

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 p. ISBN 9782503594552.

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Through a meticulous and detailed analysis, this book examines the intricate relationship between urban and rural spheres within the context of Flemish woolen textile production in preindustrial times. It challenges established historical conventions by shedding light on an underexplored facet of Flemish manufacturing history, aiming to unveil fresh perspectives on the developmental factors of preindustrial economies.

The significance of textile production in the preindustrial age requires no emphasis, for it not only stood as the foremost manufacturing activity in terms of population involvement, but also led in the local and international distribution of products. The Low Countries, in particular, held a pivotal role in Europe, with the developments of Flemish manufacturing influencing the global textile market.

The focus here narrows onto the Flemish West-Quarter (FWQ), a sub-region of the historical county of Flanders roughly corresponding to the northwest of the Lys River and primarily south of the regional capital, Ypres. This area experienced substantial economic growth, driven by textile activity, between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. A distinctive feature of this study is that a significant portion of production took place not only in urban centers but also notably in rural areas. Even more remarkable is that this involved the production of medium-quality fabrics, often crafted from imported wool from Spain and Scotland, intended for export. This specific level of quality in rural textile production constituted an exception within the customary framework of preindustrial economies, where high-quality production was typically linked to urban environments.

A primary aim of the book is to question the sharp divide between town and country, suggesting a complementarity between these two seemingly distinct aspects. The author engages in the historiographical debate between economic historians emphasizing urbanization and commercialization as drivers of development and those attributing economic evolution to shifts in land ownership. Through meticulous analysis employing a precise methodological approach (that is, to study the centers involved in textile production considering them alternately as rural and urban entities), the book demonstrates that

these forces were deeply interconnected and interdependent, defying the traditional narrative of a firm partition between industrial cities and agricultural countryside.

Unlike certain parts of Western Europe where urban entrepreneurs favored cheaper rural labor and lighter regulation, the FWQ saw rural entrepreneurs take control of the production process. This engagement led to direct competition with urban production and, as a consequence, to protectionist policies endorsed by the dominant Ypres. These policies aimed to uphold a clear demarcation between urban industrial production and rural agricultural activities, resulting in the cultivation of a 'rhetoric' by the urban elite emphasizing the need for a distinct separation between urban industrial and rural agricultural vocations. This rhetoric, maintained by a classical historiography, is refuted by the book, as indicated from its very title.

The volume's well-structured narrative guides the reader through various analytical phases. The first chapter delves into the demographic evolution of the Flemish West-Quarter in relation to economic growth. It aims to examine the conventional correlation between the dynamics of rural manufacturing and agricultural development, ultimately noting that this phenomenon is less pronounced in this area compared to other regions. A noteworthy aspect is the significant absence of proto-industrialization due to the nature of textile production, which required full-time commitment from workers; the presence of small landholdings, despite continual impoverishment, did not form the foundation of the workforce. This development is further evidenced by the timing between agricultural phases and manufacturing production cycles, which would not have allowed simultaneous dedication to both activities by the workers. The second chapter explores the organizational aspects of textile production, highlighting signs of capitalism and diverse forms of business structure. The absence of stringent regulations, or craft guilds, coupled with the resulting entrepreneurial freedom, contributed to flexibility in production organization (including elements of putting-out, centralization of production stages, variations in wage relationships with workers encompassing both wage and piece-rate remuneration) and drove a market-oriented approach. With regard to trade and the sale of textiles, the third chapter emphasizes the presence even in rural communities of commercial infrastructures and institutions (both stemming from local initiatives and drawing on those found in urban contexts), in addition to stressing the importance of informal relationships among

local economic actors. The concluding two chapters are focused on the social and economic structure of rural textile centers, particularly Nieuwkerke. The author demonstrates how the gradual development of these villages was influenced by various factors, including the progressive improvement in cloth quality and the liberation from restrictions imposed by Ypres, which had sought to secure a monopoly on quality production.

Ultimately, the book aims to demonstrate that the “engine” of capitalism was able to emerge in both rural and urban environments. The distinction between town and country is thus found to be less clear-cut than previously thought: suffice it to say that more than 29 percent of rural dwellers were “external” citizens of Ypres, and the percentages go up for other towns. Moreover, it raises significant questions about the presence and the nature of forms of capitalist economy in preindustrial contexts – though perhaps overly broad issues, building on a single, albeit relevant, case study – and about the validity of generalizing historiographical narratives: were capitalist economic relations the most appropriate or indicated, given the socio-political context, in the preindustrial period? Does an approach that seeks to pinpoint the emergence of capitalist relations in a timely manner and with an evolutionary slant not risk being teleological and anti-historical?

While the volume may not autonomously provide definitive answers to this extensive agenda, it undeniably questions traditional historiographical accounts. What is certain is that the analysis of case studies like the one presented here can, at the very least, provide new and more detailed insights grounded in local circumstances and often overlooked socio-cultural peculiarities. This process of revision is greatly facilitated by the synergistic utilization of abundant and diverse archival sources, which the study extensively relies upon.

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