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**“Commercial revolution” in the county of Flanders during 13th century.  
Developments in economic and professional activity in towns of the county.  
Political and economic interrelations between merchants and artisans.  
Historiographical notes.**

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**Summary**

The main scope of this announcement is focused on how social relations between merchants, aristocracy and artisans evolved during the “commercial revolution” in 13th century Flanders. Already in the beginnings of 11th century, we can trace the growth of a network of towns that gradually acquired multiple rights through comital or ecclesiastical charters and evolved into centers of trade and textile industry. There was a division of production between cities, in an effort of internationally keeping a specific share of the market and domestically to regulate labor. Flemish ports, at least before the expansion of the German Hansa were often staples for certain products. At least by 1213 there was a sort of a trade partnership between towns, all within the limits of the ancient archbishopric of Reims. We will try to make a brief presentation of the nexus of economic relations within the towns of Flanders. The main relationship to be defined is that between the merchant oligarchy, and the –then still politically weak or rising –guilds of textile artisans. We also will try to analyze some phenomena, that have a lot of common characteristics with modern day “strikes”, as were the riots of 1280, that ended up even in the executions of craftsmen. In general the high accumulation of textile economic activity in Flanders turned this county into one of the first “victims” of the prolonged 14th century of European crisis. The participation of artisans into

clearly political conflicts, such as the “Franco-flemish” war of 1297-1304, is a clear indication of the diversity and complexity of interrelation inside Flemish towns.

The literature for the economically and socially vibrant towns of 13<sup>th</sup> century Flanders is enormous and almost permanently follows a very general but distinct pattern: The main effort is focused on how – through a complex procedure that included political conflict, economic growth, stagnation, and decline, as well as social unrest -this northern French county became one of the first victims of the prolonged crisis of the later middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

This article is an effort to describe some features of the relationship between the ruling elite of merchants and the textile artisans of towns in 13<sup>th</sup> century Flanders and also to propose a different perspective on their role in the county’s policies. The frequent tensions between these groups were almost certainly connected with their role in economic production and were omnipresent even from the very beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Generally, merchants were holding the regulatory offices in the city Council, as aldermen with the permission of the Count.

Even though social division in medieval Flanders had some unique features already from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on (maybe even earlier),<sup>2</sup> the period between the 1240’s and the formal war proclamation from the King of France against his vassal, the count of Flanders at 1297, saw cities such as Bruges, Gent, Douai, Ypres facing internal challenges.

These challenges were not exclusively due to the so called “international” factor, even though both the King of France and the Count of Flanders exploited the internal divergence of interests between merchants and artisans for their benefit.<sup>3</sup>

It also seems that the counts themselves, even though frequently indebted to the rich merchants of their towns, were familiar with practices that enhanced their external influence through the expansion of this model to neighboring principalities

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<sup>1</sup> For an updated historical debate on the sources and discourse of the late medieval crisis see Drendel, J. (ed.), *Crisis in the Later Middle Ages, Beyond the Postan-Duby Paradigm*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Warren C. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe*, London, Routledge, 2014 (2011) p. 48-49

<sup>3</sup> Even though Flanders was a county of the Kingdom of France, a part of it (the small county of Alost at the southwest) belonged to the Holy Roman Empire. Nonetheless the level of Flemish autonomy permitted the county to act as an independent international trade partner and political player, throughout almost the bigger part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. So, the “international” aspect in Flemish medieval history is substantial and not just a literary device.

such as the Counts of Holland.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the counts of Flanders could become lenders of other rulers themselves was not only a proof of their elevated status quo.

It was evidently due to their capacity to find access to cash. The adjacent county of Holland had a longtime quarrel over sovereignty of Zeeland, and the fact the counts themselves were indebted to their Flemish counterparts and adversaries, was indicative of the latter's status.

