


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘On behalf of the city’: wax and urban diplomacy in the late medieval Baltic and North Sea

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## Abstract

Focusing on the largely unpublished ‘city accounts’ (‘Stadsrekeningen’) of Bruges, this article examines the city’s giving of prestigious Baltic beeswax to their lords, the Valois and (later) Habsburg dukes of Burgundy. It sheds new light on urban government by analysing how civic leaders across north-western Europe used the apriary product to manage often fraught relationships with their rulers and reinforce their identities as trading centres or outposts of international repute. More broadly, the gifting of Baltic beeswax points to the political and diplomatic prestige associated with the trade and display of the commodity in the later medieval period and the desire of urban leaders and communities to extract symbolic and political capital from its exchange.

In 1426, the Hanse outpost in London pledged to give the city’s mayor a hundred-weight of ‘Polish’ wax yearly in return for confirmation of their liberties.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, the Hanse outpost in Bruges presented in 1440 a ‘fine piece of wax’ weighing almost 350 kilos to Duchess Isabella of Burgundy, to mark her entry into the Flemish entrepôt.<sup>2</sup> Around January 1404, and ‘on behalf of the city of

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<sup>1</sup>R.R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Letter-Book K. Temp. Henry VI* (London, 1911), 46.

<sup>2</sup>*Urkundenbuch der Stadt Lübeck: Siebenter Theil 1427–1440* (Lübeck, 1885), 874–6 (no. 852). For a summary of recent research on Hanse outposts, see N. Brunmayr, ‘Herring trade, quality controls and diplomacy in Cologne in the fifteenth century’, *German History*, 38 (2020), 527–49, at 539 n. 90.

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Bruges', the city council dispatched almost 200 kilos of 'Polish' wax to Paris to give to the duke of Burgundy's chancellor.<sup>3</sup> Further afield, the bishop of Ösel in Livonia, embroiled in disputes with the Hanse city of Tallinn in 1499, gifted around 200 kilos of wax to the city's council to demonstrate his 'goodwill and friendship'.<sup>4</sup> These examples run alongside many other instances where civic communities gave or received wax, and this article seeks to understand why urban centres and leaders across north-western Europe presented the product in diplomatic and ceremonial contexts in the late medieval period. The giving of beeswax has been ignored in scholarship on gift-giving and diplomacy in favour of more traditional commodities, such as wine, jewellery and manufactured items. A close examination of the city council of Bruges and their giving of Baltic wax to their Valois and (later) Habsburg masters underlines how the commodity formed a vital and consistent tool in managing their often fraught relationship with their lord. From a broader perspective, the gifting of beeswax sheds new light on urban government, highlighting how civic councils and leaders attempted to exploit access to in-demand luxuries such as beeswax for both political gain and to reinforce their status and identities as exalted international trading centres deserving of their privileges. The desire of urban leaders to gift beeswax also reflects more generally the prestige that the commodity enjoyed in the late medieval period and the symbolic significance that contemporaries attached to the produce of the most celebrated social insect.

Across the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bruges' leadership gifted significant quantities of beeswax to their lords, the Valois and then Habsburg dukes of Burgundy, and to other notable visitors, including the king of France, foreign diplomats, local aristocrats and bishops and papal legates. The quantities purchased were noteworthy – over 2,500 kilos of wax were presented to Duke John the Fearless alone between 1404 and 1414 – and sometimes formed the most expensive gift-marking ducal visits, costing more than the wine, cloth and other luxuries usually handed over.<sup>5</sup> As Bruges' finances deteriorated into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, successive mayors generally prioritized the gifting of wax and wine, cutting costs by foregoing other, previously regular, gifts, such as spices, ornamental crosses and clothing.<sup>6</sup> Wine generally remained the most consistent gift, and both the cost of the wax and wine presented by Bruges could be exceeded by other presents. To mark the entry of Duke Charles the Bold into the city of 1468, for example, the council presented their lord with two silver gilt images worth an enormous 151 pounds, while the gift of wax was worth only 5 pounds.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Bruges, Stadsarchief Brugge, 216, Stadsrekeningen (hereafter Stadsrekeningen), 1403–04, fol. 117v.

<sup>4</sup>L. Arbusow (ed.), *Liv-, est- und kurländisches Urkundenbuch: Zweite Abteilung Band I 1494–1500* (Riga, 1900), 589–90 (no. 778).

<sup>5</sup>These gifts and the surrounding circumstances are discussed below.

<sup>6</sup>Bruges' declining position in the fifteenth century is explored in B. Dewilde, J. Dumolyn, B. Lambert and B. Vannieuwenhuyze, "So one would notice the good navigability": economic decline and the cartographic conception of urban space in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Bruges', *Urban History*, 45 (2018), 2–25 (esp. 3–5).

<sup>7</sup>Unless otherwise stated, the currency referred to is the Flemish pound groot. The city accounts of Bruges purchased wax by the pound or units thereof, including the *waghe* of 180 pounds and the *naghel* of 6 pounds (1 *waghe* = 30 *naghel* = 180 pounds). When transcribing from archival material in Middle

Wax, nevertheless, remained a regular gift. By 1515, the practice of presenting wax had become a tradition, with the city accounts recording the gifting of wine and around 170 kilos of wax to the future Emperor Charles V, 'our redoubted lord, as is the custom, upon his entry'.<sup>8</sup> Bruges was not alone in this practice, for leaders of urban communities and representatives of trading posts gifted wax at diplomatic and ceremonial events too.<sup>9</sup> To the instances noted above, one could add, for example, the 10 pieces of wax and 10 tuns of wine presented by the commonalty of the city of London to the Tower in 1342 to celebrate the wedding of the king's son.<sup>10</sup> Wax was also gifted routinely on smaller scales. The 'gift book' of a wealthy Nuremberg patrician's wife from the early 1400s records frequent presents of large candles to her peers, while the account book of a patrician in the same city a century later included yearly entries recording the costs for 'what I...gifted in terms of clothes, for feasts, [and] for wax candles'.<sup>11</sup> The detail contained in the mostly unpublished city accounts of Bruges offer unique insights into the gifting of beeswax, making it possible to reconstruct the practice and meanings behind an exercise that held currency in urban communities across north-western Europe.

Scholarship on the political and diplomatic activities of urban communities in north-western Europe is flourishing, especially for cities that have left rich archives.<sup>12</sup> Neil Murphy has emphasized how towns from Tours to Tournai took advantage of royal and aristocratic entries to lobby for privileges and special treatment, providing gifts as varied as barrels of salmon to silver statuettes to push their case, while Valentin Groebner has examined how urban councils along the Rhine gifted liquid bribes to secure diverse goals and build networks of support.<sup>13</sup> Drawing upon Tallinn's rich archive, Anu Mänd has underlined the city's gifts of

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Dutch, I have standardized capitalization, expanded common abbreviations and inserted punctuation to make reading easier. *Stadsrekeningen, 1467–68*, fol. 69v. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this piece of information.

