

Wim Blockmans
Urbanisation in the European Middle Ages.
Phases of openness and occlusion

[A stampa in *Living in the City. Urban Institutions in the Low Countries 1200-2010*, a cura di L. Lucassen e W. Willems, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 16-27 © dell'autore - Distribuito in formato digitale da "Reti Medievali", www.retimedievali.it].

The migration to cities

The renowned urban historian Peter Clark provides an answer to the question at the heart of this volume in the introduction to his current synthesis. Urban communities, he writes, are characterized by chances: more employment opportunities, the hope of greater social mobility, more freedom of thought and actions. But also by risks, including high mortality rates, greater economic and political instability and the danger of poverty.¹ During the sixteenth century that he describes, large fluctuations occurred in the urban population. From the eleventh century, urbanization increased steadily and radically changed the character of European societies. There was a fundamental difference with the city foundations of Roman times which, in the colonies at least, derived from the urban character of Mediterranean cultures. This was partly the reason why they contracted and disappeared during the disintegration of the Empire.

In another recent synthesis work about European urban history, the authors delve deeper into the phenomenon of increasing growth that occurred from the eleventh century. This, they say, can be accounted for, firstly, by the increased productivity in the agricultural sector, which generated surpluses of both products and people without which the expansion of the urban network – that comprised concentrations of markets, craft production and services – would have been unthinkable. It was the constant migration of farmers to the cities that set the first and decisive growth phase of the European urban network in motion. Thus, the early cities were the primary agricultural market centres. Secondly, other factors, such as the establishment of political, religious and cultural institutions, strengthened the growth.²

The different structure of these two overviews serves to highlight that the temporal perspective can make a significant difference to the problem and, therefore, also to answering the question posed. For the medievalist, the urbanization phase, which began around the year 1000, marks a crucial turning point. The character of societies changed fundamentally when, across the whole of Europe, the majority of old urban centres experienced new development and countless new cities arose or were founded. Medievalists look for an explanation for this remarkable breaking of the negative spiral, which had undermined the urban culture of the Roman Empire since the fourth century. What made the rise in productivity in farming possible to the extent that the population persistently increased more than the established infrastructure in the countryside could handle?³

The relative overpopulation of the countryside, in the sense that there was a surplus of labour, was dealt with in a variety of ways. The existing social relations came under pressure, particularly the exploitation of farmers in the form of servitude with all its limitations on freedom and performance obligations. If the landlords wanted to maintain their position, they had to tolerate the fact that surplus workers were no longer tied to their farm, but could leave. Where they went depended on the possibilities that the environment had to offer. The most obvious choice was to cultivate the as yet unexploited landscape in the immediate vicinity, by clearing forests and draining land. In anticipation of higher yields, large land owners, such as abbeys, went so far as to offer 'settlers' favourable business terms for the uncultivated land. The main provisions had to do with personal freedom and lower duties, which were of particular importance in the development phase. As the availability of land in the vicinity dried up, then people moved further afield in order to cultivate land. We must recall the renowned settlement of people from the Holland-Utrecht

¹ Clark 2009:10

² Boucheron, Menjot & Boone 2003; 371-382.

³ Verhulst 1999: 119-113.

lowlands in the unexploited areas along the river Weser, as recorded in the acts granted by the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen in 1113 and subsequent years. The readiness to migrate was a result of the relative overpopulation in the area of origin and the widespread availability of uninhabited lands elsewhere. The 'settlers' sought resources in the form of workable land, as a way of improving their social status. They retained their own mode of life, remained peasants and applied their familiar methods and rules to new areas.⁴

A third possibility to escape overcrowding was the development of another economic activity, for example in fishing or the crafts. Maritime work supposed shipbuilding, which in turn required a multitude of small businesses. A large part of this remained tied to agricultural production such as forestry, sail making and rope making. Other resources, such as logs that were suitable for masts, nails and tar and pitch, had to be obtained from coastal areas via long distance trade. Special forms of craft and trade activities were effectively exercised by the concentration of housing and jobs which were clearly separated, but never disconnected, from the countryside. This particular reception of the overpopulation from the surrounding areas marks the origins of the first spontaneous growth of cities. Ultimately, because the migration to the cities entailed not only different economic activity but also a profoundly different way of life it was the least obvious but the most radical solution to the overpopulation. For the kind of massive urbanization movement to occur that was witnessed across the entire continent from the tenth century there must have been very strong push factors at play and few tempting alternatives. The demographic pressure, combined with the geographical and technological possibilities, must have been the decisive motive to move away to other areas – especially to concentrated forms of habitation.

