Craftsmen and Guilds in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods

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At the close of the medieval period, nearly every city or town in Europe had occupational associations within its walls that were organised to lesser or greater degree. The craft, or guild, was an example of several manifestations of medieval sworn associations (coniurationes) which, according to Max Weber, played a pivotal role in the formation of urban communities in the West. In fact, the city of the central Middle Ages was itself an oath-bound community, with the legal status of a corporation that represented a spatially rooted association of citizens. Occupational associations are arguably the best studied of the various corporations that shaped medieval and early modern urban society, although it has proved difficult to pin down what exactly their economic and wider societal significance was. In fact, the prevalence of occupational associations in pre-modern Europe still puzzles historians today.

Over the past decade, a debate has been going on between revisionist historians and their critics over the economic effectiveness of merchant and artisan guilds. This article does not directly engage in the discussion as to whether or not guilds offered effective answers to market or state failures, since it does not approach them as economic institutions in the first place. Instead, it focuses on their non-economic activities, or, more precisely, their involvement in urban government and politics. By examining the political participation of occupational associations in three major late-medieval urban centres, Florence, Ghent and London, the consequences of the guilds’ institutional embeddedness to their organisation and functioning are assessed. This cross-European comparison complements existing regionally specific


studies to widen our understanding of the guilds’ combined political, economic and social role in medieval and early modern urban society.

Medieval trade and craft guilds are commonly described as flexible and adaptable institutions, which, alongside their core economic purposes, participated actively in the political, social and cultural life of pre-modern cities and towns. Guilds did not offer solutions to problems of economic exchange in isolation; instead, they created linkages within and across different domains. Thus, urban institutions were interdependent and mutually reinforcing, yet without necessarily producing an overall arrangement that reconciled the objectives of the different institutions and actors involved. This is, as theorised by Avner Greif and Masahiko Aoki amongst others, because a society’s institutional complex not only reflects the unstable equilibrium between power groups, but also a path-dependent historical process. That is to say, that existing institutional settings and interrelations direct (and sometimes resist) further institutional change.

The fact that the merchant and artisan guilds’ fortunes were shaped by (urban) political-institutional settings and socio-economic structures has been pointed out by several historians. Soly, for example, aptly demonstrates how differences in contextual factors explain the degree of ‘political leverage’ attained by guilds in Italy and the Low Countries. However, a further question is in order: to what extent did indeed guild systems and guilds in pre-modern European cities and towns co-evolve with their political-institutional environment? The following analysis of the political participation of occupational associations explores this question. Taking a comparative approach, it seeks to explain differentially the implications of the guilds’ institutional embeddedness for their evolution as cooperative institutions during the later Middle Ages.

The emergence of guilds antedated or coincided with the formation of communal authorities in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London. In London, for example, craft guilds appeared in the early 12th century, both before and then independently

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from the mayoralty and the community of citizens, but it was, according to Derek Keene, precisely ‘the deep-rooted nature of the crafts and associated guilds in the social and political organisation of London’ that explains their long survival. The guild system was highly defined by political factors in late-medieval Florence and Ghent, too, where guilds became a constitutive element of the political order. In order to assess the degree to which guilds were involved in the civic government of these cities, and how this political participation shaped their development, it is first analysed how occupational associations were represented in the cities’ councils, and what role they played in civic electoral procedures. Subsequently, the analysis focuses on the regulation of the guilds by princely and urban authorities, as well as the structure of the urban guild systems. Finally, the impact the guilds’ political participation had on their internal organisation and functioning is explored. The article’s underlying argument is that political (and social) explanations are as important as economic reasoning in understanding the prevalence and persistence of occupational guilds in medieval and early modern urban Europe. Still, the case studies should in no way be regarded as representative or exemplary cases from which general patterns of institutional development can be drawn; they offer a starting point for a comparative analysis of the broader significance of guilds to pre-modern urban society.

THE GUILDS’ ENTRY INTO URBAN POLITICS

By the end of the 13th century, professional and occupational groupings of all kinds had become firmly established in the fast-growing cities and towns across Europe. In many Italian cities – and with Florence as a prime example – guilds grew rapidly in numbers during the 13th century, and their members increasingly voiced their political concerns. The Florentine occupational associations, according to John Najemy, unlike other associations, represented ‘a specific political and constitutional program, based on some definite legal and corporate principles’. In medieval England, urbanisation and economic development also led to a proliferation of loosely organised guilds, but a ‘redefinition of such associations as institutions in the body politic of English towns’ occurred in the late 13th century. Finally, during the first half of the 14th century, craft guilds ‘made some inroads in government in many of the important towns throughout the Low Countries’ after their members had been involved in urban politics for a lengthy period of time.