<sup>8</sup>L.P. Gachard, *Collection des voyages des souverains des Pays-Bas* (Brussels, 1874), ii, 541; trans. in A. Brown and G. Small, *Court and Civic Society in the Burgundian Low Countries, c. 1420–1530* (Manchester, 2007), 208.

<sup>9</sup>As Venetian diplomats dispatched to Istanbul took candles to present to the Ottoman sultan – 290 alone in one sixteenth-century embassy – and the city's senate presented wax to notable visitors upon their arrival in the city, gifting the apiary product was perhaps common across Christendom, but urban communities in north-western Europe remain the focus of this article. For examples: L. Molá, 'Material diplomacy: Venetian luxury gifts for the Ottoman Empire in the late Renaissance', in Z. Biedermann, A. Gerritsen and G. Riello (eds.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2018), 56–87, at 61; M. Letts (ed.), *The Travels of Leo of Rozmital through Germany, Flanders, England, France, Spain Portugal and Italy 1465–1467* (Cambridge, 1957), 152.

<sup>10</sup>*Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1323–1364*, vol. I (Cambridge, 1926), 153.

<sup>11</sup>G.K. von Kressenstein, 'Das Schenkbuch einer Nürnberger Patriciersfrau von 1416 bis 1438', *Anzeiger für die Kunde der Deutschen Vorzeit*, 23 (1876), 37–42, 70–4 (with examples on 37, 38, 39–40, 71 and 73); W. Loose (ed.), *Anton Tuchers Haushaltbuch (1507 bis 1517)* (Tübingen, 1877), 106.

<sup>12</sup>The literature is extensive. For concision, references in the following footnotes are made only to the most recent or pertinent scholarship.

<sup>13</sup>N. Murphy, 'The court on the move: ceremonial entries, gift-giving and access to the monarch in France, c. 1440–c. 1570', in D. Raeymakers and S. Derks (eds.), *The Key to Power: The Culture of Access in Princely Courts, 1400–1750* (Leiden, 2016), 40–64, at 52–6; V. Groebner, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. P.E. Selwyn (Philadelphia, 2002).

exotic animals such as beaver to influential individuals in the region, both to establish good relationships and to remind the giftees of the town's commercial interests in the fur and pelt trade.<sup>14</sup> Alexander Brondarbit has highlighted how urban communities in southern England cultivated the goodwill of important figures both in the region and at the royal court with well-chosen gifts – from crimson hoods to barrels of certain fish – who in turn helped the city's leaders navigate the changing political landscape of England during the Wars of the Roses.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the Low Countries, a new generation of scholars have built on Alain Derville and Marc Boone's studies on the giving of wine to lubricate social and diplomatic relations, bringing renewed attention to how Flemish and Brabantine cities could use gift-giving to manage often tense relationships with their lords.<sup>16</sup> In a series of studies, Mario Damen has drawn attention to the political negotiations and powerplay that underpinned the present exchanges accompanying the civic entries of rulers as well as the symbolism of the gifts of themselves.<sup>17</sup> In his study of the Holland seaport of Brielle, for example, Damen has underlined how the maritime community ensured the friendship and patronage of their lord, Duchess Margaret of York, with distinctive gifts that only a well-connected seaport could provide.<sup>18</sup> This included the high-status sturgeon, renowned in gluttonous aristocratic circles for its taste similar to pork, allowing the consumer to indulge in a meat-like delicacy on fish days, as well as more regular gifts of salmon, cod and herring.<sup>19</sup> Most recently, Kristiaan Dillen has underlined how the coastal community of Blankenberge's yearly presentation of a porpoise to Bruges reinforced the sense of community and co-operation between the two cities, while also advertising the former's status as an important site in the maritime landscape of Flanders.<sup>20</sup> These research trends have been

<sup>14</sup>On the rich city accounts generally, see J. Kreem, 'Gäster I Reval under medeltiden: Gåvor I stadens räkenskaper', *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, 83 (1998), 471–88 (esp. 472–3); A. Mänd, 'Horses, stags and beavers: animals as presents in late-medieval Livonia', *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 22 (2016), 3–17, at 9–10.

<sup>15</sup>A.R. Brondarbit, *Power-Brokers and the Yorkish State, 1461–1485* (Woodbridge, 2020), 32–40.

<sup>16</sup>For examples: A. Derville, 'Pots-de-vin, cadeaux, racket, patronage: essai sur les mécanismes de décision dans l'État bourguignon', *Revue du Nord*, 56 (1974), 341–64; M. Boone, 'Dons et pots-de-vin, aspects de la sociabilité urbaine au bas Moyen Âge. Le cas gantois pendant la période bourguignonne', *Revue du Nord*, 70 (1988), 471–87 (esp. 472–3). For the most recent treatment of gifts of wine in an urban context, see Y. Kitajima, *Ghedrunken unde voreret. Wein in städtischen Gesellschaften des Spätmittelalters. Aufschlüsse aus den Hildesheimer Stadtrechnungen* (Trier, 2017), esp. 111–22. For case-studies focused on aristocratic gift-giving to local religious houses in the Low Countries, see A.A. Bijsterveld, *Do ut des: Gift Giving, Memoria, and Conflict Management in the Medieval Low Countries* (Hilversum, 2007), chs. 2–4.

<sup>17</sup>M. Damen, 'Piëteit of propaganda: Glasschenkingen in het graafschap Holland in de late middeleeuwen', *Holland*, 47 (2015), 157–65; *idem*, 'Giving by pouring: the function of gifts of wine in the city of Leiden (14th–16th centuries)', in J. van Leeuwen (ed.), *Symbolic Communication in Late Medieval Towns* (Leuven, 2006), 83–100; *idem*, 'Princely entries and gift exchange in the Burgundian Low Countries: a crucial link in late medieval political culture', *Journal of Medieval History*, 33 (2007), 233–49.

<sup>18</sup>M. Damen, 'Charity against the odds. Margaret of York and the isle of Voorn (1477–1503)', in D. Eichberger, A. Legaré and W. Hüsen (eds.), *Women at the Burgundian Court: Presence and Influence* (Turnhout, 2010), 57–72, at 57–8.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 58, 60–2.

