At the turn of the fourteenth century, the character of political rule in the major cities of Flanders changed decisively. Around 1280, the manual workers who during the thirteenth century had been systematically excluded from the city government, finally entered the political stage. After the popular victory of 1302 the craft guilds, especially in the larger urban centres of Bruges and Ghent, gained access to the arenas of political decision-making. The cities emerged with new constitutions in which control of the urban government was shared between the old merchant class and the guilds, which were now given new liberties, though the equilibrium between the two would always remain precarious. Guild power became a prominent feature of social and political life, so much so that the late medieval period in Bruges can be justly termed the age of ‘corporatism’, with the city being regarded as a body politic strongly influenced by the ‘political guilds’. While this development partly emerged from longer-term economic change, the momentous events around 1300 altered the nature of communal politics. While corporatist ideas and practices of governing the urban body politic borrowed from an earlier communal ideology, after 1302 the craft guilds would become, or would at least present themselves as, the embodiment of the urban commune. For centuries to come, the guilds would also be the main political bodies around which popular demands would mobilize. Their sign languages and practices – their banners, slogans, meetings, armed gatherings and strikes – came to dominate the processes and course of popular politics.

Yet as ‘political guilds’, the Bruges crafts were also Janus-faced: they functioned both as instruments of popular political participation or even rebellion and also as tools of urban government, delegated with military, political and legal tasks. They also developed their own internal elites, who were economically powerful and politically active, though they were connected

---

1 The best synthesis on the events and aftermath of 1302, with references to older works, is Van Caenegem (ed.), 1302.

still to other social groups. An examination of the city’s political history needs to consider the changing nature of Bruges society, and the difficulty of categorizing the social groups involved in political processes. Even so, one of the main underlying sources of tension, perhaps the major fault-line in Bruges society throughout the later Middle Ages, was between two main groups: the commercial elites (rentiers, merchants, bankers, brokers, hostelers and the richer retailers, including butchers and fishmongers) on the one hand, and the producing classes and small shopkeepers from the local market (small entrepreneurs, middle-class guild masters and wage-workers), on the other. The commercial elite was constantly trying to restore its power and eliminate corporatist rule of the city. Yet while this main fault-line is often visible, it was complicated and obscured by other social and political networks and solidarities. A full picture of late medieval politics and society in Bruges has to take account of other alliances: between families, between textile workers and merchant factions siding against ruling regimes, or between the rich and their clients among poorer people.  

From the Commune to the Corporatist Body Politic: Institutions and Administration

The institutional bases of guild authority were many. Essential to their flexing of political power was their military muscle. In 1302, the Bruges city militia shown itself to princes and nobles as a force to be reckoned with, and by 1340 it counted more than 6,000 people, the majority of whom were artisans. The division of each guild or section of the poorterie in the militia, the voud, was directed by a captain or hooftman recruited from its own ranks, and artisans also took part in the shooting guilds of the longbowmen, later known as St Sebastian’s guild, and of the crossbowmen, eventually organized into two guilds of St George, the Oudhof (Old Court) and the Jonghof (Young Court). During the fourteenth century these shooting guilds became strongly associated with the urban government and urban identity, though the crossbowmen would always retain a more socially elitist profile than the longbowmen. By 1349, the craft guilds had successfully lobbied to receive

---

3 Dumoly, ‘Guild Politics.’
a salary during campaigns, the so-called ‘monthly money’ (*maendgheld*).\(^5\) Apart from the regular militia mobilized by the guilds and the merchants, a paramilitary group in the service of the town also developed, known as the Red Hoods (Rode Kaproenen), an elite corps of between 40 and 100 men led by a captain, the *upperhoofman*. First mentioned around 1360, its subsequent history suggests strong connections with guild aspirations, for it would be abolished after the 1436–8 revolt and then re-established in 1477, both dates when guilds lost and reasserted their authority (see below). The city’s military organization was thus a mixture of corporatist and professional elements, the exception being the urban cavalry which was the preserve of rich burghers who possessed their own horses and armour. The Flemish urban militias have sometimes been unfairly dismissed as inefficient and ineffective compared with professional armies. The militia was makeshift in so far as many citizens kept arms at home, but it also had professional artillery specialists to handle a considerable arsenal of heavy guns, and the guilds also stocked weapons in their guildhouses.\(^6\) But the militia’s military capabilities were of less significance than its political importance: its military strength primarily served to bolster urban autonomy and to add political weight to artisans within the body politic.

Capitalizing on their power after 1302, the Flemish artisans forced their allies of the comital family to grant privileges to their guilds and cities. These charters made concessions to many popular demands that had been voiced from the first major wave of Flemish revolts in 1275–80. In 1302, having exiled their adversaries of the pro-French Lily party to which the majority of the merchant class belonged, the popular alliance of artisans and entrepreneurs – who were then still known as the *amici comitis* or *partie li conte* (‘friends’ or ‘party’ of the count) – occupied approximately 75 per cent of governmental offices in Bruges. After 1304 this number began to decrease and a new balance was sought between the different social groups.\(^7\) On 4 November 1304, Philip of Chieti, a son of Count Guy de Dampierre (the latter still held prisoner by the French king) granted Bruges a new charter of privileges. Like its predecessors of 1165–77 and 1281, this

---


\(^7\) J. F. Verbruggen, ‘Beschouwingen over 1302’, *HGG*, 93 (1956), 38–53 (at 43).
‘urban constitution’ mostly covered matters dealing with criminal and private law, and with procedures for the administration of justice. However, testifying to an increased degree of urban autonomy, new stipulations set out how relations between the city and the count and his officers were to be run, and how the city government was to be elected. The textual tradition of the 1304 privilege is confusing. The document exists in different versions. Only the copies from the ‘urban point of view’, and not from the ‘comital’, explicitly describe how the city government was to be elected. Every year on 2 February (Candlemas), thirteen aldermen (scepenen) and thirteen councillors (raeden) were to be appointed. Significantly, the craft guilds had the right to appoint nine of the thirteen aldermen and councillors while the four other ones were to be appointed by the count from the ranks of the poorters (burghers). The term poorter had been used to denote anyone with burgher rights, but now it was also used more narrowly to refer to merchant families, other property owners and rich burghers. The poorterie, a group that now formed a separate institution and in effect the legal successor to the former merchant Hanse, would continue to operate as a political counterweight to the guilds in Bruges. Following the election of the aldermen and councillors, the aldermen were to choose a burgomaster (burchmeestere van scepenen) from their ranks, and subsequently the aldermen and councillors together would elect the burgomaster of the council, also called the burgomaster ‘of the body’ (burghemeester van den courpse) or ‘of the commune’ (van den commune). Another type of city officials, the treasurers, already introduced as distinct officers in 1297–8, reported on urban finances. Their number was eventually settled at two for each yearly jurisdiction.  

Institutionally, the city government and the administration of justice were closely intertwined. Many of the councils, commissions and boards in Bruges exercised both administrative and judicial powers. Elected or appointed politicians normally served no more than one consecutive year on a particular council, although they could be – and were often – re-elected after a compulsory one-year lapse. They were assisted by professional city clerks, who built their career in the city administration and who guaranteed

---

its continuity. The council of aldermen (den ghemeenen college van scepenen) – in historiography commonly referred to as the ‘bench’ of aldermen although this term never occurs in a medieval source – acted both as the supreme council for the daily political administration of the city and as the highest court of law in criminal matters, including both penal and reconciliation justice, and in civil matters, including contentious and voluntary justice. Acts of private law, such as inheritances, sales and other contracts were sealed by the aldermen (for although notaries existed in Bruges and Flanders, they were less prominent than in Italy). It was the urban court that acted as a warrantor for property rights and business contracts, including those involving foreign merchants. In spite of contemporary references to the council as ‘the aldermen’ or ‘the common council of aldermen’, the city government was composed not only of twelve aldermen, but also of twelve councillors (raeden), each with a burgomaster. Hence, the city council’s full title, often used in its sentences and deeds, was ‘the council of burgomasters, aldermen and councillors’.9

The precise competencies of the ‘councillors’, who in origin may have emerged from older communal institutions (see Chapter 4), still need further investigation. Contrary to a persistent myth in Bruges historiography, the councillors did not constitute a second ‘bench’ of magistrates separate from the aldermen (as was the case in Ghent, where the aldermen of the keure and those of gedele constituted two benches, each with its own organization and even assembly hall).10 The collective name for the councillors in contemporary sources was indeed ‘council’ (raed), but this is not the same as ‘the council’. In fact the councillors acted as assessors in the council of aldermen and in its commissions and deputations, but they had a lesser role as their votes were not taken into account when reaching a verdict or establishing a quorum. In contrast to the aldermen, the councillors did not take part in the judgment of criminal cases, but in civil cases only. Moreover, the burgomaster of the council, apart from also imposing arbitration and reconciliation justice on conflicting parties, acted as public prosecutor defending the interests of the commune.11 However, certain executive powers


10 For the institutions of Ghent, see M. Boone, Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen ca. 1384 – ca. 1453. Een sociaal-politieke studie van een staatsvormingsproces (Brussels, 1990); and numerous other publications by the same author.

11 See above, Chapter 4. A useful source for the urban institutions remains the treatise by the Bruges jurist Joos de Damhouder, Van de grootdadigheyt der breedt-vermaerde regeerringhe van
remained in the hands of the count. Another prosecutor was the ‘sheriff’ (schout, scouteete, escoutete or scultetus). The sheriff was directly appointed by the prince and was not to be a burgher of the town. He upheld public peace, the rule of law and the interests of the count. He was lodged at the Love on the Burg square and had his own police force of twelve sergeants (‘s heren cnaepen). The sheriff summoned perpetrators of crimes and other transgressors of the law before the aldermen.¹²

The council of aldermen generally assembled every morning, except on Sundays, in their chamber in the aldermen’s hall (scepenen huus), in the Burg square. During the assemblies, behind closed doors, the aldermen, often jointly with the councillors, dealt with matters of city government and with judicial cases that were brought to them. Unlike the legal proceedings and verdicts, of which records were kept as early as 1361 (no registers of the chamber survive from before 1423 and those preserved cover only thirty years of the fifteenth century), the political discussions by their council were for a long time kept secret from the outside world.¹³ They presumably also remained unrecorded, as the registers of the resolutions of the aldermen only start in 1535 and no reference is made to them before that date.¹⁴ Hence, little is known about political decision-making by the city government, beyond that it was to be kept secret by those participating (observing the so-called secret van scepenen or ‘secret of the aldermen’) and that there was an established order in which the council members were allowed to voice their opinion (first came the aldermen, then the senior clerks and finally the councillors). Prior to 1491, except for some decisions copied into the city’s cartularies of privileges, there are no surviving records of the council’s political decisions, the hallegeboden, which were made public in proclamations at the Belfry.¹⁵

By 1304, the main apparatus of urban administration was established, although in line with many towns, it grew in size and became further professionalized during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The policemen

---

¹² The development of the princely judicial officers in Bruges and Flanders, from burggraaf (castellan) to baljuw (bailiff) and, particularly in the case of Bruges, the schout (sheriff) may be traced in Ganshof, Recherches sur les tribunaux; Nowé, Les baillis; J. Van Rompaey, Het grafelijk baljuwsambt in Vlaanderen tijdens de Boergondische periode (Brussels, 1967); and see above, Chapter 4.

¹³ SAB, 157, 164, 165 and 166 contain registers of the chamber dating from the fifteenth century (but no earlier than 1423), that have sometimes been mixed up with registers of the vierscare (as is the case with series 157).

¹⁴ SAB, 118.

¹⁵ SAB, 120 (injunctions issued at the halle of Hallegeboden) starts in January 1491.
in the service of the city (the *scarwetters*) had their headquarters in the Groenevoorde house at the market-place and were charged with upholding public order and protecting the members of the town government. Apart from its political members, who were annually renewed (from 1241 onwards, as we have seen), the urban administration was also composed of a varying number of salaried clerks, who advised on city governance and in trials, and who registered the council’s political and legal proceedings: they formed the most stable and professional element within the administration. There were four to eight ‘senior clerks’ (*upperclerken*) in the fourteenth century, rising to thirteen in the busiest years of the fifteenth century, and stabilizing at around ten in the sixteenth. They included the *pencionarissen* or *clerken pensionarissen*, who acted as senior political and legal advisors to the aldermen and who were often legally, or at least academically, trained, as indicated by their university title of master (*meester*). (Confusingly, the term *pencionarissen* (*van der stede*) could be used to refer to all city personnel who were on the city’s payroll.) The *clerck pensionaris* who was first in rank had no specific function title before the sixteenth century, when he was called the ‘(first) secretary’ (*secretaris* or *eerste secretaris*) or the first *pennonaris*. Besides the senior advisors, who had no specific responsibilities, the category of city clerks also included the *greffiers* or *clerken* who acted as the registrar or administrative head of one of the aldermen’s offices (*greffies*) or commissions. They comprised – in order of importance – the registrar of the (aldermen’s) chamber, later known as the civil registrar (*greffier civil*); the registrar of the *vierscare*, in the fifteenth century also called the clerk of the blood (*clerc van den bloede*) or simply the registrar (*greffier*), and in the sixteenth century the registrar of the blood (*greffier van den bloede*) or the criminal registrar (*greffier criminel*); his *onder greffier*; the clerk of the treasury (*clerc van der tresorie*); his *onder clerck*, who acted also as the collector of the heritable rents; and the clerk of the orphans’ chamber (*clerc van den wesen*). Moreover, *taelmannen* or lawyers served the city to defend its interests in princely and ecclesiastical courts. From the end of the thirteenth century there was also an official city surgeon, and engineers (*engienmeesters*) responsible for the locks and water infrastructure. The *mudderaers* were of much lower rank, responsible for cleaning the streets and canals. The city employed many messengers, and twelve trial servers who also served as bodyguards for the magistrates (*stede garsoenen*). Other official urban offices included cloth measurers, wine carriers and other types of porter, profitable offices which were often leased to a limited number of people. The urban prison (the Steen), was run by a warder (*steenwaerder*). By the end of the fourteenth century, the

