

THE IDENTITY OF THE URBAN ‘COMMONERS’ IN 13TH CENTURY FLANDERS

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the social protest of the 1280s in the main cities of the county of Flanders. The protestors were a very heterogeneous group, because wealthy tradesmen, craftsmen and middle class artisans united forces to fight their common enemy, the established families that had governed the cities for many decades. The protestors had a shared, distinct and insistent identity. They presented themselves as the *meentucht*, a vernacular translation (or better: a contemporary interpretation) of the Latin *communitas*. The use of this term as a basis for their self-definition justified their protest because the rebels saw themselves as the true commoners of the city.

KEYWORDS

Political History, City, Medieval Flanders, Identity.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Historia Politica, Civitas, Flanders Mediaevalis, Identitas.

The history of rebellion and political conflict fascinates medievalists. The thrilling stories of bellicose Jacques, ransacking Ciompi and murdering peasants in the English countryside in 1381 attract amateurs and scholars of history alike. The same is true for the medieval history of the Low Countries. Historians have extensively examined the numerous revolts and political conflicts that took place in present-day Belgium and the Netherlands between *circa* 1280 and *circa* 1580. As they have shown, this densely populated region, which consisted of many small principalities and wealthy cities, faced violent conflict between powerful factions, fighting amongst the elite, uprisings of craft guilds, struggles between artisans, and so on. In his study of the moral and political society of Brabant and Flanders, the main principalities of the Low Countries, the nineteenth-century historian Léon Vanderkindere even described the Low Countries as *le paradis des luttes sociales*.¹ As a result, historians have at their disposal many publications covering who rebelled in the prosperous cities of the Low Countries, when they did it, and why; what rebels did and said; and if they succeeded in changing policies, or not.² However, the scholar who searches for a work on the identity of these people rapidly becomes disappointed. Most of the existing literature on urban identity in the Low Countries deals with the identity of an entire city, or the identity of the population of a particular region, while a study on the self-representation and distinctive characteristics of subordinate urban groups has yet to be written.³ In this article, I will provide an initial, tentative approach to this topic and also raise many new questions.

Much depends, of course, on what is meant by 'identity'. Even though there are a number of works which define and specify the term 'identity' and its use, scholars still do not agree on the exact definition of this concept. Some scholars, such as the American sociologist and follower of Bourdieu, Roger Brubaker, even claim to have excluded this term from their analysis, because it is vague and inherently contradictory. He argues that, in its focus on the connections between people and their similarities, 'identity' refers to the fundamental similitude of a group of people. At the same time, 'identity' points to the uniqueness and collective 'selfhood' of a people, because it concentrates on aspects that distinguish individuals or groups from

1. "the paradise of social struggles". Mollat, Michel; Wolff, Philippe. *Ongles bleus, Jacques et Ciompi. Les révolutions populaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1970: 126 (quoting: Vanderkindere, Léon. *Le siècle des Artevelde. Etudes sur la civilisation morale et politique de la Flandre et du Brabant*. Brussels: Lebègue, 1879).

2. Dumolyn, Jan; Haemers, Jelle. "Patterns of urban rebellion in medieval Flanders". *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005): 369-393; Cohn, Samuel Jr. *Lust for liberty. The politics of social revolt in medieval Europe, 1200-1425. Italy, France, and Flanders*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2006; Boone, Marc. "The Dutch Revolt and the medieval tradition of urban dissent". *Journal of Early Modern History*, 11 (2007): 351-375; Arnade, Peter. *Beggars, iconoclasts, and civic patriots. The political culture of the Dutch Revolt*. London: Cornell, 2008; Dumolyn, Jan; Haemers, Jelle, "'A bad chicken was brooding.' Subversive speech in late medieval Flanders". *Past and Present*, 214 (2012): 45-86; Lantschner, Patrick. "Revolts and the political order of cities in the late Middle Ages". *Past and Present*, 225 (2014): 3-46.

3. Boone, Marc; Stabel, Peter, eds. *Shaping urban identity in late medieval Europe*. Leuven: Garant, 2000; Stein Robert; Pollmann, Judith, eds. *Networks, regions and nation. Shaping identities in the Low Countries, 1300-1650*. Leiden: Brill, 2010; Soen, Violet; Junot, Yves; Mariage, Florian, eds. *L'identité au pluriel. Jeux et enjeux d'appartenances autour des anciens Pays-Bas, XIVe-XVIIIe siècles*. Lille: Revue du Nord, 2014.



each other.⁴ To overcome this ambiguous word 'identity', Brubaker advises focusing research on less congested categories of thought, such as peoples' identification and self-categorization, commonality and connectedness, or self-understanding and social location. Following Brubaker's advice, I will focus on one specific aspect of the research on identity. I will use this term to refer to the perception people have of themselves. Although I am well aware that reconstructing peoples' self-portraits is only one of several optional approaches to (the history of) their identity, it is, in my view, necessary if we are to understand their distinctiveness. In short, the 'self-understanding' of social protesters in the late medieval town, the focus of this article, refers to the practical sense that people had of themselves and their social world.⁵

Medievalists rarely find sources which give insight into the individual self-consciousness of citizens, because rebels have left us only those documents in which they collectively expressed claims. They give us insight in the insurgents' 'collective identity', which is above all a communicative construct or a 'discursive fact'. This means that collective identities are expressed in a group's qualitative description, formulated by the consensus of the group. Consequently, a study of the 'self-portrait of a group' (or better yet: the self-painted 'group portrait') must focus on a close empirical reading of the relevant features of the relationship between people and their surrounding world.⁶ To explore the identity of social protesters in the Flemish cities, it would be worthwhile to investigate the names they gave themselves in their uprisings. Historians typically use 'anonymous' terms, such as the 'crowd', the 'mob', or the 'poor', to describe rebels. In this article, I will look at the terms rebels used to represent themselves to the people whose rule they contested. This requires finding documents written by the social protesters, which is not an easy task.

It has long been recognized that we cannot use chronicles and repressive documents to study the identity of these people. Such texts usually describe rebels in negative terms, because in them, the elite writers were trying to legitimise their repression of the uprisings by their Maecenas. For example, French chronicles, written at the courts of the counts of Flanders, the dukes of Burgundy, or the kings of France, used words such as *chiens esragiés* (Jean Froissart), *bestes* (Philippe de Commynes), *rudes crueux sattelittes de tres basse condition* (Jean Molinet) to describe Flemish rebels.⁷ Documents written by the social protesters themselves are harder to find, because these city dwellers were often illiterate. If they did write documents, the authorities usually destroyed them during the repression phase. However, city subjects sometimes wrote documents such

4. Brubaker, Roger. *Ethnicity without groups*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2004: 28-63; Hoppenbrouwers, Peter. "The dynamics of national identity in the later Middle Ages", *Networks, regions and nation. Shaping identities in the Low Countries, 1300-1650*, Robert Stein, Judith Pollmann, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2010: 32-33.

5. Brubaker, Roger. *Ethnicity without groups...*: 44; Bourdieu, Pierre. *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Minuit, 1980.

6. Straub, Jürgen. "Personal and collective identity: a conceptual analysis", *Identities. Time, difference and boundaries*, Heidrun Friese, ed. New York: Berghahn, 2002: 71-72; Hunt, Scott; Benford, Robert. "Collective identity, solidarity, and commitment", *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, David Snow, Sarah Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: 433-457.

7. Dumolyn, Jan. "Le povre peuple estoit moult opprimé: elite discourses on 'the people' in the Burgundian Netherlands (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries)". *French History*, 23 (2009): 175.



as petitions (also called *requêtes*, *Suppliken*, *gravamina*, etc.). These documents were written versions of specific complaints about governmental policies which had been presented orally to the authorities. Everywhere in late medieval Europe, but especially in the cities, subjects composed such texts. While the petition writers occasionally succeeded in influencing the town's decision-making process, usually they were not effective. Even though the documents were often lost or destroyed if the movement failed, large numbers of petitions survive in some cases. The plethora of recently published overviews and studies of petitions show how fruitful the research on these documents can be for the history of subordinate groups.⁸

Petitions have not been widely used by scholars who study the political history of the Low Countries, because these documents survive only in a few cases. However, there are documents in which subjects complained about their rulers' government available from the very beginning of the 'rebellious period' of the history of the Low Countries (which started in the 13th century and ended in the 16th). In the 1280s particularly, urban dwellers in the county of Flanders protested against the exercise and abuse of power by their rulers. The surviving documents are useful sources for the identity of 'rebels', because they are the oldest known texts written by subordinate groups in the Low Countries. Though most of these texts were studied by historians during the twentieth century, their language and discursive context have not yet been analyzed in detail. The analysis below intends to scrutinize the discursive construction the text composers used to present themselves in order to legitimise their protest. Therefore, this article concentrates on the identity of the *ghemeente*, the term that the 'commoners' of the Flemish cities used to portray themselves. It will show that these people cleverly used existing discursive registers of political thought to express their wishes, while they subverted the meaning of words used by the town's elite with the aim of legitimising their expressions. This talented use of language may explain the success of the instigators' collective actions in the 13th century, although it must be remembered that the town rulers could not ignore the social and economic power, and therefore the military potential, of these people.