<sup>20</sup>K. Dillen, 'Porpoise, punishment and partnership: the meaning of presenting and consuming a marine mammal in late medieval coastal Flanders', *Urban History*, forthcoming (FirstView).

accompanied by a renewed interest in the elites who governed cities in the region, with a focus on the changing characters of the ruling elites and the impact that ongoing negotiations and bargaining with their lords had on their political culture and institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the interest in urban government in the Low Countries and in Bruges in particular, the giving of wax has been ignored. Andrew Brown's brief account of Bruges' gift-giving to their Valois lords was based upon a close reading of the city accounts and highlights the significant quantities of wine laid on for the ducal couple, alongside gifts of plate, cloth and horses.<sup>22</sup> Brown was selective in the gifts he assessed, however, and no mention is made of wax, despite – as we will see – such gifts often being the most expensive item offered by the city council, and usually placed before all other presents in the lists of gifts presented to visiting dukes drawn up by the scribes who composed the city accounts. Studying Bruges' gifts of wax not only brings a hitherto overlooked commodity into the frame, but endows the gift exchanges themselves with a different character. In contrast to money, wine and jewels – items prized across Christendom throughout the medieval period – Bruges' decision to gift wax reflects a trend more distinctive to the later Middle Ages and to the Baltic and North Sea region. By the later medieval period, Baltic wax was a product in demand across Europe and – as this article will show – a ware in which the dukes of Burgundy were especially interested. In giving wax, Bruges' leaders were exploiting contemporary interest in the apiary product and advertising the access they enjoyed to the ware, governing as they did the staple port of Flanders and the entrepôt that formed the hinge of the late medieval wax trade in northern Europe. It is against these gifts that the more general culture of gifting wax exercised by Hanse outposts and other city councils and leaders in the late medieval North Sea and Baltic can be best understood, and it is to the city accounts of Bruges that we now turn.

### The city accounts of Bruges and gifts of wax

The city accounts of Bruges survive in a relatively clear run from 1280 to 1794 and are, to quote one historian, of 'priceless worth', offering insights into the management and leadership of a commercial centre and its diverse community across the later medieval and early modern periods.<sup>23</sup> The purchases of wax for gift-giving purposes generally appear in a section of the yearly accounts, under the rubric

<sup>21</sup>As an introduction and for further references, see F. Buylaert, J. Baguet and J. Everaert, 'Returning urban political elites to the research agenda: the case of the Southern Low Countries (c. 1350 – c. 1550)', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 568–88, and related articles in the issue. On bargaining and negotiation, see as an introduction, J. Dumolyn, 'Privileges and novelties: the political discourse of the Flemish cities and rural districts in their negotiations with the dukes of Burgundy (1384–1506)', *Urban History*, 35 (2009), 5–23.

<sup>22</sup>A. Brown, *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300–1500* (Cambridge, 2011), 237. An earlier and lengthier study also makes no mention of wax: *idem*, 'Civic ritual: Bruges and the counts of Flanders in the later Middle Ages', *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997), 277–99.

<sup>23</sup>For basic information about the city accounts, see A. Vandewalle, *Beknopte Inventaris van het Stadsarchief van Brugge. Deel I: Oud Archief* (Bruges, 1979), p. 100. The city accounts for the years 1280–1319 have been published: C. Wyffels, *De rekeningen van de stad Brugge, 1280–1319*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1965–97). On the value of the city accounts more generally, see K. Vanhaverbeke, 'De reële

'outgoings for general matters' ('Item uutgheven van ghemeen en zaken'), where entries are often grouped with other presents, such as wine, plate and foodstuffs such as confectionary, ginger and pepper. There is another section in the accounts usually entitled 'outgoings for transport, wax lights, torches, and ridden horses' ('Item uutgheven van crude, waslichte, toorken ende afgheredene paerden'), where wax gifts for visiting notables are more rarely included alongside the purchase of lights and torches for civic buildings and chapels and religious processions.<sup>24</sup> The most frequent recipients of wax in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were, unsurprisingly, the dukes of Burgundy, who held the county of Flanders from 1384 and were therefore Bruges' lords. As lords of the city, it was customary for the city council to offer gifts when they visited, with the mayors' generosity also frequently extending to providing the dukes with luxuries and presents while they resided in town.<sup>25</sup> While the accounts do not shed light on how the wax was made present in the ceremonial receptions of the dukes, the detailed entries do inform about its cost, Baltic origin and place within the broader gift-giving strategies of the city council. It would be otiose to work through the dozens of entries gifting wax to the duke in the later medieval period, but examination of representative cases during the half-century between 1380 and 1430 exemplifies the significant role wax played in managing the city council's relationship with both their lord and other important figures, such as the duchess of Burgundy and officers in ducal employ.<sup>26</sup> Just as importantly, the city accounts emphasize how wax required more investment in financial and logistical terms than any other gift rendered to the ducal household throughout the period. Why Bruges' leaders consistently believed that Baltic wax merited the extra cost and effort associated with its purchase and gifting can be understood in light of the great esteem attached to the apiary product in the later medieval period and the demand it enjoyed in aristocratic households and religious institutions, an issue to which this article will return after assessing some of the city council's gifts of wax in context.

Perhaps the most extravagant array of gifts that Bruges' city council offered any Valois Burgundian duke occurred upon John the Fearless' entry into the city in April 1404. As the rubric above the list of gifts recorded in the city accounts makes clear, this was in fact John's 'first entry' ('eersten incommene'), meaning it was especially important, as it was the first opportunity Flemish towns had to greet their new lord and establish a productive and hopefully beneficial relationship.<sup>27</sup> The first entry, placed before any other gift, was the purchase of 'four packages of

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machtsstructuren binnen het stadsbestuur van Brugge in de periode 1375–1407. Verslag van een prosopografische studie', *Genootschap voor Geschiedenis Handelingen*, 135 (1998), 3–54 (quote on 7).

<sup>24</sup>Rubrics in this instance taken from *Stadsrekeningen*, 1426–27, fols. 77r (for wax lights, torches and horses) and 79v (for general outgoings). On the provision of torches for the procession of the Holy Blood, see Brown, *Civic Ceremony*, 306–8.

<sup>25</sup>On the significance of princely entries, see Damen, 'Princely entries and gift exchange', 233–5.

<sup>26</sup>The city accounts of Bruges are a vast resource and mostly unpublished, and for reasons of time I focused my archival research on the 50-year period noted above, uncovering no less than 26 gifts of wax made between 1386 and 1436. It is for this reason that the article's representative cases are drawn from that stretch of chronology. Further research into the city accounts will hopefully uncover more evidence regarding the city council's giving of wax in the later medieval period.

