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Steep Fall or Gradual Decline?
International Trade in Sixteenth-Century Bruges
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During the fourteenth and most of the fifteenth century, the Flemish city of Bruges was one of Europe’s most important centres of international trade. Connected to the North Sea by the Zwin estuary, Bruges attracted merchants from more parts of Europe than any other place north of the Alps, including the Hanseatic cities in northern Germany and Scandinavia, the Italian city-states, the Iberian Peninsula, England, and France. These traders supplied goods from all corners of the continent and beyond, establishing the city as a leading hub for financial services.¹ At some point in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, however, Bruges lost its economic primacy to Antwerp in the nearby Duchy of Brabant. Consequently, it was the Brabantine city on the Scheldt, rather than its Flemish counterpart, that emerged as the main centre for Europe’s booming trade with the African coasts, the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia and, later in the sixteenth century, the Americas. Whereas Bruges had never been more than a European gateway for the domestic market of the Low Countries, the centre of Northern Europe in a bipolarised trade system alongside Venice in the south or a European distribution centre, Antwerp became, in the words of Fernand Braudel, the first capital of a truly global economy, a position it would maintain until the 1560s.²

The most detailed chronology of the transition is that given by Joseph Maréchal. In an article published in 1951, Maréchal considered the Flemish Revolt against Maximilian of Austria as the main cause of Bruges’s downfall. Ruling over the Low Countries in the name of his underage son, Maximilian’s authoritarian style of government provoked tensions with the politically autonomous cities of Flanders (including Bruges), leading to an open rebellion in 1482. In an attempt to economically weaken his opponents, the prince ordered all foreign merchants to leave Flanders and to relocate to Antwerp in 1484. Hostilities ceased and the trading communities returned in 1485, but a new revolt broke out in 1487, prompting Maximilian to order the foreign traders to leave Bruges once again in 1488. Peace was finally concluded in 1492, bringing about a partial return of the foreign merchant groups to Flanders. Bruges had lost much of its commercial allure, however, and proved unable to match the trading conditions in Antwerp. As a result, all but some of the foreign traders settled definitively in Brabant in subsequent years. In 1511, the consulate, or the official representation, of the Portuguese, who controlled the quickly expanding trade with Africa and Asia, left Bruges. By

¹ For the most recent account of Bruges’s medieval history, see: Medieval Bruges, c. 850–1550, eds. Jan Dumolyyn/Andrew Brown, Cambridge 2018.
² For Bruges as a gateway market, see Peter Stabel, Dwarfs Among Giants. The Flemish Urban Network in the Late Middle Ages (Studies in urban social, economic and political history of the medieval and early modern Low Countries 8), Leuven 1997, pp. 160–161. For the city as a European distribution centre, Wilfrid Brulez, Bruges and Antwerp in the 15th and 16th Centuries: An Antithesis?, in: Acta Historiae Neerlandica 6 (1973), p. 22, 17. Brulez nuanced the differences between Bruges and Antwerp by pointing, among other things, at the presence of goods from Africa and Asia in Bruges during the fifteen century but acknowledged that the trade between Europe and the rest of the world was more significant in sixteenth-century Antwerp. For Bruges as the centre of a bipolar system and Antwerp as the capital of a global economy, see: Fernand Braudel, Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century. Vol. 3: The Perspective of the World, New York 1984, S. 96–101, 143–145.
1516, the consulates of all the Italian merchant groups, who had dominated luxury trade in the city for two centuries, had followed suit. According to Maréchal, the last individual Portuguese and Italian merchants based in Bruges were recorded in 1518 and 1519. He sees Hanseatic trade in the Flemish city coming to an end by 1517, even though the Hanse maintained a consulate in Bruges until 1553.3

Others have presented Bruges’s decline as a longer-term process caused by structural problems rather than a short-term turnabout prompted by political events. Many have highlighted, for example, that the city’s accessibility as a maritime port was progressively reduced as a consequence of the silting-up of the Zwin estuary already beginning in the early fourteenth century.4 Several historians have also emphasized that, certainly during its fairs, Antwerp attracted high numbers of foreign merchants long before the later fifteenth century, sometimes even bringing international trade in Bruges to a standstill. Drawing on toll accounts, Raymond Van Uytven has revealed that revenues from river traffic to and from Antwerp increased from the 1440s.5 Using the accounts of an Italian banking company, James L. Bolton and Francesco Guidi-Bruscoli demonstrated that even at the end of the 1430s, Antwerp was already acting as a centre of international commodity trade and a hub for South German traders, who would become one of the city’s leading merchant groups in the sixteenth century.6