11 Prak: Corporate Politics in the Low Countries (cf. note 6), p. 76.
Political unrest occurred in many European cities and towns during the tumultuous decades preceding and following 1300, but it did not always effect a durable constitutional political role for craftsmen. The fact that guilds emerged as interest groups actively vying for political influence from the 13th century onwards, meant that their organisation and functioning were increasingly shaped by their interactions with other urban power groups. On the one hand, craft guilds were perceived as a threat to political and social order by the incumbent authorities and (merchant) elites, which tried to curb their influence and privileges; on the other, guilds could be mobilised by rulers and their opponents for a range of political ends. But the most significant consequence of the guilds’ political ambitions perhaps concerned the liberty enjoyed by medieval tradesmen and craftsmen to form professional associations, as is shown in the discussion that follows. Furthermore, in addition to altering the urban political order in Florence, Ghent and London, the artisans’ pursuit of power gave rise to newly strained relationships between larger and lesser craft guilds, reminiscent of the older tensions between the merchant and craft associations.

The guilds’ growing political involvement in the three cities in question became more formal once they secured a role in the election of urban magistrates. In the case of the Tuscan city, the last two decades of the 13th century turned out to be decisive in this respect. Firstly, a new ruling body was formed in 1282, to put an end to decades of political factionalism and instability in the city. The members of the new magistracy were all supposed to be guildsmen, and were overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of the major guilds. In the period from 1282 to 1293, for example, 90% of the bimonthly elected priors of the guilds (priori artium) belonged to six of the seven major guilds (arti maggiori), of whom 72%, furthermore, were members of the guilds of the calimala, giudici e notai and cambio: the international merchants and cloth refiners, the lawyers and notaries, and the bankers. Secondly, the number of politically recognised occupational associations was limited to 21 guilds by the promulgation of the Ordinamenti di Giustizia in 1293. This meant that of the ‘dozens of more or less organized corporate bodies’ that aspired to political participation, only a few gained formal recognition. The seven major guilds, and, to a lesser extent, the five middle guilds, dominated the urban political landscape. The remaining nine lesser guilds (arti minori) were allowed to bear their own arms

12 Lis/Soly: Worthy Efforts (cf. note 4), pp. 328–333. The position of municipal councils was relatively weak around 1300, making it difficult for them to withstand the craft guilds’ political pressure. It was a critical juncture, and it is remarkable that the guilds’ efforts to gain access to urban government in later centuries were generally unsuccessful.
The political events in late 13\textsuperscript{th}-century Florence would have far-reaching consequences for the guilds’ freedom of action in the later Middle Ages, even though the actual political influence of the majority of corporations, not to speak of ordinary guildsmen, remained fairly limited, and swayed in accordance with the balance of power in the city. The procedures for electing the members of the signoria (the executive council comprising the gonfaloniere di giustizia and initially six, later eight priors) and the two advisory councils (the dodici buonomini and the gonfalonieri delle compagnie), subject to fierce debates and political wrangling, as meticulously described by Najemy, were repeatedly altered and refined. Moreover, even though all guild members became politically eligible citizens of Florence, only those belonging to the major guilds were effectively elected to communal offices, thereby blocking an equal distribution of power among the recognised guilds, let alone among the various occupational groups.

The major guilds’ dominance was twice interrupted by short periods of popular government, during which the minor guilds increased their power share at the expense of the major guilds and elite families. This first happened in 1343, at a time when the commune faced political unrest and a grave public debt crisis, giving the 14 lesser guilds an opportunity to gain more influence on urban government and to extend their legal competence. This phase of popular government ended five years later, when new provisions were made stipulating that only members of seven of these lesser guilds were eligible for office, and limiting the representation of these guilds in the signoria to two priors.\textsuperscript{18} The revolutionary events in 1378 are the second well-known example of popular government. With the support of disgruntled low-skilled textile workers, mainly wool carders, known as the ciompi, a new guild government took over, which created three new associations for the numerous unorganised artisans and the workers in the clothing and textile industries. The ciompi, unsatisfied with the new arrangements, eventually broke ranks with the other guilds, but their revolt was crushed, and the guild government remained in power until 1382.\textsuperscript{19} The popular regimes were relatively short-lived, then, and the political influence of all guilds was further reduced after the ascent of a coalition led by Cosimo


de’Medici in 1434, who effectively asserted control over the civic and corporate electoral procedures. Guilds remained the formal foundation of the Florentine republic in the 15th century, but despite the fact that guild membership had become a requirement for election to the signoria over a century earlier, and although all guildsmen were politically eligible citizens, ordinary traders and artisans were rarely in a position to participate in the city’s government during the later Middle Ages.20

