

The Rise of Markets and Centres of Industry: Revisiting Adriaan Verhulst's Views on the Economic Development of Cities in the Southern Low Countries

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The Rise of Markets and Centres of Industry:

Revisiting Adriaan Verhulst's Views on the Economic Development of Cities in the Southern Low Countries

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Bart Lambert and Adam Hall

Introduction

At the time of its publication, in 1999, Adriaan Verhulst's *The Rise of Cities* offered the first synthesis of the earliest economic development of cities in the Southern Low Countries in more than fifty years. Bringing together research by Belgian, Dutch, French and German scholars, the book set out how fifteen urban settlements and towns in the regions between the rivers Somme and Meuse were transformed from small regional markets to internationally leading centres of industry and trade between 300 and 1200. Verhulst authoritatively refuted earlier explanatory frameworks for urban economic growth, most notably that of Henri Pirenne, and replaced them with a model of his own.

The purpose of this contribution is to see how his views have fared since the publication of his book. In the first part of the chapter, we present Verhulst's most important arguments on the early economic development of cities in the Southern Low Countries and specify how these perspectives differed from those of his predecessors. In the next section, we focus on one of the most original aspects of his work — his emphasis on the relationship between economic growth and urban space, that is, the organisation and lay-out of the area occupied by the city — and survey how the next generation of scholars has engaged with his views in this area. The third part of the chapter considers Verhulst's ideas about the institutional agency behind urban economic development, exploring who he believed was responsible for the economic rise of cities. We compare these ideas with those of the New Institutional Economics, a school of thought that has been greatly influential in recent economic historiography and whose views have some parallels with those of Verhulst. In the concluding section of the contribution, we make an overall assessment of Verhulst's arguments on urban economic growth and offer some perspectives for future research. Even though we will occasionally refer to other regions in the Southern Low Countries, the focus of the chapter will be on the county of Flanders and the duchy of Brabant.

A "Decent Funeral" for Pirenne's Views

In order to properly understand Verhulst's economic arguments and their impact, it is important to take into account the earlier ideas of other historians that he took issue with. In the words of Peter Clark, editor of the series in which the book was published, *The Rise of Cities* provided the views of Henri Pirenne, the Belgian pioneer of medieval economic history and Verhulst's predecessor at Ghent University, with a "decent funeral".¹ In a series of lectures given in the 1920s and in his seminal *Mahomet et Charlemagne* study, published in 1937, Pirenne had argued that the Islamic conquest of Northern Africa and the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century had turned the Mediterranean Sea into a *lac musulman* (a 'muslim lake'), cutting off Western Europe from the East and bringing long-distance

¹ A. Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities in North-Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. vii.

trade across the continent to a standstill.² Towns, which Pirenne defined as places of trade and industry with their own municipal organisation, disappeared.

The Arab supremacy in the Mediterranean, however, came to an end over the course of the tenth century, allowing Italian merchants to develop commercial contacts with the Near East and Byzantium. This revival of Italian trade also acted as an external incentive for commercial activity in North-Western Europe and the Low Countries, where merchants started trading with the Italians. Pirenne believed that these North-West European traders were new men who did not belong to the established feudal order but, for reasons of protection, settled near fortifications erected earlier against the Vikings. As long-distance trade grew, so did the power of the emerging merchant class, which was able to free itself from any seignorial control. Having assumed self-governance, the traders' suburbs boomed and developed into proper cities.

Verhulst strongly disagreed with the role that Pirenne attributed to long-distance trade as the prime mover of urban economic expansion. He claimed that after having reached its nadir following the disintegration of the Roman empire in the sixth and seventh centuries, urban life in the Southern Low Countries recovered. The origins of this recovery did not lie in a commercial revival, but rather in the organisation of the rural economy (see Chapter 3). Crucial in this respect was the emergence of abbeys, in the seventh and eighth centuries, and seignorial fortifications, in the ninth and tenth centuries, often in places that had already been inhabited during Roman times. According to Pirenne, these centres only played a minor economic role as protectors of merchants and artisans and as passive consumers. For Verhulst, by contrast, they were essential nodes of economic life, where the produce of the surrounding manorial estates, such as grain and wool, was redistributed and, once agricultural production started expanding, surpluses were stored. Traders selling these surpluses settled in the castles' and abbeys' vicinity, together with skilled manual workers servicing their inhabitants. These people were no new men who stood outside the established feudal society, as Pirenne had thought, but dependants who had started working on their own account, often at times of a decline of seignorial authority.