1. The 1280s in the Low Countries

In the 1280s, the Low Countries entered a new phase of their political history, the stage of 'civic emancipation'.⁹ In the first phase of 'communal emancipation',

8. Millet, Hélène, ed. *Suppliques et requêtes. Le gouvernement par la grâce en Occident (XIIe-XVe siècle)*. Rome: École française de Rome, 2003; Nubola, Cecilia; Würzler, Andreas, eds. *Bitschriften und Gravamina. Politik, Verwaltung und Justiz in Europa (14.-18. Jahrhundert)*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005; Ormrod, Mark; Dodd, Gwilym; Musson, Anthony, eds. *Medieval petitions: grace and grievance*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009.

9. Dumolyn, Jan; Haemers, Jelle. "Patterns of urban rebellion...": 375-378; Boone, Marc. "Le comté de Flandre dans le long XIVe siècle: une société urbanisée face aux crises du bas Moyen Age", *Rivolte urbane e rivolte contadine nell'Europa del Trecento: un confronto*, Monique Bourin, Giovanni Cherubini, Giuliano Pinto, eds. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008: 17-47.



begun in the 12th century, the Flemish cities became relatively independent from ecclesiastical and territorial powers. In the 1120s, Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Lille and other cities had successfully fought for political recognition from the count of Flanders and his sovereign, the French king. The cities gained political privileges which made its elite, mostly prosperous merchants, a politically autonomous power in the county. As in the Italian city-states, the ruling urban families not only governed the city, but also the surrounding countryside, while noble power declined. In the cities, these families owned large blocks of land on which less privileged town dwellers worked and lived. As elsewhere in Europe, the cities were governed as a 'commune'. In practice, this meant that the leading families ruled the city by common consent among themselves, without interference from the count, or the lower social strata.¹⁰ These lower groups, however, became politically important during the first half of the 13th century. Economic growth in these decades, when Flanders was at the crossroads of international trade between the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas, allowed many skilled labourers and middle class merchants to accumulate wealth. In the mid-13th century, they started to organize themselves in religious confraternities. The urban elite was still able to control these subordinate groups by establishing, and then leading, the resulting corporative organisations. But in the decades that followed, the leading city merchants could no longer keep the lower classes from fighting for political recognition. The phase of these groups' 'social emancipation' had arrived.

The same struggle, sharing similar characteristics, broke out in different areas all over Western Europe. Between 1245 and 1320, the towns in Northern France, Brabant and Flanders proved to be a real seedbed for social turmoil.¹¹ Petty commodity producers in the craft-guilds formed a new kind of middle class, distinct from both the patrician families who had monopolised politics in the past, and the unorganised lower-class proletarians and marginal groups. In 1245, the first strikes (called *takehans*) took place in Douai, and were repeated in 1276.¹² In 1252 and 1274-5, the textile workers of Ghent went on strike. In 1275, a group of protesters even succeeded in overthrowing the existing Ghent city government and electing a new board of aldermen, though two years later the ruling families (called the 'patricians' in the historiography) managed to regain control over urban institutions. In 1280, a general revolt of labourers spread across the county. Disruptions of international trade, such as the interruption of the English wool trade in the 1270s, could provoke merchants into joining rebellions. Scholars have described revolts in Tournai in

10. Watts, John. *The making of polities. Europe, 1300-1500*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2009: 98-99.

11. Leguai, André. "Les troubles urbains dans le Nord de la France à la fin du XIII^e et au début du XIV^e siècle". *Revue d'Histoire Economique et Sociale*, 54 (1976): 281.

12. Espinas, Georges. *La vie urbaine de Douai au Moyen Age*. Paris: Colin, 1913: I, 226-269; Boone, Marc. "Social conflicts in the cloth industry of Ypres (late 13th-early 14th centuries): the Cockerulle reconsidered", *Ypres and the medieval cloth industry in Flanders. Archaeological and historical contributions*, Marc Dewilde, Alexis Wielemans, Anton Ervynck, eds. Doornveld: Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, 1998: 147-155; Bardoel, Agatha. "The urban uprising at Bruges, 1280-81. Some new findings about the rebels and the partisans". *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 72 (1994): 761-791.



1279-1281, Saint Omer in 1280-1283, Ghent in 1280, the *Cockerulle* in Ypres in 1281 and the *Moerlemaye* in Bruges in 1280-81. While each of the 1280s rebellions had its distinctive features, the general recession in commerce and industry explains why they occurred simultaneously. The key to understanding this massive wave of revolts lies in examining the infringements to the social, economic, and political position of ordinary craftsmen—and peasants, as rural revolts broke out also in these years¹³—coming from multiple directions and intensifying in the final decades of the 13th century.

The study of the petitions urban rebels presented to their city government, or to (representatives of) the count in these conflicts sheds light on the rebels' social background and demands. As elsewhere the protests of the late 1200s were led by a conglomeration of people, mainly connected by collective protest against the regime's abuse of power.¹⁴ Local conditions, such as the existence of craftsmen or frustrated tradesmen who had been excluded from power, determined the precise social background of the protest. In Bruges and Ghent, for instance, the uprisings were led by *nouveaux riches*, though the majority of the protesters belonged to the craft guilds (some of which were still being formed).¹⁵ In both towns, factional divides within the urban elite gave rise to an alliance between one of the ostracized factions and craft groups, who were using the factional split within the urban elite to further their own political ends. In the end, however, the coalition between the wealthy tradesmen and the less powerful craftsmen disintegrated, as some of the 'frustrated families' were allowed into the urban government. Although the craftsmen did not obtain power, it would not be long before they rose up again. In the beginning of the 14th century, a general revolt of Flemish craftsmen broke out and continued until they obtained political rights following the Battle of the Golden Spurs (July 1302), a defeat for the patrician elite of the towns.¹⁶

Multipliciter sunt abusi, the Ghent commoners wrote to the French King Philip III on 7 November 1275.¹⁷ In this and many other petitions, their social protest strategically

13. Bavel, Bas van. "Rural revolts and structural change in the Low Countries, thirteenth – early fourteenth centuries", *Survival and discord in medieval society. Essays in honour of Christopher Dyer*, Richard Goddard, John Langdon, Miriam Muller, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010: 249-268.

14. Gleba, Gudrun. *Die Gemeinde als alternatives Ordnungsmodell. Zur sozialen und politischen Differenzierung des Gemeindebegriffs in den innerstädtischen Auseinandersetzungen des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*. Mainz, Magdeburg, München, Lübeck. Cologne: Böhlau, 1989: 257.

15. Wyffels, Carlos. "Nieuwe gegevens betreffende de 13de eeuwse 'demokratische' stedelijke opstand: de Brugse 'Moerlemaye' (1280-1281)". *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, 132 (1966): 43; Martins, Renate. *Wertorientierungen und wirtschaftliches Erfolgsstreben mittelalterlicher Grosskaufleute. Das Beispiel Gent im 13. Jahrhundert*. Cologne: Böhlau, 1976. For Bruges, see also: Dumolyn, Jan; Haemers, Jelle. "Reclaiming the common sphere of the city. The revival of the Bruges commune in the late thirteenth century", *La légitimité implicite*, Jean-Philippe Genet, ed. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015: II, 161-188.

16. Caenegem, Raoul van, ed. 1302. *Le désastre de Courtrai. Faits et mythes de la bataille des Eperons d'Or*. Antwerp: Mercator, 2002; Dumolyn Jan; Haemers, Jelle. "Patterns of urban rebellion...": 373-374.

