick, reframe and move past older debates driven by Pirenne and Espinas on 'merchant capitalist'/'capitalist entrepreneurs'. To achieve these aims, both authors take a welcome focus on individuals and case studies. Their approach allows for a much more fragmented, variegated and overall more interesting picture of medieval textile production to emerge for the reader. As a result, these studies revitalise medieval textile history and should serve to remind medieval and early modern historians of the importance of work on textiles, and the importance of finding new and innovative ways forward with the subject.

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