Drawing on insights from history, archaeology, toponymy and numismatics, Verhulst showed how in many places these settlements around castles and abbeys merged and developed into pre-urban spaces. Attracting increasing numbers of rural workers, particularly in the cloth sector, these early towns gradually grew bigger. As the produce of the surrounding countryside was increasingly less sufficient to feed the population, they engaged in trade over ever longer distances.³ In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these communities also started to self-organise, were granted forms of self-governance and became fully-fledged cities.

While Pirenne argued that urban economies in the Southern Low Countries emerged as an antithesis of feudal society, propelled by an exogenous factor, that is, the revival of trade in the Mediterranean, Verhulst thus claimed that they developed organically out of, and in interaction with, their feudal surroundings. In contrast with the Pirenne thesis, which assigned a central role to merchant outsiders but failed to clarify where these traders would have come from, Verhulst's theory was explicit about

² H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1925 – new edition: Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Brussels: Nouvelle Société d'Éditions, 1937).

³ See, in this respect, the debate between Verhulst and David Nicholas. Nicholas stated that, already in the twelfth century, Flemish agriculture was incapable of generating the surplus needed for urban growth and Flemish towns had to rely on interregional trade. Drawing on the twelfth-century *Gros Brief*, the earliest surviving comital account, Verhulst pointed out that coastal Flanders at this time not only produced oats but also wheat, meat, dairy products and wool. See respectively D. Nicholas, 'Of Poverty and Primacy: Demand, Liquidity, and the Flemish Economic Miracle, 1050-1200', in *American Historical Review*, 96 (1991), 17-41; A. Verhulst, 'The Alleged Poverty of the Flemish Rural Economy as Reflected in the Oldest Account of the Comital Domain Known as "Gros Brief" (A. D. 1187)', in *Studia Historica Oeconomica. Liber Amicorum Herman van der Wee*, ed. by E. Aerts, B. Henau, P. Janssens and R. van Uytven (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1993), pp. 369-382.

the agency of urban economic development: in his view, public authorities such as kings, counts, lords and abbeys were the instigators of urban economic growth, providing the basic framework in which their emancipated dependants could conduct commercial and industrial activities. One of the main attractions of Verhulst's account was also that he, unlike Pirenne, demonstrated how urban economic development was reflected in the changing urban space: in nearly all of the fifteen cities that he discussed, the earliest commercial and industrial settlements were shown to be situated in close proximity to comital castles or abbeys.

Economic Development and Urban Space before and after the Twelfth Century

Over the past twenty years, historians and archaeologists have continued to investigate the earliest urban economic development in the Southern Low Countries from a spatial point of view. Drawing on insights from new archaeological excavations or new interdisciplinary analyses involving history, archaeology, historical geography and other disciplines, the work of most of these scholars has confirmed, further refined and occasionally refuted Verhulst's views. *The Rise of Cities* has shown, for example, that in Ghent, the region's largest city for most of the medieval period, a *portus*, or trading settlement on the water, had emerged by the ninth century. The place probably served as a distribution centre for the products of the manorial estates of the important Saint Bavo abbey, which was situated nearby. Later in the ninth century, the *portus* moved further away from the abbey, inside a D-shaped ditch and earthwork connected to the River Lys. Verhulst assumed that this fortification was constructed to protect the merchant settlement. Yet recent research has demonstrated that the land in this spot was owned by the counts of Flanders, which suggests that the defence works originated as a comital fortification. The trading settlement would thus have moved from the vicinity of one manorial distribution centre to that of another, where it would further expand in the tenth century.⁴

Brussels, a place where a substantial part of the medieval urban fabric was destroyed and for which written sources are scarce, had only one page dedicated to it in *The Rise of Cities*. The book presented the city's genesis as a monocentric story, whereby it would have expanded around a fortification erected on an island in the river Zenne in the second half of the tenth century. In the past two decades, this view has been abandoned in favour of more polycentric explanations, according to which multiple nuclei would have developed simultaneously. Even though there are several of these polycentric interpretations, each of them confirms the strong connection between the economic development of the city and that of their rural surroundings. Paulo Charruadas, for example, showed that from at least the end of the tenth century, feudal lords were involved in the commercial exploitation of the countryside in the region of what was to become Brussels. Many of these magnates, including the powerful counts of Leuven who would later become the dukes of Brabant, settled in the Senne valley and on the nearby hills, from where they managed their rural estates. Also attracting the lords' vassals and dependants, these settlements developed into pre-urban nuclei. One of them may have been the *Brosella* identified as a *portus* or trading point on the water in an eleventh-century text. In a later period, these various settlements merged, forming the city of Brussels.⁵ Bram Vannieuwenhuyze