17. Warnkönig, Leopold. *Flandrische Staats- und Rechtsgeschichte bis zum Jahr 1305*. Tübingen: Fues, 1836: II, 68. See also my case-study: Haemers, Jelle. "Révolte et requête. Les gens de métiers et les conflits sociaux dans les villes de Flandre (XIIIe-XVe siècle)". *Revue historique*, 677 (2016): 27-56.



targeted misbehaviour by political elites to complain about autocratic rule in the cities. Moreover, the petitions claimed that they were written in the general interests of everyone —*pro utilitate communi*— in the words of the Ghent document. A close reading of the demands of the 1280s social protest reveals that political questions were foremost in the rebels' petitions. As elsewhere in Europe, the spark that ignited the artisans' rebellion was fiscal, but the fact that anti-tax sentiments or concerns about fiscal mismanagement progressed rapidly to constitutional levels suggests that artisans were deeply concerned about issues that went beyond their pocketbooks to encompass the structure and maintenance of the community.¹⁸ Their principal desire was the restoration of communal harmony instead of familial and factional conflict.¹⁹ During the revolt, protestors pinpointed two objectionable practices: financial excesses, in the form of heavy taxation, exploitation of people's property and work, corruption, and similar abuses; and misgovernment, in the form of arbitrary policies, unfair judgments, improper use of coercion, violation of rights, and other malfeasance.²⁰ Rising taxes might often inflame people with anger in a difficult economic period, but as members of the commune who paid taxes to support its government, working citizens were more concerned that their commune be well-governed. Citizens denounced the unjust division and improper use of taxes by city oligarchs, not the taxes themselves. The taxes did weigh more heavily on those people who had the most meagre resources, which was a source of discontent. Going further, the rebels demanded direct control over city finances and urban policy through political representation. The period of turmoil ended only in 1302, after a number of craft guilds succeeded in winning the right of self-government and attaining political power in their cities. Indeed, in the end the revolts of the 1280s were successful, which explains why some documents from these conflicts were preserved and why they are studied intensively today.

Less thoroughly considered are the language these people employed to express their claims and the strategies they used to legitimize their demands in their redacted petitions. Before investigating the origins of the 'nomenclature of 13th century rebels', it is useful to review what existing research shows about language and strategies in later periods. As John Watts has shown for England, the meaning of words used to describe social groupings (such as the 'commons') changes over time, and probably over place as well. In 14th century England, 'commons' and 'commoners' referred to the entire urban community. By the 16th century, the meaning of these words had shifted to be increasingly associated with the lower

18. Farr, James. *Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2000: 189.

19. Black, Antony. *Guilds and civil society in European political thought from the twelfth century to the present*. London: Methuen, 1984: 66-67.

20. Billen, Claire. "A la recherche d'un prélèvement fiscal équitable. Pratiques, discours et porte-parole dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux", *Fiscal systems in the European economy from the 13th to the 18th century*, Simona Cavaciocchi, ed. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008: 871-880; Prevenier, Walter. "Conscience et perception de la condition sociale chez les gens du commun dans les anciens Pays-Bas des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles", *Le petit peuple dans l'Occident médiéval. Terminologies, perceptions, réalités*, Pierre Boglioni, Robert Delort, Claude Gauvard, eds. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002: 177-189.



classes.²¹ So the terms ‘commonalty’ or *communitas*, which originally applied to the entire borough community, including mayor and aldermen, changed in meaning during the late 13th century; by the 14th century it was beginning to designate the mass of the citizens, as distinguished from the ruling body, or the so-called *probi homines* in the town.²² The same process happened in Flanders. In the 16th century *ghemeen* principally referred to the have-nots of urban society because it had become a term employed to describe radical rebels who formed the shock troops for the collective actions staged by the craft guilds. However, in 13th century Flanders, this term had a different meaning, although there was a discussion about its exact interpretation even in the 1280s. In Flemish towns different social groups used words like *communitas* and *ghemeen*, just as their counterparts in other areas of Europe called themselves *el pueblo comun*, *le commun*, and *die Gemeinde*.²³ So the historian must be cognizant of which social group is under examination if he wants to know what these words mean.

2. The nomenclature of *le commun* and *het ghemeen* in the 12th and 13th centuries

In 1275 and 1297, political protesters in Ghent called themselves *le coumun* or *le commun de Gant*.²⁴ In a letter of October 1280 sent to Robert of Béthune, son of the count of Flanders (as the count was in France, his son was the addressee), the Bruges ‘commoners’ presented themselves as the *meentucht*, *meintucht* or *meente*.²⁵ *Die ghemeente van den Damme*, a small port near Bruges, submitted another petition to Robert in 1280. In this document, the Damme protesters also used the term *ghemeentucht*. In 1299 the *mentucht* of Damme complained to the count about the abuse of power by the local bailiff Jan van den Stene.²⁶ Determining which social group composed these letters requires some analysis of these word choices. The middle Dutch words (*ghe*)*meentucht* and (*ghe*)*meente*, and the French term *commun* do not have the same literal meaning. While the word ‘commun’ is derived from

21. Watts, John. “The commons in medieval England”, *La légitimité implicite*, Jean-Philippe Genet, ed. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015: II, 207-222.

22. Swanson, Heather. *Medieval Artisans: An urban class in medieval England*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989: 120.

23. Haemers, Jelle; Merlevede, Dries. “‘Le commun se esmeut’. Een onderzoek naar het politieke optreden van het ‘gemeen’ in het kader van de Gentse opstand (1379-1385)”. *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 88 (2010): 177-204.

24. See, respectively: Espinas, Georges; Pirenne, Henri. *Recueil de documents relatifs à l’histoire de l’industrie drapière en Flandre*. Brussels: Kiessling et Imbreghts, 1909: II, 382; Vuylsteke, Julius. *Uitleggingen tot de Gentsche stads- en baljuwsrekeningen, 1280-1315*. Gent: Vuylsteke, 1906: 78.

25. Wyffels, Carlos. “Nieuwe gegevens...”: 105.

26. See, respectively: Smet, Antoine de. “De klacht van de ‘Ghemeente’ van Damme in 1280”. *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d’Histoire*, 115 (1950): 9; Nowé, Henri. *Les baillis comtaux de Flandre: des origines à la fin du XIV^e siècle*. Brussels: Lamertin, 1929: 435.



the Latin *communio*, *ghemeente* on the contrary (with suffix *-te* or *-tucht*) is a literal translation of *communitas*. *Ghemeente* is closely related to the German term *Gemeinde*, which is an eight-century loan translation from the Latin word *communitas*.²⁷

The Germanic derivation of the words *ghemeente* (in Dutch) and *Gemeinde* (in German) is therefore based on a Latin original, just as the French, Spanish and Italian derivatives are. But what does it exactly mean? *Communio* can be divided into two parts, *com* and *munis*, and the same division applies to *gemeen* (*ge* and *meen*). The Dutch and the Latin word parts have similar meanings. *Com* and *ge* mean 'together'; *mein* and *munis* stand for 'contribution', 'tribute', or 'tax'.²⁸ As combinations, the words *communio* and *gemeen* refer to a tributary people, or, in a political context, to a people who pay taxes together. The suffix *-tucht* or *-te* in *ghemeente* or *meentucht* might be understood in a similar way. Although the precise meaning of this suffix is unclear, it likely involves regulating order and the maintenance of discipline within a group.²⁹ The suffix gives the word *meentucht* a political meaning, as it designates a distinct group of people with internal regulation, or better: a certain political authority.

The etymological origins of the word *gemeen* clarify why social protesters used it to identify themselves in their petitions of fiscal and political demands. The first use of the word in Dutch, at the beginning of the 13th century, strengthens this argument. Undoubtedly, the word *gemeen* was known before the 13th century, but vernacular texts on urban administrative affairs only begin to appear after 1200.³⁰ The term is first attested in the statutes of the Ghent lepers' house of 1236, though the text is clearly a translation from Latin. The statutes speak of *de gemene nutscepe* ("the common utility") of the house residents regarding their welfare. In 1260, the term *ghemeen* appears autonomously in an agreement to build dikes and drain a polder undertaken by the *ghemeenten van den lande* ("the communities of the land") in Saaftinghe. In the third quarter of the 13th century, a text used the *ghemente van Sente Pieters* to refer to a village community of those living nearby the powerful abbey of Saint Peter's in Ghent.³¹ These three records, the first uses of the word *gemeen* in Dutch, show that the term referred to a collectivity of people involved in

27. Olberg, Gabriele von. "Gemeinde", *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, Rosemarie Müller, ed. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998: XI, 1-3; Dilcher, Gerhard. "Gemeinde". *Lexikon des Mittelalters*. Munich: LexMA-Verlag, 1989: IV, 1209-1211.

28. Philippa, Marlies; Debrabandere, Frans; Quak, Arend. *Etymologisch woordenboek van het Nederlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004; Vries, Matthias de; Winkel, Lammert te. *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*. The Hague: SDU, 1889, both under *gemeen*. The English word *common* has the same etymological origins, see: Kurath, Hans, ed. *Middle English Dictionary*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959: II, 438-441; Klein, Ernest. *A comprehensive etymological dictionary of the English language*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966: 152.

29. Philippa, Marlies; Debrabandere, Frans; Quak, Arend. "Lemma tucht". *Etymologisch woordenboek van het Nederlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004.