The long growth phase from the tenth to the thirteenth century was followed by a period of roughly one and a half centuries, from 1300 to 1450, during which a considerable reduction occurred in the total, but also in the urban, population. Without doubt, strong migration from the countryside to the cities was based on the phases of growth, in both the period until 1300 and again after 1450. But it is also highly probable that the outflow from the countryside persisted during the long period of depression from 1350 to 1450, although regional differences can be identified. The direction of the migration also changed, following a varying assessment of the unfolding opportunities. As a result, the explanation for the migration to the city demands a different answer for each of these three periods. The first phase is characterized by the formation and growth of cities out of small old centres by foundations that appeared from nowhere. During the later phases urban institutionalization had already occurred, which may have exerted its own pulling-power. This could include the institutional social services which built up over time in the cities. It remains, then, to explain the causes of these significant regional differences and why migration persisted, both during times of growth and times of decline.

Environmental historians have put yet more fundamental aspects of urbanization on the agenda. They point to the vital link between a city and its surrounding areas. In the most general sense, the constant supply of potable water, food, energy and materials is essential to a concentrated urban population; at the same time, in order to keep the environment viable, they must be able to eliminate waste. In biological terms, a permanent and relatively large population concentration is only possible if the surrounding area can be intensively exploited. Thus, the interaction between urban and rural stimulates the intensification and diversification of agricultural production. An urbanized society brings about a transformation in the ecosystem, both in the countryside and in the city. In such a society, the space, matter, energy, the exchange of information and the allocation of time are designed in a new and particular way. In biological terms, the urban way of life offers the human species the information processes that make it possible to multiply and to accelerate. The size, density and diversity of an urban population increase the effectiveness of sexual contacts and, therefore, reproduction. This boosts cultural performance, leading to an increased exploitation of natural resources and manpower.⁵

⁴ Van der Linden 1981; 1982 and 2000.

⁵ Herrmann 2007: 230.

These insights were obviously not made by people at the time but are a reconstruction by researchers today. Consequently, they are describing previous effects of the urbanization process rather than the motives of the people themselves. To uncover the latter, we need to delve into the specific circumstances that were apparent to contemporaries of this age. The fact that from the tenth century an entirely new trend occurred in society warrants special attention; that after centuries of decline, once more new cities arose and the existing ones started to grow again.

The first phase of growth

The urbanization movement that began across the whole of Europe from the tenth century, albeit with significant variations in region and timing, continues to this day. Cities have increased in number and size, and the urban lifestyle became dominant. The movement found its origins around the Mediterranean Sea, with an apparent continuity of ancient city culture. From the eighth to the tenth century, Byzantium – with 800,000 inhabitants – was the largest city of Europe. Andalusía, with Cordoba as the capital of the caliphate in the tenth century, was the most urbanized area, counting as many as 400,000 inhabitants. Such magnitude would only be matched in the rest of Europe by seventeenth century London.⁶ From the eleventh century, Northern and Central Italy became unmistakably dominant. The demographic high point was reached in about 1300, when Venice, Milan and Florence counted at least 100,000 inhabitants each and both Genoa and Bologna had perhaps around 80,000. There were 20 other cities in their environs with more than 20,000 residents at this time. The second most densely urbanized area in Europe in this period was the Southern Low Countries, where it can be assumed that around 1300 Ghent had more than 65,000 inhabitants, Bruges had probably close to 45,000 and in addition, Arras, Saint-Omer, Lille, Douai and Ypres were estimated to have numbers of between 20 to 30,000. It was not until the sixteenth century that this concentration was surpassed by the growth of Antwerp and the cities of Brabant, and in the seventeenth century by Amsterdam and the other Dutch cities.

Thus, the first urban growth illustrates two remarkable phenomena: in the Mediterranean, urbanization occurred much earlier than elsewhere and on a significantly larger scale. The contrast between the capitals of Byzantium and Cordoba prior to the tenth century and the later developed metropolises is striking. In 1300, together Venice, Milan and Florence did not exceed the size of Cordoba three centuries earlier. What accounts for the difference in the growth opportunities of these cities? Was the attraction of the political centres so overwhelming that they surpassed the spontaneous growth of the trade cities? The great size of Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, as long as they remained the capitals of an expansive empire, seems to support these thoughts. In addition, the exceptional size of Paris during the late Middle Ages can also be explained, primarily, by the absorption of the administrative core of a centralized kingdom.⁷