Historians have thus claimed that the transition from Bruges to Antwerp was a more gradual process, not only starting earlier, but also being completed later than has been argued by Maréchal. Herman van der Wee, for example, has showed that the shift of financial services from Bruges to Antwerp happened much more slowly than the shift of the commodity trade: while Antwerp was already the leading commercial centre during the 1490s, it did not become the prime money market until after 1515.7 Similarly, Peter Spufford has considered late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Bruges as one of the many examples of the ‘stickiness’ of financial services, which tend to remain in a place after commercial activities have moved.8 Even international commodity trade did not suddenly disappear from Bruges altogether at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Castilian merchant community did not leave the city and even made it the staple market for its successful trade in Merino wool. Studies by Casado-Alonso and Phillips have shown that throughout much of the sixteenth century, Bruges was home to a permanent community of 50 to 60 Castilians. Their activities reached their peak only around 1560, when they traded 4,500 tons of wool, or about one quarter of all Iberian imports to the Low Countries.9 While they never had the same impact as their Castilian colleagues,

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9 Antwerp was still responsible for 68 percent of Iberian imports to the Low Countries. Hilario Casado-Alonso, La nation et le quartier des Castillans de Bruges (XVe et XVIe siècles), in: Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis 133 (1996), S. 61–77; W. D. Phillips, Merchants of the Fleece: Castilians in Bruges and the
other Iberian groups like the Aragonese, the Navarrese, and the Biscayans also kept frequenting the city.  

Even though the problem has thus given rise to lengthy and sometimes heated debates, a study of international trade in sixteenth-century Bruges other than that of the Castilian community is still lacking. This article will assess to what extent international commercial and financial activities remained in the city during the period in which Antwerp had taken over as the leading market on the basis of the registers of the Chamber. Organised by the urban aldermen, the Chamber was Bruges’s main court for civil matters, including both contentious and voluntary jurisdiction, throughout the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. As such, it was also the default tribunal for trade-related disputes between both citizens and foreign visitors and can be a useful indicator for commercial and financial activity in the city.  

Although the Chamber’s registers have been preserved for most of the sixteenth century, they have so far only been used to study international trade in Bruges during the later Middle Ages. This article will focus first on the registers for the period 1521–1523, or the first years after Maréchal supposed that nearly all foreign merchant communities had departed from the city. Then, as a point of comparison, we will zoom in on the period 1541–1543, when all authors agree that, apart from its role as a centre of Castilian trade, Bruges had definitively lost its position as an international commercial and financial hub. For each period, we will identify the foreign merchant groups present in the city, the kind of activities they were involved in, and the relationship between business in Bruges and in Antwerp.

I. Bruges in the Early 1520s: Centre of Castilian Trade and International Money Market

The registers of the Chamber of 1521–1522 and 1522–1523 suggest that, at the start of the 1520s, international trade in Bruges was dominated by one particular group of foreign merchants. The majority of cases related to commercial and financial activities involved some ten to fifteen recurring Castilian traders resident in the city on a permanent basis. Most of their disputes before the aldermen concerned the sale and delivery of Castilian Merino wool, which had become increasingly popular throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a substitute for the higher-quality and more expensive English wool, the purchase and delivery of Flemish cloth, and the settlement of financial transactions. In many of these cases, the


10 Maréchal (as fn. 3), pp. 45–54.

11 Jan Dumolyhn/Frederik Buijslaert/Guy Dupont/Jelle Haemers/Andy Ramandt, Political Power and Social Groups, c. 1300–c.1500, in: Medieval Bruges (as fn. 1), p. 272. Only cases between foreigners of the same origins were not dealt with by the aldermen but by the consuls of the foreign merchant communities.