30. Oostrom, Frits van. *Stemmen op schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006: 225-232.

31. *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300)*, ed. Maurits Gysseling. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1977: I, 21, 71, 291.



the administration of an economic concern, such as the management of a hospital, the government of lands protected by a dike system, or the rule of a village. Perhaps through representatives, the identified 'common' people collectively administered the group they belonged to, possibly by contributing financially to the collectivity. The word clearly was used on the countryside as well. Until the twentieth century, the word *gemeen* was connected to the common use of land in village communities and the government of *wateringen* on the coastal plain (i.e. the administration of lands enclosed by a dike system).³² At the regional level, the cities and the rural areas of Flanders collectively called themselves 'the common land' of Flanders (*gemene land*). Flemish subjects particularly used this term in their negotiations with the count in reference to payment of taxes and other political affairs.³³

In the 1280s, the composers of petitions might not have been aware of the etymological origins of the word *gemeen*, but they might have known about its historical roots (and, of course, these origins cannot be uncoupled). As historians know well, the word *communitas*, or 'commune', was a widely-used term to denote the privileged urban communities which obtained rights of self-government in different regions of Europe beginning in the 1100s. In the 12th century, inhabitants of port towns, embanked villages and fortified places in the northern regions of present-day France and Italy successfully fought for rights of political recognition. As the etymological origins of the word 'commune' indicate, these people had gained the right to govern themselves through the taxes they had formerly paid to lords, bishops and kings.³⁴ *Communitio* became a generic term for the people who lived in this privileged territory, generally labelled a *civitas*, inhabited by 'citizens' (*cives*), as Galbert of Bruges described the Flemish cities in his contemporary Latin chronicle.³⁵ Even though the long-lasting debate over the existence of such 'communes' in Flanders continues, descriptions of these cities' political characteristics in Galbert's chronicle and other sources are remarkably similar to their Italian and northern French counterparts. In the same way that urban citizens in these regions did, Flemish burghers enjoyed rights to govern, judge, and tax themselves without noticeable interference from the count. Is it a coincidence that citizens who wanted to end arbitrary justice and taxation at the end of 13th century used the same terminology

32. Hoppenbrouwers, Peter. "The use and management of commons in the Netherlands. An overview", *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe, c. 1500-1850*, Martina De Moor, Leigh Shaw-Taylor, Paul Warde, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002: 87-109; Soens, Tim. *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte, 1280-1580*. Ghent: Academia Press, 2009: 23-25.

33. Prevenier, Walter. *De leden en de staten van Vlaanderen (1384-1405)*. Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 1961: 21.

34. Oexle, Otto. "Die Kultur der Rebellion. Schwureinung und Verschwörung im früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Okzident". *Ordnung und Aufruhr im Mittelalter. Historische und juristische Studien zur Rebellion*, Marie-Theresa Fögen, ed. Frankfurt-Main: Klostermann, 1995: 119-137; Schulz, Knut. *Denn sie lieben die Freiheit so sehr... Kommunale Aufstände und Entstehung des europäischen Bürgertums im Hochmittelalter*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992; Blickle, Peter. *Kommunalismus. Skizzen einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform*. Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000.

35. Galbert of Bruges. *De multro traditione et occisione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandriae*, ed. Jeff Rider. Turnhout: Brepols, 1994. On the Flemish 'communes': Verhulst, Adriaan. *The Rise of Cities in North-Western Europe*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1999: 119-139.



(albeit in 'their language', the vernacular) as their predecessors in the 12th century had? The social protesters of the 1280s were not related by kinship to the leading *civitates* of the 12th century (for protesters were governed by the descendants of those leading families who had fought for political recognition in the 1120s), but as citizens with citizens' rights, they demanded political recognition and proper government of their city. These citizens seem to have tried to strengthen their claims and legitimize their arguments by using terms as *meente*, which harkened back to the 'communal phase' of their history.

Scholars of medieval communes have observed that leading families in the 13th and 14th century cities frequently used the terminology of the 'communal phase' of their history as a point of reference in the performance of their urban identity.³⁶ Even in later stages of their history tax-paying citizens, such as the *pecheros* in Castilian cities, called themselves the *común* when claiming rights of political participation.³⁷ In 13th century Flanders, it seems that not only the urban rulers but also subordinate groups effectively used 'communal terminology' to describe themselves. They claimed words such as *communitas* and 'community', albeit in 'their' language, the vernacular Dutch, while French was used in correspondence between urban rulers and the count, who spoke this 'language of culture' by preference. Furthermore, the use of *ghemeente* was a clever political strategy employed to justify the protest, as was the claim of the 'commoners' that they were acting for the 'common utility' of every townsman. A Ghent document of 1275, for instance, tells its readers that the commoners acted *por le profit et por le preu dou coumun*.³⁸ Walter Prevenier and others have shown that concepts such as 'common good', and *utilitas publicas* were meaningless clichés during the entire Middle Ages, deployed by both rulers and ruled to justify their political actions.³⁹ The vague connotations of these phrases might explain their popularity, but in Prevenier's view (and I agree), the slogan 'for the common good' was a mobilising device, employed to convince bystanders that a contention was legitimate. The 'commoners' of the 1280s used discourse on the common good mainly to distinguish themselves from the urban administration, which they depicted as a selfish regime serving the interests of the ruling families. Moreover, the terms *ghemeente* and *meentucht* not only gave the protest much-needed

36. Chittolini, Giorgio; Johanek, Peter, eds. *Aspekte und Komponenten der städtischen Identität in Italien und Deutschland (14-16 Jahrhundert)*. Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, 2003; Gilli, Patrick; Salvatori, Enrica, eds. *Les identités urbaines au Moyen Âge. Regards sur les villes du Midi français*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.

37. Sánchez León, Pablo. "Changing patterns of urban conflict in late medieval Castile", *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages. An exploration of historical themes*, Chris Dyer, Peter Coss, Chris Wickham, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: 226 (*Past and Present Supplement 2*); Naegle, Gisela; Solórzano, Jesús. "Geschlechter und Zünfte, principales und común. Städtische Konflikte in Kastilien und dem spätmittelalterlichen Reich". *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 41 (2014): 574-575.

38. Espinas, Georges; Pirenne, Henri. *Recueil de documents...*: II, 383.

39. Prevenier, Walter. "Utilitas communis in the Low Countries (13th-15th centuries): from social mobilisation to legitimisation of power", *De Bono Communi. The discourse and practice of the common good in the European city, 13th-16th centuries*, Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010: 216; Blickle, Peter. "Der Gemeine Nutzen. Ein kommunaler Wert und seine politische Karriere", *Gemeinwohl und Gemeinsinn. Historische Semantiken politischer Leitbegriffe*, Herfried Münkler, Harald Bluhm, eds. Berlin: Oldenbourg, 2002: 85-107.



authority, but also conveyed a special political meaning. The protesters presented themselves as the true heirs of the 12th-century commune, rightfully—in their eye—claiming that the city should be well-governed. Using *ghemeente* gave those who challenged the regime a certain political authority and juridical legitimacy.⁴⁰ By intensive deployment of this terminology the protestors made clear that they did not want to overthrow the urban government. Although they may have intended the opposite, repeating that they were only interested in seeing that the privileges of the town were respected offered bystanders and higher authorities legitimate, respectable reasons to listen to the protestors. This 13th century use of the concept of the ‘commune’ is reminiscent of battle-cries, “*Wyth kynge Richarde and with the trew communes*” and “*Communitatis!*”, shouted by the English rebels in 1381,⁴¹ and of the cry *Wir sind das Volk* in the East German protests of 1989. In these collective actions, as in the 1280s, protesters claimed that they were the only true state of the realm, a shared characteristic at the core of their message and their identity.

3. ‘Elite’ vs. ‘popular’ discourses on social distinction within the city?

It is interesting to compare the language of the petitions from the ‘commoners’ with the discourse of social distinction used in elitist texts, such as chronicles written by clerics. Was there a difference in their descriptions of social distinction within the city? The narratives of many clerics justified the rule of towns by the *meliores* or *majores*, who faced continuous threat from the urban *minores*. This simplified black-and-white division of urban social composition was commonly employed by chroniclers composing social histories of the 12th-century communes. Italian chronicles spoke of the *popolo grasso* and *popolo minuto* to refer to the subordinate population (or the *popolani*).⁴² The word *populus* meant the total population of a town in classical Roman classical texts, and was similarly used by medieval chroniclers. Galbert of Bruges, for example, used the term *populus* in his descriptions of the inhabitants of Ghent and Bruges.⁴³ Following Roman tradition, Isidore of

40. Gleba, Gudrun. *Die Gemeinde...*: 257; Barth, Reinhard. *Argumentation und Selbstverständnis der Bürgeropposition in städtischen Auseinandersetzungen des Spätmittelalters. Lübeck 1403-1408, Braunschweig 1374-1376, Mainz 1444-1446, Cologne 1396-1400*. Cologne: Böhlau, 1974: 348.

