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Transactions at the Fairs of Champagne and Flanders 1249-1291

Only on very rare occasions can we grasp the reality of the transactions as they occurred at fairs in the 13th century, especially North of the Alps. Therefore, the collection of acts passed by the aldermen of Ypres from 1249 to 1291, deserve close scrutiny. Until the bombardment of that city in August 1914, more than 7000 of them had been preserved, of which 161 examples have been published in 1900.¹ Twelve other have been published recently, together with the analyses of 5505 of these acts as they had been drafted before 1914 by the Belgian mediaevalist Guillaume Des Marez.² As a good deal of these acts contain agreements concerning transactions of goods and payments at the fairs of Champagne and Flanders, we can exploit them to achieve a precise understanding of the practices of buying, selling and paying at these two cycles of fairs.

As a first observation, it has to be stressed that these acts were not bound to the period of the year during which the Ypres fairs were held, which was during the first four weeks of Lent. No relation can be detected in the distribution of the acts through the year and the dates of the fairs in Ypres and elsewhere in Flanders. Moreover, the distribution changed considerably from year to year, without being determined in this respect by the Easter dates from which depended the timing of the Ypres and Bruges fairs.³ The aldermen's activity as warrants of the acts was thus a continuous service for the parties.

¹ G. DES MAREZ, La lettre de foire à Ypres au XIII^e siècle, Brussel 1900, pp. 7-8.

² Analyses de reconnaissances de dettes passées devant les échevins d'Ypres (1249-1291), ed. C. WYFFULS, Brussels 1991, esp. pp. 491-495.

³ The Bruges fair was held in the month beginning with the second Monday after Easter: G. DES MARIZ, La lettre de faire, cit., pp. 79-84.

A considerable number of the instalments referred to the various fairs in Champagne and in Flanders. This is especially the case in the 114 acts in which Italian creditors were involved: 63 payments were to be effectuated in the Champagne fairs, 26 in the Flemish fairs, 12 on an otherwise determined date and for 13 the due date had been passed already. Table 1 shows this distribution for a sample of 608 contracts (11% of the total).⁴

	N	%	foreigners	%
Flemish fairs	188	30.9	16	8.5
Champagne fairs	38	6.3	28	73.7
Date	258	42.4	9	3.5
Expired	113	18.6	2	1.8
Open	11	1.8	2	18.2
Totals	608	100.0	57	9.4

Table 1. Instalments in 608 Ypres contracts in 1284 and 1288

Fairs for all sorts of traders

The debtors in these contracts normally were Ypres burghers, sometimes other Flemings, but all had to acknowledge the applicability of the law of Ypres to the agreement. In the whole collection of 5505 acts about which were have precise information, 13.5% were delivered to foreign creditors in the form of *chirographs* or *chartes-partie*. The largest category were Frenchmen, mostly originating from the Nort-Western parts and the Atlantic coast, but also including a considerable number of people from Cahors.⁵ In the sample, in which foreign creditors are underrepresented, more than 37% of the instalments were due at precise moments of one or several fairs in Champagne or Flanders. Foreign contract parties obviously preferred Champagne, although merchants from La Rochelle, Bayonne, Rouen, England and Cologne all considered the Flemish locations to be more convenient.

The most striking phenomenon revealed by these data, however, is that the fairs clearly had a much broader participation than the international merchants. 86.5% of the acts passed by the Ypres aldermen concerned debts among Flemings and predominantly local people. 172, or 31% of the Flemish debtors in the sample, choose or accepted instalments at one or several of the

⁴ The sample has been taken from the first half of the year 1284 and the second half of 1288, 353 and 255 contracts respectively. Des Marez counted for these entire years 785 and 791 contracts, the highest numbers per year during the period for which the documents have been preserved.