⁴ D. Tys, 'Macht, nederzetting en landschap in vroegmiddeleeuws Gent', in *Gentse Geschiedenissen ofte, Nieuwe Historiën uit de Oudheid der Stad en Illustere Plaatsen omtrent Gent. Ook ter inspiratie dienende voor diergelijke Steden in de Nederlanden, nu Te samen gevoegd uit verscheidene Schriften van eventijdige Aantekenaars*, ed. by K. De Groote and A. Eryvynck (Ghent: Stad Gent, 2017), pp. 35-44; D. Tys, P. Deckers and B. Wouters, 'Circular, D-Shaped and Other Fortifications in 9th- and 10th-century Flanders and Zeeland as Markers of the Territorialisation of Power(s)', in *Fortified Settlements in Early Medieval Europa*, ed. by N. Christie and H. Herold (Havertown: Oxbow Books, 2016), pp. 183-186.

⁵ P. Charruadas, 'Croissance rurale et action seigneuriale aux origines de Bruxelles (haut Moyen Âge-XIIIe siècle)', in *Voisinages, coexistences, appropriations : Groupes sociaux et territoires urbains (Moyen Age-16^e siècle)*, ed. by Ch. Deligne and C. Billen (Turnhout : Brepols, 2007), pp. 175-201; P. Charruadas, *Croissance rurale et essor urbain*

argued that the oldest of the pre-urban settlements was probably situated on the Coudenberg hill. In classic Verhulst style, integrating history, archaeology, toponymy and historical geography, he claimed that a fortification was constructed around the hill either by the feudal lords of Aa or the counts of Leuven. Subsequently, a market settlement developed in its proximity where goods from the surrounding areas were traded, possibly constituting the eleventh-century *portus*. In the twelfth century, this primary nucleus was overtaken by the more rapidly expanding centres in the lower Senne valley.⁶

An obstacle that often prevents us from properly investigating the Verhulst thesis is that the agricultural, artisanal and commercial human activities that would have taken place during the earliest stages of urban economic development usually leave few, if any, traces.⁷ A major step forward in this respect has been the study of so-called “dark earth”, that is, thick, humic, non-peaty and seemingly homogeneous layers of soil rich in anthropogenic elements. In Ghent, such dark earth was found specifically on the roads immediately west of the D-shaped fortification mentioned above. This would suggest that this area experienced particularly intense human activity during the late ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, confirming the importance of fortifications for the early economic development of cities.⁸ In other places, the analysis of dark earth supported Verhulst’s arguments about the role of agriculture in the earliest urban economies. In Antwerp, for instance, the micromorphological study of these layers suggested that the development of a ninth to tenth-century early trading town with fortifications was preceded by long-term agricultural activities, including crop cultivation.⁹ The analysis of dark earth in Brussels indicated the presence of crop fields, pasture land, stone quarries and stone extraction pits in several places, including some of the pre-urban nuclei mentioned above, from the tenth until well into the thirteenth centuries, with traces of artisanal activities only appearing in a later stage.¹⁰

The Rise of Cities convincingly shows how economic changes were reflected in urban space during the earliest stages of cities’ growth, but not during their continued development: Verhulst’s period of analysis ends around 1200, after most of the urban centres in his account had been granted self-governance. Since 1999, many scholars have explored the link between economic and spatial development in the cities of the Southern Low Countries during the later Middle Ages. During this period, urban growth in the region could no longer be sustained by local agricultural production alone, and cities increasingly had to rely on commercial contacts with other regions. At the same time, commodities produced in the Southern Low Countries, particularly its high-quality woollen cloth, became increasingly popular elsewhere in Europe. As a result, long-distance trade and export-oriented

à Bruxelles. *Les dynamiques d’une société entre ville et campagnes (1000-1300)* (Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique - Classe des Lettres, 2011).

⁶ B. Vannieuwenhuyze, ‘Brussel, de ontwikkeling van een middeleeuwse stedelijke ruimte’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ghent University, 2008), in particular pp. 426-429; P. Charruadas and B. Vannieuwenhuyze, ‘La ville en puzzle. Centralité et « subalternité » des espaces urbains à Bruxelles au Moyen Âge’, in *Subaltern City? Alternative and peripheral urban spaces in the pre-modern period (13th-18th Centuries). La ville subalterne? Espaces urbains « subalternes » et périphériques à l’époque pré-industrielle (XIIIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. by P. Clark and D. Menjot (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), pp. 23-44.

⁷ On the difficulty of identifying early artisanal activity in cities, see J. Bouwmeester, D. Tys and F. Theuws, ‘Reflections on the Role of Artisan Production in Urban Development in the Low Countries between AD 500-1150’, *Medieval and Modern Matters*, 4 (2013), pp. 153-164, and, specifically for Ghent, M.C. Laleman, ‘Ghent (East Flanders, Belgium) in the Discussion about Early Towns and Artisan Production’, *Medieval and Modern Matters*, 4 (2013), pp. 109-118.