<sup>27</sup>On the importance contemporaries attached to the 'first' visit, see Damen, 'Princely entries and gift exchange', 236; and in more detail: W. Hüskens, 'Royal entries in Flanders (1356–1515)', in Eichberger,



Polish (*pollaensch*) wax' weighing an enormous 1,380 pounds (c. 640 kilos), 'presented by command of the mayors to our redoubted lord of Burgundy and Flanders', at a cost of just under 27 pounds.<sup>28</sup> Given that Saint Donatian's, the principal church (and cathedral from 1559) of Bruges, employed a plumber at 15 pence a day to repair their guttering that year, the city council's gift of wax was equivalent in cost to over 430 days of wages for a skilled worker.<sup>29</sup> Not for nothing did Bruges' city secretary enter this huge package of wax at the top of the duke's list of gifts, for the individual cost dwarfed what followed: two quantities of wine worth 12 and 11 pounds respectively, 'two great oxen' worth 4 pounds, presumably for eating, with an additional 6 shillings to pay for the horns of the two beasts to be gilded and presented to the duke while at table.<sup>30</sup> Also handed over were two gilded crosses together worth around 10 pounds, a gilded drinking cup worth around 6 pounds and decorated cushions worth just under 6 pounds. The quantity of wax would have sufficed to meet the liturgical needs of a significant ecclesiastical foundation for an entire year, if not longer: Saint Donatian's generally purchased anywhere between 800 and 1,500 pounds of new wax a year in the first half of the fifteenth century, consuming, for example, no less than 933 pounds just for the celebration of ecclesiastical feasts between August 1404 and 1405.<sup>31</sup>

Bruges' presenting of significant quantities of beeswax to their lord was not just restricted to John's 'first' entry, but in fact continued throughout his reign, and nor did he just receive 'Polish' wax. In August 1408, for example, the city accounts recorded the purchase of 'two pieces of Lembrisch (*lembuerch*) wax weighing 4 *waghen* and 17 *naghele*' (c. 381 kilos), costing 14 pounds and 13 shillings.<sup>32</sup> 'Lembrisch' wax was similarly Baltic in origin, coming from the broad region around Lviv in modern-day Ukraine (Lemberg in German; hence 'Lembrisch'). This was in addition to the roughly 400 kilos of 'Polish' wax the council had given him in December 1407 and another 300 kilos the year before.<sup>33</sup> Further gifts of wax followed in the years after 1408.<sup>34</sup> If we take a snapshot extending until September 1414, then in the 10 years following his accession the city council gifted John just over 2,500 kilos of wax alone. These gifts were presented against a backdrop of tension between Flemish cities and the duke, with John expelling members of the Bruges patriciate and confiscating their belongings in 1406–07

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Legaré and Hüsken (eds.), *Women at the Burgundian Court: Presence and Influence* (Turnhout, 2010), 37–42.

<sup>28</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1404–05, fol. 132r.

<sup>29</sup>Bruges, Bischoppelijck archief, Kerkfabriek Rekeningen, G2, 1404. The booklet recording the accounts for this year are unfoliated, but counting from the first folio would place the payment to the plumber ('Jacobus Scaerphoof plumbifusori') on fol. 8r, and appears under the rubric 'extradatum operariis ecclesie'.

<sup>30</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1404–05, fol. 132r–132v.

<sup>31</sup>Bruges, Bischoppelijck archief, Kerkfabriek Rekeningen, G2, 1404. While unfoliated, counting from the first folio would place the expenses on fol. 5r.

<sup>32</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1407–08, fol. 105r; on the *waghe* and *naghele*, see C.A. Franzke, 'Die persönlichen Handelsrechnungen des preußischen Kaufmanns Johannes Plige (1391–1399)', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 130 (2012), 1–59, at 30–2.

<sup>33</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1407–08, fol. 98r; 1406–07, fol. 104r.

<sup>34</sup>For gifts of wax to John between September 1408 and September 1414, see Stadsrekeningen, 1408–09, fol. 86v; 1410–11, fol. 112r; 1413–14, fol. 80v.

while installing his own men in their place. John's harsh treatment of Bruges' leadership culminated in his commuting of their annual tax payable to him into a harsher arrangement whereby he collected one seventh of all civic revenues instead in April 1407.<sup>35</sup> Presenting substantial gifts to the duke was part of a broader strategy of maintaining as much of his goodwill as possible, at a fraught time when the privileges of Flemish cities in general were under ducal pressure. Giving wax in such quantities was, therefore, costly for the city council, and a close examination of the appellations qualifying the Baltic wax underlines how the city council purchased the most prestigious beeswax available in Christendom.

The geographical monikers describing the wax in Bruges' city accounts and the names of those selling it both explain its high cost and why Bruges' leaders deemed it an appropriate gift: the beeswax in question was the highest quality available on the market, sourced thousands of miles away in the vast forests of Russia and exported by Hanseatic merchants from their bases in the eastern Baltic. For John the Fearless and the Valois Burgundian dukes before and after him, the city council purchased either 'Polish' (*pollaensch*) or 'Lembrisch' (*lembuerch*) wax, both Baltic in origin, and both enjoying a prestige and reputation for purity across Europe. 'Polish' wax was not strictly Polish in the sense that it was produced in the kingdom of Poland. It had rather been transported through Poland to reach Prussian ports, such as Gdańsk or Königsberg, and had probably been smelted and sealed for quality control in one of those ports or in settlements inland on the Vistula, such as Toruń, along which merchants transported bulky commodities.<sup>36</sup> 'Lembrisch' wax came from the broad region around Lviv in modern-day Ukraine, finding its way to Bruges probably through the same Prussian ports as the 'Polish' wax did.<sup>37</sup> The wax here was produced in a vast forest zone stretching between Novgorod, Smolensk, Lviv and Warsaw, where climatic conditions and native vegetation provided an ideal habitat for beekeeping and the production of wax.<sup>38</sup> Hanse merchants transported Baltic wax to western markets in vast quantities, and it is no surprise that Bruges' city council purchased their wax in bulk directly from the biggest players in the market, often transporting it straight from its point of unloading at the dockside to the ducal lodgings.<sup>39</sup> In large part because of Hanse insistence on

<sup>35</sup>These disputes can be followed in R. Vaughan, *John the Fearless: The Growth of Burgundian Power* (London, 1966), 26–7. On Flemish revolts later in the century and for further references, see Dumolyn, 'Privileges and novelties', 13.

<sup>36</sup>For examples of wax processed in Toruń and shipped from Königsberg to Bruges contemporary to the Valois dukes, see C.A. Franzke, *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen der Großschägger und Lieger des Deutschen ordens in Preußen*, vol. IV: *Lieberbücher der Großschäfferei Königsberg (Ordensfolianten 150–152 und Zusatzmaterial)* (Berlin, 2018), 256 (no. 387) in 1393; 467 (nos. 717–19) in 1426; 578 (nos. 780–91) in 1430.

<sup>37</sup>For a summary of the trade routes along which Baltic wax was exported to Bruges and for references to further scholarship, see M. Whelan, 'Review of *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen der Großschäffer und Lieger des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen*, Bd. 4: *Lieberbücher der Großschäfferei Königsberg (Ordensfolianten 150–152 und Zusatzmaterial)*, ed. C.A. Franzke (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2018)', *Zapiski Historyczne*, 84 (2019), 693–7 (esp. 696–7).

<sup>38</sup>A. Sapoznik, 'Bees in the medieval economy: religious observance and the production, trade, and consumption of wax in England, c. 1300–1555', *Economic History Review*, 72 (2019), 1152–74, at 1160–1.

