

**Europa e Italia.
Studi in onore di Giorgio Chittolini**

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Cities, networks and territories.

North-central Italy and the Low Countries reconsidered

by Wim Blockmans

European history has most often been written from the viewpoint of growth. The growth of the monastic orders, the communes, the bourgeoisie, the state, capitalism and so on. Grand theories such as the always fascinating insights formulated by Max Weber, describe long-term processes such as secularization, bureaucratization and state formation. Such approaches are surely helpful to discern major tendencies, but reality is always far more complex and diverse than a handful ideal types. In the following pages, I intend to develop an argument in favour of historical explanations as necessarily dealing with complex systems, including a multitude of variables and interactions, all changing over time. Growth, as well as its corollary decline, need to be qualified with regard to the level of analysis. Decline in one region may very well contribute to the growth of another one, whereby the overall system may just be adapted to external changes. Therefore, concepts describing a particular configuration, such as an urban hierarchy, a city-state, a regional state, or a multiple monarchy can just be seen as stepping stones in the complex patterns of change historians are studying. An overly strong accent on one or the other particular model or region, seen as general or dominant, distorts the constantly changing relations of highly variegated interactions. The difficulty will then reside in avoiding the Scylla of purely descriptive juxtapositions of unique cases, as well as the Charybdis of teleological over-simplification.

In recent years, major efforts have been made in bridging the historiographical gap between local and regional studies, on the one hand, and the tradition describing the steady growth of larger political systems integrating many, but surely not all, the pre-existing structures into dynastic states. The interpretation of an overall tendency in Europe towards the formation of strong dynastic states no longer prevails as a primarily top-down process initiated by princes, their courtiers and bureaucrats¹. Attempts have been made

¹ Ch. Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton 1975; R. Bonney, *The European Dynastic States 1494-1660*, Oxford 1991.

to compare ancient City-States with medieval and early-modern ones². The continuity of local and regional powers within overarching state structures has been stressed, which could lead to long-term stabilisation on smaller levels than that of the large dynastic states³. The relative autonomy of economic systems vis-à-vis state power has been understood as a necessary corollary to the study of political systems⁴. This led to the insight that the variety of state structures depended highly on the complex interaction between existing and newly emerging power systems of various kinds⁵. The relative strength of the contenders rested highly on their economic basis and on the level of community building in previous stages⁶.

All this showed the need to think in terms of multiple dimensions – political, economic, cultural – and multiple levels. As the three dimensions were organised and functioned along different logics, their interactions operated at various levels since economic and cultural phenomena did not coincide with political borderlines. All these elements underwent changes due to internal as well as external processes, which made the complexity of the interactions hard to oversee. Therefore, most analyses remain limited to particular regions, aspects and periods. A more encompassing insight might require computer simulations such as these used for weather forecasts.

Giorgio Chittolini has greatly contributed to our better understanding of the way in which the large communes in North and Central Italy underwent towards city-states and then to regional states. He clarified the variation between the regions and explained how their interaction triggered warfare and rivalry which profoundly changed the structure of the social and political system during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It were, however, the urban elites who extended their control over the countryside and strengthened it in order to secure their own economic interests. The regional states which were consolidated in the middle of the fifteenth century, maintained most of their features even under the Habsburg domination. They differed profoundly from any other political system in Europe as their basis was urban and not feudal, and the capital city's domination was not counterbalanced by political participation and representation of the smaller towns⁷.

² A. Molho, K. Raflaub, and J. Emlen, eds., *City States in Classical Antiquity and medieval Italy*, Stuttgart 1991; M.H. Hansen, *Polis and City-State. An Ancient Concept and its Modern Equivalents*, Copenhagen 1998.

³ Ch. Tilly and W.P. Blockmans, eds., *Cities and the Rise of States in Europe, A.D. 1000 to 1800*, Boulder 1994; W. Blockmans, A. Holenstein, and J. Mathieu, eds., *Empowering Interactions: Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe, 1300-1900*, Cornwall 2009.

⁴ R. Bonney, ed., *Economic Systems and State Finance*, Oxford 1995.