The precise control that guildsmen exercised over the urban government is not easy to document; and in the early fourteenth century it was not even certain that guild dominance would prevail, still less that the earlier communal model of mass assemblies, in which every sworn member of the commune had been able to participate, would be replaced by a guild system of popular participation. This system had to be gradually worked out and the artisans’ impact on Bruges’ institutions would continue to depend on the particular socio-political balance of forces in any given period.\footnote{J. Mertens, 'De verdeling van de Brugse schepenzetels op sociaal gebied (XIVde eeuw),' Wetenschappelijke tijdingen, 21 (1961), cols. 451–66; J. Mertens, 'Brugge en Gent: De vertegenwoordiging van de “leden” in de stadmagistraat,' in J. Dezutter, L. Charles and A. Capiteyn (eds.), Qui Valet Ingenio, Liber Amicorum Dr. Johan Decavele (Ghent, 1996), pp. 385–91; Van den Auweele, 'Schepenbank,' passim; A. Vandewalle, 'De Brugse stadsgarsoen en de deelname van de ambachten aan het bestuur, 14de–15e eeuw,' in W. Prevenier and B. Augustyn (eds.), De Vlaamse instellingen tijdens het Ancien Régime: Recent onderzoek in nieuw perspectief (Brussels, 1999), pp. 27–40; Dumolyn, De Brugse opstand, pp. 105–20; Vanhaverbeke, 'Het stadsbestuur in Brugge in de periode 1375–1407: Sociaal-institutionele benadering aan de hand van een prosopografische methode,' unpublished MA thesis, Catholic University of Leuven (Leuven, 1997); Vanhaverbeke, 'Het stadsbestuur in Brugge,' A. Janssens, 'Macht en onmacht van de Brugse schepenzetels op sociaal gebied (XIVde eeuw),' For the Common Good, passim.} The Moerlemaye Revolt of 1280–1 tried in vain to revive the memory of the old communal assemblies, and by 1302 it had become clear that the guilds, asserting a greater military and economic power, were in the best position institutionally to represent the mass of the urban population. Even...
so, the charters granted to Bruges and other cities in Flanders between 1301 and 1304 referred to liberties granted to 'the commune' and 'commoners' (ghemeentucht, ghemeente, ghemeen or li commun) rather than explicitly to 'guilds'. However, shortly after, Bruges charters began to name the guilds as the groups with the exclusive right to represent the commoners.18 Other institutional experiments in these early years also seem designed to frame the increased political influence of a larger portion of the population. Shortly after 1302, the Bruges guildsmen took control of an institution known as the 'hundredmen' (hondertmannen). On 25 April 1303, these hundredmen were appointed as justices of the peace (paisieres), to mediate in conflicts and feuds between citizens. Earlier in that year they had already been checking the city accounts, a long-standing popular demand to prevent fraud and corruption by the ruling oligarchs, replacing the ephemeral 'twentymen' whom the king of France had installed during French occupation. However, the competences of the hundredmen were also short-lived and they were ultimately replaced by the colleges of the 'partitioners' (deelmannen) and of the 'headmen' (hooftmannen). The 'hundredmen' are not mentioned after 1337–8. The college of deelmannen was given a formal structure in 1305 and by 1311 they seem to have gradually replaced the 'hundredmen' in most of their responsibilities. Initially, there were three to seven deelmannen per section (zestendeel) but their number ultimately settled at six, each led by a dean. They were appointed by the aldermen and councillors within three days of a new city magistracy being established. As decreed in their regulations around 1305, these 'partitioners' dealt with the succession of goods in small inheritances, the settlement of minor debts, the supervision of marriages and priestly ordinations (to prevent too lavish parties and gifts being given), removing fire hazards, and dealing with the borders between properties. The aldermen also charged them with other kinds of neighbourhood inspection.19

The exact relationship between the 'revolutionary' institution of the hundredmen and the older one of the headmen (hooftmannen) of the zestendeelen (the six sections, usually called ambochten or official before the 1330s)20 had also to be clarified, as the one potentially rivalled the other. The headmen were selected only from the poorters (the merchants and property

---

18 Dumolyn and Haemers, 'Reclaiming the Common Sphere'. A similar example is the 'constitutional' charter of Senlis granted to Ghent in 1301: M. Boone, 'Het "Charter van Senlis" (November 1301) voor de stad Gent: Een stedelijke constitutie in het spanningsveld tussen vorst en stad (met uitgave van de tekst), HMG, 57 (2003), 1–45 (at 44): 'ceus du commun'.


20 See Chapter 2.
owners), while the hundredmen appear to have been recruited largely from guild ranks. Surviving sources suggest that the headmen originally operated only within their own section, with some responsibilities over its policing, guarding its part of the city defences and leading the contingent of the poorterie of their district in the militia. In the mid fourteenth century the college of the headmen developed into a collective institution that represented the interests of the poorterie as a whole, as a corporatist counter-weight to the power of the craft guilds. The headmen assembled under the presidency of the St John’s section, the richest section in the town. In 1359 the hundredmen controlled the accounts for the last time and in 1363 the headmen appear in the sources as a fully functioning college. At this point their responsibilities become clearer: they dealt with crimes against public morality and family affairs, areas of jurisdiction the aldermen had appropriated from ecclesiastical courts. They also assumed the paisierer function of the hundredmen in the early 1360s. In 1384, under Burgundian rule, they would temporarily obtain more responsibility as ‘governors’ of the city when the guilds were again deprived of their military and political autonomy, and from 1399 they were directly appointed by the prince.21

Other courts also had jurisdiction in Bruges or over Bruges citizens, notably the comital court of the Audiencie. From 1386 it was known as the Raedt van Vlaanderen (Council of Flanders), competent for instance on crimes relating to princely jurisdiction such as lèse majesté, and from the 1450s it would also handle civil cases from Bruges as a court of appeal. The feudal court of the ‘Burg of Bruges’ dealt with transactions and inheritances of fiefs held from the count in both the city and the castellany.22 From the late thirteenth century, Bruges also had its own ecclesiastical court under a sigillifer or ‘seal carrier’, a decentralized delegation of the official of Tournai with limited competence, so that Flemings did not have to travel to Tournai for every case.23 As we have seen, there were also seignorial courts operating within enclaves of the Bruges territory that had resisted the unification

22 On these comital institutions, see J. Buntinx, De audiëntie van de graven van Vlaanderen: Studie over het centraal graafelijk gerecht (c.1330 – c.1409) (Brussels, 1949); J. Van Rompaey, De Grote Raad van de hertogen van Boergondië en het Parlement van Mechelen (Brussels, 1973); D. Heirbaut, Over heren, vazallen en graven: Het persoonlijk leenrecht in Vlaanderen ca. 1000–1305 (Brussels, 1997); J. Dumolyn, De Raad van Vlaanderen en de Rekenkamer van Rijsel: Gewestelijke overheidsinstellingen als instrument van de centralisatie (1419–1477) (Brussels, 2002).
of the city: the redenaers, magistrates of the Proosse who also administered justice, at least in criminal cases, in the Kanunnikse. Despite these other courts, the development of administrative and judicial processes in Bruges largely reflected the increasing institutional hold that the guilds had begun to exert over urban government, as well as the strong tendency towards legal and political autonomy, an aspiration shared by both the commercial elites and the guildsmen. This aspiration would be gradually crushed as the dukes of Burgundy built up a more centralized state apparatus in the fifteenth century, but the types and competences of city offices and councils that had emerged by the mid fourteenth century would largely remain.

The Guilds as Urban Institutions

Between the early fourteenth century and the 1370s, during a period of constant strife, the craft guilds developed into institutions that became fully integrated into the urban political system. They emerged, in effect, as a political force that counterbalanced the vested interests of the ruling oligarchic families of merchants, hostellers, bankers and landowners and represented the interests of the productive classes in society and the petty retailers. In many or most cases their delegates may well have belonged to an upper group of wealthier guild masters, yet these men could not disregard the wider interests of other craftsmen, and acted to channel the economic and political opinions of their members, who were consulted in assemblies of the entire membership or at least of the masters, where the views of the rank and file would be voiced. We have seen above how the guild wardens, the dean and the ‘finders’ also served as smalle wetten (small courts of law) to judge on infringements of market regulations; how, de facto or de iure, the craft guilds also operated as consultative bodies for economic policy; how they had the power to reject new taxes or to deliver petitions to the city government. But the guilds’ jurisdiction extended beyond economic


matters, for the task of organizing their own members, and of working with other crafts in city government, required them to promote harmony at all political levels. In both guild and city-wide legislation, certain ideal goals became stressed above all others, even if they were difficult to achieve in times of crisis: peace, brotherly love, unity and justice, including economic justice, the possibility of securing a livelihood through honest labour. These goals amount to a ‘corporatist ideology’ that dominated political discourse within the city. Artisans would hold the urban government accountable for defending the ‘common weal’ (ghemenen oerboer) of the city which they defined within this ideology.27

The guilds also increased their political autonomy, but in the teeth of opposition. For a brief period after 1302, while the alliance held between the artisans and the comital family, they managed to obtain the most favourable privileges they would ever have regarding their internal organization and autonomy. They gained the right to elect their own leaders, a demand that the Damme guildsmen had articulated in 1280 and one that had surely also been circulating in Bruges. Evidence for the precise functioning of election procedures is fragmentary for some guilds and non-existent for others, however. The privileges of the fullers and shearers, probably granted in 1303 (although the texts preserved may only have been draught documents never issued), laid out a complicated procedure for internal elections but did not eliminate the role of the city government entirely. The guilds had to present two lists in which they nominated candidates for the office of warden, from which the magistrates would make the final selection. In the fullers’ privilege, journeymen also obtained the right to be represented among the wardens. The brokers’ privilege, dated 8 May 1303, apparently did not then have such autonomy: a later charter, dated 8 June 1306, stated that ‘from now on, they shall choose their sworn men themselves’. Probably the first Flemish guild to gain the right to elect new guild wardens was the Bruges butchers in their privilege of 2 December 1302, secured only a few months after the victory at Kortrijk (11 July). This charter highlights the complexity of our picture of these early election procedures. The newly elected leaders were to share electoral power with four men appointed by the ‘community’ (meentucht) of the craft guild, in other words the assembly

of all the guild masters. Together they were to choose six men, one to be the 'shield bearer' (military leader), and five to be 'finders', with the offices to be apportioned by lot. It seems that these six men were then to select the dean together with the whole guild, or at least with the approval of all members gathered at a meeting. Though the charter does not describe the process exactly, it involved seeking consensus rather than using ballots.  

However, there were limits to full participation of guild members in elections, and to the autonomy of their procedures. Where consensus was sought in elections, the voices of the most wealthy and socially prestigious guild members probably dominated. It is unclear which guilds allowed journeymen to participate in meetings, but the majority probably did not; while apprentice boys and female members had no say in internal guild politics. Socio-economic and political hierarchies existed within guilds, as we shall see: we need to avoid too rosy a picture of 'guild democracy'. And guild autonomy was also opposed. When artisan revolts were suppressed, the count and urban authorities would typically substitute the dean elected by the guild masters (sometimes also by the journeymen) with a maenre (translatable as 'summoner') or a beleeder (although this could also refer to an outside military leader of the guilds in the militia). Maenres or beleeders were recruited from the urban elites, and were often imposed on the Bruges guilds after corporatist revolts had failed, for instance (as we shall see) in 1328, 1348, 1380 and 1384.  

Guilds were not simply economic and political organizations: the corporatist values they promoted encompassed other aspects of urban life. They regulated moral behaviour according to the guild ethos of brotherly love and they organized charitable activities in ways that helped maintain social order. They promoted festive social events and ceremonies to reinforce their solidarity. An integral part of their assumption of greater political power was the manner in which they established a religious and architectural presence in the urban landscape. Information about guild buildings is fragmentary, and some guilds may have possessed chapels at an early date: the carpenters had a chapel in the Franciscan church by 1300. But during the fourteenth century, as we have seen (Chapter 6), the more important craft guilds certainly began to construct new guild houses and chapels.

Guild altars would be furnished with the guild’s own liturgical objects and vestments adorned with its symbols, and every guild would have had a cof-fer containing devotional artefacts. Stained glass windows in side chapels of major churches could include the images of craft guilds and of their patron saints. The guild chapel also had an administrative function, particularly before the fifteenth century when the majority of guilds did not have their own guildhouse: a chapel could serve as a guild meeting place, or storage space for the guild archives and silverwork.\(^{30}\)

This increasingly visible presence of guilds in the urban landscape, and within its sacred spaces, no doubt helped to strengthen their political status in relation to commercial and noble families who were similarly active in prestige constructions. But this distinction between ‘guild’ and ‘commercial’ interests was not hard and fast (as later comment on factions in Bruges will show); and despite guild promotion of corporatist ideals, attempts by workers to establish new guilds were not often welcomed by existing guilds. By the end of the fourteenth century the number of Bruges craft guilds stabilized at fifty-four, and any new trade could only take the institutional form of a poortersnering (burgher trade), whose members would be politically represented by the poorterie.\(^{31}\) The porters at the Old Mill Bridge, for instance, were prevented from organizing themselves into a proper craft guild, and in their case, the religious fraternity they founded, devoted to Our Lady and approved by the city government in 1425, may have served as a surrogate craft organization: the regulations of this fraternity included ones on work and morality that were similar to other craft guilds, yet they had no political rights.\(^{32}\) Moreover, corporatist discourse did not eliminate competition between guilds, and there often remained a gap between the ideals of unity and the many conflicting interests and identities that the world of the craftsmen represented.

### A Century of Social and Political Struggle

Guild power in fourteenth-century Bruges in some aspects reached a level found in few other European cities outside the southern Low Countries

---

\(^{30}\) On the collective devotion of the guilds, see also Chapter 8.

\(^{31}\) Parmentier, *Indices*, vol. 1, passim; Vandewalle, ‘De Brugse stadsmagistraat’.

and the Rhineland. But its growth was sporadic and took place amidst great political uncertainty. The Flemings may have won the Battle of Kortrijk in 1302 and survived the Battle of Mons-en-Pévèle in 1304, but they were forced in 1305 to accept the humiliating treaty of Athis-sur-Orge.\textsuperscript{33} The French king imposed a massive fine on the Flemings, and ordered a punitive pilgrimage to be undertaken by no fewer than 3,000 male burghers. The exiled ‘Lilies’ (the pro-French party which included the majority of the merchant class) returned to their hometowns and recovered their confiscated property. With their return, the fragile compromise between the propertied classes and the guilds, within the newly established political system, was put under pressure. A fear that the old ruling families would reassert their authority in Bruges probably caused artisans to wring from Count Robert a decree, dated 28 March 1306, that testifies to their aspirations to legal and political equality: the decree stated that all burghers of Bruges ‘whether guildsmen or others, should all be equally free’ (‘soient gens de mestier ou autre, soient également franc, aussi avant li uns ke li autres’).\textsuperscript{34}

The history of fourteenth-century Bruges, until the Valois dukes of Burgundy assumed comital power in 1384, would be marked by frequent rebellion and other forms of collective action. The guilds, and especially the four textile guilds of the weavers, fullers, shearers and dyers, were at the forefront of these movements. It must be emphasized, however, that the artisans only rebelled when they saw their privileges and economic welfare seriously threatened. In most cases the Janus-faced guild organizations played a stabilizing role, seeking compromise between warring groups rather than stirring up class antagonisms. But their efforts were vitiated by the limited nature of their political power: guild participation in the urban government was often more theoretical than real. But at least the common artisans preferred it over the oligarchic rule that had existed in the thirteenth century. The principle that nine of the thirteen aldermen and councillors had to be nominated by the craft guilds operated only in some periods (as the prosopographical research thus far undertaken suggests).\textsuperscript{35}

The fragile nature and changing roles of institutions like the hundredmen and the headmen, and the severe restrictions sometimes imposed on the autonomy and the influence of the craft guilds, should also be explained by alterations in the balance of power within the city. As stated above, one of the main underlying causes of unrest in Bruges politics throughout the


\textsuperscript{34} GVS, Coutume, vol. 1, p. 366.