In contrast to Florence, where commercial and financial interests of merchants and bankers dominated, Ghent’s economy was driven by its textile industry; but the craftsmen in the Flemish city endured an equally long struggle to assert their voice in the city’s government. The famous participation of the Flemish guilds (ambachtsen) in the county’s revolt against the French king during the Anglo-French wars of 1294–1303, whereby the French cavalry was defeated in the Battle of the Spurs on 11 July 1302 near the town of Kortrijk, is generally considered a watershed in the political involvement of the artisan guilds, even though their ambitions were older, and it would still take several decades for their formal say in the towns’ governments to play out.21 It was, for instance, only after 1360 that power relationships stabilised in Ghent, and a new constitutional order was settled. According to the new procedures for electing the 26 members of the city’s two benches of aldermen, the wealthy, politically privileged citizens (the poorterij), in conjunction with the count, chose six aldermen; the weavers’ guild appointed ten members; and the 53 lesser guilds together elected the remaining ten members. These arrangements developed over the course of the 14th century, and reflected the balance of power between the three ‘members’ of Ghent’s body politic, and which, as argued by Marc Boone, should be understood as an institutionalised form of conflict management.22

Ghent’s boards of aldermen were dominated by the large and powerful guild of weavers, but it was not without a particular struggle that they obtained this position. The weaver-drapers were often enmeshed in violent strife with the fullers, who in 1361 finally lost their guild’s autonomy and the privilege of political participation.23 Similar to the developments in Florence, the number of politically recog-
Guilds and Politics in Medieval Urban Europe

Organised guilds became fixed in the early 1360s as the balance of power and relations between the guilds took shape. Four minor groups of textile workers were attached to the weavers’ guild as subordinate members, but played a negligible political role; meanwhile, the 53 lesser guilds represented artisans from about a hundred different occupations.24 Thus, political influence was far from being equally distributed among the guilds, and not all artisans of the same profession were organised into a separate, recognised association.

Ghent’s political landscape differed from Florence’s due to the fact that the former city was subject to an overlord, the Count of Flanders. Revolts of the Flemish urban communities against the count’s authority occurred repeatedly throughout the later medieval period. On the one hand, cities and towns sought to defend their political and economic autonomy against the centralising efforts of the count; on the other, they themselves were, often simultaneously, riven by violent struggles for power between ruling factions or guilds, or by uprisings of craftsmen and labourers deprived of a political voice against the urban elites in times of hardship.25 Ghent, for example, experienced prolonged political unrest during the Ghent War of 1379–1385, followed by revolts against Duke Philip the Good (during the years 1449–1453), Archduke Maximilian of Austria (1483–1492) and Emperor Charles V (1539–1540). The latter two rebellions ended in bitter defeat: the guilds lost almost all their political privileges between 1453 and 1477, and again after 1540.26 The Emperor also reorganised Ghent’s guild system in that same year, abolishing nine guilds and clustering the remaining 49 into 21 new occupational organisations.27 Similar to the developments in Florence, the political involvement of the guilds in medieval Ghent had far reaching implications for their autonomy, internal organisation and mutual relationships.

London never achieved the degree of autonomy enjoyed by Florence and Ghent in the Middle Ages. It was by far the largest city in England, but its complex rela-

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tionship with the relatively powerful Crown placed a check on its political and economic ambitions. Ties between the Crown and occupational groupings had existed in London at least as early as the 11th century; for example, by 1130–1131 the weavers were among several guilds paying annual sums to the king. Despite these early peculiarities, the later history of the relationship between occupational guilds in London is less exceptional than is sometimes thought. From the late 13th century onwards, the (major) trade guilds exerted considerable influence on the city’s government, and the municipal authorities increasingly involved the guilds in administrative matters. As the London guilds’ political, military, administrative and economic responsibilities grew in the later Middle Ages, the role of the corporations in civic electoral procedures and power struggles that arose between the major and lesser guilds became recurring issues of conflict and unrest.

The election of London’s mayor was an event during which these political tensions often surfaced. In 1293 the mayor was elected by twelve good men (probi homines) from each ward, but it remained a matter of contention throughout the later Middle Ages how many representatives from the wards should be summoned to attend the annual mayoral election. The role of the London guilds – initially known as misteries and later as companies – in these elections was formally recognised in 1467, when guild wardens or masters joined the members of the common council and the other ‘good men’ to elect the mayor and sheriffs. Two further decisions were taken by the court of aldermen in 1475: not only the wardens but also the liverymen of the guilds were to be summoned for the annual election of the mayor, and it was ruled that the two nominees for this office should no longer belong to the same company or guild. These arrangements concluded a long struggle of the guilds for political recognition. The major guilds, however, had exerted considerable, albeit informal, influence on London’s government from the early 14th century onwards, since the elected mayors and aldermen were overwhelmingly guildsmen. To be sure, the city’s aldermen were drawn from the 24 (and, after 1394, 25) wards, and not elected by the guilds, while the mayor was, until 1467, chosen annually by a limited electorate comprising the wards’ good men. In practice, both proce-
dures meant that civic elections could still be dominated by a small group of wealthy men. Almost all mayors and aldermen were members of the wealthier mercantile companies trading in luxuries or foodstuffs – the vintners, fishmongers, drapers, mercers, grocers and goldsmiths – while very few members of the artisan guilds found their way into the court of aldermen or the court of common council, an elected representative body that emerged in the 14th century.