41. Strohm, Paul. *Hochon's arrow. The social imagination of fourteenth-century texts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992: 41.

42. Zey, Claudia. “Autour des soulèvements communaux en Italie septentrionale et centrale aux XI^e et XII^e siècles”, *Révolte et statut social de l'Antiquité tardive aux Temps modernes*, Philippe Depreux, ed. Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008: 131-147; Zorzi, Andrea. “The Popolo”, *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance*, John Najemy, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 145-164; Crouzet-Pavan, Élisabeth. *Enfers et paradis. L'Italie de Dante et de Giotto*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2001: 132-135; Poloni, Alma. *Potere al popolo. Conflitti sociali e lotte politiche nell'Italia comunale del Duecento*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2010; Judde de Larivière, Claire; Salzberg, Rosa. “‘Le peuple est la cité’. L'idée de popolo et la condition des popolani à Venise (XV^e-XVI^e siècles)”. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 68 (2013): 1113-1140.

43. Galbert of Bruges. *De multro traditione...*: 95, 102. On the Roman use of *populus*: Hornblower, Simon; Spawforth, Antony, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996: 1224.



Seville and the so-called *Decretum Gratiani* (a collection of canonical law) divided the *populus* into the *maiores* and the *plebs*.⁴⁴ Some chroniclers added an economic interpretation to these vague political categories, by dividing the social world of the cities into the dichotomous categories of 'rich' and 'poor' citizens.⁴⁵ Predictably, none of them sympathized with social protest. Those who questioned or disturbed the existing social order were seen as devilish fiends, or animals who instinctively reacted to irrational impulses. This tendency to 'pathologise' or even animalise political resistance appeared in Galbert's chronicle, when he denounced the popular protest of the *minores* as harmful to the total community.⁴⁶

As the social composition of towns diversified over the course of the 13th century, the terminology deployed to describe urban inhabitants diversified as well. In an era of growing social protest in Europe, Thomas Aquinas wrote in his *Summa Theologica* (circa 1270) about three categories of citizens: *supremi* or *optimates* (comparable to the Roman patricians), the *medii* or *populus honorabilis* (a new category of 'middle groups'), and the *infimi*, or *vilis populus* (those at the bottom of the social ladder).⁴⁷ Chroniclers of the Low Countries used a parallel discourse. In his description of the 1307 revolt of the commoners in Tournai, the cleric Gillis li Muisis distinguished the *magnis* who ruled the city (the *civitas*), or the *gubernatores, cives et majores civitates* (this is the so-called *major pars* of the citizens) who administered the *communio*, on one side. On the other, there were *mediocribus* and *parvis* who had to be controlled by their rulers lest the city fall into disorder.⁴⁸ In 1316, Abbot Jacob of Muevin divided the Flemish population into *potentes, nobiles, divites, mediocres et pauperes*, with the latter three categories designating townsmen.⁴⁹ It seems that chroniclers were well aware of urban social diversity, and that most of them sympathized with the urban elite (from which they often came). This tendency and terminology was reproduced

44. See: Isidori Hispalensis. "Etymologiarum Sive Originum Liber V, chapter 10". *The Latin Library*. 24 June 2014 <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/5.shtml>>; *Decretum Magistri Gratiani*, ed. Emil Friedberg. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879 (vol. I, 2, 1, 3). See also: Reynolds, Susan. "Medieval 'Origines Gentium' and the Community of the Realm". *History*, 68 (1983): 375-390.

45. Ehbrecht, Wilfried. "Zu Ordnung und Selbstverständnis städtischer Gesellschaft im späten Mittelalter". *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte*, 110 (1974): 83-103; Bosl, Karl. "Potens und Pauper. Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur gesellschaftlichen Differenzierung im frühen Mittelalter und zum 'Pauperismus' des Hochmittelalters", *Alteuropa und die moderne Gesellschaft. Festschrift für Otto Brunner*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963: 60-87.

46. Deploige, Jeroen. "Meurtre politique, guerre civile et catharsis littéraire au XIIe siècle. Les émotions dans l'œuvre de Guibert de Nogent et de Galbert de Bruges", *Politiques des émotions au Moyen Age*, Damien Boquet, Piroska Nagy, eds. Florence: Florence University Press, 2010: 245.

47. Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica* (*Die deutsche Thomas-Ausgabe*). Salzburg: Pustet, 1953: I, 108, 2.

48. Gilles Le Muisit. *Chronique et annales de Gilles le Muisit, abbé de Saint-Martin de Tournai (1272-1352)*, ed. Henri Lemaître. Paris: Renouard, 1906: 43.

49. Jacobi Muevin. *Chronicon Jacobi Muevin*, ed. Jean-Jacques de Smet. *Corpus chronicorum Flandriae*. Brussels: Hayez, 1841: II, 457-458. About the use of these terms, see also: Constable, Giles. "Was there a medieval middle class? 'Mediocris (mediani, medii)' in the middle Ages", *Portraits of medieval and renaissance living. Essays in honor of David Herlihy*, Samuel Cohn, Stephen Epstein, eds. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996: 301-323.



in other regions in Europe as well.⁵⁰ One vernacular source also gives a telling example of the widespread use of this 'tripartite description' of social distinction in town. In a 1296 investigation of the causes of the social turmoil in the 1280s, the Ghent patrician Willem Utenhove divided the urban population into three parts. As a city official, he said that he had acted for the *plus grant pourfit* of everyone, namely the *marcans, bourgeois et au commun de le vile de Gand*.⁵¹ The groups he named were, respectively, the hereditary families who had governed the city in previous year, the burghers who had citizenship rights, and the *povres gens*. Though Utenhove regretted that some citizens had been impoverished in the previous decade by factional divides between governing families of the city, he nonetheless tried to convince his readers to ignore the demands of the common people to abolish the political power of these families.

The 13th century royal officer Philippe de Beaumanoir, who mentioned the rise of the Flemish commoners in his *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*, was more understanding towards their political demands. Although Beaumanoir condemned the disturbance of social order—he remained a royal officer—he did not minimize the political desires of the citizens as much as his predecessors had. In his collection of customs Beaumanoir viewed the mobilisation of the poor and the 'middle' of the town (*li povres* and *li moiens*) as a rupture of public peace which had to be adequately punished.⁵² However, he considered their fiscal and political demands rightful, because the rich and the poor both should be taxed according to their estate.⁵³ A similar view can be found in a contemporary chronicler who wrote in the vernacular language, Dutch, the everyday language of Flemish commoners. The cleric Jacob van Maerlant, who lived in Damme at the end of the 13th century and thus witnessed the protest under study, sympathized with the moral and political criticisms expressed by social protesters to urban rulers and the clerical elite. In addition, Maerlant used the terms *meentucht van der stede* or *mentucht van der pord* to

50. See for instance the terminology that was used to describe social layers in Sicilian and Catalan towns: Titone, Fabrizio. *Governments of the Universitates. Urban communities of Sicily in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009: 182-183; Sabaté, Flocel. "Oligarchies and social fractures in the cities of late medieval Catalonia", *Oligarchy and patronage. Late medieval Spanish urban society*, Maria Asenjo-Gonzalez, ed. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009: 1.

51. Warnkönig, Leopold. "Documents inédits relatifs à l'histoire des trente-neuf de Gand". *Messenger des Sciences Historiques*, 1 (1833): 113.

52. *Et entre les autres mesfès dont nous avons parlé ci-dessus, l'uns des plus grans et dont li seigneur se doivent prendre plus pres de prendre vengeance, si est des aliances fetes contre seigneur ou contre le commun pourfit*. Beaumanoir, Philippe de. *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*, ed. Amédée Salmon. Paris: Picard, 1899: I, 446. The fragment is put into context by: Bourin, Monique. "Les révoltes dans la France du XIV^e siècle: traditions historiographiques et nouvelles recherches", *Rivolte urbane e rivolta contadina nell'Europa del Trecento: un confronto*, Monique Bourin, Giovanni Cherubini, Giuliano Pinto, eds. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008: 57-58.