⁸ M.C. Laleman and G. Vermeiren, ‘Ruimte en bebouwing in het centrum van het middeleeuwse Gent’, *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent. Nieuwe Reeks*, 64 (2010), pp. 33-34.

⁹ Y. Devos, B. Wouters, L. Vrydaghs, D. Tys, T. Bellens and A. Schryvers, ‘A Soil Micromorphological Study on the Origins of the Early Medieval Trading Centre of Antwerp (Belgium)’, *Quaternary International*, 315 (2013), pp. 167-183.

¹⁰ Y. Devos, ‘Dark Earth in Brussels (Belgium): A Geoarchaeological Study’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2019).

industries became more important as a driver of urban spatial development than was the case during the earlier period. In thirteenth-century Ypres, the city government bought part of the comital settlement around which the city had expanded initially in order to construct an impressive cloth hall. The market place was levelled and made more suitable to place stalls. All this had to facilitate the further growth of Ypres' fair, where merchants from all over Europe came to purchase its high-quality cloth.¹¹ In Bruges, which had grown out of a settlement around a Carolingian fortification, part of the urban fabric was demolished around 1200 to redirect the city towards the Zwin estuary, an inlet of the North Sea which was becoming a major axis of international trade.¹² In several large Flemish cities, suburbs of labourers working in the export industries developed and were incorporated within the city walls during this period.¹³

It would be wrong, however, to assume that these changes were dictated only by economic interests. Marc Boone has reminded us that interventions in public space, such as the construction of halls, markets or waterways, were also the subject of political strife, between different urban groups, different towns and between cities and the central government.¹⁴ Moreover, international trade may also have occupied a more prominent place in the Flemish cities, thirteenth-century Ypres and fourteenth and fifteenth-century Bruges in particular, than elsewhere in the Southern Low Countries.

Verhulst not only focused on the period between 500 and 1200 but also on cities specifically, that is, the largest of urban centres. The interplay between economic and spatial development in more modest towns, however, was largely ignored in his book. Thanks to a recent interdisciplinary research project that integrated archaeological approaches, many of which were non-invasive, and historical analysis, we are now relatively well informed about the spatial layout of a number of smaller port towns in the Zwin estuary. One of these was Hoeke, which originated as a fishing village and then became part of the portuary network of the larger city of Bruges. Trade in the Zwin was regulated by the staple privileges, which prescribed where in the estuary specific goods could be sold. While most commodities could only be traded in Bruges, Hoeke was made the compulsory staple market for nautical supplies and the main point for repairing ships.¹⁵ Its position as a trading hub had a strong impact upon the way in which Hoeke's urban space was organised. The archaeological and historical research revealed a town directed towards the water, with a harbour protected by a dike where ships could be pulled ashore and two quays. The evidence also indicates that at the end of the fifteenth century, when international trade in the Zwin region declined, the town shrank considerably.¹⁶ Based on the current state of the scholarship, Hoeke thus looks like a place that had its economic fortunes and its spatial organisation dictated almost entirely by its position on one of the most important commercial routes in the late medieval Southern Low Countries.

¹¹ O. Mus, 'L'évolution de la Ville d'Ypres depuis l'origine jusqu'à 1400', in *Ypres and the Medieval Cloth Industry: Archaeological and Historical Contributions*, ed. by M. Dewilde, A. Eryvynck and A. Wielemans (Asse-Zellik: Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, 1998), pp. 50-51.

¹² M. Boone, 'Brügge und Gent um 1250: die Entstehung der flämischen Städtelandschaft', in *Europas Städte zwischen Zwang und Freiheit. Die europäische Stadt um die Mitte des 13. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by W. Hartmann (Regensburg: Universitätsverlag Regensburg, 1995), pp. 97-110.

¹³ J. Dumolyn, 'Economic Development, Social Space and Political Power in Bruges, c. 1127-1302', in *Contact and Exchange in Later Medieval Europe. Essays in Honour of Malcolm Vale*, ed. by H. Skoda, P. Lantschner and R.L.J. Shaw (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp. 33-57.

¹⁴ M. Boone, 'Urban Space and Political Conflict in Late Medieval Flanders', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002), pp. 621-640.

¹⁵ B. Lambert, 'Merchants on the Margins: Fifteenth-Century Bruges and the Informal Market', *Journal of Medieval History*, 42 (2016), pp. 226-253. Whereas the staple regulations probably restricted the economic development of larger Zwin ports like Sluis, a case could be made that the system provided smaller towns like Hoeke and Monnikerede with opportunities they would otherwise not have had.