⁵ H. COPPEJANS-DESMEDT, Handel en handelaars op de Vlaamse jaarmarkten in de tweede helft van de XIIIde eeuw, in: Album Carlos Wyffels (Brussels 1987), 69-88, esp.75, 81.

five Flemish fairs, not only and even not mainly the local one. One case is the agreement between two burghers of Ypres that a debt of 58 s. d'Artois had to be settled by weekly deliveries of bread between 6 December and the Ypres market, when the rest had to be paid off.⁶ On 12 December 1275, Simon Paeldinc, a member of a patrician family, contracted a debt of 72 \pounds art. for which he promised to deliver before 14 May cloth to another Ypres merchant,

'ensi comme il vauront l'un marchant a l'autre, et s'il ne li livroit les dras dedens le jor devant dit, il li devroit paier les deniers devant noumés a le foire de Provins en mai, le prochaine ki vient.'⁷

The alternative payment at the Provins fair clearly demonstrates the close linkage between the two cycles and between these and the local markets.

Putting-out contracts for the textile production were similarly linked to the calendar of the fairs where the products had to be sold, and they were made up in exactly the same format as the other *chartes-partie*. So, on 15 November 1288 a woman acknowledged a debt of 28 s.9 d.art., for which a female relative had to appear as pledge. She promised to pay off 10 s. at Easter, which was on 28 March, while the rest had to be delivered until the Torhout fair starting on 28 June in the form of twine at 6 d. per pound:

'et le remanant li doit elle deservir entre chi et le fieste de Thorout prochaine venant en taindre fileit, cascune livre pour 6 d. d'art.'s

Some debts between Ypres burghers were contracted to be paid off in relatively small instalments at consecutive fairs in Flanders.⁹ The same technique was used in the international trade, where the instalments could be spread over up to thirteen years. Laurent Ludlow made such an arrangement in 1284 for the next thirteen years at the Lille fairs; Benoit Jehan and Guillaume Beraut from Cahors made one in 1281 for ten years at the Mesen and Bruges fairs; in 1290 the Bardi company of Florence contracted repayments by an Ypres merchant at the Lagny fairs for the next twelve years. The Bardi, Pucci-Rambertini and Riccardi companies made such similar arrangement collectively in 1288 at the Mesen, Bruges, Lille and Ypres fairs during five years.¹⁰ The relatively small amounts of these installments - 66 s. 5 d.st. to 10 f_{c}

⁶ G. DES MAREZ, La lettre de foire, cit., 72; Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., nr. 219. The livre d'Artois was equal to the livre parisis.

⁷ G. DES MAREZ, La lettre de foire, cit., 73; Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., nr. 841.

⁸ G. DES MAREZ, La lettre de foire, cit.; Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., nr. 4670.

⁹ H. COPPEJANS-DESMEDT, Handel, cit., 77; Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., nrs. 60, 599, 120, 4992.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3075, 1595, 5088, 4437; 2713. 1 lb. par or art. equalled 3 s. 3 d. sterling, as mentioned by professor John Munro.

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st. - give the impression that they were intended to cover current costs of the company's representatives. They are anyhow a testimony of the trust of the participants in the regularity of their meetings in the future.¹¹

The fairs thus were meeting places for a great variety of persons, merchants and producers active on very different scales of magnitude. They fulfilled the function of a debt clearing-place for the local population and the inhabitants of the county. This implies that the fairs helped to disseminate to broader layers of the population commercial and financial techniques currently used in international trade. The same format of documents was applied for purely local transactions, and more than one-third of these referred to the fairs at least for their payments.

It has been observed that more than half of the visitors of the Chalon fairs between 1367 and 1406 traveled at most 40 kilometers.¹² The Ypres data suggest that the higher population density in Flanders made possible a larger partipation from a much smaller surrounding area. Most of the places where the Flemish fairs were held, were not further away from each other than twenty to thirty kilometers, Ypres and Mesen only ten. The longest distance, that between Lille and Bruges, was merely seventy kilometers. The geographical and social penetration of the effects of international trade must have been felt much more intensely here than in Burgundy, and even more than in Champagne.