With the exception of Paris and, to a lesser extent, London, the political capitals of Northwestern Europe did not have a striking advantage, because the majority of rulers in this period constantly travelled around. There were two fundamental reasons for this, which explain the marked difference with the Mediterranean capitals. Firstly, sovereigns – and their mobile court – travelling in far flung parts of their realm were dependent on production from the domains where they were staying for their subsistence. Secondly, these rulers insisted that lower ranks of their administrative apparatus be physically present in all parts of their empire in order to maintain their authority, if necessary with superior physical force.⁸ Both factors are essentially due to the atrophy of transport, commerce and finance from the fifth century onwards in Europe, with the notable exceptions of Andalusía and the Byzantine Empire. Moreover, the agricultural yields in the north were significantly lower than in Mediterranean regions.

This ecological constraint was only overcome when the food needs of the intensely urbanized areas were provided for by the long distance trade overseas. Bulk goods such as grain only became

⁶ Clark 2009: 25 and 116.

⁷ The figure of 225,000 inhabitants proposed for 1500 may be attributable to a questionable reading of a document; but even with 100,000 people less Paris occupies a unique position around 1300: Clark 2009: 37 and Zeller 2003:601; for a different view see Boucheron et al. 2003:395.

⁸ Bernhardt 1993; this vision has recently been nuanced in relation to Charlemagne in McKitterick 2008: 171-186.

regularly available to Italy in the thirteenth century, and more than a century later to the Low Countries. A distinction with the big political capital cities arises here too: a strong state could organize its own food flow by using the tax burden, market rules and, if necessary, coercion. The concept 'command economy' applies here.⁹ On the other hand, trading metropolises were dependent on generating equivalents for the relatively expensive transport of mass goods. In a more general sense, in the early Middle Ages, the Episcopal cities also fulfilled – in the tradition of the late empire – central administrative, educational, and cultural functions in their territories, through which they attracted city dwellers and encouraged craft activities.¹⁰ From the tenth century they also formed the core of spontaneous urban expansion. However, by themselves, these functions were not sufficient for the ecclesiastical centres to grow into large cities.

Thus, in the early cities, people flocked together from diverse areas of origin and with varying backgrounds. All of them sought new opportunities and felt free of the constraints and strict social controls that prevailed in the areas and farming communities from which they had fled. The oldest city charter of the Low Countries, dates from 1066 and relates to the town of Huy on the Meuse. It illustrates that not all landlords were willing to accept that they had lost their grip on runaway serfs. The charter devotes much attention to the status of unfree peasants who had fled their domain to go and work in the city, but were subsequently reclaimed by their lords. This proved that the lords still retained various privileges, but now they had to provide proof of their claims.¹¹ Another infamous case involves an incident in 1127 that disrupted the annual fair in the southern Flemish city of Lille. The Count wanted to snatch back one of his serfs at the event, but encountered the armed resistance of the citizens. They chased the Count and his followers out of the city and beat up some members of his retinue and threw them into the swamps. The Count immediately besieged the city on all sides and forced the citizens to pay fourteen hundred marks of silver.¹²

The urban area became known as the 'freedom' of the city. Citizens were 'freed' by acquiring their citizenship, but during the phase of growth new rights had to be constantly fought for with weapons. Not every inhabitant of a city could enjoy citizenship directly.¹³ This legal status was initially obtained by actual residency of the proverbial period of a year and a day; a rule that we first encounter in the founding charter of the Flemish town of Nieuwpoort in 1163. Especially during the development stage, the urban population was primarily a community based on solidarity, to which one was admitted after swearing an oath to comply with the provisions of the city charter. Thus, a citizen came to a *coniuratio*, which literally means confederacy – in the positive sense of the joint enforcement of the city charter and mutual protection against external dangers. The name of the Swiss 'Confederation', which is also based on formally acquired citizenship, still refers to such a law. Citizenship is only available to outsiders after a hefty payment and the fulfillment of some other conditions.

Urban communities insisted, frequently with weapons and increasingly with give and take, that their legal status, the city charter, be recognized by incumbent rulers. By doing so, the lords gave away certain privileges, such as the right of a city to self-governance and self-regulation; in the terms of Max Weber: *autocephaly* and autonomy. But the most farsighted landlords understood that they could gain strategical and tax benefits from these new productive communities. A flourishing urban market delivered more revenue for a lord or a prince from coinage, tolls, jurisdiction and boosting the overall economic development – also in the countryside. From the perspective of power games, territorial lords supported the development of cities, seeing them as allies against the great landed nobles and clerics who, until the thirteenth century, were their most significant opponents.¹⁴ The particular status of each medieval and early modern city can be symbolically and literally read on its city walls and gates. Inside, the closed community enjoyed

⁹ For the application of this concept with regard to the Ottoman Empire, see Stoianovich 1994.