\textsuperscript{35} See the references in note 17 in this chapter.
later Middle Ages was, broadly speaking, the structural fracture between two main groups: the commercial elites and rentiers, on the one hand, and the producing classes and smaller retailers for the local markets, on the other. While the latter tended to support a corporatist approach to ruling the city, the former made continual efforts to eliminate it and restore their power, even if the commercial families were themselves often divided by business and factional interests. This generalization will need to be qualified, but it provides a useful guideline for understanding the main tensions in Bruges politics from the fourteenth century onwards. The Flemish political revolution of 1302 was a victory for the middle and working classes, but the merchant elites also retained much of their power, especially because the count of Flanders soon sided with them again, abandoning his temporary coalition with the commoners against the king of France. Very soon cracks appeared in the united front of guildsmen. By 1309, in Bruges and in Ghent, some prosperous commercial guilds, such as the brokers, butchers and fishmongers, were siding with the pro-French Lily faction against the textile workers.

As the Bruges ‘popular front’ of 1302 withered away, the new count, Robert de Béthune, lost the support of the common guildsmen as a result of his increasingly autocratic policies. Other members of the comital family sided with the French again and the Lily party regained much of its influence. Between 1310 and 1320, the initial success of the guilds in gaining positions in city governments ran up against a reaction from the old commercial elite. In 1316, 25 per cent of the Bruges aldermen once again came from the top 5 per cent of taxpayers. On 26 March and 24 April 1309, Pieter de Coninck and Jan Heme, a fuller who had also played an important role in 1302, led many artisans in risings against the provisions of the treaty of Athis-sur-Orges. Their guild banners were deployed, and their armed followers turned on the poorters, the brokers, the butchers and fishmongers. During the two centuries to come, artisan revolts would continue to

use a fixed set of rituals of mobilization: ringing bells and shouting rallying cries, attacking the houses of enemies within the city, and organizing armed assemblies (wapeninghe or auweet) at the Market Square. Their actions were preceded and accompanied by a vibrant culture of political speech acts ranging from muttering in inns and workshops, formulating petitions in meetings and shouting defiant slogans against rulers they considered unworthy to lead the city.\textsuperscript{41} This was the fundamental character of ‘popular politics’ in Bruges: even in times when the middle and lower classes had no say in the town government, they would continue to put pressure on the elites by voicing their opinions and threatening instability.\textsuperscript{42}

During the early decades of the fourteenth century, tensions in Bruges sharpened as Count Robert de Béthune and the king of France continued their hostilities, while the burghers tired of the conflict and the heavy financial toll it imposed on them. In 1318 conflict arose between Bruges and Robert de Béthune, and in 1321–2 an open revolt against the count broke out, led by radical textile workers. This time the divisions cut right through social groups and guilds. The butcher Jan Breydel now opposed his erstwhile comrade Pieter de Coninck (the latter supporting the count), and he was followed by most (though not all) of the textile workers.\textsuperscript{43} In 1323 the count, never enthusiastic about the political role his family had been forced to grant the guilds, reacted with new election rules. The date for appointing the magistrates was to be changed to 11 October; and a college of eight electors was to be set up, four of them chosen by the count and four by the city, who would then choose the new aldermen. In 1324 the new count, Louis of Nevers, issued a further regulation, reserving to himself the exclusive right to appoint the magistrates; although failure to do so within eight days after 2 February, would give the outgoing aldermen the right to appoint them.\textsuperscript{44} It seems, however, that this charter was never put into effect, for by then a


\textsuperscript{43} Sabbe, ‘De opstand’; Verbruggen, Geweld, pp. 32–40.

major revolt had broken out in Flanders. The attempt of the count to pacify
the revolt in 1324 failed, and hostility to his rule escalated between 1324
and 1326 in western Flanders, and in Bruges itself.45

The chronology, causality and social character of the ‘revolt of Maritime
Flanders’ (1323–8) still needs further study (which is made difficult by
the disappearance of many documents for these years from the Bruges
archives).46 As with most rebellions in Flanders, the revolt was not a
straightforward clash of social classes. At first, the protests of the rebels of
the castellany of Bruges and other rural districts in coastal Flanders were
aimed at the abuses in tax collection by the ruling elites – and more specifi-
cally members of the castellany’s noblemen who were thought to be exploit-
ing the commoners to line their own pockets. Factional divisions among
these ruling elites (some of whom were excluded from political participa-
tion) also played a small but crucial part. However, the rising was soon
joined by a Bruges coalition of artisans and some disgruntled members
of the city’s commercial elite. Discontent with Count Robert, who died in
1322, and then with his son Count Louis of Nevers, was reinforced by the
policies of John of Namur (Louis’ uncle): he held the Bruges outport of
Sluis as a fief and had tried to draw away the foreign merchants from the
city to Sluis’ more accessible harbour. As a result, on 1 August 1323, the
Bruges militia put Sluis to the torch (see below). In February 1324, a full-
scale rebellion broke out in the city and the merchant-dominated govern-
ment was overthrown. Willem de Deken, a moderately rich broker who was
burgomaster of the commune during the revolt, was sent to England on a
diplomatic mission to gather support. He led a rebellious coalition unit-
ing various social groups though with the textile workers as its backbone.47
Peasants and artisans joined forces and until 1328 a large part of the county
resisted the young count’s weak political authority. At one point in 1325,
Count Louis was taken prisoner in Kortrijk and brought over to Bruges,
from where he eventually managed to escape. After a failed peace treaty in
1326, on 23 August 1328 the rebellion was finally crushed by a French army
at Cassel. Bruges had to send 500 hostages to Paris, among whom were
many textile workers, a number of veterans from the struggles of 1302 and
the subsequent conflicts, but also some rich burghers who had supported

46 On this revolt, see in general J. Sabbe, Vlaanderen in opstand 1323–1328: Nikolaas
Zannekin, Zeger Janszone en Willem de Deken (Bruges, 1992); W. TeBrake, A Plague of
the revolt. The rebel leader Willem de Deken was executed in Paris. The new ‘privilege’ of 1329 severely limited Bruges’ autonomy from the count, and the power of the guilds. Many of the gains of 1304 were now reversed, and the terms of the Keure of 1281 were reinstated. The city government could no longer tax or make laws without the bailiff’s permission; the craft guilds could no longer choose their own leadership; and the judicial competence of the aldermen was reduced while the role of the central officers and comital justice was reinforced. Most importantly, the count demanded that he alone would have full right to appoint the aldermen.

In the years after 1330, however, Louis of Nevers began to moderate these regulations. Comital power weakened, especially because of the outbreak of war between the kings of France and England. Louis was caught between his vassalic loyalty to the French crown, and the economic interests of his Flemish townspeople, who were dependent on English wool. King Edward III used this dependence to force Louis’ hand, while the Flemings exerted pressure on their count. In 1336 the English banned the export of wool to the county, thus causing a severe crisis in its textile centres. Ghent and Bruges despatched their militias to help Louis of Nevers block the entrance into Sluis and the Westerscheldt stream at the island of Cadzand but they were defeated by an English fleet. To obtain the favour of Bruges, Count Louis acquitted the fine he had imposed after the 1323–8 revolt and revoked the order to demolish the urban fortifications (which, as we have seen, had not been properly carried out). On 6 January 1338, the count also restored an important Bruges privilege prohibiting the confiscation of burghers’ properties, and on 24 April he restored all other privileges that had been abolished in 1329 ‘because of the good conduct’ of the city. The 1304 Keure again obtained the force of law. Amid the political turmoil and comital concessions, guild power in Bruges was quickly re-established; and without the least gratitude to the count for his concessions, between 1338 and 1348 the city joined with Ghent in its revolt against the count, led by the famous rebel captain James of Artevelde. During the first Artevelde years, comital

rule was all but at an end: this is the period that some historians have called 'the age of the Flemish city states', when in practice Bruges co-ruled the county with Ghent and Ypres (though Ghent tended to dominate).  

Further light needs shedding on internal events in Bruges around this period; but it is clear that the crisis in the Flemish textile industry had hit Bruges especially hard, and that the same groups who had ruled the city in 1323–8 went on to support Artevelde. For half a century to come, the textile workers would grow increasingly radical in their struggle but they also became isolated from most other guilds: small retailers tended to be more conservative and prudent, preferring to side with the commercial elite and rentiers. Bruges would now lose its reputation as Flanders’ most rebellious town to Ghent, its larger and more industrial neighbour. The crisis of the Bruges textile industry meant its workers lost political influence, though they continued to voice their grievances. For instance, in 1344 the shearsers went on strike to demand higher wages. The political situation remained tense until Artevelde’s death in 1345. In 1348, the pro-comital party in Bruges regained the upper hand, and the city was reconciled with the new count, Louis of Male. Louis confirmed all Bruges’ privileges, forgiving the city for its rebellion, probably because he considered Ghent a more dangerous threat and needed Bruges as an ally.

Louis of Male, a far shrewder politician than his two predecessors, soon mastered Ghent and Ypres, and established firm rule in Flanders. Politics remained turbulent, however. The period after 1348 witnessed the Black Death, popular religious upheaval with the ‘flagellants’, and crises within the textile industry. The weavers, fullers, shearsers and dyers attempted to maintain their political power. The ideal of more popular and representative rule, the political heritage of 1302, was now threatened by the oligarchic

1982); D. Nicholas, The Van Arteveldes of Ghent: The Varieties of Vendetta and the Hero in History (Leiden, 1988). Until now, these revolts and this period in the history of Bruges have not been sufficiently studied. For a state-of-the-art survey, see J. Dumolyn and M. Lenoir, ‘De sociaal-politieke verhoudingen binnen het Brugse stadsbestuur tijdens het midden van de veertiende eeuw (1329–1361), HGG, 151 (2015), 323–76.


53 Dumolyn and Lenoir, ‘De sociaal-politieke verhoudingen’.


tendencies of merchants, brokers and richer craftsmen who did not espouse the corporate ideal as much as the textile workers did. There were riots and revolts in which textile workers played the main role. In 1351, 1359, 1361, 1367 and 1369 collective actions broke out in Bruges. Most were unsuccessful as they seemed unable to forge the necessary alliances between different social groups to achieve victory; but between 1359 and 1361 (though the events are unclear) the textile workers and the guilds in general were briefly able to restore their political power. In May 1359 there were heavy riots on the Market Square. In July the textile guilds faced the other crafts in a violent struggle, and changes of government followed. On 2 March 1360, an agreement was sealed by ‘all the commoners’ (‘al tcommun ghemeenlike van der stede van Brucghe’) to maintain the peace, but after April 1360 new conflicts broke out. Ultimately in September 1361 a peace was concluded. A new compromise was established between commoners and the poorterie, similar to the one after 1302. On 3 September 1361, Louis once again forgave the city for its rebellions, illegal meetings and violence, clearly because he lacked the power to intervene more aggressively. This charter of peace was sealed by all the guilds.

After the events of 1359–61, the city’s representative institutions – those that included larger groups of people than the aldermen and councillors – assumed a more stable form. During the early 1360s efforts were apparently made to restore the fragile social and political balance that had existed within the city since 1304, and to develop a clearer constitutional framework that could encapsulate the ideal of the city as a corporate entity and channel the political voices of the guilds. During the decades that followed 1360, the city’s body politic was increasingly referred to as ‘the common body’ (de ghemeene buke or den gheheelen lechame ende ghemeente van der stede). Depending on the particular balance of forces in place after political upheavals, from this period onwards the principle of guild representation on the ‘bench’ of aldermen (established in 1304 but in practice often neglected) gradually became institutionalized in the system of the ‘Nine Members’ in which every ‘member’ of the body politic comprised either a certain group of craft guilds or the poorterie. The Nine Members, a terminology fixed in

the later fifteenth century but already apparent as an organizing principle, were divided according to economic sectors. The first Member was the *poorterie*, representing the interests of the commercial and landed elites. The second brought together the four textile guilds. The third assembled the butchers and fishmongers. The fourth was called ‘the Seventeen Small Guilds’, mainly from the building industry. The fifth was known as ‘the guilds of the Hammer’ (*van den haemere*), and grouped the metal workers together. The sixth included the guilds ‘of the Leather’ (*van den ledere*), the various leather workers. The seventh, ‘the guilds of the Needle’ (*van den naelde*), comprised the clothing workers. The eighth included the bakers, millers and some subordinate guilds. The ninth and last Member consisted of the large brokers’ guild. As we have seen, the first Member, the *poorterie*, was led by the headman of the St John’s section, while the other eight were all led by what would eventually be called a ‘heavy dean’ (*zwaerdeken*, a term encountered in 1464) who was the dean of the principal guild of the Member in question, for instance the weavers’ dean for the textile guilds and the blacksmiths’ dean for the ‘Hammer’. From 1363 onwards, the registers of ‘the new laws’ (*wetsvernieuwinghe*) appear in the Bruges archives, listing for each year all the burgomasters, aldermen, councillors, treasurers, headmen, *deelmannen*, members of urban commissions for quality and market control, and all the deans and finders of the fifty-four guilds. After 1361 (or 1363) the Nine Member system, even if not referred to, was probably used to nominate the aldermen and the councillors, meaning that the *poorterie* would obtain four of the thirteen seats (including the burgomasters’) in each institution, and the guilds the other nine. In practice, though, its application continued to depend on whether the guilds or merchants were dominant in the city and was thus discarded at various times during the following century and a half.  