12 See, for example, Bart Lambert, Making Size Matter Less: Italian Merchant Guilds and Companies in Late Medieval Bruges, in: The Company in Law and Practice: Did Size Matter? (Middle Ages–Nineteenth Century) (Legal history library 23/ Studies in the history of private law 12), ed. Dave De ruysscher/Albrecht Cordes/Serge Dauchy/Heikki Pihlajamäki, Leiden 2017, pp. 34–48. Selected cases from the Civiele Sententiën, as well as from the sixteenth-century registers, have been published in: Cartulaire de l’ancienne estaple de Bruges: recueil de documents concernant le commerce intérieur et maritime, les relations internationales et l’histoire économique de cette ville, Volume I–IV, ed. Louis Gilliots-Van Severen, Bruges 1904–1906. These, however, constitute only a small sample of the total number of verdicts relevant for the history of international trade in the city.
Castilians dealt with drapers from Ypres, one of the traditional Flemish cloth cities, which, despite a severe crisis in the fourteenth century, still exported to foreign markets, or from the newer drapery towns in the Lys basin, such as Armentières and Nieuwerkerke. In August 1522, for example, the Castilian merchant Jan de Madaria had Simon Spanvut, a draper from Ypres, arrested in Bruges. De Madaria claimed that, as a result of an earlier bond, Spanvut still owed him £18 7s. 1d. gr. The draper objected that, according to a later settlement, he was only expected to pay part of the money. Occasionally, the disputes of the Castilians before the Bruges aldermen related to transactions made further afield. In August 1522, Mathys Quennoy sued his fellow Castilian Andries de Pino. Together with Diego de Haro, another Castilian, they had bought Castilian wool which they had subsequently sold in Rouen, in Normandy. Part of the wool purchase had been paid for in cash, part in financial obligations. When those obligations had to be redeemed, however, de Pino proved unable to pay his part. Quennoy therefore had his former business partner arrested and demanded that the latter come up with the money within fourteen days. De Pino then claimed that he could not be held accountable by the Chamber, as the same matter was already being dealt with by the consuls of the Castilian community in Bruges. The aldermen determined that he was right, annulled the case, and told Quennoy to resort to the consuls. Yet even though they outnumbered all other groups, the Castilians were far from the only foreign merchants active in Bruges at the start of the 1520s. The Portuguese no longer appear in the records of the Chamber, but traders from other parts of the Iberian Peninsula such as Aragon and Navarre do. The consulates of the Aragonese and the Biscayans were still operating and watched over the privileges of their merchant groups in the city. On 23 September 1522, for instance, the consuls of Biscay claimed that only they, and not their colleagues from Castile, were authorised to deal with a dispute between Biscayan shipmasters and merchants. Some cases involved merchants from Toulouse, Paris, and Arras. Hanseatic merchants were few, but certainly not absent: the Hansards Jan Meerscheid and Hendrik van Rode sued people before the Chamber in 1521. While the Venetians and Lucchese seem to have left the city collectively, members of the Lomellini, the Pallavicini, and other Genoese families still frequently appeared before the aldermen, and Bruges attracted merchants from parts of Italy which were hardly ever mentioned in the fifteenth-century records of the Chamber, such as the Piedmont.

The most active Italian merchants in Bruges in the early 1520s were the Florentines, in particular the members of the Frescobaldi, Gualterotti, and Altoviti families. Between 1489 and 1518, Girolamo Frescobaldi had been one of the most prolific businessmen in the Low Countries, selling wool and cloth, controlling the alum trade, speculating on the import of

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14 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 202r.
15 Ibid., fol. 15r–156r, 158r–159r, 199r–200v.
16 Ibid., fol. 1r–v, 276r–277v.
17 Ibid., fol. 1r–v; 1522–3, fol. 117v.
18 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1522–3, fol. 27v.
19 Ibid., fol. 52v–53v, 241r–v.
20 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 10r–11r, 70r.
21 For the Lomellini and the Pallavicini, see Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 137r–v; 1522–3, fol. 220v–221r, 300r–v. For the Piemontese, see Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 88r–v and also Cartulaire de l’ancienne estaple II (as fn. 12), p. 583.
pepper, running a bank and lending to the central authorities. Until his death in 1518, he had managed these very diverse interests operating from both Antwerp and Bruges. After 1518, the Frescobaldi family continued this presence in Brabant and Flanders, also appearing regularly before the Bruges bench of aldermen. Many of these cases concerned the settlement of Girolamo’s debts, outstanding salaries of his employees and disagreements among his heirs. In December 1522, for example, the Bruges Chamber ordered his sons and heirs to pay no less than £3,600 gr. of arrears to the company of the Augsburg merchant and banker Jacob Fugger, which had its headquarters in Antwerp. Yet the Frescobaldi family also laboured at new enterprises in Bruges. In 1522, for instance, Filippo Frescobaldi, one of Girolamo’s sons, had to appear repeatedly in relation to an unpaid loan from the Antwerp Van Bombergen family. Antonio Frescobaldi, a further relative, had merchants summoned before the Bruges aldermen on account of debts. The Gualterotti family was led by Filippo Gualterotti, Girolamo Frescobaldi’s most important business partner and competitor. After his death in 1522, it was mainly Piero Gualterotti who looked after the liquidation of Filippo’s company and the family’s new business ventures. The Gualterotti also combined interests in Antwerp and Bruges, as did the Altoviti, the third leading Florentine family in Bruges during these years.