The situation of the county of Flanders during the 13<sup>th</sup> century in terms of economic/labor organization can be briefly described as follows: Firstly, there was a dense network of walled towns with privileges and a considerable micro-autonomy. The existing autonomy provided these towns -quite early in their history -the ability to self-organize their interior market and economic functions. In this respect aldermen quickly evolved to a body of officials that regulated nearly every aspect of life within the towns of Flanders.<sup>5</sup>

This predominance of the merchants was crucial since specialization in the process of textiles was important. From the first step of processing the imported wool until it was sold as a finished cloth, sometimes, more than twenty specialized artisans were involved. Technology sometimes changed the social standing of some groups of artisans. That was the case of the fullers, who cleansed the unprocessed wool from dirt or other elements. When the use of mills spread, the position of the fullers in the artisans' hierarchy certainly deteriorated.

Secondly, the power balance within the towns themselves rested on the interrelation between the merchant oligarchies that usually monopolized the city council and the various guilds or fraternities of the textile industry, which was the main economic activity for the major Flemish towns.

Thirdly, there was a constantly evolving monetized economy that led to the gradual emergence of a money market based on a system of generalized security that

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<sup>4</sup> Archives Generales de Royaume St-Génois no 70. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August of 1248, Floris the Count of Holland (and a brother to William II of Zeeland, the German "anti-king" of the Romans – the acting Holy Roman Emperor at the time was Conrad IV since the bigger part of the German Electors never recognized the validity of William's ascendance -, acknowledged a debt of 7.200 pounds, to the countess of Flanders Margaret. There even exists a margin of two years to repay the debt. Given the fact that the Flemish dynasty of the Dampierre's were not at ease and a few years later even waged war against the Counts of Holland, it is very clear that the Counts of Flanders were aware of the benefits that they could reap from lending cash to other sovereigns, through an internationally legitimate and institutionalized procedure.

<sup>5</sup> For a renewed take about the institutional evolution within the Flemish towns, especially at Bruges, see Gelderblom, Oscar, *Cities of Commerce*, The institutional Foundations of International trade in the Low Countries, 1250-1650, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013

was provided for merchants and traders, and had a certain similarity with the ones that existed and have been further sophisticated at the same time at the fairs of Champagne.

The fairs of Flemish towns functioned also as clearing houses, as it has been portrayed on a few surviving documents.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless it should be noted that this evolution took solid and more permanent characteristics and a general implementation through juridical apparatuses only after 1300, especially at the city of Bruges.<sup>7</sup>

Primarily it should be noted that aforementioned conditions, validate the firm place of urban Flanders on the locomotive of the so called commercial revolution of the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

Due to that unique – for the so called transalpine Europe - sociopolitical environment it became quite evident, as early as 1128, that not a single member of the French nobility could be elevated to become the count of Flanders without the political support of towns.<sup>9</sup> This evolved into a pattern that was repeated almost through to the end of the middle Ages, certainly until 1477 and the end of the Burgundian dynasty.

The incidents of 1127-1128, are very elaborately presented in the deeply studied work of Galbert of Bruges about the murder of Charles the Good from the faction of the Erembalds and the consequent conflict that led to the ascendance of the House of Alsace.

Nearly a century after 1128, on June 1213, saint Louis (son and later successor to his father the King of France Philip II “Augustus”, as Louis VIII styled as “Lion of

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<sup>6</sup> That is the case of Ypres, especially through the documents that Guillaume des Marez published in the turn of the previous century (Des Marez, Guillaume, *La letter de foire a Ypres au XIIIe siècle*, Bruxelles, 1901). As Wim Blockmans in his “Transactions at the fairs of Champagne and Flanders 1249-91”, in S. Cavaciocchi (ed.), *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione delle economie europee, secc. 13-18: atti della “Trentaduesima Settimana di Studi”, 9-12 maggio 2000* (Florence, Monnier, 2001, p.p. 993-1000, has shown, these letters were not limited to international transactions but they also involved local merchants or other people, that made use of the trade techniques that were spreading fast due to a series of factors. The main factor remains the proximity of the Flemish towns and the interdependence of the fair system, not only of Flanders but of Champagne, probably Hainaut, Artois and the broader area of Picardy proper.