The term ‘common body’ and its variants were also used for a new government institution known as the Great Council (*grote raed*): its membership included all the guild deans and the six captains of the sections, the latter as representatives of the *poorterie*. Assemblies representing the entire commune and advising the city government had doubtless gathered earlier, though their forms are ill recorded. The *meentucht* had gathered in 1280; during the Artevelde Revolt (1338–45), a ‘Great Council’ of the city made decisions alongside the college of aldermen. Evidence for others has to be gleaned from the city accounts as they did not produce reports before the later fifteenth century. For instance, in 1357 the headmen, guild deans and

---

58 Vandewalle, ‘De Brugse stadsmagistraat’.
finders met to deal with a weighty financial issue, and represented the entire commune.\textsuperscript{59} Assemblies of the ‘commune’ or ghemeente were probably also formalized during the reforms of the early 1360s to become meetings of the Great Council, and these would include the captains of the burghers and all the guild deans. Taxes and troops would only be granted to the prince by meetings of ‘den ghemeenen van den stede’ (the common of the city), or ‘al tghemeente’ (the whole commune), but it is not always clear whether such meetings meant an assembly of the entire Great Council in its embryonic or developed form. More restricted consultative meetings also continued to take place, those of ‘good people’ (bonnes gens or goede lieden), usually members of the commercial class of merchants, hostellers and brokers, with only six headmen and the nine or eighteen most important deans present, along with former aldermen and burgomasters. Nonetheless, in its varying forms the Great Council would remain a part of the city’s institutions, even if its political weight and frequency of meeting varied. In 1388 and 1399, for instance, meetings of the urban government and ‘toute la communaulté’ are mentioned. In the fifteenth century we encounter meetings of the headman with all the guild deans and sworn men or at least the nine or eighteen principal deans. The Great Council, by then often referred to as ‘de ghemeene buke van der stede’ (the common belly of the city), appears to have assumed competence over all important financial and fiscal matters. During the revolts of 1436–8 and in the years 1477–85 and 1488, it played a major role in ruling the city. From then on, it became a more subservient institution.\textsuperscript{60} While further research is needed, it is clear that the creation of the Nine Members and the Great Council were institutional attempts to resolve political instability within the city: they offered popular forms of representation for guilds and artisans that could act as counterweights to the power of the city government, which without pressure from below usually acted in the interests of the propertied elites and the prince.

The City and its Hinterland

The economic, social and political development of Bruges did not take place in isolation from the surrounding countryside; an understanding of the city’s internal history must take account of Bruges’ relations with its

\textsuperscript{59} GVS, Inventaire, vol. ii, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{60} W. Blockmans, De volksvertegenwoordiging in Vlaanderen in de overgang van middeleeuwen naar nieuwe tijden (1384–1506) (Brussels, 1978), pp. 81–7.
rural neighbours and the Zwin ports. The relationship between the city and the rural district (castellany) of the ‘Liberty of Bruges’ (Brugse Vrije, Franc de Bruges), a fairly prosperous area, was ambivalent at best. As we have seen, when the castellany was first installed under Count Baldwin IV (r.988–1035), the castrum of Bruges became its administrative centre, and for about a century, town and countryside were governed as a single, inseparable whole. Probably just before 1100, when Bruges developed as a legal and political entity, the city was institutionally detached from the castellany. The two remained linked, however, because the principal seat of the Liberty aldermen remained in Bruges (and from their residence in the Burg square these aldermen would continue to govern the castellany until the end of the ancien régime).  

But the institutional separation of town and castellany did not prevent tensions between them. Violent clashes, arising from court cases between the citizens of Bruges and inhabitants of the Liberty, evidently took place in the Burg square, for on 22 July 1289, the count was moved to condemn them.  

As both Bruges and the castellany relied primarily on their respective customary laws and their writs of privilege to determine their rights of jurisdiction, marking out their rights in relation to each other was an ongoing process. A formal agreement between Bruges and the Liberty was first chartered in 1318. It would become known as ‘the seventeen points’ and it dealt with conflicts of judicial competence, criminal law, taxes from toll rights, local legislation, mobilization in wartime and burgher rights. In 1322 new tensions arose over textiles, and at the request of Bruges, the count forbade the sale of textiles in the Liberty, outside of the smaller privileged cities, except those produced in the villages themselves and in free annual fairs. In 1342, during the Artevelde period, this measure was extended to a ban on rural cloth production except for small-scale and domestic use. This charter was enforced by Bruges militias who destroyed looms, fulling tubs and shearing tenter in the villages. Throughout the later Middle Ages several points of contention dogged relations between

---


64 GVS, Inventaire, vol. 1, pp. 337–9; Van Houtte, De geschiedenis van Brugge, p. 119.
the two legal entities: political and military issues, trade and commerce, the production of cloth and its marketing in the villages (a direct threat to the Bruges textile guilds), and the particularly thorny problem of ‘outburghership’. This was the right to burghership (typical in Flemish towns) that a non-resident could acquire when he or she resided for a certain period in town. In Bruges, they were called the hagepoorters (hedge burghers). Outburghership was often acquired by rural elites to avoid paying taxes in their own castellany. Many of them lived elsewhere, away from the city, but some of the Bruges outburghers lived in the city’s immediate vicinity, outside its ramparts but still within the judicial authority of the aldermen. 65

Although relations with the Liberty were frequently tense, they did not become as divisive as relations could sometimes be with Sluis, Bruges’ outport in the Zwin estuary. The conflict in 1323 involving John of Namur was particularly serious. In 1305 John had become lord of Lamminsliet or Sluis which had only recently been established. Because of the gradual silting of the Zwin, Sluis rapidly became important as the place where seagoing ships had to stop to unload freight into, or receive it from, smaller boats that could pass further upstream. It was vital for Bruges to control full access to the sea with minimal lordly interference. It managed to assert this control over its nearest outport Damme (certainly by the mid fourteenth century) but the larger port of Sluis remained a potential threat to its commercial interests. From the 1320s tensions escalated. Bruges pressured the count to obtain a staple privilege on 4 April 1324 stating that most goods of foreign merchants could only be stapled in Bruges. When, in July, John obtained the judicial office of ‘water bailiff’ in the Zwin, including the right to police all traffic on the estuary, the Bruges commune reacted immediately: on 31 July, the urban militia marched on Sluis and burned it to the ground. 66

These events coincided with the peasant revolt of 1323–8 and were the direct cause of Bruges’ participation in it. 67 During such revolts townspeople and peasants, especially the less affluent, could unite in common interest. Indeed, the rural communes of the coastal plain of Flanders had similar


67 Ibid., pp. 24–5.
political aspirations to urban communes and similar traditions of popular meetings and assemblies. The internal dynamics of rural assemblies are less well documented; but it seems that during mobilizations, captains were elected in each rural district. The captains also played other roles in popular politics, for instance in authorizing the local levy of taxes. The rural communes were led not by the most downtrodden peasants but by the more important farmers and those of middling wealth. These were people who resisted rising rents and taxes imposed by the local nobility and the princely government; and who could also articulate a communal sense of politics and aspirations to liberty and self-rule. So it was that farmers and peasants could cooperate with urban rebels against landed and commercial elites – as they were to do during rebellions in Bruges in 1436 and 1477. However, on other occasions, the interests of countrymen and townsmen diverged. The men of the Liberty could become incensed by attempts of townspeople – guildsmen and merchants – to subject them to the authority of the city (though apparently not in 1477, as we will see). Certainly during the Artevelde years (1337–45), Ghent, Ypres and Bruges strove to create hinterlands similar to the contadi surrounding Italian city-states, and aroused opposition from country-dwellers: in 1342 Louis of Nevers had to order that any inhabitant of the Liberty who would ‘ring the bell upon those of Bruges’, that is, mobilize a popular assembly or riot against the city (‘dat niemene clocke of scelle en sla in tVrije up die van Brughe’), would be exiled.

There were areas of political cooperation between city and Liberty within the county of Flanders. Relations between them became more complex in the later fourteenth century when the Liberty began to take its place within the county’s system of representative assemblies. During the fourteenth century representatives from Ghent, Bruges and Ypres began to assemble in negotiations with the count over matters of taxation and legislation, and became known as the ‘Three Members’ of Flanders, serving as the representative body for the county (rather different from the model of the ‘three estates’ common in most other European regions). In the later fourteenth century, the political elite of the Liberty gained recognition as the ‘Fourth Member’. A crucial factor in its eventual acceptance, and consolidation under the rule of the dukes of Burgundy in Flanders after 1384, was the economic significance of the castellany, most strikingly manifested in its

68 TeBrake, Plague of Insurrection, pp. 57–8, 135.
69 Boone and Prevenier, ‘City-State Dream’.
70 Verbruggen, Geweld, pp. 103–4 (1342) and 141 (1380).
contribution to subsidies (aides) granted to the prince. It was in acting as the 'Fourth Member' that the Liberty showed a remarkable solidarity with the cities, cooperating with or resisting the count as mutual goals shifted and realigned. During the Burgundian epoch, therefore, the issues that divided Bruges and the Liberty did not prevent them from presenting a unified front when necessary. In fact, Bruges and the Liberty conferred almost daily on matters affecting their interests, as well as on their relations with the other two Members. Bruges and its hinterland had a complex relationship, which was complicated still further (as we shall see) by relations between their elites.\(^{71}\)

The Burgundian Dukes and the New Balance of Power

The peace of 1361 solidified constitutional arrangements within the city, but was not a permanent solution to political divisions. In 1379 a new revolt erupted in Ghent, and the Bruges textile workers soon took sides against the elite of their own city. The 'Ghent war', lasting until 1385, began as a conflict between the two cities, when Bruges began to dig a canal to link itself with the Lys River, having been granted permission to do so by Count Louis of Male: this allowed barges carrying grain to bypass Ghent, undermining the interests of the Ghent shippers and the grain staple of their city. In retaliation, the Ghent urban militia of the 'White Hoods' attacked the Bruges canal workers in the village of Sint-Joris-ten-Distel, and Ghent rebelled against the count. The weavers and some other artisans in Bruges and Ypres allied with their 'brother' artisans from Ghent. In Bruges, the count's representatives tore up the peace charter of 1361. In February 1380, a Bruges alderman was killed in a riot but the pro-comital party reasserted control and the rebel textile workers were punished, and were forced to swear never to serve in the city government again. In May 1380, following

another uprising, the comital party regained the upper hand; and a new attempt by the weavers to take power in December also failed. However, the count’s partisans were unable to gain enough support among other artisans, and the blacksmiths also joined the rebel party in the city. In May 1381, forces from Ghent marched on Bruges, and defeated the Bruges city militia at the Beverhoutsveld. As the Ghenters occupied their rival city, rebels in Bruges cheered them in. On 20 May 1382, a new revolutionary regime was installed. However, this came to an end after the Battle of Westrozebeke (27 November 1382), where the Ghent rebels were defeated by a combined French and comital army. Reprisals were crueler than for any previous repression of a Bruges rebellion. In 1383 and 1384, 224 rebels (not all from Bruges) were executed. In all likelihood the count reinstated the repressive privilege of 1329; and even after his death in 1384 the guilds were unable to recover their power.  

The balance of forces between guilds and commercial elites, and between city and prince, had begun to change. The new count of Flanders, Duke Philip the Bold of Burgundy, who succeeded to the county de juro uxoris as husband of Count Louis’ sole heir, Margaret of Male, began an era of more assertive comital rule. Ghent capitulated to him in 1385 (though on advantageous terms), but in Bruges it was not the guilds that emerged victorious, but the commercial elites and rentiers: they assumed full power in the city, backed by the new dynasty. The charter imposed on Bruges by Duke Philip on 26 April 1384 included clauses that were anti-communal in nature and weakened guild authority in decisive ways: the policing of the commune and the leadership of the militia were transferred to the captains or headmen of the poorterie. In effect, this eradicated the role of the guilds from the body politic, returning the political system to the regime that had existed in the 1270s. The guilds were stripped of political and military power. Symbols of their corporate identity were removed: their banners were seized (on the pretext that this would stop guilds fighting each other); and the candles they carried during the annual civic procession of the Holy Blood (see Chapter 8) were confiscated.

---

For the next twenty-five years, Bruges was run by an oligarchy, mostly belonging to rich hosteller families. The measures repressing guild power were challenged but without success: in 1387 a ‘revolt, alliance and conspiracy’ (‘upset, verband ende vergaderinghe’), a plot by the weaver Jan Groeninc to kill the ‘goede lieden’ of the city, was put down. The dominance of a hostellers’ faction headed by Clais Barbezaen, the son of an immigrant from Lucca, and by the Honin family, could not be broken. Another uprising of textile workers failed in 1391: it showed how the power of the textile guilds was fading. Riots in 1392 and 1394, caused by divisions between city and prince in the wake of the Papal Schism, did not undermine the authority of the ruling faction. Further unrest occurred in 1398–9. In the end the faction’s grip on power was loosened not by the guilds but by the prince. Duke Philip grew dissatisfied with the ruling faction because of its unwillingness to support his ambitions at the French court. The unrest in 1398–9 led to ducal legislation on 26 October 1399 ruling that the appointment of aldermen could only be made by the princely ‘commissioners of the renewal of the law’ (‘commissarissen van wetsvernieuwinghe’), usually high ducal officials, often including the bailiff, and important clerics. In the first years of the fifteenth century, more than in any previous period of Bruges’ history, the elites began to turn against one another, their divisions encouraged by the machinations of a new and more ambitious prince.

In 1407, Duke John the Fearless, Philip’s successor, supported a coup to replace the Barbezaen faction and tighten the Burgundian grip on the politics and finances of Bruges. Its circumstances reflected other familiar tensions within the city and between Bruges and the Liberty. In that year, the men of Bruges refused to allow a comital arbiter to judge on certain differences between themselves and the Liberty. This was a classic conflict of interest between, on the one hand, the urban working and middle classes, who wanted to suppress the rural textile industry, and, on the other, the Bruges merchant elites who wished it to continue, since they could ‘put out’ textile work to villagers and pay them lower wages. Duke John decided to draw up a compromise and to grant the Liberty of Bruges and Sluis some minor new rights for the sale and production of cloth. The prince cleverly used the resulting discontent among the popular classes to arrange a coup and to replace the Barbezaen faction with another political clan led by the aldermen and emphasizing the freedoms and equality of all burghers; GVS, *Coutume*, vol. 1, pp. 434–6.

