On Saturday 17 September 1127, in Bruges, William Clito, the newly appointed count of Flanders, proclaimed the re-imposition of tolls on the town, which he had abolished on his accession only five months previously. The burgesses of Bruges regarded the count’s new impositions as unjustified and unreasonable. The tolls had been remitted by William as part of a package of concessions granted in order to gain the support of the city of Bruges during the dispute over the succession to the county which had broken out on the murder of Count Charles ‘the Good’ by some of his vassals on 2 March of the same year. The reason for William’s action in September was that before the remission of the tolls, the revenue accruing from them had been enfeoffed to several of his vassals. These vassals were now evidently in financial difficulties, and claimed that the count had not had the right to remit the toll without their consent, since it constituted a diminution of their fiefs; equally, they argued, the people of Bruges had no right to demand remission from the count.¹ Yet for the burgesses the abolition of tolls had undoubtedly been a major economic benefit, and their re-imposition could be expected to damage the commerce of the town, already threatened by a climate of incipient civil war. William Clito’s actions on 17 September and their consequences show the new count of Flanders between a rock and hard place. As a political body, the citizenry of Bruges was the most important institution among the count’s supporters, which it might seem foolhardy to alienate. Yet with rival claimants to the county of Flanders challenging his rule, William could even less afford to antagonise the knightly vassals who he relied on to do the bulk of his fighting for him.

Why did William Clito go so far as to tear up the solemn concessions with which he had inaugurated his rule, thereby sowing the seeds of a revolt that flared up throughout northern Flanders over the next few months and eventually deposed him? In view of the political and military importance of both the town of Bruges and his own vassals,
could William not have found the means to compensate one or the other, rather than having to choose between depriving his vassals of their income, and breaking his word to the burgesses? Unlike modern governments, the medieval Flemish comital administration evidently did not have the option of shuffling income and expenditure around to the extent necessary to cover the amounts lost by the remission of the toll. Bruges was clearly the most important city in the county, and the main source of the count’s wealth; the importance of the assignation of revenues from the tolls there was that they represented a regular form of income, and one which was probably in the form of cash rather than kind. The revenues derived directly from the urban tolls may thus have been far more attractive to William Clito’s vassals than the tenure of perhaps modest country estates.

This episode, from Flanders in the year 1127, shows the workings of an institution generally known in French-language scholarship as the fief-rente, and in English either as fief-rent or money-fief. There was a simple distinction between this and what we might clumsily, although usefully, think of as the ‘traditional fief’. The latter constituted a source of revenue: this source might consist of land or rights which produced income, which might be in the form of cash (such as rents) or kind (i.e. produce or renders) or a combination of the two. The money-fief, by contrast, was limited to the income itself. Even though money-fiefs, when described in the sources, were normally described in terms of a sum of money expressed as an annual payment, the practicalities of medieval life meant that they were most probably paid out in the form of smaller amounts at shorter intervals. This explains why money-fiefs were hypothecated, that is, they were tied to specific sources of revenue, as in the case of the tolls of Bruges. This element of hypothecation is significant, as it is one feature that distinguished the money-fief from a simple money grant or pension.

In its distribution the money fief was limited to those parts of Western Christendom that had an economy in which trade and industry were more important than agriculture. A recent study of the money-fief in Flanders has argued that it was a military institution, whose ‘primary goal was to attract foreigners who would serve the prince on the battlefield’. Clearly, the money fief seemed to form a system of remuneration for military service that was distinct from the traditional feudo-vassalic bonds. Scholarship has always accepted that money-fiefs formed an important element in the recruitment of military forces in