The political ambitions of London’s companies were not fundamentally different from those of the guilds in Florence and Ghent, albeit that it took longer for the former to establish an official position within the urban political order. As a consequence, the evolution of London’s guild system took a slightly different course, and the municipal authorities had less direct influence on the organisation and autonomy of the companies. From the 14th century onwards, many trade and craft associations still secured formal recognition from the Crown (often to the frustration of the mayor and aldermen, who wished to approve the guilds’ ordinances before they were promulgated), but the number of incorporated companies was never restricted, at least not for political reasons, even though a hierarchy emerged among the corporations at the end of the 15th century. The order of precedence of the ‘great twelve’ livery companies became permanently fixed in 1515; not coincidentally, this process of consolidation took place exactly during the same period when London’s constitutional framework became more clearly defined. Generally, about 50 companies of the over 110 occupational associations mentioned in London’s medieval sources were organised enough to play some role in the government of the city during the late 14th and 15th centuries.

RELATIONS AMONG AND WITHIN GUILDS

Two recurrent issues can be traced in the development of the guilds’ political participation in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London, regardless of all the local particularities. On the one hand, there was the question how corporate interests were to be represented in urban government, and on the other was the closely linked lingering rivalry between occupational associations. The political ambitions of the guilds translated most visibly into electoral responsibilities, whereby the major cor-

or other administrative subdivisions were not directly involved in the election of aldermen in medieval Ghent. The weavers’ guild, however, had its own division of the city into 23 wards, of which the gezworenen participated in the election of the guild’s deans. Some of the lesser guilds also ensured that their deans and jurors equally represented the parishes or wards of the city; see: Najemy: A History of Florence (cf. note 16), pp. 53–50; Boone: Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen (cf. note 22), pp. 61–67, 87.


porations sought to suppress the influence of the lesser guilds. The political involvement achieved by merchants and artisans, therefore, had lasting consequences for the relationship between urban authorities and guilds, the interactions between guilds, and the internal organisation of guilds. For this reason, it can be argued that political dynamics, as much as economic or demographic factors, determined the late-medieval history of urban guilds. How far can this argument be convincingly applied to the three cities in question? Or, in other words, what exactly were the effects of the institutional inter-linkages that were created by guilds across the political and economic boundaries?

Since Florence, Ghent and London already had relatively complex and diversified economies around 1300, many occupational associations existed (to lesser or greater degrees of organisation) before this date, often taking the form of, or being attached to, religious confraternities. Although it could be argued that there was less economic need to create new occupational associations in the 14th and 15th centuries, the question is whether disenfranchised artisans and labours were actually allowed to organise themselves into new occupational associations.

The demographic factor only had a minor impact on the structure of the late-medieval urban working population. The overall population levels of Florence, Ghent and London fell sharply after the Black Death, recovering only slowly up until the late 15th century. But whereas the number of occupational associations increased in line with the rapid growth of the cities in the 12th and 13th centuries, the decline of the urban population after the mid-14th century, and its slow recovery, did not affect the number of trade and craft guilds in a noticeable way. In fact, the 15th century has been characterised as ‘the heyday of the city companies of London’, a period during which the capital city did not escape recession and stagnation, despite profiting from the difficult demographic and economic conditions experienced by other English cities and towns during this century.

Florence probably lost half of its estimated population of 100,000–120,000 inhabitants during the Black Death. This number had fallen to 37,144 by 1427, but Florence’s population rose steadily from the late 15th century onwards; the city had 59,000 inhabitants by the mid-16th century. Medieval Ghent had an estimated population of 64,000 in the mid-14th century. The Flemish city, less severely hit by the Black Death, counted approximately 45,000 inhabitants around 1500. London’s population passed the 80,000 inhabitants mark in the early 14th century. The city’s size was probably reduced by half after the Black Death, but London had an estimated 55,000 inhabitants in 1520. Thus, the three large cities were of comparable size around 1500, and – with the exception of London – belonged to the most densely populated and urbanised regions of Europe. See: Maria Ginatempo/Lucia Sandri: L’Italia delle città: il popolamento urbano tra Medioevo e Rinascimento (secoli XIII–XVI). Florence 1990, p. 148; Peter Stabel: Dwarfs among Giants: the Flemish Urban Network in the Late Middle Ages. Louvain 1997, p. 31; Barron: London in the later Middle Ages (cf. note 31), pp. 237–238.

See, for the complex relationship between demographic developments and the number of guilds in the Low Countries: Bert De Munck/Piet Lourens/Jan Lucassen: The Establishment and Distribution of Craft Guilds in the Low Countries, 1000–1800, in: Prak/Lis/Lucassen et al. (eds.): Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries (cf. note 6), pp. 32–73, here: pp. 64–66.

strengthen the view that, indeed, the inscription of the trade and craft guilds within the cities’ constitutional order led to the formation of an inflexible guild system whose structure and configuration could not easily adapt to changes in the social and economic domains.

