CHAPTER TWO

AN URBAN NETWORK IN THE MEDIEVAL LOW COUNTRIES.
A CULTURAL APPROACH

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Introduction

In the year 1089–1090 the duchy of Lower Lotharingia—an area roughly equivalent to today’s Low Countries—was struck with a terrible epidemic. Many people died, their arms and legs, hands and feet coloured black; others survived but their limbs died off and had to be amputated. Nowadays, we believe that the victims were suffering from a disease called ergotism, that was caused by the *claviceps purpurea* species, a parasite that had affected the rye that was a staple in their diet.¹

In the twelfth century however, it was believed that the wrath of God had caused the sick to be afflicted by the *mal des ardents*, later called St Anthony’s fire, for the cure of which the intervention of the Virgin was indispensable. The memory of this tragedy must have haunted people for generations. Centuries later many still travelled from far and wide to commemorate the events and to honour the redemptive Lady. The commemoration of the eleventh-century epidemic of ergotism is one of the earliest indications for the existence of a cultural network that developed in the southern Low Countries and (present-day) Northern France during the high Middle Ages, and that would later extend further to the north. For centuries, townsmen from many places gathered annually to commemorate the terrible plague. But in fact this is merely one example. Frequent interchange developed between the most important towns over a long period.²

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A shared culture is often seen as one of the key elements of a collective identity. The religious historian and medievalist Adrian Hastings, for instance, describes a nation as: ‘a large human community, at once cultural and political’. In this volume, Peter Hoppenbrouwers adds that it is only the extent of politicisation that distinguishes ethnies (‘more cultural entities’) from nations (‘more political entities’). When researching nations and national identities, most scholars take political boundaries, real or mythical, as their point of departure, and subsequently try to reconstruct the shared cultural identity within this area. That is also what Wim Blockmans and I did when we started a research-project entitled ‘Centralisation or particularism? The development of national identities in the Netherlands’. We wanted to compare identities in the principalities of Brabant and Guelders with emerging identities of the Low Countries as a whole. This approach is certainly valid, as we can see in the chapters by Noordzij, Smithuis and Bijker in this volume. A sense of Low Countries as identity can be seen to operate especially from c. 1570 onwards, when William of Orange and others started their media offensives. Still, we should ask ourselves if this emphasis on the political entities is inevitable. Can a collective identity only develop inside existing political boundaries? Is it homogeneous by definition?

By taking a cultural network as a point of departure, this chapter explores another possible approach, concentrating on a series of inter-urban meetings—military contests, religious and urban festivals—I will try to establish if and to what extent the towns of the Low Countries fostered a shared culture. Which towns were involved? How far did this network spread, how did it evolve during the late Middle Ages and what was its character? We will establish its density and spread, and

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3 For a discussion of the different approaches of culture, see for instance: David Inglis and John Hughson, *Confronting culture. Sociological vistas* (Oxford, 2003), 5–6. See also Hoppenbrouwers’ contribution in the present volume.


5 See the contributions by Alastair Duke and Judith Pollmann in the present volume.