THE CHALLENGE FOR A MEDIEVAL CENTER OF INDUSTRIAL GROWTH: YPRES AND THE DRINKING-WATER PROBLEM

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A Definition of the Problem by Way of Introduction

In order to be able to sketch the problems regarding water management in the town of Ypres during the Middle Ages, we first of all need to discuss its demographic, industrial, and topographic development during this period. The Southern Low Countries—consisting of present-day Belgium and Northern France—experienced during the course of the eleventh century until around the middle of the thirteenth century a significant economic expansion. At the head of this development was the region ruled by the Count of Flanders. Thanks to the flourishing textile industry with important sales in all of Western and Eastern Europe, some very large cities developed here, e.g. Arras, Douai, Saint-Omer, Lille, Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres. As a result, the County of Flanders became one of the most urbanized regions, with some of the largest towns to be found in medieval Western Europe. With its sixty-thousand inhabitants, Ghent was, in the thirteenth century, the second-largest town north of the Alps, after Paris. Still according to

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1 There exist two short and popularizing contributions concerning this issue; see H. Vermeulen-Meynne, Yper en haar waterstelsel (Ieper, s.d.) and R. Boone, Overheidszorg voor drinkwater in Vlaanderen (Ghent, s.d.), pp. 174–184. Because of the limited originality of these publications, I will not refer to them in my essay. My thanks go to my colleague Marjan De Smet for her English expertise and her critical reading of the manuscript.

2 For a more or less accurate view of the medieval topography of the town, one still has to fall back on Henri Hosdey, “Ypres (Ieperen). Plan d’Ypres en 1564,” in Atlas des villes de la Belgique au XVIe siècle, ed. Charles Ruelens (Brussels, 1887), 4 pp. + map. The recent study by Ann Vanrolleghem, Ieper à la carte. De Ieperse vestingen in kaart gebracht (Ypres, 2006), is mainly interesting for its reproduction of numerous post-medieval maps and plans. The introduction should, however, be used with great caution. It merely repeats older theories on the origin of the town.

3 Among other works, see David Nicholas, Medieval Flanders (London, 1992).
medieval standards, Ypres—with its population of forty thousand at the end of that century—was also a metropolis.

The town owed its growth especially to the afore-mentioned textile industry, which initially processed the local wool from sheep grazing on the nearby salt marshes of the Yser basin. However, at the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth centuries, the supply of wool partially broke down, due to the silting-up of the salt marshes, which rendered them useless as pastureland for the sheep. Moreover, the demand for high-quality cloth necessitated the import of raw materials from England, where better wool was to be obtained. Consequently, from the twelfth century onwards, wool was increasingly bought on the English market, and good connections between Ypres and the sea became a conditio sine qua non for its continued development.

The Necessity of Good Connections by Water

During the Middle Ages, the most efficient and cheapest way of transporting bulk goods such as wool (as an import) or cloth (as an export) was by water. The connection of Ypres to the North Sea, and thus to England, was guaranteed by the Ieperlee, a tributary of the Yser river, which discharges into the North Sea. As a result, English woollen-exporting ports such as Boston and Hull could be reached relatively easily.

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6 For the importance of the cloth industry as a catalyst for the spectacular development of the town, see especially Marc Dewilde et al., ed., Ypres and the Medieval Cloth Industry in Flanders. Archaeological and Historical Contributions, (Archeologie in Vlaanderen, Monografie) 2 (Asse-Zellik, 1998).