⁵ M.A. Ladero Quesada et al., *Poderes Publicos en la Europa Medieval. Principados, Reinos y Coronas*, Pamplona 1997; Ph. Contamine, ed., *War and the Competition Between States*, Oxford 1998.

⁶ P. Blicke, ed., *Resistance, Representation and Community*, Oxford 1997.

⁷ G. Chittolini, *The Italian City-State and its territory*, in Molho, Raflaub and Emlen, *City States*, p. 589-601; *Cities, "City-States", and Regional States in North-Central Italy*, in Tilly and Blockmans, *Cities and the Rise of States*, p. 28-43; *I principati italiani alla fine del Medioevo*, in Ladero Quesada, *Poderes Publicos*, p. 235-259.

Several authors have compared the cities' dominant position in North-Central Italy with that in Flanders, where the three major cities also tended to control their hinterland, most clearly during the periods of revolt during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries⁸. Most recently, Giorgio Chittolini compared the county of Flanders with the duchy of Milan and observed correctly that the urbanisation percentages depend highly on the threshold applied to count an agglomeration as a city. In the whole of the Low Countries around the middle of the fifteenth century, 241 localities have been considered as towns, as they had been granted urban privileges. However, 102 of these had less than thousand inhabitants, and only 37 more than 5000. The latter counted together 495,000 inhabitants or 60 per cent of the population of all the privileged towns⁹. If only centres with more than 5000 inhabitants are counted, Lombardy reached the level of 25% urban population, and Flanders around 15%. Moreover, one should rather consider the realities of the social and economic geography than the political borderlines. So, Bergamo and Brescia belong to the Milanese network more than to the Venetian *Terraferma* in which they were incorporated, and Genoa was its great gateway¹⁰. Similar observations have to be made about the county of Flanders which, as an economic region, included Lille, Tournai, Valenciennes, and Mechelen, all cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants. It is therefore more adequate to consider larger economic systems as a whole. Even then, there can be no doubt about the lower level of urbanisation in the Low Countries, as compared to North-Central Italy, and the smaller size of their metropolises. In 1300, three Italian cities had a population of 100,000, and 21 others 20,000 or more. In the Low Countries, only Ghent had then over 65,000 inhabitants, and ten others reached 20,000. At the end of the fifteenth century, North-Central Italy had around 5.3 million inhabitants on a total surface of over 100,000 square kilometres, the Low Countries 2.5 millions on c. 80,000 square kilometres, which implies approximate average densities of 48 and 31 respectively¹¹.

⁸ Most recently E. Crouzet-Pavan and E. Lecuppre-Desjardin, eds., *Villes de Flandre et d'Italie (XIII^e-XVI^e siècle). Les enseignements d'une comparaison*, Turnhout 2008, with especially the contributions about power relations: M. Boone, *Les pouvoirs et leurs représentations dans les villes des anciens Pays-Bas (XIV^e-XV^e siècle)*, p. 175-206 ; J.-C. Maire Vigueur, *Les inscriptions du pouvoir dans la ville. Le cas de l'Italie communale (XII^e-XV^e siècle)*, p. 207-233; G. Cherubini, *Rapport de synthèse: Les pouvoirs dans la ville en Flandre et en Italie*, p. 235-243.

⁹ P. Stabel, *Composition et recomposition des réseaux urbains des Pays-Bas au Moyen Âge*, in Crouzet-Pavan and Lecuppre-Desjardin, *Villes de Flandre et d'Italie*, p. 41, 58.

¹⁰ G. Chittolini, *Paysages urbains du comté de Flandre et du duché de Milan (XV^e siècle)*, in W. Paravicini, ed., *La Cour de Bourgogne et l'Europe*, Paris 2010 (in print).

¹¹ G. Pinto, *Poids démographique et réseaux urbains en Italie entre le XIII^e et le XV^e siècle*, in Crouzet-Pavan and Lecuppre-Desjardin, *Villes de Flandre et d'Italie*, p. 13-27 ; P. Stabel, *Composition et recomposition des réseaux urbains*, *ibidem*, p. 29-63; W. Blockmans, *Les pouvoirs publics dans des régions de haute urbanisation, « Flandre » et « Italie » aux XIV^e-XVI^e siècles*, *ibidem*, p. 65-74.