<sup>39</sup>For general background on Hanseatic trade, see C. Jahnke, 'The Baltic trade', in D.J. Harreld (ed.), *A Companion to the Hanseatic League* (Leiden, 2015), 194–240 (on wax, 218–20).



quality control that resulted in a whiter, cleaner wax, Baltic wax in general was renowned for its purity and enjoyed significant demand across Christendom, but 'Lembrisch' and 'Polish' wax enjoyed the highest status.<sup>40</sup> For the funeral services of the Holy Roman empress in Nuremberg in 1467, only 'the finest Lembrisch wax' would do ('des schonssten leymerisschen wachs'), while in England, Baltic wax appears frequently in the accounts of aristocratic household and ecclesiastical foundations, with wax 'de Polane' almost always commanding higher prices than wax from elsewhere, such as Portugal and Lübeck.<sup>41</sup> Situating Bruges' gifting against this context explains why their city council decided to spend significant amounts on their gifts of wax. It also explains why the city council did not just give wax to their lord, but also to the array of important family members and officials that followed in his wake. The fact that Bruges' leadership enjoyed access to prestigious Baltic beeswax was something that needed to be advertised and exploited.

As well as the duke, the city council gifted wax to the duchess and other ducal relations too, but on a less frequent basis: during John the Fearless' reign as duke, for example, Bruges' mayors gifted Duchess Margaret about 150 kilos of 'Polish' wax in May 1407, and the duke of Brabant, Duke John's brother, just over 350 kilos of 'Polish' wax in April 1404.<sup>42</sup> In these cases, the financial outlay on beeswax exceeded that spent on providing the ducal family with wine and other luxuries. Giving beeswax to the extended ducal family continued into the fifteenth century, with city accounts recording in May 1438 the purchase of packages of wax for the duchess of Burgundy and young prince of Cleves, weighing respectively roughly 186 and 60 kilos.<sup>43</sup> To the figures above, one should also include the wax gifted the ducal family 'indirectly'; that is the wax, candles and torches laid on by the city council to light the townhall (*scepenhuis*) and other civic chambers so that the duke and his retinue could enjoy entertainments, dancing and feasting, well into the night.<sup>44</sup> Nor does this figure include wax purchased by the city council and given to churches in Bruges for religious services in memory of members of the ducal family. In March 1405, for example, the city council paid for c. 7 kilos to burn in Saint Donatian's, in memory of the recently deceased Margaret III, countess of Flanders, wife of the late Duke Philip the Bold.<sup>45</sup>

John the Fearless' father, Duke Philip the Bold, received wax across his reign too, and especially in his particularly high-profile entries of 1386 and 1397. Philip's tour of Flanders in the later 1390s came at a difficult time for the ducal family, with his heir, a young John the Fearless, languishing in Ottoman captivity after his capture

<sup>40</sup>Further discussion, see Sapoznik, 'Bees in the medieval economy', 1163.

<sup>41</sup>F. Fuchs, 'Exequien für die Kaiserin Eleonore († 1467) in Augsburg und Nürnberg', in P. Heinig (ed.), *Kaiser Friedrich III. (1440–1493) in seiner Zeit. Studien anlässlich des 500. Todestags am 19. August 1493/1993* (Cologne, 1993), 447–66 (quote on 465); the prices of Baltic wax in England, including wax 'de Polane', are discussed in Sapoznik, 'Bees in the medieval economy', 1163–4.

<sup>42</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1407–08, fol. 102v; 1404–05, fol. 132v (where Anthony, duke of Brabant, appears as 'the Duke of Limbourg' ('den hertoghen van Lemborch')).

<sup>43</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1436–38, fol. 133v.

<sup>44</sup>On the *scepenhuis*, see A. Brown and J. Dumolyn, *Medieval Bruges, c. 850–1550* (Cambridge, 2018), 181–2.

<sup>45</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1404–05, fol. 132r.

at the battle of Nicopolis in September 1396.<sup>46</sup> Paying John's ransom required significant sums of money, and it was no surprise that Duke Philip toured Flanders throughout 1397 where he could raise extraordinary taxes and loans and take advantage of the credit networks available in commercial centres.<sup>47</sup> Bruges' city council presented Philip and his entourage with gifts upon their arrival in March 1397, and by far the most expensive item was a quantity of wax, here given in full: 'Item, presented to our aforesaid redoubted lord 3 pieces of Polish (*pollaensch*) wax purchased from John Saly the Easterling, weighing 5 *waghen* and 17.5 *naghele* (c. 466 kilos); cost per *waghe* of 64 marks, amounting to 26 pounds, 14 shillings, 2 pence [Flemish] groot.'<sup>48</sup> At just under 27 pounds, the Polish wax, purchased directly from an 'Easterling' – that is, a Hanse merchant – was more expensive than the city's other gifts, including the red wine worth around seven pounds, the Rhenish wine worth five pounds, furs valued at six pounds and gilded plate worth eleven pounds.<sup>49</sup> The ducal chancellor received gifts on a smaller scale, but wax similarly remained the most expensive of his presents, with the package of 'Polish' wax weighing around 150 kilos costing over 8 pounds, more than the cost of the wine and skins put together that were also presented to the official.

Baltic wax similarly appears in the accounts recording the costs associated with the civic entry of King Charles VI of France and Philip the Bold in summer 1386.<sup>50</sup> The list of presents indicate that wax was, indeed, a gift fit for a king.<sup>51</sup> The city council purchased for their 'lord sovereign the king' four pieces of 'Polish' wax weighing around 500 kilos, while the duke received two gifts of 'Polish' wax, amounting to 850 kilos together.<sup>52</sup> Gift-giving at Charles VI's court has been the subject of an extensive study by Jan Hirschbiegel, but wax does not feature within, with the focus instead turning on jewels, cloth, art and books.<sup>53</sup> This reflects Hirschbiegel's selection of sources, largely confined to royal inventories of jewellery and plate, the receivers' accounts of the Burgundian chamber and precious book

<sup>46</sup>Reactions in the French and Burgundian courts to the defeat are discussed in M. Claus, 'Die Türkenabwehr als Argument zur Einigung der Christenheit? König Sigismund und die Niederlage von Nikopolis 1396', in S. Pentz and P. Thorau (eds.), *Rom 1312: Die Kaiserkrönung Heinrichs VII. und die Folgen. Die Luxemburger als Herrscherdynastie von gesamteuropäischer Bedeutung* (Cologne, 2016), 445–74, at 465–9.

<sup>47</sup>On the importance of Flemish communities in assisting in John the Fearless' ransom, see C. Wright, 'An investment in goodwill: financing the ransom of the leaders of the crusade of Nikopolis', *Viator*, 45 (2014), 261–98 (esp. 274–5, 81).

<sup>48</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1397–98, fol. 91v: Item doe ghepresentiert onsen gheduchten heere vorseit iii bodeme pollaensch was, ghecocht jeghen Janne van Saly den Oosterlinc, weghende v waghen xvij naghele; coste de waghe lxiii maerc, daer comt up xxvi lb, xiii s, ii d. grote.