¹⁰ Vercauteren 1934.

¹¹ Joris 1959: 479-484.

¹² Van Caenegem, Demyttenaere & Devliegher 1999: chapter 93, 233.

¹³ Van Uytven 1982.

¹⁴ Van Uytven 1976.

privileges over the peasantry in the countryside. It tried to protect its independence and individuality through a strict control on the in- and outflow of people and goods. There were fiscal reasons for this, because the city insisted on the right to collect excise duties on goods that were brought to the market or were alienated from the urban patrimony. There were also social and legal reasons for the control over admission, because the status of the citizen was distinct from that of a clergyman, noble or rural residents. A citizen enjoyed legal protection by his Aldermen, and simply could not be sued by an ecclesiastical, royal or other external judge. A specific body of the city council watched over the care and property of widows and orphans.

The city was a corporate body, symbolized by a seal, which could act as a collective against the outside world. The city walls ring-fenced this special status and, as a result, no one town had exactly the same law as any other. Even though there were some similarities between city rights, such as those of Louvain to Den Bosch and those of Haarlem to numerous smaller Dutch cities,¹⁵ the traditions that resulted from their actual application led to diverse legal practices. The ramparts, gates and walls were among the oldest public facilities of a city. The first taxes were levied for the construction of walls and included special civic services for monitoring citizens. During the first phase of growth the city walls were repeatedly extended. Their function was primarily military, directed against any siege by unwanted potentates. If a city was taken and submitted, then often large parts of the walls would be destroyed or certain gates closed. No other symbol radiated so concretely and clearly the independence of a city: inside a person was safe, but, above all, he was different to all others. This certainly promoted the loyalty of a citizen to his own city. The local identity of the citizen, however, also obstructed the solidarity of citizens with those from other cities or with rural inhabitants. This kind of 'apartheid' meant that joint action by cities was rare and fragile, also in terms of defence. Over time, this eventually facilitated the superiority of territorial rulers.¹⁶

The oldest city charters are brimming with articles about the maintenance of order within the city walls. Apparently, the biggest worry in the rapidly growing cities was about the establishment of a new type of public order. This was not exactly second nature for people who originated from very different contexts. The carrying of weapons was forbidden for aliens in order to curb violence. The inclination to take the law into one's own hands by taking revenge was particularly persistent. The nobility considered the bearing and use of arms in case of (real or imagined) attack on the personal integrity, honour or possessions of an individual or a family member, to be a class privilege. The new elites that filled the power vacuum in the fledgling cities appropriated many noble rights and behaviours. Thus, the new rich, often the owners of land in the urban centres, tried to translate their real advantage into a recognised status.¹⁷ Since the urban upper class saw feuding not only as a way of enforcing their own position but also as a status system, the sovereign authorities could not simply eradicate this right. The pacification of urban communities was a gradual process, in which the right to revenge and reconciliation by private parties was respected for centuries.¹⁸

Traditionally, ordinary violent offences were combated by calling on supernatural powers. But in the most developed cities irrational 'proofs', such as the duel, the ordeal, trial by fire or water and taking oaths (made by *compurgatores*, literally 'oath-helpers'), were gradually replaced by rational evidence, supported by investigation and testimonials by 'reliable people'. Already by the end of the eleventh century, the common law of the merchants' guilds contained rules that were subsequently incorporated into public law. In 1116, at the request of the citizens of Ypres, the Count of Flanders abolished the legal duel. In 1127 and 1128 the successive counts granted the burghers of Saint-Omer a general exemption from duels during the annual Flemish fairs. In Valenciennes, in 1114, the 'sworn commune' came up with its own evidence procedure requiring two identical testimonials by 'men of the peace'. If such men were unable to be found, then the magistrates would pass judgment based on traditional ways. A similar double option, two legitimate witnesses or proof of innocence and trial by cold water, was still practiced in Tournai in

¹⁵ De Smidt 1982: 140-141.

¹⁶ Blockmans 1994.

¹⁷ Blockmans 1938; Van Kan 1988.

¹⁸ Glaudemans 2004.

