As everywhere in Europe, Netherlandish, medieval and early modern urban life was organized around corporations. Besides the specific goals in the fields of profession, religion, culture and defence, these corporations offered their members a forum for sociability by eating, drinking and feasting together. In the late medieval and early modern Netherlandish cities, economic and professional life was mainly organized in crafts and guilds. In confraternities townspeople could devote themselves to religious activities and charity; the shooting guilds provided the necessary training for the urban militia; townspeople with literary interests found their way to chambers of rhetoric. All these associations had common structures and ritualized devotional activities.¹ In the professional-cultural sector, guilds of librarians and of artists were active in the larger cities. From the fifteenth century onwards, but mainly in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one sees the emergence of associations (confraternities, guilds, colleges) of schoolmasters, and of legal and medical professionals. These types of associations are scarcely researched and never in the context of civil society. In this paper, I will only concentrate on the lawyers’ associations.

The questions for which we have to look for answers are inter alia: why did schoolmasters and lawyers feel the need to establish guilds, and why did this only happen in a few Netherlandish cities, both important ones as well as smaller ones? Why were they late in creating these guilds,

¹ See in the context of this article the definitions in Ulrich Meyer-Holz, Collegia Iudicum. Über die Form sozialer Gruppenbildung durch die gelehrten Berufsjuristen im Oberitalien des späten Mittelalters, mit einem Vergleich zu collegia doctorum iuris, Fundamenta Juridica. Hannoversche Beiträge zur rechtswissenschaftlichen Grundlagenforschung 6 (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989), 193–198.
compared with what occurred in many other European countries? What were the motives for their creation: the protection and improvement of the quality of the profession, religious and sociable activities, political and prestigious influence, education? A careful reading of their deeds of foundation and statutes can certainly help to answer some of these questions. But we know that these formal charters do not explain the full truth and often stick to traditional religious and companionable motives. Thus an analysis of the activities of the members of the association can help to elucidate the problem. Furthermore, comparing the often poorly documented associations with analogous institutions in other regions and countries is also fruitful.

The corporate organization of juridical life started in Northern Italy in the thirteenth century. Colleghi
cum or juristarum (= collegi professionali cittadini dei dottori, giudici ed avvocati) or Arte dei Giudici e Notai (guilds of judges and notaries) were established in all the cities with an organized juridical life. According to Ulrich Meyer-Holz who analyzed the juridical professional organizations in Northern Italy it is quite clear that they correspond to the medieval guild system with all of its elements. A detailed analysis of the sources reveals that the associations were horizontal social structures whose aims and goals were not only professional but also political, social and religious. Under the influence of the Catholic restoration in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, several religious confraternities dedicated to Saint Yves were founded in addition to the secular lawyers’ guilds. In the early modern period, Rome possessed no less than four such associations.

Compared with their peers in the rest of Europe, Castile’s lawyers were slow to develop any form of communal or corporate life, despite their rapid numerical expansion. They organized similar institutions only in the second half of the sixteenth century. The first to organize a corporate association was the attorneys in 1574; it was attached to the royal councils in Madrid. It was followed by colegios de abogados (colleges of advocates) in several other cities. The purposes of these colleges were, as elsewhere, to institutionalize some form of communal

---