---

the Scutelare family. The coup resulted in some advantages for the guilds. They were given back their banners, their right to carry candles in the Holy Blood procession, and to elect their own wardens. The Scutelare family, though also hostellers and merchants, were more favourable towards the guilds: over the previous century, they had often sided with the guilds and must have enjoyed some popularity among them. However, the policies of the new regime were as disadvantageous to the lower orders as those of the preceding one. A charter soon issued by the duke, known as the Calf Skin (Calvvel) decreed that a seventh part of Bruges’ annual revenues was to be directly paid to him. In order to finance this burden, a ‘cueillote’ was introduced – a new consumption tax on grain that weighed heavily on the middle and working classes, who were also suffering from higher grain prices. It was soon alleged that the Scutelare faction had promulgated this Calf Skin ‘without the knowledge of the commune’, and that the guild deans had been forced by threats to seal the charter without knowing its contents.  

In October 1411, the Scutelare regime was overthrown by the guilds, who reinstated the previous faction and regained many of their privileges as a reward. A dramatic demonstration of re-emerging guild power had precipitated this regime change. The militia of Bruges, returning from a Burgundian expedition against the Armagnac enemies of Duke John in Picardy, struck camp on a field just outside Bruges. They refused to put down their arms and enter the city unless the Calf Skin were given to them, and the tax house demolished with hammers and thrown into the canal. On 19 October 1411, the Calf Skin was duly handed over to the guild deans. Every dean tore off the seal of his guild and the whole parchment was then shredded by the artisans using their teeth. Also at stake during the turbulent years of 1407–11 were other special privileges possessed by the Bruges commune. One highly sensitive issue that touched on the original communal emancipation from servility was the prince’s right to confiscate the material goods of burghers. Louis of Nevers had abdicated this right in 1338. In 1384, Philip the Bold had made an exception to exemptions from confiscation for those who rebelled against him; and in 1407, the Calf Skin charter stated that those who brought their guild banner to the marketplace before that of the count would have their goods confiscated. In 1411, however, the restrictive measures of 1407 were abolished.

---

75 V. Fris, *Het Brugsche Calvvel van 1407–1411* (Antwerp, 1911); Dumolyn, ‘Une idéologie urbaine’.  
On this issue, the duke gambled and lost. Nevertheless, ducal power was in the ascendancy. The ‘Burgundian state’ was gradually reinforcing the power of the central institutions it had created in Flanders: the judicial court of the Council of Flanders, which sought to tighten its grip over urban justice as a court of appeal and by handling cases in the first instance; and the Lille-based Chambre des Comptes, which assumed general financial and administrative control in the county. Although the Burgundian grip on the Bruges elite should not be overstated, within the city notables belonging to pro-Burgundian political factions increasingly formed marriage alliances and networks with ducal officials and important noblemen. Thus, notwithstanding guild successes, the events of 1407–11 principally demonstrated the strength of developing ties between the commercial and political elites of Bruges and the Burgundian state apparatus. Internal politics in Bruges would be increasingly shaped by the rulers’ dynastic interests. Compared with the fourteenth-century Flemish counts, the Valois dukes had far more resources at their disposal, enjoying the means to discipline urban politics and control the often dangerous turns these could take when under the influence of corporatist ideology. As some elite factions were autonomist, tending to side with the guilds, ducal strategy was often cleverly tactical rather than confrontational. Thus, on 30 September 1414, in a trade-off for subsidies for his campaigns in France, John the Fearless once again granted the privilege of non-confiscation and also imposed the \textit{wepelganc}. This meant that burgomasters and treasurers could not be reappointed for two years after they had left their offices, while the aldermen, councillors and captains had to wait one year. This was a concession to the popular classes, but it was also motivated by a princely interest in preventing monopolies of power among the Bruges elites. However, the new privilege also stated that only native-born Flemings who were burghers of Bruges could become members of the city government, reflecting suspicion in Bruges towards a duke keen to install his own cronies from outside in urban offices.

The following period, until the 1430s, was relatively peaceful, although tensions between Bruges and variously the Liberty of Bruges, Sluis and Ghent were rising, and Duke Philip the Good, who succeeded John the Fearless in 1419, was augmenting his power and unifying the principalities of the

78 As illustrated by the case of the Italian Rapondi family: see Lambert, \textit{The City}.
Netherlands. The commercial elite continued to dominate the city government but the guilds, or at least the guild elites, were not entirely excluded from power. Political rule was relatively stable after the 1414 privilege had returned some autonomy to the city government. The city could still issue its own decrees without the intervention or presence of the *schout*, a privilege that the Burgundian dukes had not changed. For some time, politics remained a matter of compromise between the prince and the Flemish urban elites who negotiated with princely central power in the assemblies of the Four Members of Flanders. A number of ‘power brokers’ also acted as intermediaries between the Burgundian court, or state apparatus, and the commercial and financial milieu of Bruges. Urban finances were subject to the influence of financiers with links to the duke – often financiers of Italian origin, such as Dino Rapondi from Lucca. Notable citizens from Bruges like Pieter Bladelin and Pauwels van Overtvelt rose to the highest levels of princely administration, acting on behalf of the duke in the city and of the urban elite at court. The wealth they amassed – expressed in the purchase of grand residences, luxury goods and fashionable artworks – was acquired less as a result of their social origins (which lay among the lower segments of the commercial class) and more through their service to the prince. Other important Bruges families, such as the de Baensts, Adornes and Van Gruuthuses, however, combined urban and princely politics without becoming fully dependent on the Burgundian dynasty, and looked primarily after their own interests.

---

Criminal Justice during the Fifteenth Century

In a medieval city, politics and justice were two sides of the same coin. During the fifteenth century (when sources for the administration of justice become more abundant), the exercise of criminal justice in Bruges reflected the growing impact on society of public power, both urban and princely. Princely power especially under the Burgundians was eventually to prevail, but its extension over criminal justice was not a straightforward or linear process. As with urban politics, the administration of criminal justice was a joint affair (as shown above) between the town government and the schout, the comital sheriff and public prosecutor. Since the beginning of the urban commune in its legally recognized form, criminal justice had occupied the larger part of any privilege Bruges obtained, as was also the case for other cities. Communal space had to be one of ‘peace’ and security in order to guarantee the well-being of city-dwellers and a sound climate for investment, and during the later Middle Ages, public authority was to strengthen.

The criminal justice system in Bruges, as elsewhere in Flanders, had both public and private aspects. The public dimension of criminal law became dominant from the twelfth century onwards in conjunction with the centralization of comital power. We have seen above that the charters issued by the counts, starting with the Great Charter of Philip of Alsace from 1165–77, and later adapted in 1281, 1304, 1329, 1338 and 1384, constituted the legal basis for the prosecution and the punishment of criminal offences, particularly acts of violence labelled illegal by the counts. The creation of an urban ‘bench’ of aldermen that acted as a panel of judges on the count’s behalf, and of a comital officer, the bailiff, who acted as a public prosecutor, along with the burgomaster of the commune, and as the executor of criminal sentences involving fines, corporal punishment or the death penalty, set the organizational framework for the local criminal justice system. The older privileges of 1281 and 1304 had been preoccupied with preventing feuds between warring families. By that time, the last remnants of ‘irrational’ methods of proof such as the judicial duel were abolished and replaced by testimonies of witnesses and an inquisitorial procedure (which included the use of torture). Outside the ecclesiastical courts, imprisonment was never used as a punishment; only those awaiting their trial, or who could not pay off debts, were incarcerated in the Ghiselhuus and later in the Steen as the urban prison. The usual communal punishments were exile, forced
pilgrimages, execution, mutilations and shaming punishments but also a great many fines.  

The sustainable settlement of violent conflicts among citizens and between families, clans, factions or corporations could not be achieved, however, by the mere punishment of criminal acts. The pacification of those conflicts by (private) arrangements between offenders and victims was equally important in order to recognize the rights of all parties involved and to restore the social equilibrium. Bruges had no reconciliation court separate from the criminal court, in contrast to Ghent (which was unique in the county in this respect). Admittedly, the panels of partitioners (deelmannen or partiseurs), which were lower courts subordinate to the aldermen, were given the competence of peace makers (paisterders) in 1305. These panels numbered six – one for each of the city sections – until 1525, when they merged into a single panel for the whole city. But their power was limited, by statute, to imposing legal ‘truces’ which were (in theory) only temporary cessations of hostilities, and which did not include ‘reconciliations’ (or sustainable commitments of friendship). The Bruges aldermen, who constituted a single bench together with the councillors, dealt with criminal affairs both in criminal trials, where they acted as a panel of judges, and in reconciliation cases, where they simply acted as a panel of notaries. A reconciliation procedure between offenders and victims was conducted largely outside the courtroom, because it was seen essentially as a private lawsuit that did not offer a valid legal alternative for a criminal procedure (a rule which, exceptionally again, did not operate in Ghent). However, a successful reconciliation could – and often did – interfere with the criminal procedure, as it could serve as a motive for the public prosecutor, the bailiff, to drop the charge in exchange for the payment of a composition.

The procedure of ‘composing’ (comiseren or verdingen in Dutch) by the bailiff was often applied in the resolution of criminal cases during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as evidenced by the Bruges sheriff accounts. Most criminal offences were eligible for composition, though some crimes, for instance homicide, could not be ‘composed’ without prior advice from a higher-ranking comital officer or court (the bailiff sovereign, the receiver general, the comital Chamber of Accounts, the Council of Flanders or an individual master of accounts or comital councillor). Only the most

84 Van Caenegem, Geschiedenis van het strafrecht, passim; Van Caenegem, Geschiedenis van het strafprocesrecht, passim.

serious crimes, including murder, armed robbery or lèse-majesté, were excluded from composition. Initially, the compositions concluded by the Bruges sheriff concerned in the first place acts of violence, punishable by fixed fines (of 3 pounds, 11 ¼ pounds or 60 pounds parisis), as listed in the comital charters, including physical assault, threats with weapons, and complicity to homicide. The second most important category of ‘composed’ offences included those linked to the organizing or facilitating of prostitution (brothel keeping or ownership, fined respectively with 3 pounds and 10 pounds parisis). From the late 1430s on, the formerly minor category of ‘various offences’ (‘diverses calaenges et aventures in French’, the language of the Burgundian administration normally used in the sheriff accounts) increased exponentially, thus widening dramatically the range of criminal cases (including economic and property crimes) that were resolved by a composition with the sheriff.

It is important to note that composition, as a legal term and technique, designated not only the financial arrangement with the bailiff or sheriff in his capacity as the public prosecutor on behalf of the count in order to buy off prosecution (thus avoiding trial), but also the partial cancellation (or remission) of the criminal fines imposed by the aldermen, or more exactly, of the comital part of the revenues of those fines, by the same sheriff, but in his capacity as an executor of the court’s criminal sentences. In both cases, by making use of his jurisdictional power to compose with an accused or convicted offender, the sheriff played an important role in the exercise of both criminal justice and the right of pardon. This was especially true for the charges of violent crimes punishable with the huge fine of 60 pounds (the equivalent of 120 days’ wages of a skilled labourer in fifteenth-century Bruges), which were in 99 per cent of all 2759 cases between 1385 and 1550 composed by the sheriff, either before or after trial. Also the much lower, but still substantial, fine of eleven and a half pounds was in 83 per cent of the cases (numbering 1469 in total) not entirely composed by the comital officer. For the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we are ignorant about the ratio between the number of criminal charges that resulted in a pre-trial composition with the sheriff and those that led to an actual conviction by the aldermen. No registers of criminal sentences by the vierschaar, the main chamber of the aldermen’s court for criminal cases, survive before 1520 (except the register for 1491–2, filled mainly with charges of rebellion following the Flemish Revolt). Until 1530, the sheriff accounts give no clue either as to whether the financial arrangements occurred before or after trial. In the period 1530–50, around 70 per cent of all charges of violent crimes punishable with fines of 60 pounds or 11 ¼ pounds resulted in a
Political Power and Social Groups, c.1300–c.1500

Pre-trial composition, and about 30 per cent in a post-trial composition (or partial cancellation). Besides, post-trial composition was not the exclusive province of the sheriff. The burgomasters, particularly the burgomaster of the commune, had the same power to compose a fine – or more exactly, the city’s part in the revenues of a fine – imposed by the court of aldermen. By 1480 the treasurers had taken over that competence from the burgomasters. The power to compose before trial, however, was reserved to the sheriff only.

Whether composition by the sheriff had a positive or negative effect on the fairness and quality of the criminal justice system in late medieval Bruges is hard to decide. It is true that the sheriff could abuse the right of composition for personal gain, by forcing alleged suspects into accepting a composition on his terms, or by siphoning off a part of the compositions’ revenues. The sheriff did indeed embezzle the revenues of 25 to 50 per cent of all compositions he concluded, either by not registering them or by booking a lower sum than he actually received. After all, the sheriff of Bruges received no salary (unlike most other comital bailiffs), which compelled him to generate his own revenues. For a long time, the central authorities did not have the power or the will to clean up the sheriff’s financial administration. The only effective way to change this proved to be the farming out of the office of sheriff, which began to occur from 1469. But leaving aside the risks of abuse, composition was nevertheless a means to add flexibility and leniency to the rigid system of fixed fines by taking into account the distinct elements of every case and the financial means of every suspect. Composition allowed for a more balanced judgement of an offence or crime, especially in those cases where the judging panel had no discretionary power, and it encouraged offender–victim reconciliation. It was a pragmatic solution for justice to be applied in cases where either a lack of evidence or legal means of coercion to bring the suspect before the court jeopardized the chance of conviction. From 1385 until 1485 the number of charges that resulted in a fine imposed by the aldermen or a composition concluded by the sheriff fluctuated around a yearly average of 93, with peaks in the 1390s and 1440s (yearly averaging 120–5) alternating with troughs in the 1410s (yearly averaging 60) and 1460s (yearly averaging 75).

In the long run, fines and compositions declined in number. By the 1530s – no information survives for 1495–1530 – the yearly average had shrunk to 22, and one decade later to 11. The amounts paid slowly declined too. In the late fourteenth century, a violent crime punishable with the fine of 60 pounds was composed for an average of 30 pounds; by the end of the fifteenth century, the average suspect of that type of crime paid in reality no
more than 5 pounds. This amounts to saying that the late medieval criminal justice system was oriented towards the private settlement of offences through reconciliation and its concomitants, composition with the sheriff, and towards financial punishment; but that by the mid sixteenth century this system had collapsed. From 1465 onwards, as the central Burgundian state grew stronger, a new, ‘early modern’ system of criminal justice, based on public humiliation, corporal punishment, and banishment outside the county, had begun to take its place. The number of sentences to the pillory, whipping and/or mutilation doubled from a yearly average of 7 in the period 1385–65 to 13.5 in the period 1465–1500. In the first half of the sixteenth century this yearly average doubled again to 26. At the same time, the traditional focus of the criminal justice policy on violent crimes shifted towards property crimes, vagrancy and begging, as evidenced by communal and princely ordinances (from 1496 onwards), the expenses for executions in the sheriff accounts and the sentence registers of the aldermen.  