1188.¹⁹ The charters of Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders for Arras (1157-1163) and Saint-Omer (1164) are the oldest in the Low Countries to prescribe the testimony under oath from two members of the Council as formal proof.²⁰

In Brabant, the charter of 1213 for the town of Zoutleeuw was the oldest to provide for the abolition of the legal duel, a century later than Ypres. Zinnik had already introduced witness evidence in 1142, but only for less serious offences – and it was the same in Diest in 1229. The Brussels ordinance from that year provided for the evidence and sworn testimony by two honourable and sworn witnesses for almost all crimes. These testimonies came from the Magistrate in the first place in order to eradicate feuding and any continuing violence. Penalties had to be proportionate, but the warring parties had to call a truce (*treuga*) and stick to it. Whoever refused or broke the peace, would be heavily fined by the magistrates. There were remarkably mild sanctions for the murder of a peace-breaker by his enemy.²¹ The pursuit of mutual peace and solidarity by citizens strengthened the process of rationalizing the law of evidence. This resulted in a new concept of public power, which was no longer legitimised by divine provision or by class privileges. The urban community designed its own system of rational values, which were different from the ecclesiastical and feudal traditions, and were based on the equality of rights between citizens. This independence, with a certain amount of control over the hinterland and a network that was necessary for the viability of the city, is seen as determining the specific development of capitalism in the West.²²

Outside of the city walls the feudal balance of power remained for quite some time. Since the nature of their economic activities meant that citizens had to rely on travel to and communication with a sometimes distant outside world, they were faced with authorities that were not bound by the rules of a specific city – that were sometimes even hostile to them. Legal protection for travelling citizens depended entirely on the effectiveness with which the urban community could be upheld *extra muros*, outside the city walls. One means of doing this was the formation of alliances, for example between members of the same city who had common interests in a particular trade route, but also between citizens of different cities with similar interests. Originally, these were private legal associations in the form of merchants' guilds and trade groups (*hansa*). The most well-known of these, the (North) German Hansa, evolved in the first half of the fourteenth century from a society of merchants into an alliance of trading cities. Such groups succeeded in making official external agreements in order to facilitate, regulate and protect trade relations. When violations occurred they entered into negotiations about compensation and possible punishment. If the external party refused to cooperate, then compensatory reprisals ensued in the form of the arrest of citizens or goods that originated from the city or area where the conflict existed. A trade boycott or even a trade war, were the ultimate means with which to enforce reparations. However, such steps complicated the eventual settlement, which had to be reached by negotiation anyway. Besides, all parties wanted to prevent the mutual damage caused by endless escalation. In the Rhineland, a number of local landlords practiced their right to feud in order to extort trade. Cities took charge of the defence of their citizens as a collective, also with weapons.²³

From the twelfth century, the elites of the cities in the Southern Low Countries came to realize that apart from security problems, the continuous influx of newcomers also brought with it health risks and social inequalities. The sense of solidarity against a hostile outside world that had dominated during the growth phase would have declined as the population increased. The concentration of many people in a confined space caused problems in terms of housing, sanitary facilities and employment opportunities. The crafts that were dependent on the supply of raw materials from distant lands and that worked for the export market were especially sensitive to disturbances in international trade and fluctuations in business. So long as it could be assumed that the problems

¹⁹ Godding & Pycke 1981: 80-90.

²⁰ Van Caenegem 1956: 143 and 180-192.

²¹ Godding 1999.

²² Mielants 2007.

²³ Blockmans 1990: 14-17.

were of a transient nature, it was in the interests of the whole urban community to help skilled artisans through difficult periods. But also to assist them when personal setbacks impinged on their income. It seems that in the twelfth century, after two hundred years of turbulent growth, the first crises arose. In the beginning and at the end of the century (1118, 1125, 1195-1197) very serious famines took hold in much of Europe – and certainly in the Low Countries.²⁴ It can also be no coincidence that in this period many cities created various institutional arrangements to alleviate the distress. The oldest of these consisted of fundraising to support needy residents who were placed under the protection of the Holy Ghost. This, as with all the initiatives to be discussed below, involved organizations created by citizens who rallied together in fraternities and were recognized by the city government. In the course of the thirteenth century the demands for such facilities increased so strongly that a ‘poor table’ was established in every parish.