<sup>49</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1397–98, fols. 91v–92r. On the term 'Easterling', see B. Lambert, 'Merchants on the margins: fifteenth-century Bruges and the informal market', *Journal of Medieval History*, 42 (2016), 226–53, at 246.

<sup>50</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1386–87, fols. 121r and 121v–122r.

<sup>51</sup>Charles VI was in Flanders that summer to oversee preparations for a Franco-Burgundian invasion of England. On these events, see L. Crombie, 'A new power in the late fourteenth-century Low Countries: Philip the Bold's planned Franco-Burgundian invasion of England and Scottish Alliance, 1385–6', *History*, 101 (2016), 3–19.

<sup>52</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1386–87, fols. 121r–123v.

<sup>53</sup>J. Hirschbiegel, *Étrennes: Untersuchungen zum höfischen Geschenkerkehr im spätmittelalterlichen Frankreich der Zeit Königs Karls VI. (1380–1422)* (Munich, 2003), esp. 165–85.

manuscripts.<sup>54</sup> The choice of Bruges' mayors to gift beeswax reminds historians that not all communities dealt in generic presents such as gems and cloth and wine, and that civic leaders could exploit their access to the markets and specialists within their own walls to present distinctive wares that endowed the gift exchanges with a special character. In Bruges' case, gifting beeswax distinguished the city from other settlements under ducal rule also competing for ducal attention and privileges and underlined the mayors' status as leaders of a trading centre of international standing. As we will now see, the trade in Baltic wax hinged upon Bruges, and gifting wax was a manifestation of the city's identity as the staple port of Flanders and premier marketplace for the ducal household.

### Bruges and the international wax trade

In presenting significant quantities of Baltic wax, Bruges' leadership was endowing their gift exchange with a distinctive character with which few other political communities in north-western Europe could compete. Bruges was, after all, the obligatory port of call for all merchandise entering Flanders via the Zwin, making it in the words of one English poet writing in the 1430s the 'staple...to alle nacyons of Crystiante', with the city's position as an accessible centre of international trade key to civic identity.<sup>55</sup> Apiary products from both the Mediterranean and Baltic played an important role in underpinning this position. An undated document – probably from the thirteenth century – listing the city's imports recorded wax from a variety of locations, including Russia and Poland, as well as honey from Portugal and Andalusia.<sup>56</sup> The trade in honey is more difficult to track than the movement of wax, but modern excavation of early fifteenth-century cesspits attached to the ducal lodgings in Bruges suggests the consumption of honey from the south-west of the Iberian peninsula, reinforcing the accuracy of the document and underlining the city's position as an international centre for the trade in apiary products.<sup>57</sup> Bruges' staple provisions were more comprehensive than most other trading centres in north-western Europe, and benefited significantly from its status as the centre of the Hanse trading network, ensuring that the trades dominated by Hanse members – in wares, among others, such as wax, fish, cloth, amber and iron – were routed through Bruges' markets, much to the benefit of the latter.<sup>58</sup> With over 1,000 Hanse merchants in Bruges at any one time in the fifteenth century, the city formed the lynchpin of international trading networks in north-western Europe, and it was from Hanse merchants directly that Bruges' city council purchased Baltic beeswax to present to their lord.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 566–70.

<sup>55</sup> For the quote, see Lambert, 'Merchants on the margins', 226–7; on identity, see Dewilde, Dumolyn, Lambert and Vannieuwenhuyze, "So one would notice the good navigability", 25–6.

<sup>56</sup> L. Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Cartulaire de l'ancienne estaple de Bruges* (Bruges, 1904), 19–20.

<sup>57</sup> K. Deforce, 'Pollen analysis of 15th century cesspits from the palace of the dukes of Burgundy in Bruges (Belgium): evidence for the use of honey from the western Mediterranean', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 37 (2010), 337–42 (esp. 339–40).

<sup>58</sup> Lambert, 'Merchants on the margins', 227–8, 246.

<sup>59</sup> Brunmayr, 'Herring trade', 533–4.

The Burgundian dukes were well aware of not just the benefits that accrued from housing a cosmopolitan entrepôt within their lands, but of the associated prestige and renown too. Repeating in large part what Bruges' leaders probably wanted to hear, Duke Philip the Good in 1451 called Bruges the 'most important port of Christendom', going on to explain how it was both the key to and formed the frontier of 'his land and county of Flanders'.<sup>60</sup> That the settlement was a hub for international trade has long been recognized, but the city accounts of Bruges underline how their leaders exploited their status at the hinge of international trading networks for their own political and diplomatic gain.<sup>61</sup> Neighbouring towns, such as Mechelen, Ghent and Lille, likewise presented gifts to their Valois lords, such as high-quality wine and cloth, while well-connected seaports like Brielle and Blankenberge could provide distinctive and high-status fish and aquatic mammals.<sup>62</sup> No city in the ducal domains, however, could compete with the range of wares accessible to the mayors of Bruges. It is for that reason that the ability to gift Baltic wax on a significant scale at diplomatic and ceremonial events in this period was limited to other, equally well-positioned players, including representatives of Hanse outposts and Baltic leaders and prelates, such as the aforementioned bishop of Ösel.

The markets of Bruges were not just renowned across Christendom, but, just as importantly, renowned within the ducal household, and the mayors' gifting prestigious Baltic wax was designed to maintain the city's high standing as a commercial centre of international repute in the minds of their lords. A recent contribution has rightly emphasized the important role Bruges played in providing credit to the dukes, but the other benefits offered by the opulent markets in Bruges should not be forgotten.<sup>63</sup> After all, when the duke or duchess wanted obscure wares they turned to Bruges. When Duchess Margaret, the wife of John the Fearless, wanted to expand her menagerie in 1407, she directed her attention to the bailiff of Bruges, the duke's chief legal representative within the city walls. Rather than ask for support in a legal case, Margaret asked instead that he find for her the 'smallest monkey' he could procure in the city's markets and send it 'as soon as possible'.<sup>64</sup> In a study of the gifting of animals in Livonia, Mänd has convincingly argued that Tallinn's present of seven beavers to the king of Denmark in August 1489 was directly related to the negotiations then ongoing in the Danish court surrounding Hanse privileges, and the city's need to protect its valuable rights in the fur trade.<sup>65</sup> Bruges' gifts should be seen in a similar vein. Bruges' city council had

<sup>60</sup>For the quote, see L. Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Inventaire des archives de la ville de Bruges*, 9 vols. (Bruges, 1871–85), vol. V, 352 (no. 1057). Further discussion and references in Dewilde, Dumolyn, Lambert and Vannieuwenhuyze, "'So one would notice the good navigability'", 7.

<sup>61</sup>For further discussion and references, see Buylaert, Baguet and Everaert, 'Returning urban political elites', 571.