53. *Et adont il doit asseoir la taille en sa vile par loial enqueste, aussi les riches comme les povres, chascun selonc son estat et selonc ce qu'il est mestiers a la vile, que la taille soit grans ou petite*. Beaumanoir, Philippe de. *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*.... II, 271.



describe protesting crowds in his translation of the Bible in 1271.⁵⁴ In other writings, he denounced clerics and officials who abused their power. So it is possible that Jacob van Maerlant was actively involved in the political turbulence of his time.⁵⁵

As in late medieval England, in Flanders rebels received assistance from lawyers, jurists and clerks who composed the rebels' texts.⁵⁶ The 1275 Ghent document quoted above, for example, was written by an anonymous *procureur dou commun*.⁵⁷ Moreover, petitions generally used legal language because a text written in this language was more likely to be adopted in its entirety and promulgated as urban law by the government.⁵⁸ The intertextuality of petitions, legislative documents, and chronicles which were written by (even clerical) clerks is not surprising. A pessimistic view would hold that protesters' words were 'filtered' by clerks who autonomously decided which ideas should be recorded and sent to the urban rulers. However, such a view denies the agency of protesting groups. The fact that the clerks in question did determine the choice of words in these documents does not mean that the 'commoners' did not understand the ideas that were expressed, or that they did not grasp the political connotations and the historical background of the terminology which they continually heard and employed. These people likely identified with these terms and their meanings. Reifying a dichotomy between rebels' writing and elitist texts oversimplifies historical reality. There was rather a permanent dialogue between rulers and ruled, and dialectical use of terms and ideas which were interpreted differently by opposing groups. The following section shows that we can understand the identity of social protestors only within this dialectical framework of interchangeable and malleable political ideas which could take on multiple interpretations.

4. The self-representation of the *meentucht* in the 1280s

As Gudrun Gleba noticed for late medieval Germany, the creation of the collectivity which called itself the *Gemeinde* at the end of the 13th century did not originate from a theoretical model based on prior assumptions, but from concrete pre-existing local structures which were already in place before the appearance of

54. Jacob van Maerlant. *Rymbybel*, ed. Jan Baptist David. Brussels: Hayez, 1858: II, 523, 526. About Maerlant's life and work: Oostrom, Frits van. *Stemmen op schrift...*: 512-516.

55. Dumolyn, Jan; Haemers, Jelle. "'Let each man do his trade and remain silent'. Middle class ideology in the urban literature of the late medieval Low Countries". *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013): 177-178.

56. Scase, Wendy. *Literature and complaint in England, 1272-1553*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: 115.

57. Vuylsteke, Julius. *Uitleggingen tot de Gentsche...*: 78.

58. See the remarks of: Nierop, Henk van. "Popular participation in politics in the Dutch Republic", *Resistance, representation and community*, Peter Blickle, ed. New York: Clarendon Press, 1997: 280-290; Fuhrmann, Rosi. Kümin, Beat; Würgler, Andreas. "Supplizierende Gemeinden. Aspekte einer vergleichenden Quellenbetrachtung", *Gemeinde und Staat im Alten Europa*, Peter Blickle, ed. Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998: 267-269.



the *Gemeinde* in the sources.⁵⁹ This means that each of these collectivities was shaped by the social conditions in which it arose, and that the *ghemeente* in a particular city of Flanders differed from the *ghemeente* in another city and another region. A historian must therefore take into account the local specific conditions surrounding the 'commoners' in order to clarify the particularities of their 'self-understanding'. A close reading of the commoners' petitions should allow us to determine how the Flemish *ghemeente* differed from those in German, French, Italian, or English towns. Although more research is needed on the precise social background of the people in question in order to understand the concrete meaning of many of their assumptions fully, it is possible to identify certain local characteristics of Flemish commoners. In particular, we can derive some economic, fiscal, political, judicial and territorial aspects of their self-image from the sources. Some of these aspects compare closely with those of other regions in Europe; others are less common.

To begin a reconstruction of the economic self-portrait drawn by the Flemish *meentuch*, the petitions particularly stress the affiliation of the *meentucht* with the embryonic craft guilds. In some cities, craftsmen had already formed *ghilden* (guilds), though most of them were still governed by members of powerful families.⁶⁰ Since the petitioners charged that trade was controlled by the (alleged) arbitrary actions of these powerful clans, it is not surprising that the emancipation of craftsmen and the fair regulation of trade were two of their main requests. In Ghent, a main industrial cloth centre, the commoners logically asked for better regulation of the wool trade, *que ce seroit pourfis au coumun*.⁶¹ In the Ypres petition of 1280, the drapers asked for *boines coutumes et boine lois* ("good customs and good laws") for the wool trade and drapery production, desiring non-discriminatory rules that would insure the *commun pourfit* of every townsmen.⁶² In 1280, they received this right and the city government's order that drapers no longer could meddle in the affairs of other craftsmen.⁶³ In the end, these demands led to the award of corporate privileges to the craft guilds in Ypres, just as craftsmen in other towns obtained the rights of economic self-regulation and political autonomy over the late 13th and the early

59. Gleba, Gudrun. *Die Gemeinde...*: 251.

60. The primary reference remains. See: Wyffels, Carlos. *De oorspong der ambachten in Vlaanderen en Brabant*. Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 1951. A more recent survey in: Stabel, Peter. "Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment". *Journal of Medieval History*, 30 (2004): 187-212; Prak, Maarten. "Corporate politics in the Low Countries: guilds as institutions, 14th to 18th centuries", *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries. Work, power and representation*, Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen, Hugo Soly, eds. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006: 74-106.

61. Espinas, George; Pirenne, Henri. *Recueil de documents...*: 383. This demand would finally lead to the promulgation of a new privilege for the town from Count Guy de Dampierre in 1297. Gheldolf, Albert. *Coutume de la ville de Gand*. Brussels: Gobbaerts, 1868: 500.

62. Doudelez, Gustave. "La révolution communale de 1280 à Ypres". *Revue des Questions Historiques*, 133 (1939): 69.

63. Doudelez, Gustave. "La révolution communale...": 19-20.



14th centuries. These economic rights and the prosperity resulting from the new regulations would be at the core of their corporate identity in the late Middle Ages.⁶⁴

In the 1280s, however, the craftsmen still had a long way to go. In both Bruges and Damme in 1280, the *meente* demanded that craftsmen be governed by a proper administration, led by *deken ende vinders*, as the commoners of Damme demanded, elected by *wie, ambochtslieden* ("we, the craftsmen").⁶⁵ In these documents, the main characteristic the commoners seemed to identify themselves with was manual labour. The Damme petition invokes *arme lieden diet winnen met haren leden* ("poor people who make money with their limbs") who pay more taxes than the rich (*die rike*).⁶⁶ While combining 'the rich and the poor' was often a figure of speech used to indicate the total urban population (the Ypres document of 1280 referred to *Toutes gens, petit et grant* to indicate that all townsmen should obey the urban customs),⁶⁷ the Damme petition seems to make the division between the rich and poor a reason for its demands, in same manner seen in several 13th century German sources which explicitly named manual laborers.⁶⁸ Because the 'poor and the commonality' (*die arme ente ghemente*) were severely hurt by heavy taxes, it stated, the *meente* demanded reduction of the consumer tax on beer.⁶⁹ The economic situation faced by commoners and identification with trade and industrial activities seem to have been important aspects of their identity. Research into 15th century petitions from the Flemish craft guilds has shown that economic justice would remain a significant element in the discourse of craftsmen in the following centuries.⁷⁰

The stress which the petition of the *ghemeente* of Damme put on fiscal conditions shows that the petitioners were well aware how financially important they were to the city government. 'Fiscal self-consciousness' evoked demands to produce the public accounts of the city administration and to prohibit urban rulers from granting gifts without the consent of the "commonality which pays for it", as the Bruges petition of 1280 phrased it.⁷¹ This particular demand was the initial reaction to a city ordinance promulgated by the Bruges authorities a few days before the redaction of the petition. On 28 September, the aldermen had ordered all *lieden die ghelt ghegadert hebben in meentuchten* ("citizens who had collected money in commonality") to hand

64. Wyffels, Carlos. *De oorsprong der ambachten...*: 85-89; Boone, Marc. *A la recherche d'une modernité civique. La société urbaine des anciens Pays-Bas au bas Moyen Age*. Brussels: Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 2010: 38-40.

65. Smet, Antoine de. "De klacht...": 12.

66. Smet, Antoine de. "De klacht...": 129.

67. "All people, small and big". Doudelez, Gustave. "La révolution communale...": 70.

68. Monnet, Pierre. "Les révoltes urbaines en Allemagne aux XIV^e siècle: un état de la question", *Rivolte urbane e rivolte contadine nell'Europa del Trecento: un confronto*, Monique Bourin, Giovanni Cherubini, Giuliano Pinto, eds. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008: 142-143; Maschke, Erich. *Städte und Menschen. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Stadt, der Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980: 159-165.

69. Smet, Antoine de. "De klacht...": 9.

70. Dumolyn, Jan. "'Our land is only founded on trade and industry'. Economic discourses in fifteenth-century Bruges". *Journal of Medieval History*, 36 (2010): 374-389.