¹⁶ W. De Clercq, R. Dreesen, J. Dumolyn, W. Leloup and J. Trachet, 'Ballasting the Hanse: Baltoscandian Erratic Cobbles in the Later Medieval Port Landscape of Bruges', in *European Journal of Archaeology*, 20 (2017), pp. 710-736.

The development of other Zwin towns seems to have been more complicated. The smaller port of Monnikerede, for example, must also have looked like a miniature trading town around 1400, with a commercial street, a pier, a weighing house and a fish market, probably the result of its role as the compulsory market for dried and salted fish in the area. Monnikerede, too, withered away when trade declined at the end of the fifteenth century and even disappeared completely in subsequent centuries.¹⁷ Yet a survey of written sources demonstrated that before the town became a hub on the international trade routes in the Zwin estuary, it had served as a distribution centre for an important nearby abbey, in the same vein that some of the larger pre-urban centres did: in the thirteenth century, monks from the Ter Doest abbey in Lissewege used the place as a landing point to reach their scattered manorial estates in the neighbouring county of Zeeland and to bring in supplies.¹⁸

We should also be careful not to automatically project the patterns observed in the Zwin towns onto other small urban centres: Hoeke, Monnikerede and other places in the Zwin area owed a lot to their proximity to Bruges, one of the most successful commercial markets in North Western Europe during the later Middle Ages. Scholarship has shown that the earliest economic development of many of the more inland towns in the county of Flanders can be associated with the establishment of lordly castles and abbey estates. The demand and supply generated by this seigniorial or ecclesiastical presence allowed centres like Aalst or Ninove to emerge as distributive markets for their surrounding areas.¹⁹ In a later stage, these towns expanded further thanks to the success of their woollen cloth industries, whose products could be exported abroad via so-called gateway cities. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was Bruges that connected the smaller cloth-producing towns of Flanders with international markets, in the sixteenth century Antwerp. Requiring the construction of market squares and cloth halls, these textile activities had a significant impact on the towns' urban space.²⁰ In neighbouring Brabant, fortifications and monastic settlements also played an important role, in particular the castles erected during the consolidation and expansion of ducal power from the twelfth century onwards. Urban settlements like Zoutleeuw, Halen or Zichem grew around these establishments, in some cases following initiatives by the dukes themselves, and were subsequently granted self-governance. As in Flanders, the most successful of these towns combined regional market functions with the manufacture of textiles geared for export.²¹

Economic Development and Institutional Agency

In identifying counts, abbeys and other public authorities as the instigators of urban trade and industry, Verhulst was clear about the institutional agency behind cities' earliest economic growth. Debates about the institutional aspects of market development have taken centre stage in the economic

¹⁷ J. Trachet, W. Leloup, K. Dombrecht, S. Delefortrie, J. Dumolyn, E. Thoen, M. Van Meirvenne and W. De Clercq, 'Modelling Monnikerede. The Topographical Reconstruction of a Deserted Medieval Outport near Bruges', *The Medieval Low Countries*, 4 (2017), pp. 91-130.

¹⁸ W. Leloup, W. De Clercq, K. Dombrecht, J. Trachet and J. Dumolyn, 'Monnikerede: The Rise and Decline of a Medieval Port Community in the Zwin Estuary', in *The Medieval Low Countries*, 7 (2020), 97-130.

¹⁹ For Aalst and Ninove, see D. Callebaut, 'De topografische groei van Aalst of hoe een zehof een gebastioneerde stad werd', *Archeologia Belgica*, 255 (1983), pp. 227-249; G. Vande Winkel, 'Over de oorsprong van de stad Ninove (tot ca. 1100). Een hypothese geherformuleerd', *Het Land van Aalst*, 48 (1996), pp. 203-224.

²⁰ P. Stabel, *De kleine stad in Vlaanderen (14de-16de eeuw). Bevolkingsdynamiek en economische functies van de kleine en secundaire stedelijke centra in het Gentse kwartier (14de-16de eeuw)* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1995); P. Stabel, *Dwarfs among Giants. The Flemish Urban Network in the Late Middle Ages* (Leuven and Apeldoorn: Garant, 1997).