People living in the villages in the immediate surroundings appear frequently enough as contract partners to prove this statement. Many more unrenowned local tradesmen and artisans appeared before the same Ypres aldermen than the representatives of the great Italian trading companies from Florence, Lucca and Piacenza. The latter's presence was all but restricted to the weeks of the Ypres fair, since their contracts were dated at all moments of the year, even during the winter months. This leads us to reconsider the impact of the international fairs in a double sense: socially, they included a vast majority of local and regional participants dealing mainly among each other; chronologically, the foreign merchants remained active in the region throughout the year.

¹¹ I cannot follow G. DES MAREZ, *La lettre de foire*, ctt., pp. 72-73 and H. COPPEJANS-DESMEDT, *Handel*, ctt., pp. 76-77 who qualify all kinds of contracts passed by the Ypres aldermen as 'lettres de foire', even if no mention is made of payment at any fair at all, and if its date does not coincide with the Ypres fair.

¹² H. DUBOIS, Les foires de Chalon et le commerce dans la vallée de la Saône à la fin du moyen âge (vers 1280-vers 1430), Paris 1976, pp. 142-187.

The value of the transactions

Not surprisingly, the average value of the transactions enacted for foreign merchants was considerably higher than that for local people. Table 2 shows the averages for a selected group of foreigners. But there were notable distinctions also between them.

Origin	N	minimum	maximum	average
Shrewsbury	15	12£	281£	99£
Cahors	13	23£	342 <u>£</u>	94£
Lübeck	18	18£ 17s	162£	81£
Italy	114	5£ 8s	343£	73£,
La Rochelle	51	4£,138	200£	49 <u>£</u>

 Table 2. Value of transactions by selected categories of foreign merchants at Ypres, in pounds sterling

Only six agreements between burghers of Ypres were enacted worth more than 50 f, st. and only one of them exceeded 130 f, st. On the other hand, the debtors were always local people who managed to deal in the same orders of magnitude as their foreign contract partners. Nevertheless, foreign merchants operated in various orders of magnitude. For the smaller amounts, enough local competitors were available. At the top, individual merchants from Cahors, Shrewsbury, and even from Northern Germany, struck transactions for similar or even higher values than the largest Italian contracts. In the first week of October 1279, Roger Pride from Shrewsbury sold wool in two contracts to three Ypres burghers for a total sum of 346 £, st.¹³ On 19 September 1287 the Ypres merchant Hugelot Croeselin bought for 358 f, st. from two merchants from Braunschweig, for which debt he had to produce six pledges. The biggest single acknowledgement of a debt was that, in 1290, by three Ypres merchants towards a brother of the German House, the local branch of the Teutonic Order, for 455 £, st.14 These transactions, however, remained exceptional; the average values were higher for the smaller numbers of merchants coming from England, Northern Germany and Cahors, while the large groups from La Rochelle and from the North-Italian cities - 44 contracts with Florentines, 36 with Lucchese, 25 with Placentines - dealt with a wide range of amounts.

¹³ Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., nrs. 1438, 1441.

¹⁴ Ibid., nrs. 4072, 5146.

Organization

The trade in English wool, which had been interrupted in 1270 by a commercial war, remained concentrated in very few hands. In 1272, one single party of 40 sacs of wool was sold for 227 f 10 s.st., while later on only Roger Pride and three members of the Ludlow family from Shrewsbury appeared in the acts. Nicolas de Ludlow is probably the same person who negotiated in December 1276 on behalf on the King of England about the conflict with Flanders. At two occasions, his *valets* Renault le Clerc and Henri engaged in the sales.¹⁵ This concentration was obviously due to exceptional political circumstances.

Merchants from La Rochelle and North-German cities normally acted as individuals, sometimes in combination with a single partner, a relative or a servant. In contrast, the merchants from Cahors from 1276 to 1281 appeared regularly in the context of companionship. True companies, named after a leading family, were a phenomenon of the North-Italian cities. The first to appear in the Ypres records was the company of Bernard le Scot of Piacenza, named as such since 1274. From 1282, Aubiert le Scot seems to have taken over. Until 1289, 14 different agents concluded 21 agreements, for which the company was represented 13 times by two agents, eight times by a single one. One person, Guillaume Marabot, acted ten times, two others four times. Another company from Piacenza, called Gagnebien, appeared three times, from 1288 to 1290. The best years of the Scoti company had been in 1274-76, when they concluded most and the biggest contracts, probably taking over trade blocked by the English boycot.