71. *Dat men negheen ghifte mochte gheven sonder die meintucht, omdat siet selve ghelden*. Wyffels, Carlos. "Nieuwe gegevens...": 105.



these sums over to the authorities.⁷² The ordinance referred to a common practice in Bruges (and in other Flemish cities as well), of maintaining a *bus*, or 'solidarity box', in which craftsmen could choose (or, in some cases, were obligated) to deposit money to assist other members in times of need.⁷³ The ordinance demonstrates that urban rulers feared the financial power of the craftsmen, who would, in fact, use the money to buy weapons in future years. More importantly, the statement reveals that the collective group had a specific political purpose for amassing the money because they collected it 'in commonality'. The same ordinance ordered people not to *meentucht van ghilde te makene* ("make the commonality of a guild"), an indication that the urban rulers feared craftsmen's political actions.⁷⁴ In sentences such as the rebel's demand to get what they had paid for, one can see the famous adage, 'no taxation without representation', or rather, 'no citizenship without political participation'. For the protesters, their fiscal contributions to the city had to be spent on the common interests of every townsman. Their 'fiscal identity' had a political edge, which could not be ignored by urban rulers.

In a more radical expression from 1295, the *li boene gent communaument de Nuefport* ("good guys, together in commonality" of Nieuwpoort), a small port-town on the Flemish coast, pushed these political ideas further.⁷⁵ In the citizens' view, the count was supposed to maintain *le commun pourfit de le ville*, because *comme il leur samble, uns communs pourfis doet alier et miex valouer de une singuliere personne*.⁷⁶ In his detailed study of the Nieuwpoort petition, Walter Prevenier connected these claims to widespread ideas of political equality, expressed by Thomas Aquinas, mendicant friars and other dissident writers, such as the English peasants who shouted in 1381: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was a gentleman?"⁷⁷ Similar thoughts can be found in one of Jacob van Maerlant's poems which was written during the turbulent decades at the end of the 13th century. He posed the central question in this type of moralist social criticism: why were there nobles, freemen and serfs, if all men descended from Adam? Maerlant wrote that *twee woorde in die werelt*

72. Wyffels, Carlos. "Nieuwe gegevens...": 103. See also: Dumolyn, Jan; Haemers, Jelle. "Reclaiming the common sphere...": 177-178.

73. Wyffels, Carlos. *De oorsprong der ambachten...*: 97-99. See also: Bos, Sandra. "A tradition of giving and receiving: mutual aid within the guild system", *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries. Work, power and representation*, Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen, Hugo Soly, eds. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006: 174-193; Haemers, Jelle; Ryckbosch, Wouter. "A targeted public. Public services in fifteenth-century Ghent and Bruges". *Urban History*, 37 (2010): 220-221.

74. Wyffels, Carlos. "Nieuwe gegevens...": 104.

75. *Li boene gent* normally refers to the better-off burghers of town, but the demands of the 'good guys' (such as fiscal equality) indicate that their social background probably resembled that of the urban protesters in other Flemish towns. Degryse, Roger. "'s Graven domein te Nieuwpoort". *Annales de la Société d'Emulation de Bruges*, 85 (1948): 110.

76. "as it seems to them, the common profit is worth more than the profit of a single person". Degryse, Roger. "'s Graven domein te Nieuwpoort...": 111.

77. Prevenier, Walter. "Conscience et perception...": 187; Hilton, Rodney, *Bond men made free: medieval peasant movements and the English rising of 1381*. London: Routledge, 1973: 210-213. See also: Frenz, Barbara. *Gleichheitsdenken in deutschen Städten des 12. bis 15. Jahrhunderts. Geistesgeschichte, Quellensprache, Gesellschaftsfunktion*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2000.



*sijn, dats allene 'mijn' ende 'dijn'. Mocht men die verdriven, pais ende vrede bleve fijn; het ware al vri, niemen eighijn. Manne metten wiven. Het ware ghemene tarwe ende wijn.*⁷⁸ Of course, these egalitarian statements were not 'communist' views from people who questioned property rights. After all, some of the 1280s protesters were tradesmen and middle-class craftsmen who had a relatively wealthy social position which they wanted to maintain. They questioned the political authority and even the wealth of their rulers because their rulers had not taken the interests of tax-paying fellow-citizens into account. As in similar conflicts all over Europe, the demand of equality in this context meant a desire for fiscal fairness, open access to the law courts for all burghers, and eligibility of all full citizens for political office.⁷⁹

Demands for fiscal equality and a kind of political equality did not mean, in the protesters' view, that all inhabitants of the county should be equally treated by the count, for the protestors basically wanted to maintain their urban privileges. In the Bruges petitions, the demonstrators called themselves *dien van der poert* ("those of the city").⁸⁰ The Damme petition insisted that the *die vrihede van der port* ("freedoms of the city") be maintained.⁸¹ In the first place, these demands sought to justify the social protest, since they were addressed to those who did not really care about local customs anymore (if we follow the protesters' logic). But in the second place, these demands were intended to maintain the fundamental legal inequality of medieval society. In the complaints of the Damme *mentucht* in 1299, addressed to the local bailiff, who had arrested citizens 'outside the city gate without process', we can read a righteous charge against arbitrary justice, but also a claim for privileged judgment on the basis of advantageous freedoms (which people in the countryside did not enjoy).⁸² As medievalists know, 'collective selfishness' about personal freedoms and legal self-determination among commoners was a characteristic of every city in medieval Europe and a central feature of the political and judicial identity of townsmen.⁸³ The 12th-century 'commune' as the ideal against its antipode, feudal society with its alleged arbitrariness, remained a classic rallying point for ages to come.⁸⁴ Urban

78. "there are two words in the world, only 'mine' and 'thine'. If one could banish those words, there would be peace, all would be free and no one a serf, men or women, and the wheat and wine would all be in common". *Jacob van Maerlant's strophische gedichten*, ed. Eelco Verwijs. Groningen: Wolters, 1879: 26.

79. Black, Antony. *Guilds and civil society*...: 74.

80. Wyffels, Carlos. "Nieuwe gegevens...": 106. *Poert* was the common description of city in 13th Flanders. Van Uytven, Raymond. "'Poort': une contribution à la lexicographie urbaine", *Villes et campagnes au Moyen Age. Mélanges Georges Despy*. Liège: Perron, 1991: 747-762.

81. Smet, Antoine de. "De klacht...": 10.

82. *Als dat hi onse porters hevet ghehouden buter port, sonder wet ende vonnesse*. Nowé, Henri. *Les baillis comtaux*...: 436.

83. Attreed, Lorraine. "Urban identity in medieval English towns". *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002): 571-572; Diestelkamp, Bernhard. "Freiheit der Bürger – Freiheit der Stadt", *Die abendländische Freiheit vom 10. zum 14. Jahrhundert. Der Wirkungszusammenhang von Idee und Wirklichkeit im europäischen Vergleich*, Fried Johannes, ed. Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1991: 485-510; Black, Antony. *Political thought in Europe, 1250-1450*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1992: 28-31.

84. Compare with: Lutz, Robert. "Wer war der gemeine Mann?", *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg von 1525*, Peter Blickle, ed. Darmstadt: Hermann, 1985: 452-467.



liberties constituted the core of the local identity of many late medieval European citizens, who collectively defended their values and rights of self-determination when these were undermined by princes or intra-urban rivals.⁸⁵ Some scholars compare this devotion to local customs and liberties to modern nationalism, as both belief systems stress the concept of an objective reality of nations or peoples as communities with collective political rights as well as shared histories and cultures.⁸⁶

Some scholars note that such 'nationalist' political communities identified principally with the physical space in which their privileges applied.⁸⁷ This holds true for Flemish cities, where commoners increasingly associated themselves with the physical territory in which they lived. As Martha Howell has written, the history of urban identities is not only a history of ideas and conceptualizations, but also a material history, a history of how physical spaces gave meaning to the concept of an urban whole, how these spaces defined and legitimised the political acts and other activities that defined the citizen, and how the concept of the urban 'common good' was realized.⁸⁸ The citizens of Bruges called themselves 'those of the city' in the 1280 petition, a concrete expression of the equation of citizens with 'their' physical space during this period. Portions of the Damme petition of the same year show that the 13th century *meente* not only claimed public space in the literal sense, but that the commoners were also struggling to govern that space. In the text, the commoners charged the aldermen with corruption because they had not paved the streets, even though they had increased taxes for that purpose. The commoners also complained that the former mayor had demolished a reinforcement of the shores of the port's main canal 'that belonged to the commonality'.⁸⁹ According to the petition he had allowed to build houses on this place. These complaints show that the commoners were concerned with the management of urban space and the concrete physical locations where they gathered and traded. The commoners, especially tradesmen and craftsmen, wanted a say in the construction of public buildings and the supervision of public space, because they contributed fiscally to the organization of that space.