As it comes to the position of the metropolises *vis-à-vis* the smaller cities, what matters is the rank size distribution. How much larger – and probably also more powerful – was the dominant city than the next in size in its hinterland? After the huge population losses in Tuscany during the second half of the fourteenth century, Florence had a population of 40,000, Pisa went down to 10,000. The proportion of 4:1 allowed Florence to subdue its seaport. Similar proportions can be noted between Venice and Milan, on the one hand, and their dependent cities, on the other. In Flanders, these proportions were even more outspoken. Bruges may have had in the third quarter of the fifteenth century 37,000 to 42,000 inhabitants, its main rival and seaport Sluis (L'Ecluse) did not exceed 9,000. The next in the hierarchy under Bruges was Dunkerque with little more than 6,000. In the quarter of Ghent, the distribution was even more unequal: the largest secondary town Kortrijk (Courtrai) had a population of 8,500, nearly one-sixth of that of the capital city; the next was Oudenaarde with 6,500. And even the third dominant city, Ypres, which held its position until the end of the eighteenth century notwithstanding its huge population losses from an estimated 27,000 around 1300 to 9,000 in 1450, could maintain its supremacy over towns such as Diksmuide, Veurne (Furnes) and Belle (Bailleul) which hardly had more than 2,000 inhabitants. Obviously, the division of the entire territory of the county between the three largest cities in the 1340s had brought about institutional arrangements aiming at the consolidation of the domination by Ghent, Bruges and Ypres as the “Three Members of Flanders”. Even the gradual suppression of many of these capitals’ privileges by the growing monarchical powers did not entirely suppress their pre-eminence, for example in the distribution of the fiscal burden. In Brabant and Holland, which territories equally had a fairly high urbanisation rate, the main cities developed more slowly and they remained smaller until 1500. Therefore, they could not attain any overweight towards the aristocracy and the prince comparable with that of Ghent, Bruges, and even Ypres¹².

For a full understanding of the power relations among cities and their hinterlands, however, our scope cannot remain limited to internal rank size distributions. Three further factors need to be considered as well: the institutional configuration during the period of initial urban growth from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, the impact of monarchical powers, and the region’s position in the world-economy. Taking for granted that North-Central Italy was the most densely urbanized region in medieval Europe, I will now examine the period in which the Low Countries underwent the relatively rapid urbanisation, and which distinguished it over several centuries from the developments in most other parts of Europe. As Jan de Vries has convincingly demonstrated, North Italy and the Southern Low Countries

¹² W. Blockmans, *The impact of cities on state formation: three contrasting territories in the Low Countries, 1300-1500*, in Blicke, *Resistance*, p. 256-271; Boone, *Les pouvoirs et leurs représentations*.

stand out as the regions with the highest “urban potential” around 1500¹³. It seems worthwhile to compare these regions systematically from various viewpoints, starting with the geographical condition.

Looking at the urbanisation in the Low Countries in context of the courses of the main rivers, the assumption is that the lower reaches of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt rivers and their estuaries would be advantageous for human mobility and the mass transport of goods across various distances. This is the main reason that these areas were able to support greater urban populations than other areas. The population density per square kilometre was higher, and the region as a whole flourished for centuries. The transport hubs that became the foundation of the urban network have kept their importance to this day: the connections across land and water from Cologne to the North Sea; the routes to, on and along the Scheldt and Meuse rivers; the sea ports; the connection to England from Calais.

Lying on the coast, the Low Countries could enjoy many advantages compared to the landlocked hinterland: the sea provided plenty of opportunities for fishing, trade and transport. As a result, the coastal provinces were also more open to external contacts and influences. They thus became more commercially oriented and were able to support urbanisation on a larger scale. Other geographical factors such as the various soil types also played a role. Even before the Roman occupation, and certainly during it, the fertile loam areas of the south were more heavily populated than the sandy or marsh areas of the north. Later, in the middle ages the higher productivity of the land could support higher population growth rates in these areas. The less attractive areas included the peat soils of the river and coastal areas in the north, as working the land continually brought new problems. The rolling countryside and hard bedrock in the south and east prevented large scale agricultural development and limited transport possibilities. However, these areas were rich in natural resources such as rock, ore, wood and coal which were much in demand in the lower lying areas. The diversity of the region offered great opportunities for development, and this diversity became the major factor that stimulated the mobility of people and goods.