<sup>62</sup>For Ghent, see Boone, 'Dons et pots-au-vin', 485–6; for Lille and Mechelen, see Derville, 'Pots-de-vin', 342–5, 352–3; for Brielle, see Damen, 'Charity against the odds', 57; for Blankenberge, see Dillen, 'Porpoise, punishment and partnership'.

<sup>63</sup>Buylaert, Baguet and Everaert, 'Returning urban political elites', 572.

<sup>64</sup>Vaughan, *John the Fearless*, 16–17. On the bailiff in Bruges, see Brown and Dumolyn, *Medieval Bruges*, 300–2.

<sup>65</sup>Mänd, 'Horses, stags and beavers', 9.

the fortune to govern an entrepôt through which shipments of Baltic wax – and, as the above letter shows, much else – continually transited. Presenting their lords with significant quantities of wax served to remind the veritable fount of their privileges of their identity as a trading centre, an identity in turn built on the staple rights and benefits in the gift of their Valois lords that were subject to renewal and clarification at regular intervals. It is for that reason that their mayors were sometimes proactive in its gifting, sending wax to possible allies rather than waiting for them to visit. Around January 1404, for example, Bruges' mayors sent around 200 kilos of 'Polish' to the ducal chancellor in Paris.<sup>66</sup> Philip the Bold was ill at the time – and, in fact, would pass away that April – and the gift was probably timed to secure an important friendship at an uncertain point. With perhaps a new duke and administration on the horizon, it was also an opportune time to remind the chief ducal official of the benefits that accrued to the rulers of Burgundy in commanding a city enjoying a staple that ensured access to much-desired commodities from across Christendom.<sup>67</sup>

From a basic perspective, it is no surprise that the city council of Bruges gifted Baltic wax to the kings of France and dukes of Burgundy in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as both were known consumers of the product and both purchased their Baltic wax from Hanse merchants in Bruges. An inventory of Philip the Bold's supplies in his household in 1387 recorded 174 pounds of wax 'in pounds of Bruges' in his fruiterie, pointing to its place of purchase. The fact that the king of France and dukes of Burgundy chose to complain to the Hanse outpost in Bruges when disappointed with the quality of Baltic wax underlines how they both purchased the commodity from the markets in that Flemish city and that it was to Bruges that complaints needed to be directed when confronted with substandard beeswax from Livonia. In 1398, for example, the Hanse outpost in Bruges wrote to the city council of Tallinn, asking them to ensure that the wax exported from their port was 'decent and good', and not filled with stones or otherwise adulterated.<sup>68</sup> The Hanse outpost explained that it had been compelled to write, for both the king of France and the duke of Burgundy themselves 'had very greatly complained' ('seer grotlike geclaget hevet') to them about the adulterated wax they had recently purchased 'from Livonia' ('van Liflande').<sup>69</sup> As discussed above, the 'Polish' and 'Lembrisch' wax that the mayors presented to their lords was the highest quality Baltic wax available on the market, and such quality would not have gone unnoticed by dukes who already took a personal interest in the purity of the wax exported from the east. As the letter of 1398 also highlights, the wax trade was a politically sensitive issue, of international concern to actors across northern and western Europe, and Bruges' gifts of wax were no doubt aimed at reminding

<sup>66</sup>Stadsrekeningen, 1403–04, fol. 117v. For comparisons with the city council of Ghent, who similarly focused gifts (wine, in this case) on members of the ducal entourage, see Boone, 'Dons et pots-de-vin', 485–6.

<sup>67</sup>On the importance of the chancellor in the ducal administration, see R. Vaughan, *Philip the Bold: The Formation of the Burgundian State* (London, 1979), 140–1.

<sup>68</sup>F.G. von Bunge (ed.), *Liv-, est- und kurländisches Urkundenbuch: Abteilung 1 Band 4 1394–1413* (Tallinn, 1859), 229–30 (no. 1481).

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

their giftees of the city's pre-eminent role in ensuring the smooth flow of a trade in which kings and aristocrats took a significant interest.

That a stockpile of Hanse-owned wax in Bruges stood at the centre of an international dispute in 1383 illustrates how the Flemish city formed the hinge of the wax trade and underlines the symbolic and financial significance that regional powers attached to the exchange of the commodity. It was not the first time that disruptions to the flow of Baltic wax aroused political tempers in royal and aristocratic courts. The English crown, for example, was furious in 1309 when it learned that Hanse merchants were allegedly withholding imports of wax to raise prices, with seven merchants summoned to court for acting 'in contempt of the king'.<sup>70</sup> In April 1383, the grandmaster of the Teutonic Order, Konrad von Rothenstein, wrote to Louis II, count of Flanders, the father-in-law of Duke Philip the Bold, to express his shock upon hearing that the count's officials in Bruges had seized the 60 packages of wax 'from Riga and Poland' recently imported by German merchants.<sup>71</sup> Rothenstein was probably reacting to a missive sent in February by the Hanse outpost in Bruges to several Hanse cities, in which they recounted how comital officials had forcibly entered their properties and taken '60 pieces of wax, both Polish and Rigish'.<sup>72</sup> The letter went on to explain that the 'lord's men' had not just seized the wax, but had weighed it, so that they could make good on their threat to over-ride Hanse privileges and tax the ware at 12 pence per pound or – even worse – sell it on themselves.<sup>73</sup> It is no surprise that the count's men targeted the Baltic wax in Bruges before any other ware, given its financial value and ease of resale. It is similarly no surprise that the powerful protector of the Hanse, the grandmaster of the Teutonic Order, promptly intervened, both to protect the rights of Hanse merchants and to prevent further disruption to a trade in which he was heavily invested. The grandmasters themselves exploited their status as a Baltic power with easy access to wax, exporting the commodity from their own strongholds to agents specially stationed in Bruges for sale there. The accounts of just one of the grandmaster's financial officials in Bruges covering the period between August 1391 and August 1399 survive by chance, recording the receipt of just under 120,000 kilos of wax from Prussia and Livonia in those years.<sup>74</sup> The dispute of 1383 highlights Bruges' central role as the gateway through which Hanse merchants purveyed precious Baltic wax to western markets, a role which Bruges' leaders were eager both to advertise and protect by gifting wax to their lords as visible reminders of their custodianship of the pre-eminent staple city in north-western Europe.<sup>75</sup> It also draws attention to the political and symbolic importance attached to wax and its trade, and helps explain why sourcing and transporting the wax, an act that involved more outlay and cost than for any other present made by the city council to the duke and duchess, was worth the effort.

<sup>70</sup>Sapoznik, 'Bees in the medieval world', 1171.

<sup>71</sup>Verein für Hansische Geschichte (ed.), *Die Recesse und andere Akten der Hansetage von 1256–1430*, vol. III (Leipzig, 1875), 142–3 (no. 166) (quote on 143).