<sup>7</sup> Ogilvie, Sheilagh, *Institutions and European Trade Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 243-44

<sup>8</sup> Whether one faces the terminology the way Robert S. Lopez put it almost half a century ago on Lopez, Robert S., *The commercial revolution of the Middle Ages, 950-1350*, Cambridge University Press 2005 (1971), or in more recent studies such as Spufford, P., *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe*, London ,Thames and Hudson, 2003 it is clear that Flemish cities were probably the most important case of the European medieval paradigm shift from a model of agricultural and limited local scale production to a massive urban centrally coordinated textile industry.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas, D., *Medieval Flanders*, Longman editions, London, 1996 (1992), p. 66

France”) found himself granting to the inhabitants of Douai, one of the most important medieval textile centers of Flanders (alongside Ypres, Lille, Gent and Bruges), the right to maintain the privileges, they had initially acquired from the last Count of the House of Alsace, Philip (1168-1191).<sup>10</sup>

Monarchy played an arbitrary role, not always leaning on the side of the rich merchants that used to support the King in his occasional conflicts with the Count of Flanders. This trend is evident even almost a century later when the King of France Philip IV the Fair, tries to reconcile the factions of merchants and craftsmen of the Flemish cities, who were divided into allies and enemies of the monarchy. At the same city of Douai, Philip IV, split on 1311 the City Council into half, where a big portion of the aldermen’s privileges and status passed in the hands of master craftsmen.<sup>11</sup>

This situation is only one of the numerous clues that portray the internal struggle for socio-political supremacy within the Flemish towns through a period of almost two centuries. Nonetheless it seems that the 13<sup>th</sup> century was the period of crystallizing the relations between merchants and master craftsmen. There almost certainly existed an intermediate social group of textile workers either journeymen or foreigners who offered work within the framework the guilds provided, but not always in conformity with the general rules and regulations.

The most well-known case is found on the testament of Jehan Boinebroke, a merchant from the southern Flemish town of Douai.<sup>12</sup> Through the texts that have been preserved and presented by Georges Espinas, it is quite clear that Boinebroke resembled in a few ways to an early modern version capitalist. He had a limited, yet existing monetary capital and provided the means of production for workers, male and female alike.

As a “patrician” of his time, Boinebroke was a prolific rent seeker who tried to establish close relations with the ruling comital dynasty, expanding also his profit through the harsh exploitation of poor textile workers. One of the reasons why he left this testament was to somehow clear his name as an oppressor. Some would say that the burden he left to his children was very heavy, since they had to make amends for

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<sup>10</sup> Archives Municipales de Douai, 84 1, fol. 1. The privileges were very clearly described as “freedoms and laws”, that is “...libertatem et legem oppida Duacensis”.

<sup>11</sup> Archives Municipales de Douai, AA 84, fol. 6

<sup>12</sup> Espinas, G., *Les origines du capitalisme II, Sire Jean de France, patricien et rentier douaisien, Sire Jacques le Blond, patricien et drapier douaisien (seconde moitié du XIIIe siècle)*, Lille, 1936

all the injustices he had inflicted on people that had worked for him. Anthropologically speaking Jean Boinebroke most likely felt, just before his death, that he had to make amends mainly before God, his maker. He tried to make a deal for this life, to salvage the next one.

The merchants themselves were having an extended international presence on all the neighboring emerging markets and fairs. That can be said for those of Champagne, England and Holy Roman Empire. As early as the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1198 there are mutually agreed deals between the bourgeois of Cologne and those of Flanders that regulated the presence of Flemish merchants in that German city on the Rhine.<sup>13</sup>

Similar statutes refer to the Flemish merchant presence in Gotland at the Baltic<sup>14</sup> and much more extended for the Flemings that frequented the markets of South England and dated back to the invasion and conquest of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms by William of Normandy back in 1066.<sup>15</sup> One could say a lot more for merchants, since as lenders and dealers with Kings, princes and nobles, are much more frequently recorded, than the mass of working artisans, especially in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when their social rank was yet clearly at a lower level in comparison to the next century.