Thus, while the geographic features offered opportunities, the degree to which these were exploited strongly depended on the human factors of the wider environment. What stands out is that from the eleventh century onwards, the river deltas have relatively high concentrations of human and material capital. This concentration has continued up to this very day. Furthermore, over the course of the last millennium, always one or the other area was at the forefront of their times.

During the seventh to the tenth centuries, the development of the upper Meuse river was strongly favoured by the natural environment and its human context. The centre of the Frankish Empire’s possessions lay in the region

¹³ J. de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500-1800*, Cambridge Mass. 1985, p. 158-161.

around Aachen and Liege, from where they could continue the building of settlements started in pre-historic and Roman times. The South Limburg loess soils are especially fertile, and the ore mined in this region supplied the iron industry, which in turn was very useful for producing knights' armour. In later periods, these advantages lost their importance as the balance of power was superseded by ever more important macro-economic forces. The cities along the upper Meuse River may have risen early, but from the eleventh century onwards they started to lose their might.

The internal dynamic within the Low Countries whereby the core activities continually moved from one area to another – though remaining in each other's immediate vicinity – is the most striking feature of the region's development over the long term. The geographic opportunities had different impacts, depending on the changing developments in the wider European context. One constant was clear throughout: that the Low Countries at any time was a border area, or better, a convergence point where different trends and developments came together. Its geographic location meant that the region was destined to link the early growth centres of the Rhine to the North Sea. The natural environment of the river estuaries was not particularly conducive for agriculture, and this stimulated the population to turn to the sea for their livelihoods. The key to success thus lay in the impulses and potentials from the upper reaches of the river and from the sea. The region was destined to be a transit hub and meeting place, and local developments and their effects depended on creativity and the creation of external relationships.

If we look back at the long term development, as demonstrated by Fernand Braudel, as it took place in Europe from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries, we can clearly see that the main growth of major economic systems occurred in two regions: Northern Italy and the Low Countries. The metropolitan cores of these two regions were continually moving, but by the end of the sixteenth century the domination of the Mediterranean had come to an end. To Braudel, the cores in the Low Countries were Bruges, Antwerp and Amsterdam. His model exposes both the hierarchy of regions as well as their internal dynamics within an intercontinental economic system. The driving force is the capitalist pursuit of profit held by actors who were constantly looking for the best combination of production factors. At the same time, the European economic system as a whole was showing both a steady intensification of its internal commercialisation, and a steady expansion of an intercontinental system towards a real worldwide economy¹⁴.

This interpretative model helps clarify the dynamics in the Low Countries. It shows the European and intercontinental contexts in which to situate change, thus providing the backdrop for events to be understood at a higher level than at the level of sheer local, specific and coincidental factors. Two events come immediately to mind: first, the continual enlargement of

¹⁴ F. Braudel, *Le temps du monde*, Paris 1979, p. 74-223.

the European system within which the Low Countries held a prominent position, though still subordinate to that of North-Central Italy; second, the continually improving efficiency of the way in which the economy was organised.

The enlarging scale is well reflected by the size of the metropolitan population, that is, the city with the largest concentration of human and material capital within the system. This can be underpinned by statistics of the population of all the towns in the immediate hinterland, and by the total population of the region. However, objection can be raised against these last two indicators given the random character of the demarcation of the hinterland and region. To work out the boundaries, historians usually depend on administrative sources that were drawn up within a state context. The economic networks however do not always coincide with these historical demarcations, leading to distortion. The assumption must be made that a city needs a hinterland for the exploitation of natural resources and for food supply that is in proportion to its population. A large city thus needs provisions from a hinterland that is sufficiently productive to meet both its needs and possibly those of the other cities in the region. Only a highly productive and sufficiently large hinterland can support major cities, and this similarly requires a high degree of market oriented production and a certain level of population density. With every step in the development of the capitalist economic system in the Low Countries, the highest population of the current largest city is roughly double that of the previous largest city. This can be seen in the following simple list:

Arras	thirteenth century	25,000 residents
Bruges	fourteenth and fifteenth century	45,000
Antwerp	sixteenth century	100,000
Amsterdam	seventeenth century	200,000
[London	eighteenth century	400,000]

Looking at this table, these figures should logically show a proportional increase in the control that a city exerts over its hinterland. The term “control” is not meant only in terms of the size of a given area, but also in terms of the city’s role as the central place in a hierarchy of markets, whereby increasing technical efficiency also exerts a strong influence. Two more points can be made about the table above. One, Braudel did not consider the vanguard position of Arras, possibly because this metropolis lay outside his chronological boundaries. Until 1191, thus in the first stage of urban growth, Arras and its region fully belonged to the mighty county of Flanders. Without the preceding stage of Arras being at the core of an industrial, commercial and financial centre with satellite cities, the connections between North-Central Italy, Flanders and England from the twelfth century onwards cannot be explained. Two, the figure for Bruges is on the low side. This is explained by the fact that a larger city lay within its economic system: Ghent, at 45 kilometres away. Ghent (with a population of 65,000 around 1350) however did not have the highest concentration of commercial capital and trading organisations, and its complex connections to the sea prevented it from dominating all areas.

Up to the early fourteenth century, the major cities in Flanders and Artois did not show any tendency towards formalising their control over their hinterlands. In contrast to Italy, the structure of the dioceses did not offer each city in the Low Countries a pre-structured *contado* of on average one or two thousand square kilometres¹⁵. Only Tournai and Cambrai were surrounded by a small territory of a dozen villages, under the bishop's rule. Liège and Utrecht became the capital cities of large territorial principalities which did not comprise the whole extent of the diocese; the bishops ruled over their own territories as lay princes, but beyond their borders they had to restrict themselves to their role as purely spiritual leaders. A second circumstance did not favour the formation of city-states during the period of strong urban growth before the fourteenth century. Again in contrast to Italy, the county of Flanders was ruled by fairly strong counts who in the course of the twelfth and early thirteenth century organised their administration in fifteen castelnies, where they appointed bailiffs as their judicial officers¹⁶. So, the structure of the dioceses was too large, and that of the castelnies too small to support any hypothetical territorial ambitions citizens may have had. Instead, they organised the protection of the trade in cooperation with the territorial rulers through merchants guilds, hansa's and fairs. The need for the formation of city-states, dominated by the three major cities, was felt only in the 1340s, as a reaction against the count's policy which ruined their trade relations with England in the context of macro-economic changes which threatened the old textile centres¹⁷. These attempts remained successful only during the revolts, but these were systematically crushed by the military overweight of the count, in the fourteenth century supported by the King of France. In neighbouring Brabant, the administrative division of the duchy may have supported the pre-eminence of the four major cities, but these lacked the overweight vis-à-vis the secondary cities, while the duke and the aristocracy could mostly counterbalance them¹⁸.

Let us now look at the features of an economic system within which a metropolis was the core. These systems underwent continual geographic expansion which was connected with the increase of organisational efficiency. If the core position moved to another location the move did not mean a radical shift. On the contrary, each location's economic system continually adjusted to the changing circumstances. Every adjustment was directed at making the most profit by reducing costs and increasing scale. The transi-

¹⁵ Chittolini, *The Italian City-State*, p. 591.

¹⁶ H. Nowé, *Les baillis comtaux de Flandre, des origines à la fin du XIV^e siècle*, Brussels 1929, p. 47-59.

¹⁷ J.H. Munro, *Medieval woollens: the Western European woollen industries and their struggles for international markets, c. 1000-1500*, in D. Jenkins, ed., *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, Vol. I, Cambridge 2003, p. 228-243.