Although their numbers were far lower than in the fifteenth century, foreign merchants had thus not departed from the city altogether by 1520, as Maréchal has assumed. The records of the Chamber suggest, however, that those who remained were no longer primarily occupied with commodity trade. Apart from the Merino wool and the cloth from Ypres, Kortrijk, and other towns of the Lys basin traded by the Castilians, goods are mentioned only very sporadically in the aldermen’s verdicts. Bruges did still function as a centre for the trade in armour, which even attracted Antwerpian merchants. In January 1521, for example, the Castilian Jan de Vittedalgo sued Herman de Boghemakere, a merchant from the city on the Scheldt, to make him pay for a sale of pieces of armour and guns. Yet the trade in most other commodities, including that of exotic goods from the African coasts (which had started to trickle through in the fifteenth century), had moved to Antwerp. Financial transactions and money transfers, by contrast, had not: the majority of the cases before the Bruges aldermen were related to the settlement of and trade in bonds, obligations, and bills of exchange, many of which were drawn in Lyons, the emerging financial centre in the South, and the redemption of loans. A reference from September 1522 implies that this money market was still highly institutionalised: on the ninth of that month, Nicolo Altoviti had Piero Gualterotti arrested “publicly and scandalously at the

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23 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 12r–v, 30v–31r, 37r–v, 103r. Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1522–3, fol. 60 r–v. See also Cartulaire de l’ancien estaple II (as fn. 12), pp. 492f., 543f., 547f.
25 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1522–3, fol. 60r, 74r–v, 188r–v.
26 Ibid., fol. 74r.
27 Stabel (as fn. 22); Denucé (as fn. 22), pp. 11–18.
30 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 45r.
bourse at the hour of the assembly of the merchants there.”

31 Even thirty-six years after Antwerp had obtained the right to organise its own Oude Beurs, Bruges thus maintained a fully-functioning stock exchange where merchants met on a regular, probably daily, basis, in order to trade financial documents.

32 With most of the international commodity trade concentrated in Antwerp, but with the Castilian wool trade and a substantial part of the financial services remaining in Bruges, relations between the two cities were often complicated. In several cases, goods were paid for in Antwerp but had to be delivered in Bruges, or vice versa, giving rise to coordination issues. Based in Bruges, Simon Butin bought, and paid for, fourteen decks of playing cards from Jeronimus Baron, a Castilian in Antwerp. Upon delivery in Bruges, however, it turned out that Baron had sent Butin the wrong cards. After several attempts to get ahold of the right goods, Baron sued Butin before the Bruges bench of aldermen. Yet, unaware of the customs of this court, the Castilian failed to appear. Baron finally agreed to provide Butin with his cards but was then unable to find transport services to deliver them in Bruges in time.

33 The need for companies based temporarily or permanently in Antwerp to defend themselves in Bruges led to a strong increase in the use of attorneys, a phenomenon which was still much more limited in the fifteenth century. Local professionals such as Jehan van Zinneghem, Jehan van Rye, and Willem van Riebeke made a living representing a multitude of customers, including the Guattrotti, the van Bombergen family, and Bernard Stegher, the factor or commercial agent of the Fugger firm.

34 The need of Antwerp-based companies for legal representation in Bruges may also explain the continued presence of some of the foreign consulates in the city on the Zwin, long after the majority of the merchants had left.

II. Bruges in the Early 1540s: Centre of Castilian Trade and Regional Gateway Market

With about 15–20 merchants from Castile regularly appearing before the bench of aldermen, the Chamber’s registers from 1541–1542 and 1542–1543 confirm that Bruges still had a large and thriving permanent Castilian community during this time. The nature of Castilian business in the city seems not to have changed much in comparison to the early 1520s: most traders mentioned in the records supplied Merino wool to drapers in Flemish textile centres such as Ypres, Poperinge, and Tourcoing, bought cloth, and engaged in financial transactions. In October 1542, for example, the Castilian merchant Fernando de Courrir had Jacques Dassaert, a cloth entrepreneur from Tourcoing, arrested and brought before the Bruges aldermen after the latter had failed to pay what he owed in arrears.