Politics at the End of the Middle Ages

Relative political stability after 1414 came to an end in the 1430s. An unfavourable commercial climate and tensions between Bruges and the Liberty and between Bruges and its unruly outport Sluis were the primary causes of a large-scale uprising in 1436–8. It started with a strike – what a Burgundian charter called a ‘ledichganc’ (a going idle) – by the urban militia. As in 1411, the militiamen were returning after a campaign in the service of the prince, in this case a failed attempt to besiege Calais in support of Duke Philip the Good’s war with England. Once back in Bruges, the guildsmen refused to start work. The familiar pattern of mobilization for collective action then followed. On 19 October 1436 the Belfry bell was rung and a crowd gathered before it on the Market Square. The rebel government proclaimed its ordinances before the urban community, liberating from banishment those who had been exiled for petty crimes by the former, unpopular, sheriff and allowing all men of the Liberty of Bruges to becomeburghers of the city. All

those who had been in the city government within the last thirty years were ordered to come to the Market Square to justify why the privileges had not been respected. The crisis escalated as the elite fled the town, but burgomaster Morissis van Varsenare was caught and lynched. As in 1323–8, the effects of the revolt reverberated around the countryside and in the smaller towns of western Flanders. In 1437 the militia laid siege to Sluis, although failed to destroy the town as it had done in 1323. Another familiar pattern of rebellion also emerged. Once again, the city was ruled by a wider cross-section of society, in which guild power was prominent. During the two years of revolt, authority was exercised through a Great Council: all guildsmen and captains of the six sections, bound together by sworn oath, ruled the city, thus in practice restricting the power of the aldermen, and in theory opening up political decision-making to the rank-and-file of all guilds. The ideal of ‘the commune’, as a wider community of all burghers and guilds, had triumphed again.87

Triumph was fleeting. An economic blockade imposed by Duke Philip the Good, lack of support from Ghent and eventual exhaustion among the rebels, caused the revolt to fail. In 1438 a harsh repression followed, including the imposition of a massive fine on the city, and the execution of some forty ringleaders of the rising. A punitive charter issued at Arras on 4 March 1438 granted greater autonomy for Sluis from Bruges, and prohibited so-called ‘bad customs’ in the city, including any form of strike. The Liberty of Bruges also emerged from the rebellion with greater prestige: it had already been formally recognized as the Fourth Member of Flanders by Duke Philip in 1437. Further misery was visited on Bruges with plague and famine between 1439 and 1441. Between 1441 and 1445, all the guild statutes were systematically revised by the duke and the urban elite, though Philip did not make the mistake of stripping the guilds entirely of their power, which would have provoked fresh revolts.88

By the 1440s, then, it seemed that the age-long struggle of the guilds (and their allies among the elites) to maintain or restore the communal privileges of Bruges had been dealt a fatal blow by their opponents. Chief among these, by this time, were the elite groups in Bruges society who had begun to hitch their ambitions to the coat-tails of Burgundian power or simply to enjoy relative stability and economic prosperity that characterized the second half of Philip the Good’s reign.89 Ducal authority, and its

89 See above, Chapter 6.
state apparatus, were in the ascendant. By 1440 Duke Philip had at his disposal more men and finances than any of his comital predecessors and he was a major player on the European political scene. The path was open to pursue more centralizing measures to reduce the autonomy of the city and to reinforce the strength of oligarchic groups within it in relation to the guilds. Philip did not remove the remaining privileges of the city entirely; even so, several were eroded. For instance, appeal against verdicts of the aldermen in civil cases with the Council of Flanders, the provincial comital court of law, became a general phenomenon from the 1450s. Such was the strength and success of Burgundian rule that for almost forty years after 1438, no new revolts broke out in the city. Even during the major Ghent Revolt of 1449–53, there were no real troubles in Bruges. Some chroniclers suggest that the Ghent rebels had their supporters in the city, but powerful representatives of the Burgundian government such as the nobleman Lodewijk van Gruthuse and the financier Pieter Bladelin, with the help of other elite groups, kept Bruges firmly in line.¹⁰

This political stability is also explained by favourable economic conditions between c.1445 and c.1475 that ushered in the classic ‘Burgundian’ high point of medieval Bruges, when living standards for middling groups were at their peak (see Chapter 6). Yet the relative urban prosperity did not necessarily make for greater social equality. Inequalities became especially visible in the mechanisms used to finance the city government. As in most other medieval cities, urban taxation was dependent on indirect taxing of daily necessities, especially of beer, wine and grain: at least 60 per cent of the city’s income in the fifteenth century came from this regressive system that was by its nature socially unjust. In addition, the wealthy were able to purchase the farms of these forms of taxation. Only during times of financial hardship were the wealthiest groups asked for voluntary loans to the city. The burden on the lower and middle classes was made heavier still by the cost of annuities that had to be paid out of city income: the city finances also depended on selling life and heritable annuities and the selling of these began to spiral from the mid fifteenth century onwards. Some annuities were sold to artisans, but it was mostly the upper classes, including the foreign merchants, who invested in them. Therefore, wealthier groups profited thrice over from this financial system: they were made to pay less taxation than others relative to income, they farmed the various forms of the indirect tax system, and they were the city’s principal creditors. The same groups

formed part of the elite who ran or had close connections with the urban government. Thus, the intermingling of the city's fiscal income and the public debt strengthened the political position of a small group of investors.  

During the reign of Charles the Bold (1467–77), the commercial elite and rentiers were still dominant in Bruges. Fiscal pressure was mounting and this caused growing discontent among the popular classes who paid the bulk of taxes. Moreover, on average, a third of taxation raised in Bruges was transferred to the treasury of Duke Charles. In the accounting year of 1475/6, a record of 83 per cent of urban revenues was directed towards his wars and the repayment of annuities and debts. In August 1475, under the pretext of budget cuts, the Bruges political elite composed an ordinance, ratified by the duke, declaring that the aldermen would no longer receive salaries. The effect was to make the city government even more oligarchic (and the artisans would revoke this law when they revolted in 1477). Prospopographical study of city government offices in this period demonstrates how few of them were in the hands of guild representatives. The poorters occupied about 22 per cent of the magistracy; the hostellers and brokers made up almost 20 per cent of the burgomasters, councillors and aldermen, while the butchers and fishmongers filled another 10 per cent of all municipal offices. The textile guilds, however, contributed 2.5 per cent and the various small guilds a mere 12 per cent. The remaining 33 per cent are more difficult to identify: they would have included some guildsmen, but probably also many poorters, who are often more difficult to identify than artisans in terms of their professions.  

These inequities were very likely a cause of tension; and the city was suffering from the growing financial demands of the princely government while economic conditions were worsening. The crisis point came in 1477 after the death of Duke Charles at the Battle of Nancy: it precipitated a period of internecine civil war that touched the whole of Flanders, and other parts of the Netherlands. Once again the guilds asserted their power and political aspirations. An alliance of rebels in Ghent, Bruges and Ypres took advantage of the weakness of Charles' heir, the young Countess Mary of Burgundy, to win back their former privileges and political position.  

93 Haemers, For the Common Good, pp. 146–7.  
The Bruges craft guilds mobilized in 1477 following the customary pattern of popular politics, breaking into the Belfry to examine the city's privileges, assembling and arming themselves in their guild houses, raising their banners there, drawing up a petition in the Great Council, and assembling in a wapeninghe (armed gathering) through a roepinghe (call for action). Much of their programme was a traditional communal one: demanding the removal of obstacles to trade and industry such as tolls and market restrictions, the restoration of guild political and military rights, the ratification of urban privileges, the eradication of corruption among the political elites, the introduction of high standards of justice, and the elevation of the representatives of the commune, the deans and captains, to a position of greater power. The 1438 charter of Arras was ritually destroyed by the Bruges nobleman and princely councillor Lodewijk van Gruuthuse as a concession to the rebels. On 30 March 1477, Mary of Burgundy granted Bruges a new privilege. The old election system was restored: nine out of every thirteen members of the 'bench' of aldermen and the councillors were to be elected by the eight Members of the guilds and the remaining four by the Member of the poorterie. The rebels also sought to weaken the privileges of the Liberty of Bruges: the Liberty was to lose its position as Fourth Member of Flanders, and any mention of the Fourth Member was to be removed from every copy of the General Privilege for Flanders which had been issued on 11 February that year. The political and judicial administration of the castellany was reorganized and on many points made subordinate to Bruges. The years 1477–85 and 1488–90 were to be the only periods, from the early eleventh century when the castellany was set up until 1795 when it was abolished, that the Liberty was de facto (if not quite de jure) subordinate to the city. The Bruges militia was also strengthened: the peasants of the Liberty joined the communal army of the city, while the militia of the Red Hoods, counting 100 men, was also re-established. 95

As in the past, though, these victories for the guilds were achieved in coalition with certain members of elite groups, and in opposition to others. The guilds were allied with a faction led by the wealthy spice merchant Willem Moreel against another party favourable to the princely dynasty. The Moreel faction survived the death of Mary of Burgundy in 1482, when her husband, the Habsburg Maximilian of Austria, assumed

---

95 Haemers, For the Common Good, passim.
power in Flanders as the guardian of their son Philip. Considered an unjust and illegitimate prince, Maximilian found his rule strongly contested by most of his Flemish subjects, including some Flemish nobles. Regime changes in different Flemish cities began to occur. In 1485, the Moreel faction was overthrown; and even though the privileges won in 1477 remained in place, the new faction loyal to Maximilian imposed a reign of harsh repression on the city under the leadership of the sheriff Pieter Lanchals. After 1485 the guilds were no longer represented in the city government.

Early in 1488, however, a vigorous revolt erupted in Bruges while Maximilian was in the city. The guildsmen once again occupied the market-place, and installed a new magistracy. Famously, they imprisoned Maximilian himself. Reprisals were visited on members of the old regime: the hated Pieter Lanchals was hunted down and executed. His head was attached to the Ghent gate. After five months, the humiliated Habsburg prince was released after he had sworn to restore all Bruges’ privileges. Unsurprisingly he did not keep his word, and waged war on the city: Bruges was finally subdued at the beginning of 1490. In the summer of that year, a final uprising took place when the Bruges rebels allied with the nobleman Philip of Cleves who was resisting Maximilian’s authority from Sluis and other strongholds, and with Lodewijk van Gruuthuse; but on 6 December 1490 the ‘peace of Damme’ was sealed and the city finally submitted to the Habsburg dynasty. The provisions of the 1438 charter of Arras were reinstated and the privileges of 1477, including those regarding the Liberty, lost all legal authority.

The guilds would never completely lose their social and political power, but from then on, and throughout the sixteenth century, they were to be cowed by a political system that was elitist and oligarchic, ruled by local merchants, jurists and nobles who were usually more unconditional in their loyalty to the Habsburg rulers of Flanders than their predecessors had been. After 1490 there were to be no more major social and political upheavals in Bruges until iconoclasm broke out in 1566, and even in that period Bruges would remain a relatively stable city.  

---

The Bruges Political Elite

The previous discussion has outlined a political and institutional history of Bruges in which an underlying dynamic was the debate and conflict over the corporate nature of the city. The guilds were often the institutions at the forefront of agitation for more popular representation, while members of the ‘commercial elites’, increasingly allied to princely authority, acted to check guild power. But it is quite apparent that political conflicts were never a straightforward contest between guilds and so-called ‘elites’, or between ‘lower’ and ‘upper classes’. There was also a complex institutional entwining of the urban magistracy with the craft guilds. To offer a more balanced approach to politics in later medieval Bruges, some further questions need to be addressed: who exactly were the ‘commercial elites’ and ‘guildsmen’? Who became members of the urban magistracy and why?

The difficulty with answering these questions partly stems from difficulties with terminology. For a start, we have only used the notion of ‘patri­cians’ as a term of convenience; in fact, it is an anachronism that ill fits the situation in Bruges. Those who became aldermen and councillors were hardly a homogeneous group with legal prerogatives akin to those of the senatorial families of the Roman republic, to whom the term ‘patricians’ was first applied. Surviving evidence is sufficiently rich to show that in the thirteenth century the Bruges magistracy in control of the judicial system and city finances was dominated by a relatively small number of families; but the members of this group undoubtedly had a mixed background, ranging from successful merchants living in the city’s oldest commercial district to rural landowners and milites who were attracted by the opportunities offered by the burgeoning urban economy.  

The early presence of such lordly landowners can be deduced from Marcus Gerards’ 1562 map of Bruges: it shows, within the city area enclosed by the second line of city ramparts (begun in 1297), what appear to be several fortified houses and moated sites. Perhaps some of these landowners had not initially been interested in commerce or urban finance, but found their properties gradually absorbed into the expanding space occupied by the city. Moreover, owning landed property outside the city limits had become a defining characteristic of the Flemish urban elites from the thirteenth century onwards. Studies of the Bruges elite family of de Vos, for instance, have shown that it continued to invest heavily in the countryside for centuries. The same family also took

up several comital offices, illustrating that a certain number of elite Bruges lineages had an active interest in serving the prince even before Burgundian power made this an ever more appealing career path.\textsuperscript{98}

At the turn of the fourteenth century, as we have seen, the traditional power of the merchant class and aldermanic families was challenged by the craft guilds, and the social make-up of the magistracy and the \textit{poorterie} became more complex. A number of the traditional ruling families of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries certainly continued to participate in the city council: some had joined the party of the guilds; others returned during the years of reaction after 1309. Many of the representatives of the \textit{poorterie} still came from the same families who had belonged to the thirteenth-century political elite. Nevertheless, many others were 'new men'. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the \textit{poorterie}, as a 'Member' in the new constitution, constituted around 20 per cent of city inhabitants. Evidence from the early fifteenth century shows that when the Bruges militia was in the field, roughly 20 per cent of the monthly expenses went to the \textit{poorterie}.\textsuperscript{99} Even if we concede that a member of the \textit{poorterie} may have received a higher monthly stipend then a fellow combatant from the craft guilds (especially as some wealthy merchants fought as fully armoured horsemen, requiring higher outlays) it is clear that the \textit{poorterie} was a much larger group than the handful of families who had once dominated the Bruges city council. Moreover, not all of them were rich merchants engaged in international commerce, for the \textit{poorterie} also represented the \textit{poortersneringen} or 'burgher trades' which were not organized in formal guilds (such as landlords of wine taverns, bonnet makers and a number of other specialized professions mostly in the smaller retailing sector). Other \textit{poorters} were merchants involved in local or regional trade; still others came from professions like jurists or schoolmasters who enjoyed some prestige but who could be relatively poor. In fact, the social make-up of the Bruges magistracy can be quite difficult to categorize even with detailed prosopographical study. For instance, some families and individuals who served in the urban magistracy did not consistently take up office via the same route: in one year they can appear to serve as members of the \textit{poorterie} and in another they are listed as hostellers, serving as members of the brokers’


\textsuperscript{99} This figure tallies with an older estimate that the commercial elite of mid-fourteenth-century Bruges comprised about 20 per cent of the population: Dumolyn, \textit{De Brugse opstand}, pp. 57–8; Prevenier, ‘Bevolkingscijfers’.
guild. And as we have noted, certain kinds of guildsmen, while representing their guilds in city government, shared the same social milieu and political outlook as poorters: butchers, fishermen, stone masons and carpenters were wealthy contractors, while many members from the luxury trades such as goldsmiths or furriers were well off. Thus, it is difficult to determine the precise social standing of the members of the city council and draw up clear statistics.