<sup>72</sup>K. Höhlbaum (ed.), *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. IV (Halle, 1896), 318–19 (no. 767) (quote on 319).

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 318–19.

<sup>74</sup>The following figure has been gathered from collating all imports of wax into Bruges in Franzke, *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen*, 229–367 (nos. 1–1481).

<sup>75</sup>The disruption after 1383 that only saw the Hanse fully restore their staple to Bruges in the early 1390s can be followed in Vaughan, *Philip the Bold*, 180–3.



Wax was a bulky commodity that was difficult to transport, but it is highly likely that Bruges' city council exploited beeswax's mass for their own ceremonial and symbolic purposes. Of all the presents offered by Bruges' mayors, it was only gifts of wax that incurred extra costs for collection and transport within the city, with purchases often followed by entries costing the transport of packages directly from the 'crane' on the portside to 'our aforesaid redoubted lord's lodgings' ('van den crane tote in ons vorscreeven gheduchten herren herberghe'), that is the 'Prinsenhof', the ducal residence in the city.<sup>76</sup> In other cases, the city council paid servants to take the wax directly from the 'weighing house' (*weghehuze*) to the ducal lodgings. The accounts do not provide any more detail about how the wax was presented, but a report describing the aforementioned gift exchange between the Hanse outpost in Bruges and Duchess Isabella in December 1440 is instructive. After noting the purchase of a 'fine piece of wax' and a quantity of wine and furs for the duchess, the account records that 'these gifts were taken together to the lord's court', the 'Prinsenhof'. The report went on to explain that the 'wax and wine were positioned (*affghestellet*) before the lord's entrance and stairs (*inghanck und treppe*)', presumably so that the duke and duchess could not escape noticing and admiring the presents when they either next returned to or departed from their lodgings, while the furs were passed through open windows to the duchess' servants. Civic leaders elsewhere in the Baltic turned their presentation of gifts into public performances. The city council of Tallinn, for example, deliberately walked adult stags through the streets of the town and up the steep slopes to the cathedral and castle on Toompea Hill before presenting the animal to the master of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order.<sup>77</sup> It would be reasonable to suggest that the brief entries in Bruges' city accounts obscure other activities associated with its delivery, and that the wax was similarly laid up before the 'Prinsenhof' to advertise the mayors' generosity and remind the ducal household of the city's status as an international trading centre. Even had they not, the gift would still have been welcome. Among Baltic and North Sea civic communities in the fifteenth century, wax was as good as cash. In June 1422, for example, the city council of Lübeck asked their counterparts in Riga to settle an outstanding tax they owed 'in wax', rather than coinage that could possibly be debased or difficult to exchange.<sup>78</sup> The demand for Baltic wax throughout late medieval Christendom and its cultural prestige made it so financially valuable and secure an investment that a gift of it in any form would have been welcome.

## Conclusions

From the entry of Duke Philip the Bold in 1386 to that of the future Emperor Charles V in 1516, the arrival of Bruges' lord was generally marked by the gifting of wax. Brown has underlined how civic ritual in Bruges could reveal and

<sup>76</sup>See, for example, *Stadsrekeningen*, 1410–11, fol. 112r; 1413–14, fol. 80v. On the 'Prinsenhof', the ducal residence in Bruges, see Brown and Dumolyn, *Medieval Bruges*, 181–2.

<sup>77</sup>Mänd, 'Horses, stags and beavers', 6.

<sup>78</sup>F.G. von Bunge (ed.), *Liv-, est- und kurländisches Urkundenbuch: Abteilung 1 Band 5 1414–1423* (Aalen, 1974), 844–5 (no. 2615).

communicate messages symbolic in nature, and it stands to reason that presenting Baltic wax in quantities sometimes exceeding half a metric ton also served a symbolic purpose.<sup>79</sup> Scholars of gift-giving have long pointed out that civic generosity itself could be a form of political communication, but Bruges' city council's gifting of wax carried distinctive overtones.<sup>80</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Bruges stood at the apex of an international trading network and enjoyed access to Baltic wax in quantities that few other cities enjoyed, a state of affairs that was only seriously challenged with the rise of Antwerp from the middle of the 1400s.<sup>81</sup> The frequent and deliberate choice of Bruges' leaders to gift packages of Baltic wax to their lords was a manifestation of the city's identity as an international trading hub, drawing attention to their exalted status as the staple port for Flanders and, by extension, the combined domains of the Valois dukes. It may be that presenting bee produce carried deeper symbolic undertones for contemporaries, with the city council exploiting the importance of bees as metaphors of community and industry to reflect favourably on their own government of an urban commune, but further research is needed here.<sup>82</sup> Whatever the case, Dumolyn has emphasized how Flemish urban communities and Bruges, in particular, stressed the advancement of trade (*coopmanscepe*) in their political negotiations with the dukes of Burgundy, even stating in their dealings with John the Fearless in 1417 that Flanders 'is founded on trade'.<sup>83</sup> Presenting Baltic wax, a valuable and prestigious commodity in demand across Christendom, reminded its giftees that its trade hinged upon the city, exemplifying Bruges' identity as 'the principal port of Christendom' and the prestige and benefits that accrued to the region and the ducal house in housing and supporting the remarkable Flemish entrepôt.<sup>84</sup> It is against this background that the gifts of wax made by other communities, such as the Hanse outposts in Bruges and London, can also be understood, reflecting more generally the political capital and symbolic significance that could be gained by urban and mercantile leaders in exploiting the wax trade in the late medieval period.

<sup>79</sup>Brown, 'Civic ritual', 298–9.

<sup>80</sup>See, for example, V. Groebner, 'Grosszügigkeit als politische Kommunikation: Geschenke in Basler Rechnungsbüchern des späten Mittelalters', in Simona Slanička (ed.), *Begegnungen mit dem Mittelalter in Basel* (Basel, 2000), 165–84 (esp. 165–6).

<sup>81</sup>For further discussion and references regarding Antwerp's rise, see O. Gelderblom, *The Institutional Foundations of International Trade in the Low Countries, 1250–1650* (Princeton, 2013), 50–1.

<sup>82</sup>These metaphors can be found, for example, in the work *Bonum universale de apibus* (On the common good [as taught] by bees), authored by the Flemish Dominican friar Thomas of Cantimpré c. 1260, and available in Middle Dutch versions by the fifteenth century. For more information, see generally C.M. Stutvoet-Joanknecht, *Der Byen Boeck: de Middelnederlandse vertalingen von Bonum universale de apibus von Thmas van Cantimpré en hun achtergrond* (Amsterdam, 1990), esp. 98, 162, 164, 169, 201 (for a selection of Cantimpré's positive comments on bees).

<sup>83</sup>Dumolyn, 'Privileges and novelties', esp. 14–15, 22 (quote from 15).

<sup>84</sup>For the quote and further discussion, see Dewilde, Dumolyn, Lambert and Vannieuwenhuyze, "So one would notice the good navigability", 7.