²¹ J.-P. Peeters, 'Het ontstaan van de 'smalle' steden en vrijheden in het Zuiden van het hertogdom Brabant (12^{de}-15^{de} eeuw)', *Eigen Schoon en De Brabander*, 97 (2014), pp. 373-388; J. Lisson, 'De stedenpolitiek van de hertogen van Brabant. De casus Zoutleeuw (10^{de}-13^{de} eeuw)', *Eigen Schoon en De Brabander*, 97 (2014), pp. 409-428; K. Corens, 'Zichem', *Eigen Schoon & de Brabander*, 97 (2014), pp. 429-446; K. Verhelst, 'Het stadje Halen: frontiere en uijtterste paele van Brabant (1206-1795)', in *Eigen Schoon & de Brabander*, 97 (2014), pp. 495-522.

historiography of the last few decades, largely resulting from the work of Douglass North. North argued that what explained whether an economic market prospered or failed was its institutional framework, that is, all its humanly shaped conditions within which economic exchange took place. The more these institutional arrangements reflected the needs of economic actors such as merchants and artisans, the lower the transaction costs, or the costs of making an economic exchange. The places that had the lowest transaction costs, and, thus, the most favourable institutional frameworks, were, consequently, the places that would attract most economic activity. While North's New Institutional Economics were highly influential, it sparked debate about who was responsible for creating the institutional arrangements that were most beneficial for economic growth. North himself believed that central or princely governments were the primary shapers, as they could coordinate their efforts to create favourable economic conditions over larger territories and had more means at their disposal to make sure that their decisions were implemented and respected. In this view, economic growth in the medieval Southern Low Countries was thus largely shaped by the initiative of the counts of Flanders and, later, the dukes of Burgundy.²² Others, most notably Oscar Gelderblom, claimed that urban authorities, rather than central governments, played the most fundamental role in boosting economic development. Gelderblom argued that city governments in late medieval Bruges, early modern Antwerp and seventeenth-century Amsterdam brought large numbers of international merchants to their towns by constantly adapting their policies to the needs of these footloose traders, thereby lowering their transaction costs.²³

Even though the views of North and other scholars inspired by the New Institutional Economics were being picked up by some economic historians of the medieval Low Countries by the end of the 1990s, Verhulst did not explicitly engage with them in *The Rise of Cities*.²⁴ While both he and the institutional accounts argue that rulers were crucial for the development of economic markets, human agency seems to be interpreted in a more nuanced way in *The Rise of Cities*. For North and Gelderblom, the creation of economically beneficial regimes by central or urban authorities was the key variable that explained why places flourished. For Verhulst, who was also a landscape historian, the initiative of counts and abbeys was essential, yet within the constraints imposed by geographical and environmental factors. He claimed, for example, that Ypres would never have developed from a comital mansion into a major city if the surrounding Yser basin had not been flooded in the eleventh century, creating perfect conditions for large-scale sheep farming and wool production.²⁵

At first sight, rulers also seem to have played a different role in the perspectives of North and Gelderblom on the one hand and of Verhulst on the other hand. In the institutional accounts, governments shaped economically beneficial arrangements by devising rules and regulations, providing speedy justice, offering favourable tax regimes and setting up economic infrastructure. The counts and abbeys in most of Verhulst's book are presented above all as economic players in their own right, whose central position in the manorial system kickstarted trade and industry in their vicinity. This, however, has a lot to do with Verhulst's chronological focus. In the last chapter of *The Rise of Cities*, which discusses the period in which the now mature cities started their commercial and

²² D.C. North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981).

²³ O. Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce: The Institutional Foundations of International Trade in the Low Countries, 1250-1650* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁴ See, for example, P. Stabel, 'Economic Development, Urbanisation and Political Organisation in the Late Medieval Low Countries', in *Political Competition and Growth: A Historical Analysis*, ed. by P. Bernholz, M.E. Streit and R. Vaubel (Berlin, Heidelberg and New York: Springer, 1998), p. 204.

²⁵ Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities*, p. 108. See also A. Verhulst, 'Les origines de la ville d'Ypres (XIe-XIIIe siècles)', *Revue du Nord*, 91 (1999), pp. 7-19.

industrial expansion, the counts of Flanders and other princes no longer appear as managers of a manorial economy, but as legislators and organisers of central taxation.²⁶