Moreover, not all richer merchants aspired to political office. For instance, Wouter Ameyde (see Chapter 6) was a typical representative of the Bruges commercial elite at the end of the Middle Ages. He combined the trades of broker, international banker and entrepreneur in the textile industry and he was also active as a merchant in wool, cloth and dyeing materials. His business network included Spanish and Italian merchants, Bruges money changers, merchants of Ghent and Lille and drapers of the smaller Flemish textile towns of Kortrijk, Menen, Hondschooote and Harelbeke. On the political level, however, the Ameyde family would never rise to great prominence. In other words, the holding of political power, after 1300, was not a necessary constituent of social prestige. Contemporaries had no clear-cut social criteria for determining access to exclusive groups of men dedicated to the direct wielding of political power as aldermen, treasurers or headmen. However, this does not mean that certain cliques were unable to establish their power in urban government over long periods, or that the inhabitants of late medieval Bruges were unaware of their existence. Prosopographical research shows the continuing dominance, within all kinds of regime in the late medieval period, of a number of great hostellers’ families, such as Honin, Bonin, Metteneye, Van der Beurze, Van de Walle or Scutelare. Indeed, there were networks in Bruges fully geared to the accumulation of an inordinate amount of status and power. This may be illustrated with the example of the Metteneye family, who were active in hostelling and international commerce, and who provided no fewer than 108 aldermen and councillors between 1351 and 1500.

The genealogical reconstruction of this prominent family is tentative but revealing: it shows that, among the elites, marriage was not only shaped by individual preferences, but also – and perhaps primarily – by collective concerns. All the marriage partners of this family originated from the top layers of Flemish society, belonging either to noble lineages (marked in black in Table 7.1) or to the world of hostellers, wealthy merchants, rentiers

100 Stabel, 'Entre commerce', pp. 75–90; Verbist, 'Traditie'.
and large landowners. Furthermore, this marriage network was closely tied to the wielding of urban political power. Of the twenty-six known families who provided a marriage partner to the Metteneye family, no fewer than nineteen had provided at least one alderman or councillor to the Bruges magistracy (underlined in Table 7.1). Marriage functioned as part of an overarching strategy to preserve and expand the family’s fortune and political influence, a function best illustrated in the alliance of the brothers Jacob and Jan Metteneye, in the later fourteenth century, with women from the Breydel family, which owned extensive properties in the Bruges hinterland and often provided the representatives of the butchers’ guild in the city council. A similar double marriage occurred again in the generation of their grandchildren, when Christoffel Metteneye and his sister Agnes Metteneye respectively married a brother and sister of the Van Nieuwenhove family, who combined long-distance trade with an increasingly frequent participation in the city council. In sum, the Metteneye family not only accumulated a large number of mandates in the city council, but also maintained strong ties with other families who were themselves exceptionally influential in Bruges society.

While it is impossible to measure the precise political power wielded by such a closely knit network of fathers, sons, brothers-in-law, cousins, friends and business partners, it was surely a force to be reckoned with. A quantitative analysis of the surviving lists of aldermen indicates that families such as the Metteneye were no rarity and that their political power far exceeded their numerical strength. The following graph shows the social balance of power in the city council: it seems that the Bruges political community was structurally shaped by two seemingly contradictory developments, namely a relatively low threshold for entrance into the urban political arena, on the one hand, and the formation of strong networks within that arena, on the other.

Put briefly, there was a strong and structural imbalance in the political community of late medieval Bruges, in which during every quarter-century period, the top 20 per cent of the families usually claimed around half of all available offices of aldermen and councillors. While, as we have seen, no information survives on the actual process of decision-making within those councils, it is likely that much of it was shaped by an aggregate of strongly interrelated ‘political dynasties’, like that of the Metteneye family. In this sense, one might say that the structure of the political elite hardly

Table 7.1 The Metteneye family genealogy in late medieval Bruges

Key: Squares represent males, ovals females; black indicates marriage partner with noble status; blank squares/circles are marriage partners with commoner status; shaded squares/circles are the individuals bearing the Metteneye family name.
changed between 1351 and 1500, despite all the upheavals and despite the political influence of the guilds. That said, this structural feature of Bruges urban politics does not imply that the city was dominated by a fixed set of families, as was the case for example in the city-state of Venice. There was always a considerable turnover within the political community in the long run, simply because not all families managed to reproduce themselves in a biological and social sense. The prominence of the Metteneye lineage spanned the entire fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but in this they were rather exceptional. If the turnover rate within the contemporary Flemish nobility is anything to go by (and the Metteneye marriages show that leading political families were closely tied to that social group), then it is likely

that the Bruges political elite would have lost more than half its members per century: other ambitious families were thus constantly given opportunities to take their place.  

Clearly, the revolts that so frequently punctuated Bruges politics only temporarily interrupted the political domination of wealthy merchants and moneyed landowners. The groups who led these revolts mostly originated in what can be considered ‘the middle class of small commodity producers’: independent guild masters who possessed their own means of production and had a comparatively good standard of living. Their social inferiors, among the artisans who did not possess their own means of production, such as the weavers working in subcontracting and fullers or the wage workers not organized in guilds, had no political power at all. However, clear distinctions between these various social layers are often difficult to make because they were to some extent interconnected through social networks and ties of patronage. Professional links between richer guild masters and common artisans must have been legion, as they made daily contact, economic partnerships and friendships, but these ties are often difficult to reconstruct. It is harder to trace in surviving sources the marriage networks that existed among these social groups than it is for those made between families such as the Metteneyes. Marriages generated trust between trade partners, created social networks functioning as a kind of social security system, and allowed the assimilation of outsiders into Bruges society: foreign merchants, for instance, often married local tradesmen in Bruges; several descendants from the Adornes, the commercial family originating from Genoa, married important banker and merchant families in the city. Though the elite was bound together by this kind of ‘trade endogamy’, marriages of elite children with sons and daughters of middle-class members often occurred, which made social mobility possible for guild masters. Social networks within the city were many and diverse, and to some extent the sharpness of social divisions must have been softened by an overlap between these networks.

The career of Boudin Petyt in the late fifteenth century reveals the connections that could exist between social networks and political power.

---


106 On this family, see Geirnaert and Vandewalle (eds.), *Adornes en Jeruzalem*.

Boudin did not belong to the urban ‘elite’, but he was a master bonnet maker (*mutsemaker*). The bonnet makers were often small entrepreneurs, as Bruges was well known for its fashionable confection products, which often had large markets, so Boudin might have belonged to the more well-to-do middle class. Since he was related to the Adornes family, whose family archives have survived, much can be retrieved about his social background. He was married to Kateline Losschaert, the sister of Jan, a wealthy hosteller who belonged to the Bruges political elite.108 With this marriage, Boudin made a remarkable social leap, as Jan Losschaert was married to Adriana Despars, the daughter of the international merchant Mark Despars and Margriete Metteneye. Boudin’s marriage contract sheds light on the economic background of both partners. When Boudin Petyt married Kateline in December 1476, the Losschaerts provided her with a dowry of money and fiefs in Oostduinkerke, Kaaskerke, Diksmuide and Cadzand (small villages in the Liberty of Bruges). From his mother, Boudin had inherited some annuities, houses in Bruges, and money from ‘diverse trading ships’ belonging to his father.109 Boudin himself owned annuities on properties in Nieuwpoort and Bruges, where he held property too.110 Evidently, Boudin had accumulated some economic and financial resources in the years preceding his marriage. This made him a more eligible prospect for a marriage into a really elite family. Two other powerful members of the commercial elite, Jan de Boot and Donaas de Moor, were witnesses at Boudin’s wedding.111 Boudin’s marriage to Kateline brought grist to his mill in another respect, as his wife would turn out to be the principal (but not sole) heir to the Losschaert estate.112 In short, Boudin came from a prosperous upper


109 The marriage contract gave Boudin Petyt annuities worth 23 pounds Flemish gros, 414 pounds Flemish gros in cash (129 pounds from ‘diversche coopmansccepten’), four houses in the Rechtstraat and land in the Sint-Jansdijk (SAB, Adornes, 361).

110 He owned annuities from Nieuwpoort (ADN, B 5392, fo. 27°), and several parts of houses in the Zouterstraat and Vlaamststraat in Bruges (SAB, 360).

111 SAB, Adornes, 361. The social background of these people is discussed above.

112 The other heir was Kateline’s sister Jozijne Losschaert, married to Jacob Boulangier. Upon Kateline’s death in 1538, her son François f. Boudin Petyt inherited from her three fiefs with a combined area of 55.5 measures (24.6 ha) and two additional fiefs in kind. Prior to her death she also bequeathed two fiefs to her granddaughters Margriete and Kateline f. Francois Petyt
middle-class family, acquired social capital among the urban elite through his marriage, and then expanded his property holdings with a lucrative marriage contract. His career reads as a story of upward social mobility.

And then a sudden opportunity offered Boudin a unique chance to acquire political power. In April 1477, only a few months after his marriage, Boudin was elected as councillor during the turbulent period after the death of Charles the Bold. The city government that had been installed in April 1477 united representatives of the craft guilds which had recently gained power, and members of the elite faction of Willem Moreel. It seems that Boudin was an excellent candidate for this office because he had social and political ties to both power networks in the newly appointed magistracy. His brother-in-law Jan Losschaert, who had become burgomaster, probably supported him as a candidate. It is quite possible that the officials of the guild to which Boudin belonged had a decisive voice in his election. Perhaps the guild officials thought that Boudin's connections with the leading networks of the urban elite made him useful to them as a candidate for city office; or perhaps (since they also appointed him guild dean in September 1478) they considered him politically and intellectually able, talents that he certainly needed to fulfill the task of political office. Briefly, Boudin was not a common craftsman, but neither did he belong to the higher circles of the socio-economic elite of Bruges. He developed social ties with the merchant elite through his marriage, which made him a 'rising star'. He might already have aspired to political office, but it was the revolt of 1477 that launched his political career.

The Lorenz graph confirms that a large part of the political community never achieved a long-term presence in the city government; and that access to the system remained relatively open, even if the men who served infrequently were liable to become pawns in the games of the more powerful or acted primarily as spokesmen for their guild or for another economic interest group. Clearly, if the top 20 per cent of the politically active families claimed half of the available mandates, the other half was filled by a large group of men who were not the products of 'dynasties,’ but individuals representing families who rarely provided members to serve in the city magistracy. These individuals, some of whom only served once, made up a broad and ever-changing satellite group around a stable core of well-established

with a combined area of 112 measures (49.6 ha). In 1503, Francois had already inherited a fief of 34.5 measures (15.3 ha) upon his father's death. See SAB, 64 (feudal register 1468) and SAB, 519.

113 Haemers, 'Factionalism'.
114 SAB, 114.
families. That some ambitious and talented individuals could rise to become councillors and aldermen, despite lacking the social connections that were so central to dominant families such as the Metteneyes, is undoubtedly a consequence of the shift in power that occurred in the early fourteenth century: the successful bid for power made by the craft guilds in 1304, and the collapse of the monopoly enjoyed by the thirteenth-century oligarchy, had allowed many newcomers to enter the magistracy as representatives of one of the Nine Members. This relative openness of the political arena was maintained throughout the Burgundian and Habsburg eras (from 1384 onwards) – this despite the gradual dismantling of guild political power.

One might imagine that the growing influence of the princely state would have allowed the fifteenth-century commercial elite to re-establish the level of control over the urban government which the thirteenth-century merchant oligarchy had lost in the early fourteenth century with the rise of the craft guilds. Yet, an analysis of the recruitment base of the urban government reveals that the socio-political history of late medieval Bruges was more complicated than that, as the following table shows:

Initially, in line with the political development outlined above, the late fourteenth century did see a trend towards oligarchy, with the temporary elimination of the guilds from power. Indeed, the first quarter of the fifteenth century saw a marked drop in the number of families who populated the city magistracy (from 138 families in 1351–75 to 115 families in 1401–25). This observation tallies with the vigorous conflicts between prominent factions who sought to oust each other from the political arena at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Yet, this trend was reversed when the Bruges craftsmen rebelled against Duke Philip the Good in 1436 in an attempt to reclaim their political rights. Although the duke eventually crushed the revolt, the repression that followed did not cause the recruitment base of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time span</th>
<th>Number of families providing aldermen and councillors to the Bruges magistracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1351–75</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1376–1400</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1401–25</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1426–50</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1451–75</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1476–1500</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the city council to shrink. Both the revolt and its repression included purges of the city council, so that no fewer than 158 families provided a magistrate in 1426–50. Yet this figure was even higher for the period 1451–75 (164 families), which was not subject to such drastic upheavals. Thus, the number of families that provided one or more members of the city government essentially remained stable and even climbed higher during the new urban uprisings and repressions of the late fifteenth century, when control over the social composition of the city council shifted to and fro between princely factions and the craft guilds. These figures contradict the hypothesis that a closed oligarchy was restored in the fifteenth century. When resuming control after a rebellion, the prince and his representatives must have felt some pressure to establish a stable urban government, and thus to encourage the recruitment to it of individuals and families who had not been tainted by previous ideological association with craft guilds or with partisans of the prince. Of course, it is quite likely that in the wake of repressions, new aldermen from higher socio-economic strata than before were put in place, yet this did not necessarily imply a complete closure of the political arena.

