



## Book reviews

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**Jim van der Meulen**, *Woven into the Urban Fabric: Cloth Manufacture and Economic Development in the Flemish West-Quarter (1300–1600)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. 251pp. €84.00.

**Peter Stabel**, *The Fabric of the City: A Social History of Cloth Manufacture in Medieval Ypres*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 278pp. €94.00.  
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The textile industry, and especially that located in the highly urbanized region of Flanders, is considered the most important industry of the Middle Ages. These two excellent monographs add considerably to the history of medieval and early modern textile manufacture in Western Europe. Of particular merit here is the fact that both books, both published by Brepols in their Studies in European Urban History Series, explore a similar region of the Low Countries in and around Ypres which allows them to be read together as a set, but also both, through meticulous and detailed research utilizing abundant and diverse sources, challenge the traditional grand narratives surrounding the textile industry in the Middle Ages.

*Woven into the Urban Fabric*, published in 2021, examines the relationship between rural and urban woollen textile production by focusing on a sub-region of the historical county of Flanders, the Flemish West Quarter, which lay south of the regional capital of Ypres. Driven by textile manufacture, the area experienced considerable economic growth between the late medieval and the early modern periods. Importantly, much of this production took place not only in urban centres like Ypres, but also in the surrounding countryside. This production was of medium-quality fabrics made from wool imported from Scotland and Spain and intended for export. The book's key contribution is its questioning of the previously understood divide between urban and rural production, suggesting instead that these were complementary modes of production rather than antagonistic. Van der Meulen demonstrates that these two zones were not only interconnected but also interdependent, challenging the traditional historiographical narrative of the distinctiveness of industrial cities and the agricultural countryside. For example, 29 per cent of those who lived in the countryside were 'external' citizens of Ypres. This was not uncommon. In the Flemish West Quarter, it was rural, rather than urban, entrepreneurs who took control of the production process. The book demonstrates that capitalism emerged in both town and countryside.

The first chapter explores the demographic development of the Flemish West Quarter in relation to its economic growth, particularly in terms of rural manufacturing and agricultural development. It notes that proto-industrialization was not a dominant feature of the Flemish West Quarter. Textile manufacture here required full-time labour and the agricultural small holdings did not form the basis of employment. Most interestingly, Van der Meulen convincingly demonstrates that the timing of phases of agricultural activity and manufacturing production cycles meant that they could not have been undertaken by the workers simultaneously. The second chapter explores the diverse structural forms of organization of textile production and focuses on signs of emergent capitalism. A market-oriented approach resulted, which included aspects of a 'putting-out' system, production centralization and diversity in remuneration type. The third chapter discusses the textile trade and highlights the existence of rural commercial institutions and infrastructure, based upon urban models, and the importance of informal, deregulated, trading. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on the social and economic structure of these rural textile centres, focusing on the large industrial village of Nieuwkerke. These industrial villages progressively improved the quality of the cloth they produced as they developed outside of the monopolistic restrictions imposed by neighbouring Ypres.

The second monograph, *The Fabric of the City*, by Peter Stabel was published a year later in 2022. This examines the social history of cloth manufacture in Ypres. The city's position as a leading centre for high-quality textile production in the Middle Ages is well known. What makes this an important contribution is its focus upon social organization of the cloth industry in the city. Historians such as George Espinas, Henri Pirenne and Guillaume Des Marez published elements of the city's extensive archives, notably the city's accounts and the *lettres de foire*, before this archive was destroyed in World War I. Historians have tended to focus in the past on the economic aspects of textile production. Using case-studies, this work collects together these important edited fragments in order to provide an analysis of the cycles of production of the city's textile trade and the role of individuals within it. The book effectively emphasizes the importance of this urban centre as an industrial city in the Middle Ages and that, throughout that time, its economy was based upon cloth. The city was organized around this trade and from the thirteenth century much of the population, at all levels of urban society, both men and women, were directly employed in, or had some connection to, cloth manufacture or trade. The city had a stellar reputation for producing the highest-quality woollen cloth. Ypres' entrepreneurs traded its textile products across Europe.

The first two chapters consider cloth markets and the cycles of growth, particularly in the period of the Champagne fairs and exports to the Mediterranean, and the decline of the industry in the sixteenth century. Importantly Stable discusses the complexities of the use of technology and the wide range of woollens produced. The refusal to take up new technologies is often considered in terms of urban protectionist conservatism. However, it is argued here that these decisions were rational business choices made by informed and experienced individuals who understood their products and sought to strengthen their commercial circumstances. The following three chapters discuss the individuals, particularly the city's leading cloth merchants and entrepreneurs, and how the Ypres's industrial focus impacted its social fabric. This was a city of considerable economic inequalities with large numbers

working in the industry, including single women, whilst the profits accrued to the elite merchants. Chapters 4 and 5 explore this mercantile elite and the characteristics of 'capitalistic' cloth production. Ypres' guilds, their organization and structure are discussed in chapters 6, 7 and 8. Importantly, Stabel argues that despite these guilds' protectionist ordinances and visibility, much of the manufacturing work in the city was undertaken by unskilled workers and non-guild labour. He emphasizes the importance here of female labour in the Ypres industry, despite their low wages and lack of access to external markets, particularly in later periods. All these features are discussed in relation to the emergence of capitalism. Ypres was also well known as a breeding ground for violent industrial revolts throughout this period. The final two chapters discuss the textile guilds fuelling clashes between cloth workers and the city's elite, despite the risk of severe suppression. This leads on to a conclusion which examines the textile history of the city within a wider European perspective, with a comparison to Florence, and explains the virtual abandonment of textile production in the early modern period.

Both of these works seek to challenge the grand narratives of the medieval textile industry of the Middle Ages. Pirenne saw the economic and social history of the Low Countries from the thirteenth century as dominated by the great urban centres of Flanders. Their economic success was down to their control over the production of fine luxury textiles manufactured from quality English wools and managed by capitalist entrepreneurs. Espinas likewise saw those who gained control over this luxury cloth production and participated in urban government as entrepreneurs. They created large enterprises and enriched themselves with these commercial ventures which have been viewed as capitalist organizations. Furthermore, the traditional narrative suggests that cloth production in the countryside was simply a product of entrepreneurs' need of a cheap rural labour force and that relations between towns and their hinterlands were predominantly antagonistic. Both Van der Meulen and Stabel make important contributions to this narrative. First, they demonstrate that town and countryside were complementary modes of production rather than antagonistic, and that proto-industrialization neither developed in a linear way nor was it a foregone conclusion; second, that the rejection of novel production techniques need not be thought of simply as urban protectionism or conservatism, but rather that these were rational choices by knowledgeable individuals. Third, in terms of the perceived ubiquity guild control over production, Stabel rightly asserts that much cloth production was undertaken by those outside guild membership. All this suggests that the road to capitalism was far more complex, faltering and varied than has previously been assumed. Both books manage to reframe older debates on merchant capitalists and medieval entrepreneurs in interesting ways.

These books make valuable contributions and provide new insights into medieval textile production and will be of great interest to scholars and students interested in the history of textiles, north-western European urbanization and the development of capitalism in the late medieval and early modern periods.

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