An important critique of the work of North and that of many inspired by his views is that it is mutually exclusive, or even mono-causal, and presumes that only one institutional level could be responsible for shaping economically advantageous institutional arrangements.²⁷ For North himself, only central governments were in a position to create the conditions for economic growth; for Gelderblom only urban authorities were capable of doing so. The latter even branded central government policy as economically destructive, led solely by political, military and fiscal interests. A similar line of reasoning can be found in chapter five of *The Rise of Cities*. Underlying this part of the book is the assumption that in the period after 1100, urban autonomy, particularly the autonomy of the urban merchant bourgeoisie, was a prerequisite for urban economic growth. Central government initiative detracted from that autonomy and, therefore, impeded cities' economic development. The 'monarchical' reign of Philippe of Alsace, count of Flanders in the twelfth century, for example, is presented in a negative light because it replaced the cities' government by sworn communal representatives with that of aldermen appointed by the central government (see Chapter 5).²⁸ The Burgundian integration of the Low Countries in the later medieval period is explicitly described as a "less favourable political and economic climate" for urban development, "a result of the centralization and taxation that came with a unified state apparatus".²⁹ Verhulst's position is remarkable given his emphasis on the positive effects which princely initiative had on cities' economic growth during earlier centuries. It also sits uneasily with some of his other publications, in which he demonstrated how the policies of the Flemish counts of the Alsace dynasty promoted urban economic development. In two articles published in 1967, for instance, Verhulst showed how Philip of Alsace founded the seaport towns of Dunkirk, Gravelines, Nieuwpoort and Biervliet and provided them with toll exemptions to further stimulate their growth.³⁰ It is important to remember, however, that Verhulst's views in *The Rise of Cities* applied only to the largest urban centres. While boosting the economies of smaller towns or founding new centres posed little threat, Verhulst explained how cities like Ghent and Bruges had grown too powerful by the twelfth century for their rise to go unchallenged by the central government. The policies of the counts of Flanders, and, following them, the dukes of Burgundy, he believed, were therefore explicitly meant to curtail the political and economic power of these large centres.³¹

Were economic policies in the Southern Low Countries after 1100 necessarily defined by opposition between the central government and the largest cities? It is hard to deny that urban economic development during this period depended primarily on the decisions of urban magistrates. Large-scale alterations to urban economic space such as the construction of the cloth hall in Ypres or the

²⁶ Even though the role of princes and the nobility as consumers and economic actors in Flemish cities remained important throughout the later Middle Ages. See F. Buylaert, 'Lordship, Urbanization and Social Change in Late Medieval Flanders', *Past and Present*, 227 (2015), pp. 31-75.

²⁷ J. Dumolyn and B. Lambert, 'Cities of Commerce, Cities of Constraints: International Trade, Government Institutions and the Law of Commerce in Later Medieval Bruges and the Burgundian State', in *Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History (TSEG)*, 11 (2014), pp. 107-123.

²⁸ Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities*, pp. 140-141.

²⁹ Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities*, pp. 156.

³⁰ A. Verhulst, 'Un exemple de la politique économique de Philippe d'Alsace: la fondation de Gravelines (1163)', *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 10 (1967), pp. 15-28; A. Verhulst, 'Initiative comtale et développement économique en Flandre au XIIe siècle: le rôle de Thierry et de Philippe d'Alsace (1128-1191)', in *Miscellanea Medievalia in Memoriam Jan Frederik Niermeyer*, ed. by D.P. Blok (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1967), pp. 227-240; A. Verhulst, *Het Landschap in Historisch Perspectief* (Antwerp: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1966), pp. 32-33.

³¹ Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities*, p. 141. Some have argued that one of the main reasons why the Flemish counts founded the port towns was to control the large cities' trade flows. Gravelines, for example, was situated at the mouth of the river Aa, which provided the city of Saint Omer with access to the sea. See, for instance, R. Rutte, 'Stadswording en machtspolitiek. Vergelijkend onderzoek met een modelmatige benadering', *Historisch-Geografisch Tijdschrift*, 21 (2003), pp. 84-86.

reorientation of Bruges' urban fabric discussed above, for example, were commonly coordinated by city governments. Urban authorities did not hesitate to intervene in the wider area beyond their city walls in order to serve their economic interests either. When, during the later medieval period, Bruges lost out as a centre of international trade because of the reduced navigability of the Zwin estuary, the city reshaped the area by digging new canals, locks and sluices, all to no avail.³²

In areas such as the granting of commercial privileges or the provision of legal security beyond their own jurisdictions, however, the major cities did not have sufficient authority to make decisions alone and thus had to consult with the central government, as well as with representatives of the merchant communities. Ever since the thirteenth century, delegations of the largest Flemish cities met with the counts of Flanders, later the dukes of Burgundy, to discuss important economic matters.³³ These princes ruling over the Low Countries were undeniably also led by non-economic interests, but so were its city governments.³⁴ Yet quite often, both parties found common ground and embarked on joint initiatives. The staple system, for instance, not only served the interests of Bruges, which became the compulsory market for the majority of goods in the Zwin basin, but also those of the Flemish counts, for whom it was easier to tax trade in a limited number of hubs rather than across the whole area. Hence, it was enforced by a series of comital privileges.³⁵