To be sure, economic factors were not entirely absent from the development of the urban guild system. The composition of a number of the formally recognised guilds changed over time, in accordance with economic circumstances, meaning that some professions or occupations attached to particular guilds were replaced by others. Furthermore, artisans had opportunities to organise themselves in one way or another outside the guild system.

In Florence, for instance, the composition of each of the 21 guilds was far from static from 1293 till 1534, when the new Medici-led government reorganised the 14 minor guilds into four università. Almost all Florentine guilds united guildsmen of different occupations, and should therefore be understood as conglomerates or ‘umbrella guilds’ with a heterogeneous membership. This is illustrated by the example of the physicians, apothecaries and spice importers who initially formed the guild of the medici e speziali; the merciai, or shopkeepers, joined as a third and equal division soon after, in 1296, while several other groups of artisans became affiliated with the guild as second-tier members (that is, without belonging to the corpo of the guild) in the 14th century, such as the saddlers, barbers, painters and wax-workers, amongst others. This complex structure, which was common for many Florentine guilds, was a breeding ground for internal strife and friction; often the principal membri tried to impose their control over the subordinate associations, which in turn sought to maintain some degree of autonomy.

Secondly, changing economic fortunes affected the hierarchy within guild conglomerates. In 13th-century Florence, several associations of retailers of luxury (textile) items were organised into the guild of Por Santa Maria, but with the growth of the silk industry the guild had become dominated by the membrum of the silk manufacturers (setaioli) by the end of the 14th century. The guild even became commonly known as the arte della seta from the early 15th century onwards, even though it still counted a variety of retailers and producers of cloth amongst its ranks, as well as artisans belonging to several secondary occupations in the silk industry.
Given the loose structure of the guild conglomerates, it was not uncommon for groups of artisans to change alliance or to form their own informal confraternities. The tailors were initially attached to the guild of Por Santa Maria, but in 1296, after the establishment of the first guild republic, they aligned with the guild of the dealers in second-hand clothing, the arte dei rigattieri. It took the tailors decades to improve their membership rights within this guild organisation, to the point of being allowed to participate in the elections of consuls in 1350 and to become officials of the guild in 1376 and 1384.42 The tailors eventually also organised themselves into a religious confraternity, San Paolo dei Sarti, in 1435, which built an oratory and a hospital.

The Florentine authorities were suspicious of any associations of artisans and workers formed under the pretext of religion, especially in the 14th century, but at least 17 other artisan confraternities were founded in the 14th and 15th centuries, which remained under strict control of the guilds and the signoria. Of those artisans and workers who were excluded from membership of the official guilds, the scissor and knife-makers, dyers, tailors, and wool-carders and shearers took the initiative to form confraternities in the 14th century.43 However, it remains unclear whether these organisations actually fulfilled any economic functions beside their core social and religious roles.

The organisation of the guilds in Ghent resembled the Florentine guild system in several ways. First of all, a significant number of the politically recognised guilds were composed of several occupational groupings. Together, the weavers’ guild and the 53 minor guilds that consolidated their position in the Flemish city in the 1360s represented a hundred professions during the later Middle Ages. Thus, about a third of the minor guilds were composed of artisans of two or more different professions. Of the 19 mixed corporations 13 had a compound structure, within which each member remained independent in terms of economic activities. The guild of the masons, for example, had two member professions, the bricklayers and the stone dressers, while the smiths’ guild even counted twelve different professions.44 The membership of the official guilds changed over time, as a result of the evolving economic conditions. For example, the bonnet makers joined the mercers’ guild as minor members in 1460, without either participating in the guild’s governing body or paying the full membership fee. The knife makers, on the other hand, left this

43 John Henderson: Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence. Chicago et al. 1997, pp. 37, 40, 45–46, 426–428, 469. Some of the confraternities were organised according to ‘ethnic’ origin, for example, the Lucchese silk-workers founded the confraternity of San Marco in 1405 or 1450, while the Flemish weavers established the confraternity of Santa Barbara in 1443.
guild in 1511 after numerous conflicts with the other main members: the mercers, the wax candle makers and the scabbard makers.\textsuperscript{45} Secondly, at least 16 formally unrecognised artisan organisations were active in Ghent in the period from the 14\textsuperscript{th} to the early 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Organised in the same way as their recognised counterparts, some of these associations even obtained a monopoly on their trade or craft from the urban authorities, but none of them enjoyed the right to political participation.\textsuperscript{46} Finally, after a re-clustering of the corporations in 1540 by Emperor Charles V, the 49 remaining guilds retained their statutes and autonomy within the new 21 umbrella organisations.\textsuperscript{47}