If we take into account the social unrest and riots that are documented in quite a few cases in the cities of Flanders, quite probably we will comprehend that already from the 1240's the textile industry was going through problems. In towns like Douai, Ypres, Bruges and the comital capital of Gent the riots are more frequent at the 1270's and reach a melting point in the years 1279-81.

The strict regulation of textile manufacture procedure was not a reason per se of the workers' unrest. In their bigger part, the petitions of the lower social ranks, the "menu people" survive mainly through the statutes of the Count of Flanders, revealing the stagnation of salaries for many years as the main reason of protest.

Flemish skilled artisans and craftsmen had already sought for new homes and activities outside Flanders, not only across the Channel but also at Champagne. Textile artisans had migrated southwards, especially at fair towns such as Provins where there also existed a record of Flemish presence, especially of merchants that frequented the fairs. Flemish artisans were even involved with the 1281 revolts that

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<sup>13</sup> Archives Departementales du Nord B 504, l. 18

<sup>14</sup> Archives Departementales du Nord B 504, l. 19

<sup>15</sup> Oksanen, El., *Flanders and the Anglo-Norman World 1066-1216*, Cambridge University Press, 2012

led to violent repression and even the murder of prominent local aldermen as Guillaume de Pentecoute, who was the head of the City Council for many years during the decade of 1270's.

Flemish workers' presence at the towns of the Fairs of Champagne are clearly an indication of, principally, the decline of the textile driven economy of Flanders and, also, of the politically polarized atmosphere at the towns of Flanders. There are numerous indications that show the degree of the emergence of merchant power within the towns, who usually were indifferent not only for the count but the king himself.

On a letter of the King of France Philip to the Count of Flanders Gui de Dampierre, dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1279, "certain aldermen" and "different administrations" of the county, were regarded as not "giving report" to their sovereigns.

These "administrations", according to King Philip, even posed the question on being judged not by the royal officers, but either by the "Free men" of the count or their counterparts, the aldermen. He called on the count to be rigorous and quick so these people would return within the jurisdiction of their natural judge, the King.<sup>16</sup> This document is quite interesting in many aspects. First of all the fact that aldermen were generally aligned with royal power, especially in the towns of South Flanders. It is important to highlight that during the riots, which started as social conflicts and ended up as revolts between merchants and artisans -and up to a degree -as a war of proxies among the King and the Count.

Nonetheless, the warning of 1279 from the King is not inexplicable. On 1280 and 1281, documents about the uprisings on Douai, Ypres and Bruges, revealed an effort of reconciliation rather than one sided intervention between merchants and artisans. The Count accepted a part of the petition issued by the artisans, while – at the same time – he tried to maintain the uneasy balance with the merchants that ruled over the towns, without breaking the existing system of governance.

The complexity of social relations and frequent conflicts within the walled towns of Flanders always tempts scholars to the neo-marxist point of view about the emergence on interpretations, proposing the shaping of a self-conscious "working" stratum. Nonetheless, scholars have shown that craft guilds were not merely close to a

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<sup>16</sup> Archives Generales de Royaume St-Génois, 251

“workers” association, but, rather they were parts of groups of political pressure on specific goals of participating in urban governments.

These craft guilds, had their own very hierarchical organization that rarely enabled economic mobility. Economic malaise of the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century proved to be very disadvantageous not only for the merchants of Flemish towns, but also for the artisans who came against a multiple problem: stagnant local demand, diversified international competition, decrease of participation on inter-border markets due to political (fairs of Champagne and England) or purely superimposing factors (the a priori political superiority of Italian merchant-bankers).

It is also quite tempting to highlight the discourse of the previous twenty years about the institutions that led to the creation or shaped the conditions for the emergence of markets. The fairs of Champagne have been already mentioned, and it must be noted that the towns of Flanders had their own circle of Fairs, that were used not for international commerce alone, but for local transactions as well.<sup>17</sup>

The fairs of the towns of Flanders were functioning as a clearance house not only for transactions that were connected to the international textile trade, but also for other products, such as agricultural products and foodstuff. In respect to the fairs system, the town stratification did not exist. That implies a pragmatic, realistic economic understanding from a considerable part of the economically active population.