One of the most crucial nodes in Bruges' portuary network, Damme, originated as a result of combined central and urban initiative. Around 1170, Count Philip of Alsace constructed a dam at the ultimate navigable point of the Zwin estuary, towards which the Bruges city government then decided to dig a canal, linking its city to the Zwin. Damme emerged near the point where the canal met the dam. Endowed with generous toll exemptions by the count, the town became a major commercial port, probably taking over this role from the nearby settlement of Letterswerve.³⁶ In an apparent contradiction of his characterisation of the count as a 'monarchical' curtailer of urban economic political and economic ascendance, Verhulst himself also mentions how that same Philip of Alsace pleaded with the German emperor to set up four new fairs in Aachen and Duisburg to provide the merchant bourgeoisie of Ghent with new commercial outlets.³⁷

Also at the end of the Middle Ages, the main cities and the central government can be seen working together on multiple occasions: many of Bruges' efforts to construct new waterways and reverse its economic decline, for instance, were supported by the prince.³⁸ It seems, then, that, even if both parties often pursued different interests, the economic policies of the central government and the largest cities in the Southern Low Countries were not as antithetical as it may appear from the work of North, Gelderblom or the concluding chapter in Verhulst's *The Rise of Cities*. Future explanatory frameworks should take this into consideration and step away from the idea that the agency of urban economic growth was necessarily exclusive to one institutional level.

³² B. Dewilde, J. Dumolyn, B. Lambert and B. Vannieuwenhuyze, "'So One Would Notice The Good Navigability': Economic Decline and the Cartographic Conception of Urban Space in Late Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Bruges', *Urban History*, 45 (2018), pp. 2-25.

³³ Dumolyn and Lambert, 'Cities of Commerce', p. 99.

³⁴ We should also account for differences between individual princes. The Flemish counts of the Alsace house, for example, conducted a much more active economic policy than their successors in the thirteenth century.

³⁵ Lambert, 'Merchants on the Margins', pp. 227-229.

³⁶ W. Leloup and B. Vannieuwenhuyze, 'Damme en Sluis: de oorsprong en vroege stadsontwikkeling van twee middeleeuwse Zwinstadjes', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge*, 150 (2013), pp. 13-15". For Letterswerve, see Th. de Hemptinne, L. De Mey and A. Verhulst, 'Un tarif de tonlieu inconnu, institué par le comte de Flandre Thierry d'Alsace (1128-1168) pour le port the Littresuerua, précurseur du port de Damme', *Bulletin de la Commission royale d'Histoire*, 164 (1998), pp. 143-172.

³⁷ Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities*, p. 139.

³⁸ Dewilde, Dumolyn, Lambert and Vannieuwenhuyze, "'So One Would Notice The Good Navigability'", p. 5.

Conclusions

Twenty years after its publication, Adriaan Verhulst's *The Rise of Cities* can only be said to have had a major impact on the scholarship on urban economic development in the medieval Southern Low Countries. As a result of the book, the theory of Henri Pirenne, who claimed that cities in this area originated as settlements of traders outside the feudal order capitalising on the tenth-century revival of trade in the Mediterranean, was basically abandoned. Over the past two decades, new archaeological excavations and interdisciplinary research supported Verhulst's view that the largest urban centres in the Southern Low Countries emerged as central places for the manorial economies of the surrounding countryside, often around abbeys or comital fortifications. Verhulst's approach of linking economic growth to changes in urban space was also increasingly adopted by scholars of the later medieval period, who showed that, after the emergence of cities as nodes in the feudal economy, long-distance trade and export-oriented industries often did take over as the primary drivers of urban spatial development. Apart from some Zwin towns, where recent research suggests an economic development and an organisation of urban space that was strongly shaped by their position on international trade routes, most smaller urban settlements in Flanders and Brabant appear to have originated around seigniorial or monastic establishments, becoming regional markets and cloth-producing centres in a subsequent stage.

In Verhulst's account of urban economic growth, rulers occupy a central position. Many others have highlighted the role of political authorities in the development of urban markets over the past few decades, mainly as a result of the work of Douglass North and his New Institutional Economics. Verhulst seems to share with these scholars the idea that only one level of government could be responsible for creating economically beneficial policies, at least as far as the largest cities in the Southern Low Countries were concerned. After central rulers had jumpstarted urban economic growth in their role of managers of the manorial system, autonomous municipal governments took charge of the further expansion of these large urban centres. For Verhulst, princely policies, which were now focused on taxation and legislation, mainly hampered this development. Both older and more recent studies, however, have shown that the policies of central governments could also have positive effects on urban economies and that princes and cities often worked together in this respect. Future research will have to account for this evidence and allow for agency across institutional levels if it wants to satisfactorily explain urban economic growth.