In contrast, London’s corporate landscape remained more fluid in the later Middle Ages, which is manifest in the evidence of rivalry and cooperation among the trade and craft organisations. The civic electoral procedures were often at stake in the strife between companies, which sought to direct the city’s policy in favour of their own economic interests. However, these multifaceted conflicts were not just between mercantile and artisan guilds, since occasional coalitions were struck between different companies and interest groups when confronted with changing political and economic realities. This was the case in 1376, when some constitutional changes were made on the instigation of John of Northampton, a draper, giving the guilds the right to elect the members of the common council; these changes persisted until the old order was restored seven years later with the election of Nicholas Brembre, a grocer, as mayor of London.\textsuperscript{48} A similar conflict arose in 1443 out of an economic dispute between the drapers and the tailors. The latter artisan company did not provide any alderman until 1435, when Ralph Holland was elected alderman, and who subsequently made three unsuccessful bids to be elected mayor. In his pursuit of political power for his craft, which led to a riot in 1441 and culminated in the rebellious year of 1443, Holland contested the election of mayor by a restricted common council, but his efforts to reform the electoral procedure proved in vain.\textsuperscript{49}

In the absence of direct political influence, smaller companies resorted to lobbying the city and the Crown. Moreover, several occupational groups amalgamated


\textsuperscript{46} Dambruyne: Corporatieve middengroepen (cf. note 24), pp. 31–34. These artisan organisations were distinct from religious confraternities by their homogeneous membership and welfare provision to members.

\textsuperscript{47} See, for the statutes: Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ms. 58.


to form larger and more secure groupings from the second half of the 15th century onwards. For example, the company of the leather sellers incorporated the tawyers in 1479, the glovers and pursers in 1502 and the pock makers in 1517, while the wiredrawers and pinners merged to form the new company of the wiresellers in 1497.50 In short, the London guilds had to be sufficiently well-organised, and required a considerable membership, in order to secure their place in relation to the other guilds, and in the eyes of the urban authorities. For this reason, they often sought official recognition from the urban authorities as well as the Crown, by whose authority the companies became incorporated bodies.51 Merchants and craftsmen in London enjoyed more leeway in organising themselves into officially recognised occupational associations compared to their counterparts in Florence and Ghent. Political considerations played an important role in this process, but the urban guild system in London never become solidified, for political reasons. The guild hierarchy that eventually emerged reflected both the economic and political leverage of mercantile and artisanal associations.

CIVIC CONTROL OVER OCCUPATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

The guilds’ involvement in politics and governance created institutional inter-linkages between the medieval urban political and economic domains, which raises two important issues. Firstly, there is the question to what extent guilds, through their political influence, succeeded in extending their control over the urban economy. This issue, however, is not addressed here.52 Instead, the focus is on the second question: how the municipal authorities and ruling elites in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London sought to increase their control over the trade and craft associations within their city walls, in order to check the guilds’ political ambitions.

The most far-reaching restriction that could be placed on the activities of merchants and artisans in the later Middle Ages was to deprive them of the right to form new corporations. This happened in Florence and Ghent after a new political order emerged in which only a fixed number of recognised guilds had a place. In addition to this regulation, urban authorities controlled guilds in various other ways, ranging from approving their statutes and ordinances to influencing the appointment of guild officials. Comparatively, the Florentine ruling elite established the strongest control over the guilds; ultimately, they sought to exclude non-elite guildsmen from

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having any real influence on the city’s government and the selection of its officials. By the end of the 14th century, the Florentine guilds ‘were reduced to offices of the state, subordinated legally and constitutionally to a sovereignty in which they no longer had any part’.  

The ruling elites in Florence had to cope with corporations that were initially very differently organised from one another, and which enjoyed autonomy with regard to their internal governance and the election of guild officials until 1328–1329. Within the larger guilds, there had long been tensions between the elite members (who favoured a limited membership, powerful guild consuls and a weak guild council) and non-elite members (who pleaded for more balance between consuls and guilds, as well as for more representative procedures in the election or distribution of guild offices). As Najemy demonstrates, using the example of the guild of the bankers and moneychangers, consular elections became controlled by a small group of elite guild members with political interests that exceeded those of the corporations. Furthermore, new eligibility criteria were introduced in the course of the 14th century to bar certain guild members from consular office, as were high matriculation fees which excluded them from guild membership as such.  

In 1329, the Florentine guilds lost the autonomy to elect their own consuls. The ultimate election of the consuls of the major guilds came into the hands of the priors and colleges of the commune, although the guilds retained a minor role in the nomination of candidates. ‘Oligarchic control’ over the nine arti minori was imposed through the Universitas Mercatorum, an organisation formed by the international merchants and bankers of the five major guilds (calimala, cambio, lana, Por Santa Maria, and medici, speziali e merciai) to guard the collective interests of Florence’s elite families. The control of the Mercanzia over the electoral procedures of the guilds was further extended between 1382, when the elected consuls had to be approved by this organisation, and 1393, when it further obtained the authority to appoint the consuls and councillors of the 21 corporations directly. With the general reform of the guild statutes in 1414, the consuls were formally referred to as state

officials rather than guild officials. Moreover, the 14 minor guilds lost the right to regulate their internal affairs, and their economic regulations became – at least in theory – subject to approval of the urban authorities. Finally, the communal authorities increasingly appointed officials who fulfilled economic and legal tasks that had been, up until then, within the competence of the corporations.