85. Coleman, Janet. "Structural realities of power. The theory and practice of monarchies and republics in relation to personal and collective liberty", *The propagation of power in the medieval west*, Martin Gosman, Arjo Vanderjagt, Jan Veenstra, eds. Groningen: Forsten, 1997: 207-230; Kaufhold, Martin. *Die Rhythmen politischer Reform im späten Mittelalter. Institutioneller Wandel in Deutschland, England und an der Kurie 1198-1400 im Vergleich*. Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2008: 313-327.

86. Reynolds, Susan. "The idea of the nation as a political community", *Power and the nation in European history*, Lean Scales, Oliver Zimmer, eds. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2005: 54. See also: Davies, Rees. "Nations and national identities in the medieval world. An apologia". *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 34 (2004): 567-567; Stein, Robert. "Introduction", *Networks, regions and nation. Shaping identities in the Low Countries, 1300-1650*, Robert Stein, Judith Pollmann, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2010: 14-15.

87. Reynolds, Susan. "The idea of the nation...": 58.

88. Howell, Martha. "The spaces of late medieval urbanity", *Shaping urban identity in late medieval Europe*, Marc Boone, Peter Stabel, eds. Leuven: Garant, 2000: 19. See also: Boone, Marc; Howell, Martha, eds. *The Power of Space in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe. The Cities of Italy, Northern France and the Low Countries*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013.

89. *Ene plate ... die der meente toebehorde*. Smet, Antoine de. "De klacht...": 12.



Commoners voiced similar concerns in other cities. In the initial years after the craft guilds took over urban governments in the Flemish cities in the 1300s, Ghent, Ypres and Bruges carried out ambitious building programs in the contemporary, elaborate and self-assured Gothic style of architecture. As in other cities which had obtained rights of self-government in the past centuries, also in Flanders public buildings, such as a cloth hall, meat hall and, last but not least, a pompous city hall were built. These structures symbolized the economic wealth and the political autonomy of the citizens, who regarded the prestigious monuments as markers of their identity.⁹⁰ In the same time period, they also created useful open space for gathering the craft guilds and selling merchandise, such as the 'Great Market' squares in Bruges and Ypres, and the *Plaetse* in front of the city hall in Ghent.⁹¹ Last but not least, they constructed new city walls or ramparts, which had a specific socio-political and legal use in addition to their military function. These cities already had walls raised during their struggle with the count to obtain the 1120s communal privileges, and immediately afterwards. Raising the walls was a symbolical act which distinguished the urban space from the less-privileged surrounding countryside for eternity. Building a second set of moats and ramparts around the city at the beginning of the 14th century was just as emblematic.⁹² With their wider diameter, the new fortifications incorporated the citizens of the former suburbs (where most of the craftsmen lived). The ambitious building campaign was the final act in the social emancipation of the commoners and their inclusion in the city's political space. It was the materialisation of their communal identity.

5. Conclusion: a 'communal identity'

In the last quarter of the 13th century, the Flemish city was in transition. Social groups which had been excluded from power struggled for social and political

90. Van Uytven, Raymond. "Flämische Belfriede und südniederländische städtische Bauwerke im Mittelalter: Symbol und Mythos", *Information, Kommunikation und Selbstdarstellung in mittelalterlichen Gemeinden*, Alfred Haverkamp, ed. Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998: 125-159; Coomans, Thomas. "Belfries, cloth halls, hospitals and mendicant churches: a new urban architecture in the Low Countries around 1300", *The year 1300 and the creation of a new European architecture*, Alexandra Gajewski, Zoë Opacic, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2007: 185-202. One can compare with other cities which had a strong communal tradition, such as Saint-Quentin and Geneva: Hamel, Sébastien. *La justice dans une ville du Nord du royaume de France au Moyen Age. Etude sur la pratique judiciaire à Saint-Quentin (fin XIe-début XVe siècle)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011: 35; Caesar, Mathieu. *Le pouvoir en ville. Gestion urbaine et pratiques politiques à Genève (fin XIIIe-début XVIe siècles)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011: 20.

91. Ryckaert, Marc. *Brugge. Historische stedenatlas van België*. Brussels: Gemeentekrediet, 1991: 91-93; Mus, Octaaf. *De geschiedenis van de middeleeuwse grootstad Ieper. Van Karolingische villa tot de destructie in 1914*. Ypres: Stad Ieper, 2010: 44-45; Laleman, Marie-Christine; Vermeiren, Geert. "Ruimte en bebouwing in het centrum van het middeleeuwse Gent". *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 64 (2010): 36-39.

92. Dumolyn, Jan. "Economic development, social space, and political power in Bruges, c.1127–c.1302", *Contact and exchange in medieval Europe. Essays in honour of Malcolm Vale*, Hannah Skoda, Patrick Lantschner, eds. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012: 33-58.



recognition. The protest did not aim at overthrowing the social order, because it only questioned the authority and legitimacy of the ruling families. In this type of crisis two forms of legitimacy clashed. The legitimacy of groups who fought for political dialogue and participation ‘from below’ collided with the more static legitimacy of established power which was used to governing autocratically. Such a conflict should not be interpreted as the source of the great evils of its time, but rather as a manifestation of the vitality of medieval political society.⁹³ In the same way, we should view the medieval protest of the 1280s as a vital struggle of newly emerging groups within the town. Their struggle was not a conservative effort to maintain privileges, as many have characterised medieval popular protest.⁹⁴ The urban ‘commoners’, as they called themselves, fought for new privileges which would give them corporate autonomy and rights of political participation. They also forced the ruling oligarchy to be accountable for the management of urban space and the city treasury. While the protesters did not see their wishes fulfilled immediately, the principles of accountability, political participation and representation they demanded became the building blocks of medieval politics in the next few centuries, and of many later constitutions.⁹⁵

The social protest of the 1280s was very heterogeneous, because wealthy tradesmen, poorer craftsmen and middle class artisans united forces to fight their common enemy. The protesters had a shared, distinct and insistent identity. They presented themselves as the *meentucht*, a vernacular translation (or better: a contemporary interpretation) of the Latin *communitas*. As they held only their purpose in common (namely, gaining political power), and not their social background, it is not surprising that the protesters chose a general term to identify themselves. Every protester could identify with its meaning, which cleverly referred to a well-known discursive register of political thought. The point of reference of the terms like *ghemeente* and *meente* was the 12th-century ‘commune’, the sworn association which had the power to regulate and govern its own affairs. The 13th century commoners cleverly used the sophisticated discourse about these communes to define its self-understanding. I would not define *meentucht* as an ‘oppositional principle’, as Gudrun Gleba did, though she is right when she claims that terms such as *Gemeinde*

93. Genet, Jean-Philippe. “Le coup d’Etat, ou les légitimités contrariées”, *Coups d’Etats à la fin du Moyen Age? Aux fondements du pouvoir politique en Europe occidentale*, François Foronda, Jean-Philippe Genet, José Manuel Nieto, eds. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2005: 14.

94. See, for instance: Mullet, Michael. *Popular culture and popular protest in late medieval and early modern Europe*. London: Routledge, 1987: 1. Sam Cohn rightly reevaluates this view in: Cohn, Sam. “The modernity of medieval popular revolt”. *History Compass*, 10 (2012): 731-741. Useful new insights are also offered by the case studies in: Oliva, Hipólito Rafael; Challet, Vincent; Dumolyn, Jan; Carmona, María Antonia, eds. *La comunidad medieval como esfera pública*. Seville: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 2014; Solórzano, Jesús; Bolumburu, Beatriz; Haemers, Jelle, eds. *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval Europea*. Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2014.

95. This is the main argument of Christian Liddy and Jelle Haemers: Liddy, Christian; Haemers, Jelle. “Popular politics in the late medieval town: York and Bruges”. *English Historical Review*, 128 (2013): 771-805.



were used to undermine the authority of political opponents of the 'commoners'.⁹⁶ *Communitas* was an authoritative principle that inspired the political acts of rulers and their subordinate citizens. Both parties saw it as an urban community, albeit perhaps idealized, in which rulers acted for the common interest of every citizen, although there was vehement discussion over whose particular interests were truly 'common'.

96. Sie erweist sich als ein oppositionelles Prinzip, in dem das bisher im Stadtreghment vorherrschende hierarchische, von oben nach unten ausgerichtete Herrschaftskonzept wesentliche Umformungen erfährt. Gleba, Gudrun. *Die Gemeinde...*: 252.