¹⁸ W. Blockmans, *Alternatives to monarchical centralisation: the great tradition of revolt in Flanders and Brabant*, in H.G. Koenigsberger, ed., *Republiken und Republikanismus im Europa der frühen Neuzeit*, München 1988, p. 145-154.

tions were gradual because the moving of the centre of specialised activities to a location in a bordering area where there were fewer limitations and more possibilities for expansion happened over time. Technical knowledge was shared because there were already forms of competition, complementarity and cooperation between neighbouring areas. This is verified by the fact that not one single rising metropolis made innovative breakthroughs in each and every area compared to its predecessor. Most of the activities were extensions of previous activities, with some new ones arising and others declining. The “down-graded” metropolitan areas for a while still maintained some of the most specialised activities, for which a high level of technical qualifications and much capital were required. Arras, for example, continued to play an important role in the new textile industry, and, in particular, in carpet weaving. Bruges kept its staple of Castilian wool and continued to still be of importance as a financial and artistic centre, just as Antwerp was in the seventeenth century¹⁹.

The geographic reach of Arras’ economic system was defined by the fairs of Champagne, Flanders, Saint Denis and England. Italian trading companies were active in all these places and though important, were not the only trading partners. In Arras itself, family companies of traders, entrepreneurs and financiers formed the economic basis, while protection outside the city walls was guaranteed by merchants’ guilds and hansa’s.

In Bruges, the geographic horizon stretched quite a bit further afield: both the Rhine region, with its centre Cologne, and the German Hanseatic League had significant representation in the city, together with other nationalities and Italian and Iberian trading companies. Bruges’ most striking advantages compared to Arras were the privileged presence of many representatives of a wide range of foreign trading companies; its significantly better accessibility for sea going ships; and its excellent connections to the fairs of Brabant and their continental hinterland. The scale and the range of the supply of goods and services were significantly increased as a result of the regular maritime connections to Genoa, Venice, England and the Hanseatic areas²⁰. Bruges’ services became more sophisticated with the increased professionalism of functions such as broker, money trader and banker, and this ultimately led to the creation of the world’s first stock exchange. Trade was protected by the city authorities, and where necessary by the other “Members of Flanders” and representatives of the count or duke.

The hinterland of Antwerp included the expanding colonial acquisitions of Castile and Portugal, the most important trading partners, still followed closely by Italy, the Hanseatic League and England. South Germany was more strongly represented in Antwerp than in Bruges. The orientation to Cologne and the fairs of Frankfurt opened important new markets in Central

¹⁹ P. Spufford, *From Antwerp to London. The Decline of Financial Centres in Europe*, Wassenaar 2005, p. 34.

²⁰ P. Spufford, *Power and Profit. The Merchant in Medieval Europe*, London 2002, p. 172-173.

Europe. The combination of Amsterdam as the distribution centre of Baltic grain, the harbour of Arnemuiden on the island of Walcheren in Zeeland as the first port of call before reaching Antwerp, the good maritime conditions of the Western Scheldt, and the possibilities for ships to dock in the city itself meant great improvements of the harbour facilities for sea going vessels. In Antwerp, the stock market became more sophisticated and the massive state loans began to play a heavier role. As the central money market for the Habsburg Empire, Antwerp enjoyed the protection of the Emperor. Around 1480 and during the decades that followed, real wages were lower in Antwerp than in Bruges and Ghent while regulations for trade and craftsmanship were less stringent than in Flanders. These conditions attracted entrepreneurs who brought employment opportunities with them. This in turn encouraged massive immigration. Wages remained relatively low for decades, which stimulated further growth.

Parallel to the economic upscaling was the political unification of the Low Countries under one dynasty. While the institutional and social effects of this should certainly not be overestimated, the question can be posed about the economic and cultural effects. The introduction of a common currency in the Burgundian territories in 1433 and its long term stability certainly contributed to the reduction of transaction costs in all areas. Wages could be kept to the same level for decades and this gave rise to fewer social conflicts than during the fourteenth century. The second positive effect was the greater homogeneity of the region vis-à-vis foreign countries. From then on cases of conflict in one of the principalities ran the risk of reprisals by the many subjects of the Burgundian or Habsburg dynasties. Similarly, foreigners were faced with a far more powerful ruler. In short, the trading position of the Low Countries became stronger than that of others. The different principalities within the Low Countries worked to maintain their own strong economic positions: Flanders maintained the ban on the import of English cloth, and Holland entered a bitter competition with the German Hanseatic League, kept off all export taxes while these were imposed in the other principalities in 1543-1545. The expansion of the Habsburg Empire from 1517 onwards in Spain, 1519 in the Holy Roman Empire, and from 1525 in Italy eased the economic relationship between the wealthiest parts of Europe, whose centres lay in Genoa, Seville, Augsburg and Antwerp. Under the Empire's protection, important entrepreneurs, traders and financiers from each of these places could carry out their transcontinental operations.