Furthermore, over time we see people founding communities where lepers were able to support each other. Later, healthy people, often monks and nuns, took over the care and regulated the city governance of such leper houses. They assumed, not incorrectly, that the disease was contagious. For this reason, lepers had to establish communities on the outskirts of the city, and be identifiable by their clothes and possibly also by the sound of a rattle. The main cause of the widespread concern about leprosy at this time can be found in unhygienic living conditions. These were caused by the rise of a relatively poor population who lived packed into rickety little houses without adequate facilities. In Bruges, the number of patients that could be housed in leper houses around 1320 was limited to 32. In general, this was about two per one thousand inhabitants. In pre-industrial Europe, leprosy was never a cause of mass mortality. Rather, it was a chronic but marginal phenomenon, certainly in comparison to other threats.²⁵

The formation of general hospitals for the sick, disabled, pilgrims and, in some cases, poor new mothers and single people dates to the last decades of the twelfth century. The capacity of such hospitals varied from tens to an extreme of 50 beds, with two patients per bed, in the St. John’s hospital in Bruges. This is the oldest hospital in the Low Countries, whose regulations were recognized in 1188. A few of its buildings, which date back to the thirteenth century, can still be seen today. The trees for the impressive roof construction of the Bijloke hospital in Ghent were felled in 1251-1255. The infirmary of 55 by 16 metres remained in use until the 1930s and today functions as a concert hall. Healthcare was generally in the hands of a monastic community, assisted by priests, surgeons, doctors and midwives. In most cases entry to the hospital was limited to the citizens of a town, and especially long-term patients were urged to transfer their capital to the institution.

Finally, some organizations of the aforementioned crafts groups deserve to be mentioned. During the thirteenth century, mostly in the second half, they formed fraternities with a charitable aim. Blacksmiths were the first and most frequent to organize themselves. There is only one known case of a charitable fraternity for the most active crafts in the textile sector, namely that of the fullers and barbers of Sint-Truiden, recorded in 1237. Perhaps the traders and entrepreneurs who governed over the large cities feared these numerous and those categories of workers who were particularly susceptible for fluctuations in the business cycle.²⁶

In summary, the increase in agricultural productivity and the prevailing working conditions, with the resultant overpopulation, were the decisive factors during the first growth phase of cities for the migration of the surplus rural population. That was particularly true for the most densely populated areas of Europe, such as the Low Countries. During the tenth and eleventh centuries people from very different origins flocked together in urban concentrations. Among the first concerns of the magistrates was the creation of order and law in such a heterogeneous community. The elite formed guilds and fraternities, which represented common objectives. For the population as a whole there were detailed regulations in the criminal law that, in the course of the twelfth

²⁴ Van Werveke 1967: 7-8.

²⁵ Maréchal 1982.

²⁶ Wyffels 1951: 124-142.

century, assumed a more rational character. Merchants' guilds were created and connected for the protection of citizens trading outside of the city.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries social problems and tensions occurred in the rapidly growing cities. After 1250, these insurrections took on the character of class conflicts. The closed system of governance by entrepreneurs and traders who ruthlessly pursued their own interests, formed the target of the riots. Wealthy citizens established diverse institutions in order to overcome the sharpest edges of social inequality. All in all, the tenth and eleventh centuries can be characterized as the phase of openness and the two subsequent centuries as a phase of sustained growth, albeit accompanied by increasing social inequality, tensions, famine, medical and sanitary problems. The response to this was great strides in institutionalization, with the intention of protecting citizens both inside and outside of their city. Since the interaction between the city and the countryside pushed up agricultural production further, the looming pressure of overpopulation continued. This also led to the trend to flee from the countryside. Indeed, cities offered more freedom, legal protection, opportunities and social facilities.

The period of decline

According to Jan de Vries, the north and centre of Italy, and to a significantly lesser extent the Southern Low Countries and the much smaller area around Naples, can be identified as the areas of Europe with the highest urban potential for the period around 1500. They were followed, at a relatively large distance by the capital cities of Paris, London and the Middle-Rhine area with its metropolis Cologne. The increasing location of major urban centres along easily navigable rivers and along or near by coasts is striking. The accessibility for large-capacity ships increasingly determined the growth of cities.²⁷ De Vries chose 1500 as his earliest measurement, because it was around this time that the first reliable estimates are possible for much of the European population. However, the demographic peak was more than two centuries earlier. In this regard, accurate details are available for Italy where, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the number of cities with a population of 20,000 halved and many large cities, such as Florence, Siena and Pisa, lost more than half of their residents.²⁸ The obvious causes of this are the successive European famines in 1315-1317 and 1322, the dramatic cattle plague in the same period and the repeated plague epidemics from 1347 to the first decades of the fifteenth century. The fact that around 1330, the population of Florence consumed annually 30,000 pigs, 40,000 cattle and 60,000 sheep,²⁹ would suggest a connection existed between the mortality of livestock and the overall nutritional status of the population on the eve of the pandemic.