The extent to which the 15th-century Florentine authorities meddled with the guilds’ internal politics and affairs was not fundamentally different from the level of their interference in Ghent and London, although the political motives to control the guilds weighed differently in the latter two cities, because of differences in electoral systems and political power. The Ghent guildsmen were free to elect their deans or wardens and other officials without interference from the urban authorities or the Count of Flanders. The privileges obtained by the city in 1477 after the death of Duke Charles the Bold reaffirmed this customary right of the guilds. Electoral procedures varied among the guilds; they were generally indirect elections and aimed at an equal representation of the members. The office of wardenship was an important stepping stone towards being elected as an alderman of the city, but generally the mobility among guild officials was high. The Concessio Carolina of 1540, however, imposed by the emperor after the Ghent rebellion, radically changed the appointment of guild officials by stipulating that the count would annually appoint the head of each of the 21 guild organisations, whereas the two gezworenen (sworn men or jurors) of each guild were to be selected by the city’s bailiff and the aldermen from a shortlist of four candidates presented by the guilds’ head and the outgoing jurors.

London’s trade and craft associations were free from interference from both the royal and the municipal authorities with regard to the election of their wardens or masters. However, the charters and ordinances of the guilds in London, which laid down the rules for self-government and internal organisation, were subject to ap-

proval by those same authorities. In a few cases, by obtaining royal patents or municipal approval of their statutes London companies played the Crown against the council of aldermen to gain certain privileges or to strengthen their position in relation to other guilds. These charters, as well as arms, banners and halls, gave expression to the guilds’ autonomy and identity, and therefore had important symbolic value. It was for this reason, for example, that after the failed rebellions of Ghent against the princely authority in 1453 and 1540, the banners of the guilds were confiscated and their political privileges rescinded as part of the city’s submission to Duke Philip the Good and Emperor Charles V respectively.

The fact that the major guilds in power in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London were keen to monitor other occupational associations illustrates that the guilds were far from forming a homogeneous front; but despite their suppression, lesser guilds and new occupational associations could and did at times challenge their subordinate position in the urban guild system. The political order was inherently unstable, as economic competition between the guilds easily translated into political rivalry; the discontent of guildsmen and workers barred from the political arena was a recurring threat to the existing balance of power. Even when leaving economic arguments out of the account, the incumbent elites had sufficient political reason to oversee the internal affairs of the guilds: to ensure that they would not pose a threat to the authority of the priors of Florence, the aldermen of Ghent and the mayor of London.

The relationship between the municipal authorities and the guilds was double-edged in these cities, then, because the corporations became an essential part of the urban body politic. The guilds achieved a constitutional role in the election of the magistrate; and, closely related to this, guild membership became the main, or even only, route to citizenship and eligibility for political office. In Florence, guild membership was a condition for practising certain economic activities, but above all it gave the inheritable right to political participation. Some guildsmen only became guild members in order to pursue a political career, without having any link with the trade or craft of that corporation (despite repeated prohibitions against this practice), a fact which caused friction within the guilds. The growth of the guilds’ membership in the early 14th century resulted in an increased number of citizens eligible for communal offices, and although the political elites devised strategies of all sorts

62 Many requests by guilds for approval of new ordinances and articles are to be found in the so-called Letter-Books of the City of London. In the same way, additions to and revisions of the guild statutes in Florence had to be approved by the approvatori degli statuti delle arti on behalf of the city’s magistracy. The Ghent guilds also presented their statutes and ordinances to the city’s aldermen; see the example of the shearmen in 1349, Stadsarchief Gent, Reeks 197/1, fol. 1r.
63 Barron: London in the later Middle Ages (cf. note 31), pp. 209–211.
to manipulate elections and so maintain their own position, mobility was still relatively high among the political offices during this century.66

London obtained a royal charter in 1319 stipulating that to become a freeman one must be admitted as member to one of the misteries or obtain the consent of the whole commonalty. In practice, citizenship was exclusively obtained through guild membership in the later medieval period, either by apprenticeship or by purchase, meaning that the London guilds achieved control over legal entry into the city’s economy, and consequently into urban politics.67

In Ghent, guild membership became an important means of access to the bench of aldermen. It was not the only one, since the poorters – the politically privileged landowning citizens – enjoyed these rights as well, but some members of the poorterij even enrolled into guilds, in particular the guild of the brokers, to gain eligibility for the election of aldermen and a greater chance to be elected.68 As in late-medieval Florence and London, citizenship was not a prerequisite for guild membership in the Flemish city; rather, those who became guild members were regarded as full citizens.69 Aspiring citizens thus had to pay a matriculation fee to become a guild member, but the status of citizenship itself was free of charge.