Hence, the Lorenz curve showing distribution of political office among families sets up yet another problem: the image of structural stability that it presents seems to contradict the recurrent phenomenon of intense political crisis. After all, the distribution of mandates over the participating number of families was as unequal at the end of the fifteenth century as it had been in the middle of the fourteenth. The underlying reason seems to be that the presence of powerful family networks could be found both among the poorterie and the craft guilds. It was not the case that the cluster of ‘political dynasties’ who claimed about half the available seats in the city council was strictly recruited from the poorterie whereas the craft guilds furnished the hundreds of isolated individuals who appear as an alderman or a councilor without ever constituting a durable political network. So, whichever political ideology held sway at a given moment – either the ideal of a corporately structured commune or that of a city entwined with the burgeoning princely state – there were always strong networks of intermarried families who had a long-standing tradition of having representatives in the college of aldermen.

Various developments contributed to this phenomenon. Firstly, the ranks of guilds were themselves to some degree joined by leading families of the poorterie: these sometimes purchased guild membership, even if they had little to do with the guild’s economic activity. Some of those families took up leading positions in the guild’s government and represented the guild in the city government. Secondly, as we have seen, many of these
Political Power and Social Groups, c.1300–c.1500

Guilds were not egalitarian institutions, but had their own internal hierarchies. In 1477 the demand that the aldermen should be elected from each member of the city, showed that the principle of fixed guild representation had long been abandoned. Since at least the end of the fourteenth century it had become the case that only some representatives from the richer guilds – such as the butchers, fishmongers and luxury trades, or those of the weavers or stone masons who were actually big entrepreneurs – managed to become aldermen. In any case, membership of the butchers and fishmongers had effectively become hereditary at the turn of the fifteenth century, and they were dominated by status-conscious families whose power, social networks and sense of lineage were equal to those of the leading families of the *poorterie*.

Within some other crafts there was also a pronounced trend towards oligarchy during the fifteenth century. Guild membership was kept scrupulously accessible to newcomers, but the guild dean, members of its government and representatives in the city council were increasingly recruited from a cluster of prominent families who usually enjoyed a privileged position within the guild economy. The well-documented case of the construction guilds provides a telling example: the politically active guild masters were also the richest members of the guild and they seem to have used their influence in the city council to exert a monopoly over contracts for public construction works in the city. A similar polarization was present in the textile crafts, where a large number of relatively poor guild masters seem to have worked as subcontractors for wealthy drapers who controlled the capital necessary for the production process. During the fifteenth century, the powerful dean of the weavers’ guild and their representative in urban government was always an important draper. The leading families in these guilds did not monopolize the guild government or the guild’s representation in the city council completely; nor could they ignore their rank and file during guild assemblies; but their dominating presence in craft guilds shows that they contributed to the exclusive network of families that claimed so many seats in the city magistracy.

A sense of social hierarchy penetrated even the most communal occasions of guild activity. The seating arrangements at the annual banquet of

---

115 Haemers, *For the Common Good*, pp. 159–60.
118 Vermaut, *De textielnijverheid*, vol. 11, p. 340.
the shooting confraternity of St Sebastian (one with broad social appeal, bringing together members of many craft guilds, and well attended by the majority of members), were carefully calibrated to highlight gradations of status within the confraternity: the table of honour was presided over by prominent urban politicians, some of whom belonged to the craft guilds; the second table was reserved for prominent craftsmen and younger members of established political dynasties; all the other guild members were relegated to three other tables – where they seem to have been served beer instead of wine. In these kinds of festive occasion, the leading members of craft guilds manifested their social aspirations. Indeed, they and their families often married into the political dynasties of the poorterie whose wealth was probably based not on craft activity but on a mix of commerce, rents and landownership. Little wonder, then, that angry craftsmen often targeted their own representatives in the city council when they rebelled to restore, in effect, the ideal of corporate equality.

These reflections help clarify the nature of the Bruges ‘elite’. It is clear that the poorterie itself did not form a coherent ‘patriciate’ of elite families; and that many powerful families of the Bruges magistracy came from the craft guilds. Less clear is whether the aggregate of the powerful families from both craft guilds and poorterie can be categorized as a coherent urban ‘patriciate’. The balance of evidence suggests not. There obviously existed powerful and thoroughly intermarried families of which middling and lower groups in Bruges society were acutely aware: the frequency of urban revolts shows that craftsmen were highly sensitive to the dangers presented by political oligarchies to which their own guild leaders often belonged. Yet it is not self-evident that these political oligarchies constituted coherent social groups. The frequent intermarriages between the mighty dynasties of the poorterie and the craft guilds (such as the Metteneyes and the Breydels), may well have appeared to members of lower social strata to be the alliances of a single social group bent on consolidating their exclusive political power, but it does not follow that those dynasties would have shared that view. First, although there was certainly a strong tendency for politically active families to intermarry, political office was not in itself their sole concern. Although the majority of Metteneye marriage partners came from families with representatives in the city council, and while all of them belonged to the top layers of the socio-economic hierarchy, some of them had little to do

120 Dumolyn, De Brugse opstand, pp. 75–6, 115.
with urban politics. Secondly, and more importantly, the aggregate of families that historians so readily term a ‘patriciate’ or the ‘urban political elite’ was not closed at the top. The aspirational sights of most prominent families in late medieval Bruges were trained less on a seat in urban government than on a place within the Flemish nobility. The marriages of the Metteneye family into noble lineages were replicated by many similar families.

Interruption between nobles and citizens had long taken place. In the wake of the increasing urbanization of the county from the high Middle Ages onwards, a growing number of noble lineages had established themselves in the large cities and opened up their ranks for marriage to those citizens who were particularly notable. From the mid fourteenth century onwards, this growing proximity to nobles enabled some of those citizens to acquire the hallmarks of nobility for themselves, namely the ownership of a lordship or a knightly title. By 1500, at least twenty-three lineages of Bruges citizens had been ennobled. The Metteneye family can serve once more as an example: one Jan Metteneye appears in the sources as a knight in the 1380s, and in the fifteenth century the family held the lordship of Marke (a village near Kortrijk). The end result was a growing noble presence in Bruges: whereas in the mid fourteenth century, there had only been six noble lineages established in the city, by the mid fifteenth there were at least thirty. Thus, the world of politically active individuals in Bruges did not constitute a self-contained social category. The widespread desire among leading families in Bruges to join the Flemish nobility superseded any desire to enter and dominate the city council: for many of them municipal office was only one constituent of the family’s power and prestige, behind more important social markers such as the acquisition of seigniorial lordship or service to the prince.  

There were pressures on the Flemish nobility as well as gradations within it. In Bruges, men such as Roeland van Uutkerke and Lodewijk van Gruuthuse stood out from the rest of the nobility within towns because of the sheer extent of their prestige and riches, and the sheer number of their offices and courtly positions. They represented a pinnacle towards which other noble families aspired to climb. Lineages such as the Metteneyes felt the pressures exerted by a strengthening ambition to acquire noble lordship. The branch of the Metteneye lineage that held the lordship of Marke – and thus with

121 Buylaert, ‘La “noblesse urbaine”’.
a stronger claim to noble status than the other branch – was increasingly inclined to marry into other noble families; and so in the fifteenth century they gradually developed a social perspective that was somewhat different from that of the lower-ranking family branch, and from that of many other families in Bruges who were otherwise their equal in terms of wealth and clout in urban politics. In other words, a process of social differentiation is evident within what had formerly been a cohesive milieu within Bruges society.

This trend seems to have been reinforced by the unusually frequent presence of Duke Philip the Good’s court in Bruges between 1440 and 1467. The more prolonged residence of noblemen associated with the court had an effect on the social character of the city that is visible in one of Bruges’ most prominent social occasions. Since the fourteenth century, the city had had its own jousting confraternity, known probably from the 1370s as the society of the White Bear, which had its own annual event; and the available evidence suggests that this exclusive society became even more elitist. In the 1420s and 1430s, this club was completely dominated by scions of local families of great power and wealth, of which roughly 20 per cent had become ennobled. From the 1440s onwards, the number of individuals allowed to participate in the jousts declined, largely at the expense of those with commoner status, while a growing number of high-born nobles from the ducal entourage now started to participate in their stead. The confraternity seems to have become the club of an increasingly small and socially conscious clique that distinguished itself from its urban peers by basking in the social glow produced by intensified interactions with the high nobility.

The quest for pre-eminence within noble society had another geographical dimension: pressures within Bruges society had implications for the Liberty of Bruges. The world view of their respective elites was not bounded by the city’s walls. The upper groups of city and countryside, while possessing their own distinctive characteristics, were all part of the same heterogeneous top layer of late medieval society; ‘boundaries’ between the Bruges merchant elite and the local nobles in the countryside had always been porous. From the twelfth century onwards, the gap between the nobility and other groups in the top social layer (such as burghers and large landowners who lacked noble status) narrowed. As we have seen, during the thirteenth century the merchant class reached a certain modus vivendi with important noble families in the vicinity, such as the lords of Assebroek, the lords of Gistel and of Praet: the city gradually bought up their toll rights and landed property. Not all local lords were compliant: the lord of Sijskele ‘had always been an enemy of the city’, according to the Annales Gandenses. After the
victory of the Flemish army at the Battle of Kortrijk – largely made up of the Bruges and Ypres militias but also with a strong contingent of peasants of the Liberty of Bruges – Bruges seized all his territories in the immediate vicinity of the city.\textsuperscript{123} In most cases, however, the relations between the elites of Bruges and the Liberty, and between the nobility and the burghers, had not been so tense. From the thirteenth century onwards they were drawn closer by the effects of two complementary processes: the growing tendency of nobles to gravitate towards the cities, and of burghers to buy property in the countryside. Both of these were closely tied up with the renewal of late medieval elites and interrelated trends in social mobility.\textsuperscript{124}

While landownership remained a staple of nobility throughout the ancien régime, from the fourteenth century onwards new nobles frequently hailed from social groups with a basis very different from rural landownership. In turn, most nobles became less dependent on seigniorial revenues. The trend towards greater social differentiation and mobility within the ranks of the nobility and burghers was intensified by the arrival of the Valois Burgundian dynasty in Flanders and the integration of the county into a burgeoning state apparatus: princely service opened up more career opportunities to noblemen, burghers and aspiring commoners alike. By the end of the fifteenth century some 25 per cent of the noble families in Bruges and its environs were from the ranks of the urban elite. We must be wary of picturing this too readily in terms of a social melting pot, though. Those groups as a whole did not completely lose their distinctive characteristics. Burghers who invested in extensive rural properties did not necessarily abandon their business interests; the purchase of fiefs could be driven by a desire for social recognition but also by a hard-nosed decision to diversify assets. A noble lifestyle and commercial enterprise were not necessarily incompatible pursuits. Overall, while there was considerable interaction between elements of rural and urban elites, the exchange between them was not reciprocated equally. As the nobility remained the class with the highest social prestige, the upper part of burgher society was more strongly drawn to the nobility than vice versa. As such, this rapprochement between burghers and nobility did not result in the creation of a group that can be labelled an ‘urban nobility’: to suggest that the nobility in general became virtually indistinguishable from the upper groups of Bruges citizens would be to stretch a point too far.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{123} Johnstone (ed.), \textit{Annals of Ghent}, pp. 8, 14.
\textsuperscript{125} Buylaert, ‘La “noblesse urbaine”’. 
Moreover, towards the end of the Middle Ages some of the most prominent families of Bruges were increasingly inclined to expand their social horizons beyond the city and its direct hinterland. In the fourteenth century, Bruges had still been more or less a political entity that was contained within a political framework involving relations with the count of Flanders and the two other urban giants, Ghent and Ypres. During the later Middle Ages, the county of Flanders was first incorporated into the political union of the Burgundian Low Countries, and subsequently into that of the vast Habsburg empire. This development opened up new vistas of opportunity for local elites. Consider the Metteneye family again: in the mid fourteenth century its activities were limited to Bruges and its environs, but in the early sixteenth century, the family extended its marriage ties out to noble lineages from Hainaut, Walloon Flanders and other more distant regions. Jan Metteneye, lord of Marke, spent several years in Spain as a chamberlain of Emperor Charles V. The Metteneye lineage did remain committed to the world of Bruges politics, but this was not the case for all families. Consider the example of the Braderic family, which had combined interests in high finance with a long-standing participation in the city council. This family also became noble in the fourteenth century, and came to possess a growing number of properties in eastern Flanders as a consequence of marriages with lineages from the environs of Ghent and Malines (such as the families Vilain, Van Massem and Van Voorhoute). In the second half of the fifteenth century, the family lost interest in Bruges politics in favour of other arenas and never again provided an alderman or a councillor after 1447.

Perhaps for most families the spires of the Bruges Belfry and the city churches continued to remain the dominant landmarks on their mental landscape; but for some the pursuit of power and prestige made them peer beyond the local horizon, and thus lose touch with the upper echelons of Bruges society.

So to what extent was position within the social hierarchy of late medieval Bruges determined by position in the political *cursus honorum* of urban government? The answer to this question must be nuanced. Political power undoubtedly bestowed social status on its holder: access to the decision-making arenas of both the urban magistracy and of guild government was restricted and thus exclusive. Only a small part of the male urban population was ever actively involved in policy-making, and those who were must have acquired considerable social standing within the urban community. Beyond that, however, there is little reason to assume that the aggregate of politically active individuals and families ever corresponded to a relatively stable and coherent social group. Oligarchies were able to form
Table 7.4 The Braderic family genealogy in late medieval Bruges

Key: Squares represent males, circles females; black indicates marriage partner with noble status; shaded squares/circles are the individuals bearing the Braderic family name.
and reform despite the political revolt of the early 1300s, but the city and
guild governments were never dominated exclusively by cliques of pow-
erful families. Such cliques did exist, and the political 'dynasties' that con-
stituted them, especially the hosteller families who profited from Bruges
international commerce, could have a disproportionately loud voice in the
Bruges polity, but they always co-existed with a relatively broad and unsta-
ble assemblage of individuals whose calling to politics was more muted and
perhaps more personal in nature. The total number of families who pro-
vided office-holders gradually grew, especially because repeated urban ris-
ing continued to bring about regime changes in the city magistracy. Thus,
members of the 'urban political elite' became an increasingly heterogeneous
group in the later Middle Ages: some remained commoners, others became
noble, while still others, the most prominent of families, turned their gaze
to opportunities far beyond the city walls. Whereas in 1300 the marriage
networks and social aspirations of Bruges’ most august families had been
ggeared principally around the city’s government and politics, by 1500 this
was no longer the case.