The average nutritional needs for an adult in pre-industrial Europe is estimated at 1kg grain per day in dry weight. Alongside this, animals that lived in cities needed to be fed. Estimates are available for the human biomass in cities per unit area. In 1250, Florence counted around 100,000 inhabitants, who lived on an area of about 3 square kilometres, which meant that there was 48 square metres per person available. In Paris in 1365 there was 2.9 square metres available per human kilogramme, or 15 square metres per inhabitant, with an average weight of 40 kg per person. Thus, in Paris people lived on a third of the area which Florentines had available a century previously, even after the first big mortality waves. It is possible that the warfare in the early stages of the Hundred Years War between England and France (1337-1453) led to an influx of refugees. Cities, with their system of exploitation of the environment, offered a better basis for subsistence than the countryside. However, this had radical cultural consequences.³⁰

Although it has been found that the consequences of the plague epidemics during the second half of the fourteenth century were dramatic for the Low Countries, they did not lead to the same prolonged and very sharp decline of the urban population that was seen in Italy. In the Low Countries there seems to have been a shift in the demographic centre of gravity rather than an overall and sharp decline. Despite the widespread deaths from the epidemic, strong urban growth

²⁷ De Vries 1984: 158-161.

²⁸ Crouzet-Pavan & Lecuppre-Desjardin 2008: 11-74.

²⁹ Clark 2009: 44.

³⁰ Herrmann 2007: 243-246.

occurred in the centre and north of Brabant and the cities of Brussels, Mechelen, Antwerp, Bergen op Zoom and 's Hertogenbosch – each with their satellite towns – can be mentioned in particular. In Holland and possibly also in Zeeland the urban growth only really got started in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³¹ The consequences of the epidemics were probably much more serious in Italy than elsewhere in Europe because of the higher population concentration and the warmer climate.

The percentage of the urban population in the most populated and most urbanized regions, namely Flanders and Brabant around 1470, is estimated to be 33 and 29, respectively. Together these two regions accounted for some 45 per cent of all inhabitants from what was then the Burgundian Low Countries. Holland, according to estimates from around 1500, added another 10 per cent with 254,000 inhabitants. The percentage of urbanization there was 44; very exceptional by all European standards.³² The explanation for this especially great exodus from the countryside in Holland around 1500 lies in the ecological situation, with land that became less and less suitable for agriculture due to subsidence. A switch to livestock meant a massive reduction in manpower. In villages and in small and medium-sized towns, all kinds of crafts activities developed which were linked to shipbuilding and to the difficult ecological situation, which required intensive labour input for the water management. At the same time, there was a massive peat excavation for heating and industrial needs, which compounded the ecological problems. Thanks to the development of fisheries and the export of herring, dairy products, beer, cloth and peat, the economies of Holland and Zeeland received a strong commercial impetus. Thousands of crew were needed for the booming long run between the Baltic and the Atlantic coasts from Bergen in Norway to Portugal. Thus, in Holland, and to a lesser extent also in Zeeland, specific circumstances occurred which dispersed the rural population and led to a change in the economy. Both factors had a hand in the high degree of urbanization, which wholly contradicted the dominant trend in Europe to stagnation or decline.³³

Cities in Brabant and Flanders also retained their pulling-power, even though there was a shift in the migration streams. Everything began to revolve around the economic cycle of the city of destination and the expected employment opportunities there. In the boom period, the years 1418 to 1450, more than 25 per cent of the unregistered workers in the building sector in Bruges originated from Brabant and 10 to 15 percent came from Zeeland. During the second half of the fifteenth century the pull of Bruges on workers from the surrounding regions virtually disappeared. This was not only due to economic stagnation but also because of the strong growth and attractiveness of Antwerp.³⁴ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, secondary centres of the textile industry in the region around the River Leie – with Courtrai and Wervik, and the Southwest Flanders town of Hondschoote as extreme examples – drew many workers away from the old industrial cities, such as Ypres. The same pattern is recognizable in the decline of Louvain, while small towns like Herentals, Aarschot, Tienen, Turnhout and Lier were on the rise. So the pulling-power of cities remained, but only when economic prospects were positive. Cities could only grow because of the exodus from the countryside. The ongoing migration streams continuously moved in the direction of areas where the best employment opportunities were expected and with the most favourable chances of social advancement.