35 Some of these Bruges-based Castilians also had interests in Antwerp. Juan Lopez Gallo, for instance, a merchant from Burgos, appeared repeatedly in cases concerning the sale of Merino wool before the Bruges bench of aldermen while holding the monopoly on the sale of alum and lending money to the crown in Antwerp.

36 The numbers of foreign traders from other parts of Europe, by contrast, are markedly lower than in 1521–1523. Merchants from Aragon and Navarre still appeared before the aldermen,

31 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1522–3, fol. 22r–23r.
32 For the Antwerp stock exchange, see Jean Denucé, De Beurs van Antwerpen, oorsprong en eerste ontwikkeling, 15e en 16e eeuwen, in: Antwerpsch Archievenblad 6 (1931), pp. 80–145.
33 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1521–2, fol. 149v–153v.
34 Ibid., fol. 7v–8v, 19r–20r; Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1522–3, fol. 86v.
35 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1542–3, fol. 24r.
but less frequently than twenty years previously.\textsuperscript{37} Hans Munster, from Danzig, was the only visitor from the Hanseatic cities in the Chamber’s verdicts, and George Trap the only Englishman.\textsuperscript{38} Quite a few cases involved merchants from Artesian cities such as Saint-Omer and Arras as well as from Paris and Lyons.\textsuperscript{39} Yet the fact that nearly all of these traders appeared in only one case before the bench of aldermen, and that they were represented by an attorney instead of showing up in person, suggests that they spent only limited periods of time in Bruges. Nearly all of the Italians, who had formed the leading merchant group in the city throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were still relatively numerous at the start of the 1520s, had now absconded to Antwerp. One of the few exceptions were the de Prato family, from Milan, who brought a number of cases before the Chamber between 1541 and 1543.\textsuperscript{40} The company of Giovanni Carlo Affaitadi, an important businessman from Cremona operating out of Antwerp, did have a factor, Francisco Gualterotti, in Bruges during these years.\textsuperscript{41} In September 1542, for example, Gualterotti looked after the Affaitadi’s interests in a case with the Castilian Antonio de Villafranca before the bench of aldermen.\textsuperscript{42} Alessandro Altinori, leader of one of the largest Florentine firms in Antwerp, also had to send a factor to Bruges, yet not as a result of a business venture. At an unspecified time, the Altinori had seen a large quantity of silk cloth disappear in front of their house and shop in the city on the Scheldt. The goods were then found in Bruges in the pawn shop of François Machet, who claimed to have acquired them as collateral for a loan. The Altinori sued Machet before the bench of aldermen, hoping to get the silks back, but the pawn broker was only prepared to do so in return for the value of the commodities. In April 1542, the Chamber decided the silk cloth had to be restored without any compensation.\textsuperscript{43}

It is clear from the records of the Chamber that by the early 1540s, Bruges had definitively lost its role as an international financial centre. Many cases still dealt with the trade in and payment of bonds and obligations, but the amounts at stake were only fractions of those transferred by the Frescobaldi, Gualterotti, and Altoviti merchant banks at the start of the 1520s.\textsuperscript{44} The only business referred to as a ‘bank’ in the Civiele Sententiën during these years is that of the Machet family, which, despite its long history in the city, was no more than a pawn shop that provided petty loans against often exorbitant interests with various objects taken as security deposits.\textsuperscript{45} The regular trade in payment instruments at the Bourse Square seems to have come to an end. Bruges may still have had a market for insurances: Hans Munster was arrested in the city in June 1543 because he had failed to pay a fee to Francisco de Carrion, who had insured his shipment of grain from Danzig to Lisbon.\textsuperscript{46} The range of commodities involved in the cases in the early 1540s was slightly wider than that twenty years earlier. Apart from the very high volumes of Merino wool and the different varieties of Flemish cloth traded by the Castilian