Given the involvement of the guilds in urban politics, their important economic functions and their sometimes sizeable membership, it comes as no surprise that these associations evolved into complex and hierarchically organised institutions governed by officials and councillors, and with extensive internal regulations laid down in statutes and ordinances. Membership was voluntary only in theory for the majority of the members who sought to practise their trade or craft but had little or no participation in the governance of their guild. The government of the Florentine guilds, such as, for example, the arte dei maestri di pietra e di legname, the guild of the masters in stone and wood, ended up in the hands of a small elite group that controlled the elections of the guild consuls.70 The guilds of London and Ghent were not instruments of politics to the same degree, but these associations knew their own internal (socio-economic) stratification; the guilds’ masters, or, in the case of London, liverymen, enjoyed a privileged position with respect to ordinary members.71

71 Dambruyne: Corporatieve middengroepen (cf. note 24), p. 179; Barron: London in the Later Middle Ages (cf. note 31), pp. 214–216; Steve Rappaport: Worlds within Worlds: Structures of
CONCLUSIONS

The struggle of occupational associations in Florence, Ghent and London for a voice in urban politics developed along path-dependent trajectories, shaped by the dynamics of power and economic variables, and affecting the guilds’ autonomy, liberties and mutual relations. In other words, existing urban institutional arrangements reinforced or constrained the further evolution of guilds and their activities.

In the Tuscan city the guilds achieved the highest degree of formal political involvement, since the government of the commune was based on the participation of the arti after 1293. The ambachten in Ghent also secured permanent representation in the city’s government, even though they had to cope with the poorterij and Flemish count. Finally, the companies of London consolidated their constitutional role in the election of the mayor in the third quarter of 15th century, but almost all mayors and aldermen were guildsmen from the early 14th century onwards, even without the guilds having a formal role in their elections. Apart from the formal participation of guilds in urban government through the eligibility of their members and as a consequence of the civic electoral systems, the guilds, of course, also had informal influence through petitioning, lobbying and social networking, the importance of which can only be revealed by more detailed research.

In the three cities in question, the guilds seized the opportunity and became constitutive parts of the urban political and constitutional order, but the merchants and artisans paid a price for the institutional inter-linkages created by their political involvement, too. Firstly, the right of voluntary association was restricted by the princely and/or municipal authorities, particularly in Florence and Ghent, where the number of recognised guilds became fixed, but also in London, where a rigid guild hierarchy emerged in the early 16th century. Moreover, the authorities sought to extend their control over the guilds for both economic and political reasons, affecting the autonomy of the corporations and their economic decision-making. Finally, the guilds’ political involvement fuelled competition between them as they strove for power, increasing the socio-economic disparities between and within the corporations, such as between merchants and industrialists on the one hand, and shopkeepers and artisans on the other. The degree to which these tensions occurred varied according to local economic circumstances.

Occupational associations in medieval Florence, Ghent and London exercised, in the first place, a number of important economic functions, including regulating production and trade, controlling the labour market, developing human capital and disseminating innovative technologies. Yet, the urban environment of which guilds were part was not merely economic in nature; at several times in the later Middle Ages, political factors turned out to be decisive for changes in the guilds’ autonomy and internal organisation. This was primarily the result of the institutional inter-linkages and interdependencies created by the activities of the guilds themselves, by which they became closely interwoven with the urban political system and social
fabric. Consequently, the guilds’ histories also became overdetermined, making a full understanding of the political economy of medieval cities and towns a prerequisite to explain the evolution of the guilds’ various political, economic and social activities.72

An obvious conclusion would be that institutional change was primarily exogenously induced; that is, by changes in the political power relations. At critical junctures, political and economic rivalries reinforced each other, promoting the economic activities of some guilds (and of interest groups within certain associations), and impeding those of others. It was also precisely during periods of political and/or economic upheaval that guildsmen themselves had the opportunity to devise new rules, and to implement existing ones in novel ways. Further comparative case studies can ascertain in which specific situations tradesmen and artisans had these opportunities, and seized them.

The presented comparative analysis, however, demonstrates that, since guilds were part of an intricate institutional environment, their organisation and functioning changed above all incrementally, as a result of their continuous interaction with other urban institutions and their responses to changing political and economic circumstances. Thus, the persistence of guilds in the medieval and early modern periods was not just determined by their particular organisational structure, nor by the urban political and economic context of which they were part, but also by the ways in which they and their environment adapted to each other. In other words, guilds in medieval Florence, Ghent and London co-evolved with other urban institutions, becoming to a greater or lesser extent complementary, both either reinforcing or compensating for each other’s effects.73 The emergence of complementary institutions in itself did not entail better performing institutions or optimal institutional solutions. In fact, the institutional complex in the three cities often hampered change, leading to incongruence between guilds and their institutional, political and socio-economic environment.

72 See for approaches addressing the complex co-evolution of political-institutional and socio-economic developments: Padgett/McLean: Organizational Invention and Elite Transformation (cf. note 66); Soly: The Political Economy of European Craft Guilds (cf. note 7).
73 Aoki: Endogenizing Institutions and Institutional Changes (cf. note 5), pp. 14, 17; Greif: Historical and Comparative Institutional Analysis (cf. note 5), p. 82.