Did push factors also exist for rural people outside of Holland and Zeeland during the period of demographic decline? In general, the purchasing power of the population that survived the Black Death of 1348 rose because the ratio between the number of people and the available natural resources had become more favourable. This led to a higher average standard of living, which expressed itself, for instance, in an increased consumption of meat in the cities. The effects of this richer diet generally increased the chances of survival. A large proportion of agricultural land was converted to pasture and this led to an extensification of work and, in turn, to the disposal of the

³¹ Blockmans 1980.

³² Blockmans & Prevenier 1997: 174.

³³ Blockmans 1993: 41-58; Van Dam 1998: 58-102; Cornelisse 2008: 234-236 and 243-249.

³⁴ Sosson 1977: maps 22-23, and 334-336.

surplus.³⁵ Specialist crafts, such as the production of sophisticated textiles and the arts, received an impetus as a result of the increased demand for luxury goods. Thus, the employment opportunities in these sectors remained good. For those who could not profit from the most beneficial industries, the cities retained their attractiveness, particularly due to the extensive institutional charitable care. Admittedly, in times of acute crisis this was reserved for a city's own citizens, but the fact that ordinances about this were enacted, would suggest that in practice urban poor relief also ended up with non-residents.³⁶ Thus, the institutional facilities, which had developed in cities over the centuries, created new attractions, which included, among other things, higher wages.

Conclusion

This global exploration of the question why people want to live in the city leads to a differentiated answer. In the first place, it makes a real difference whether we consider the strong expansion of concentrated habitation centres with a substantially non-agricultural livelihood, or if we look to the development of an already formed urban network. In the development stage there was considerable overpopulation in the countryside – a surplus of labour – and favourable social and legal conditions prevailed. The migrations occurred in a relatively sparsely populated area, where many features of the landscape remained untouched. The destinations of those who moved away were not exclusively the burgeoning cities, but initially the areas recently brought into cultivation. There, more personal freedom and a better working regime were offered than in the old areas. This spontaneous wave of urban development originated in areas that were already urbanized in ancient times and until the end of the sixteenth century had the highest density. Outside of the borders of the Roman Empire, the formation of new cities happened later and rulers often established them for their strategical motives.

After the first two centuries of openness and the absorption of diverse migrant groups, processes of institutionalization took place in the cities. The status of the citizen was then legally defined and distinguished from other inhabitants and from the outside world. Increasingly, a social upper class began to formally differentiate itself as an elite of wealthy traders and entrepreneurs. They mimicked the lifestyle of the aristocracy and distanced themselves from 'the commoners' – the ordinary craftspeople. From the twelfth century, citizens also founded diverse charitable institutions. These institutional cadres increasingly defined civil awareness as a specific local identity which, despite the general trends, varied from place to place. They determined the urban particularism until the end of the eighteenth century.

Assuming that the mortality in cities in the Middle Ages was higher than in the countryside and that the balance of natural reproduction was negative, cities had no choice other than to be open for newcomers. Also in the period of a strong overall decrease in population, from around 1348, people continued to move away from the countryside. They settled in cities, despite the chances of dying clearly being greater. Once again, the relative overpopulation of the countryside was the most important cause for the dispersal of the surplus. Subsequently, the widespread conversion from intensive farming to livestock occurred. The consequence of this was that considerably fewer workers were needed. However, people were not attracted to just any city. The migration streams shifted to cities where employment existed or were expected. This was reflected in relatively high wages and unfolding opportunities. Shifts between stagnating and expanding regions were related to the macro-economic changes in terms of employment opportunities. Where there was no work, newcomers stayed away and the population of a city decreased.

With the hindsight of the historian, the process of urbanization can be analyzed as the increasing ability of humans to control nature. Considerably more people lived per unit area in cities. They could not only mutually raise their productivity in all kinds of areas, but also stimulate the returns from the surrounding areas. Peasants who traded their land for an entirely different life in the city, would not have been directly aware of such changes. But the exploitation of the natural

³⁵ Soens & Thoen 2010 : 483-515.

³⁶ Blockmans & Prevenier 1975: 20-57.

environment guaranteed in the long term the ongoing attractiveness of life in cities. Three phenomena are striking in this regard. Firstly, intense urbanization always went hand-in-hand with high rural population density. Furthermore, the heavily urbanized areas focused on human and material capital. They formed the driving forces of commercialization for the whole economy and were crucibles of cultural dynamics. In conclusion, highly urbanized areas were at odds with large dynastic states. That was the most important reason why the urban society, especially in the Northern Low Countries, had such a dominant position.