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., fol. 275v–276v; 1542–3, fol. 153r–155v.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 1541–2, fol. 18r–19r, 80v–81v, 183r–184r, 295v–296r; 1542–3, fol. 25v–26r.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., fol. 8r–v, 17v–18r, 2r–v, 134v–135r, 145r–v, 157v. For the identification of the de Prato family as Milanese, see Cartulaire de l’ancien estaple II (as fn. 12), pp. 666-673.
\textsuperscript{41} Jean Denucé, Inventaire des Affaitadi. Banquiers italiens à Anvers de l’année 1568, Antwerp 1934, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{42} Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1542–3, fol. 3r–v. For the rest of the case, see Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1541–2, fol. 292r–293r; 1542–3, fol. 93r, 119v.
\textsuperscript{43} Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1542–3, fol. 13r–14r, 223r–226r.
\textsuperscript{44} Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1541–2, fol. 18r–19r, 19r–v, 80v–81v.
\textsuperscript{45} Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1542–3, fol. 13r–14r, 223r–226r. Originally called Macetti and coming from Italy, the Machets had been active in Bruges since at least 1418. Joseph Maréchal, Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het bankwezen te Brugge, Bruges 1955, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{46} Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1542–3, fol. 153r-155v.
community, the aldermen dealt with disputes over grain, herring, jopen beer, kettles, pots, and slates. George Trap, a merchant from England, agreed to deliver large quantities of malt to Pieter Vindegoet, a local brewer. When Trap did not deliver in time, Vindegoet bought cheaper malt from a different supplier. Skins are the only luxury products mentioned during this period. Whereas foreign merchants in the city predominantly had disputes with other visitors from abroad in the fifteenth century and the early 1520s, most of their cases were now with local citizens or people from places nearby. Bruges, it seems from the Civiele Sententiën, had become a gateway market for the regional, Flemish economy, where foreign traders could buy goods produced in the surrounding cities and towns and Flemish customers had access to commodities and services that were not available elsewhere in the region.

With Bruges having lost its role as an international payment centre, the connection with business in Antwerp, which was still quite strong at the start of the 1520s, had disappeared. Traders from Antwerp only appeared in the Civiele Sententiën between 1541 and 1543 when Bruges-based merchants had failed to pay for their dealings in the city on the Scheldt. In August 1541, for example, the Lucchese company of Bonaventura Micheli and Jeronimus Arnolfini in Antwerp sued Jehan van Cleven before the Bruges aldermen. Van Cleven had pledged himself as a guarantor for Francisco de Prato, the Milanese operating from Bruges, who had not paid his debts to Micheli and Arnolfini. The aldermen released van Cleven from his duties and told the Lucchese firm to settle the affair with de Prato. Cases like these were exceptional though. Bruges was no longer involved in the bulk of international trade and payments, which were now concentrated almost exclusively in Antwerp.

III. Conclusion

The Civiele Sententiën of the Chamber of Bruges help us gain a clearer perspective on the shift of commercial and financial primacy from Bruges to Antwerp. They confirm the views of those who have argued that international trade in Bruges during the final decades of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth centuries was subject to a slow and gradual decline, rather than a steep and sudden fall. By the early 1520s, most of the long-distance commodity trade, including contacts with the newly discovered territories in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, had shifted to Antwerp, but the city remained the centre of the important Castilian wool trade in the Low Countries and the distribution point for the new and more traditional cloth industries of the Flemish cities and towns. International financial activities were particularly ‘sticky’ in Bruges, as the city continued to play an indispensable part in major money transfers and banking operations, often in close connection to what was going on in Antwerp. Bruges’s merchant community was still fairly international, including not only Castilians, but also traders from other parts of the Iberian Peninsula, France, the Hanseatic cities, and Italy, sometimes years after Maréchal had assumed that they had collectively departed. Several of the leading Florentine banking houses divided their presence and activities between Brabant and Flanders.

By the start of the 1540s, international financial services had disappeared, and so had most of the foreign merchants. Yet Bruges maintained and arguably even reinforced its position as the centre of Castilian wool trade in North-Western Europe as it continued to act as a hub for

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47 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1541–2, fol. 5r–6r, 31r–v, 80v–81v, 95r–v; 1542–3, fol. 3v–4r, 47v–48r.
49 Stadsarchief Brugge, Civiele Sententiën Kamer, 1541–2, fol. 95r–v.
50 Ibid., fol. 107v–108r.
Flemish textiles and developed into a gateway market for the surrounding regional economy. This raises the question as to whether we should think of the development of markets in rather simplistic, mutually exclusive terms, supposing that the emergence of one hub inevitably implies the immediate demise of another. The Civiele Sententiën suggest a more polycentric commercial landscape, in which certain commercial and financial services, rather than the entire focus of international trade and banking, shifted from one place to another. While Antwerp was unmistakably the leading market in the Low Countries and in Europe from the 1490s onwards, Bruges continued to attract specific groups of traders and particular commercial and financial activities until well into the sixteenth century.