However, the disadvantages of linking the Low Countries to the Habsburg Empire lay in the fact that the Emperor prioritised other interests than did his subjects. The strengthening of the state apparatus came at the cost of the autonomy of the cities. Dordrecht for example, was unable to maintain its traditional tax exempt status under Charles the Bold. After rebellions in Utrecht and Ghent, Charles V removed the guilds' right to political participation and independence. He even built a citadel in each of these cities – as a warning to the people. Limiting political participation was intended to

smooth the path to levying taxes. These were initially intended to finance the continuous wars, especially those with France. While the subjects longed for order, stability and peace to carry out trade, Charles V and Phillip II put their unassailable, autocratic power first. The Church vindicated this ambition, but it was not able to address the needs of the time. The merciless manner in which both sovereigns oppressed the Protestant movements which spread on a huge scale among the urban middle classes and the rural proletariat from 1540 onwards, gradually undermined the loyalty that subjects traditionally had for their monarchs. This affected not only the freedom of conscience of the citizens who were used to their own autonomy, but also affected the very foundations of civil order based on regular, albeit oftentimes tense, dialogue between the subjects and their monarchs which had grown during the course of the centuries.

Ultimately, it was the monarchy, by their very actions, which ensured that an abrupt end came to the prominent role of each of the metropolises that form the guiding principle of this book. Around 1300, King Phillip IV's military operations destroyed the ties between Artois and Flanders, and vitally damaged the fairs of Champagne that were essential for Arras and surrounding cities. The oppression of the rebellion against Maximilian strangled the Bruges economy in the 1480s, partly as a result of his order that all foreign traders must operate from Antwerp. The steep rising in the fiscal burden, leading to the first Habsburg state bankruptcy, destroyed the Antwerp money market in 1554-1556. The repression of the revolt of the Low Countries, culminating in the long-lasting siege and the eventual fall of Antwerp in 1585 dealt the final blow. The simultaneous upscaling of the economic systems, of the power of the state and of the new communication media, drove the tensions between politics, economics and culture to a head. In the spring of 1559, the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis finally ended the wars that the Houses of Valois and Burgundy-Habsburg had fought with each other since 1465. A brief revival temporarily halted the downward cycle, but a deep rift with the developments of previous years became apparent. The submission of the rebellious cities in the south by Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma and grandson of Charles V, closes this chapter with the Fall of Antwerp in 1585.

The dynamic of the relocations of the cores of economic activity and demographic concentration was clearly determined by the needs of the European world-economy which required optimal harbour facilities for ever larger sea-vessels. Venice, Genoa and Porto Pisano met these requirements over the centuries, while in the Low Countries relocations were needed repeatedly. On the other hand, the metropolises Arras, Bruges and Antwerp saw their decline speeded up by monarchic policies. In North-Central Italy the impact of the fourteenth-century mortality was far greater than in the Low Countries, and that contributed to the concentration of many smaller city-states into larger regional states. The metropolises remained fairly the same, as their overweight vis-à-vis secondary cities was maintained even after heavy population losses. A striking contrast with the seaward orienta-

tion of the successive metropolises in the Low Countries, is the dominance of land-locked cities such as Milan, Florence, Bologna and Siena. They had in common their key position on major overland trading routes, in a fertile plain at the feet of a chain of mountains. The density and the value of the trade were so much higher in Italy than in the rest of Europe, that they made the dominance of these capital cities still possible. Moreover, as Giorgio Chittolini has so well shown, the urban elites had consolidated their position by turning to landed property as well.