North, Milgrom and Weingast<sup>18</sup> in their 1994 article about the role of institutions made an interpretation about the emergence of fairs as creations of merchant communities and/or guilds, suggesting that their decline started when late medieval political entities, playing a role similar with that of the modern states, intervened and regulated, something that led to the fast and gradual decline.

As Sheilagh Ogilvie has shown that view is idealized in the aspect that it bypasses the fact that counts were political entities that encouraged the function of fairs based to a very closely regulated system, both in Flanders and -of course - Champagne. To this point. I would like to add that the description between these two regions is purely due to clustering fairs at one single category.

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<sup>17</sup> Blockmans, “Transactions”

<sup>18</sup> Greif, Avner, Paul Milgrom and Barry Weingast, “Coordination, commitment and enforcement: The case of the Merchant Guild.”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 102 (4), (1992)



If one sees them closely, he will understand that in the case of Flanders the creation of fairs went hand in hand with the emergence of towns.<sup>19</sup> While, at the same time, the creation of the Champagne fairs was a purely political project, an external, fabricated as a top-bottom oriented intervention into a predominantly feudally organized territory.

Returning to the main question posed in the beginning of this article, on the delicate relations between merchant and artisans, I believe that the superimposing factor is political. The gradual transition of Flanders from a geopolitically important hub, to a county of a prolonged external crisis, put further pressure on the already tense atmosphere between these two groups.

It is quite clear that the craft guilds took advantage of the fact that already from the 1260's, the international stance of their town neighbors, the merchants, was rapidly limited, a fact that led to the concurrent decrease of their political influence. Even though a Malthusian model seems tempting as an explanation to the gradual decline of Flanders for almost half of the "prolonged 13<sup>th</sup> century" (ca 1180-ca 1320), it should be criticized, since other parts of the area between Picardy and Normandy in the West and the Rhine in the East, were also facing similar -yet smaller in scale and density -challenges.

Flanders faced overpopulation, inflation, mass migration, and peak of demand while the supply was still growing rapidly and a series of political events, not always related with the internal situation. The internal crises of 1270's and 1280's as well as the franco-flemish war of 1297-1304, accelerated the economic decline and strain on the Flemish economy. Things got even worse after 1337 and the outbreak of the Hundred Years War. But they were indirectly connected as a pure conjuncture of events. An interpretation of transition theory is most likely more accurate, even though the transition was incomplete, at least for the years until the first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In my opinion Flanders through the sophistication of its textile manufacture industry and the existence of local market facilities, exceeded the feudal, premodern capacity of crisis management. Even though there were problems, like the one of bullion that led to solutions such as the debasement of the currency denomination.

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<sup>19</sup> Guerreau, A., "Avant le marché, les marchés: en Europe, XIIIe –XVIIIe siècle (note critique)", in *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 6 (2001), p. 1129-1175. Boyer, Robert, « Historiens et économistes face à l'émergence des institutions du marché », *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 3 (2009), p. 665-693

<sup>20</sup>These practices were of widespread use, but they do not constitute an indication of widespread use, it seems that the main reason of the prolonged internal crisis was the utter inefficiency of guilds that acted less as economic institutions and more as means of social control and political ‘lobbying’ in towns. In this context there are still questions that remain to be answered and are open to future research. First of all about the “uniqueness” of the Flemish case within the general context of trade revival in Western, transalpine, European paradigm. Was it so different than the developments in the broader region? And, also, much more difficult to address, is whether these early guilds of craftsmen, were anything more than political “peer pressure” groups in a very systematical and hierarchical manner, as the official, surviving sources imply?

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<sup>20</sup> Nicholas, D., “Of poverty and primacy: Demand, Liquidity, and the Flemish Economic Miracle, 1050-1200”, in *The American Historical Review* 96, 1 (1991), p. 17-41