The Riccardi company from Lucca made 26 contracts from 1283 to 1290. In the first year, acts were always negotiated by two agents, but from May 1284 onwards, single representatives represented the company. Five different names appear during the years, two of which scored fourteen and fifteen contracts respectively. The latter one remained active during the eight years for which the documents mention the Riccardi. The Florentine companies were more numerous but each of them scored a smaller number of contracts than the Scoti or Riccardi, while the amounts concerned did not really make a difference. The most active among them, the Frescobaldi, made ten transactions through five agents, who were acting alone, by two or three. The Bardi company made eight contracts in Ypres through six agents, two of them being members of the family, Renier and Gui Bardi. The Pucci-

¹⁵ Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., nr. 459; H. COPPEJANS-DESMEDT, Handel, cit., pp. 83-85, where further literature is quoted.

Rambertini and Espina companies concluded three contracts each, the Cerchi two and the Peruzzi one.

In a way, the Ypres contracts - although they were located in only one of the five market places and probably even not the most important one - show the early development of the Italian merchant companies in North-Western Europe. A contract dated 23 December 1272 mentions two merchants from Lucca and their companions, in June 1274 the Scoti company of Piacenza is already there. Florentines came regularly together, they had companions, but their companies with a name appear only from 1283 onwards.¹⁶

On the Ypres side, these agreements were mostly concluded by groups of two, three or four people who declared to be solidary debtors for that case. The composition of these groups varied considerably. Even members of large families operated in very different settings. One in five (23 of the 114) contracts with Italian creditors mentions a single Ypres debtor, but even these men are to be found in various other configurations. None of these soloists systematically acted on their own, nor did any family constitute a durable configuration. Twenty members of six Ypres families concluded together sixty contracts with various Italian partners. Although four of these merchant families belonged to the patriciate and some of their members held offices as alderman, there was no single dominant group, family or company.

The same variation can be observed in the relations between Italians and men of Ypres. Each of the large Ypres families dealt with several Italian companies without preference, and vice versa. The Ypres Balgh family, appearing with four members in fourteen contracts with Italians, was in relations with the Scoti, Riccardi, and Frescobaldi. The Faciot and Piet de Soile families each dealt with five Italian companies. The pattern of association in Ypres was thus still very unsteady, depending on the sharp fluctuations of the trade itself. Nevertheless, the concept of association had penetrated deeply in the Ypres mcrchant class, as is shown by the fact that in 1283, a consortium farmed out the excises on cloth and on the wool balance to two groups of people among whom several merchants can be found.¹⁷

All the contracts passed by the Yprcs aldermen dealt with debts, to be repaid either at a particular calendar date, or at a fair. The credit operation involved a certain duration. For the 106 credit contracts agreed by Italians for which one or dates of payment are mentioned, we can establish the normal time span.

¹⁶ Analyses de reconnaissances, cit., 492 E, nrs. 703, 799, 985, 1013, 1032, 1185.

¹⁷ Ibid., nrs. 2451, 2455.

< 2 months	4	5 months	18
2 "	11	6 "	9
3 "	17	7-12 "	14
4 "	30	> 12 "	3

Table 3. Instalments of 106 Italian credits

80% of the credits thus had a duration of 2 to 6 months; 61% lasted 3 to 5 months, which normally was at one of the next fairs, either in Champagne or in Flanders.

In conclusion, the Ypres contracts show:

- the close interweaving between the cycles of fairs of Flanders and Champagne,
- the role of these fairs as clearing places for debts, not only between international merchants, but also for local people,
- the great trust in the regularity of these meetings for years to come,
- the penetration into the Flemish society of the techniques of concluding contracts, association and credit which were current in the international trade,
- the probability of close contacts at the Flemish fairs between local retail traders and international merchants, both Flemish and foreign,
- the flexibility of the systems of association and companionship, in Ypres as well as in Cahors, North-Italian and North-German cities.