

J.F. VERBRUGGEN

# The Battle of the Golden Spurs

Courtrai, 11 July 1302



EDITED BY KELLY DEVRIES  
TRANSLATED BY DAVID RICHARD FERGUSON

**Warfare in History**

**THE  
BATTLE OF THE GOLDEN SPURS  
(COURTRAI, 11 JULY 1302)**

## **Warfare in History**

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**THE**  
**BATTLE OF THE GOLDEN SPURS**  
**(COURTRAI, 11 JULY 1302)**

**A CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF FLANDERS' WAR  
OF LIBERATION, 1297–1305**

J. F. Verbruggen

Edited by  
Kelly DeVries

Translated by  
David Richard Ferguson

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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## General Editor's Preface

*'The Flemings stand there as hopelessly determined men.'*

Giovanni Vilani, *Historie fiorentine* (cited p. 230)

Anniversaries obviously matter. Exactly seven hundred years ago, Flemish townsmen crushed the chivalry of their French overlord in a dramatic and bloody encounter. Precisely half a century has passed since the best military historian of his era published this study in his native Flemish. J.F. Verbruggen's *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, published in English translation in 1997, the third book in this series, captures the broad sweep of his subject, while this present volume is a detailed case study. As my old tutor, R. Allen Brown, used to say, 'All history is local history', and Verbruggen's analysis supports this dictum perfectly.

For, to really understand a battle, it is essential to have a clear and accurate understanding of the ground over which it was fought. The author's close investigation of this matter enables him to draw conclusions about why and how the opposing commanders drew up their forces in the way that they did. Flowing from that is the issue of the tactics used by both sides – and flowing is an appropriate word because of the significance of the water-filled ditches and marshy areas which provided the Flemish foot-soldiers with a strong position to defend. But, contrary to frequently over-simplified views of the battle, the French did not charge heedlessly into a trap. True, in retrospect, Robert of Artois would have been better advised not to attack, although, as Verbruggen explains, he was able to get his mounted troops across the ditches with relatively little loss and into position to launch a charge on the enemy's infantry. Rather, he had underestimated the determination of the lightly-armoured and simply-armed footmen in opposing his own heavily-equipped cavalry. This may well have been the result of aristocratic arrogance. Yet the resistance of an army of the low-born was not a new thing, although some historians still write of an 'infantry revolution' in the fourteenth century. Nor again were the knightly commanders incapable of learning from their defeats, as the French showed at the battle of Mons-en-Pévèle two years later, when they exercised considerable caution in the assault and came away the better party of a hard-fought draw.<sup>1</sup> All these matters Verbruggen explores in such a way that it might seem surprising that his interpretations have not been picked-up more by the 'Anglo-Saxon' historical world. The issue is, of course, that of the availability of his conclusions, originally published in the language generically known as Dutch and

<sup>1</sup> See Matthew Bennett, 'The Myth of the Supremacy of Knightly Cavalry' in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton conference*, ed. M. Strickland, New Series vol. 7 (Paul Watkins, 1998), pp. 304–16.

little read by English-speakers. It is therefore to the credit of Kelly DeVries, whose ethnic heritage gives him an understanding of the language, that he has brought this volume to light via the equally valuable work of translation by David Ferguson.

Knowledge of language, and hence of sources, is an essential skill for an historian, and here again Verbruggen excels. While French and Latin accounts make useful reading for his analysis, it is the Flemish poem of a Brabançon priest, Lodewijk van Velthem, which takes centre stage and provides the most detailed and instructive guide to events. Verbruggen shares with this spiritual ancestor an immense pride in the achievements of the 'common people', their hands hardened by work and apparently prone to a nationalism that, to some observers, seems more redolent of the nineteenth century than the period of the Flemish Revolt itself. Similarly, his interpretation of the portrayal of the Flemish leaders on that unique survival, the 'Courtrai Chest', as bare-faced (while their bodyguard of knights ride in closed helmets) as a deliberate attempt to create a common identity with the footmen, protected merely by steel caps, may not reflect the only iconographic intention of the artist.

Indeed, it is very hard, when analysing a medieval battle, to get close to the men who made the event, not just what they thought (which must always be an exercise of historical imagination) but who they were and how many there were of them. If the size of armies in chroniclers' accounts often seems hopelessly exaggerated, it is partly because they are, and partly because numbers had a different meaning (often with Biblical connotations) than the 'perfect' data expected by a modern audience. (Although they too may often be deceived by journalistic accounts of wars and other tragedies.) So, Verbruggen's careful interpretation of the sketchy information available from which to work out how many men – roughly 8–10,000 Flemings against some 2,500 knights (with an unknowable number of support troops) – is also a model of its kind. In simple terms odds of three- or four-to-one might seem more than adequate to enable the foot-soldiers to triumph, were it not for the disparity in equipment and sense of moral ascendancy which so benefited the knights and squires of the French army. Had the Flemings' nerve failed, then there can be no doubt that it would have been them who would have been massacred. The descriptions of men unable to release their simple weapons – pikes and iron-bound clubs – after the battle, because they had been gripping them so tightly, bear simple witness to the terror that they faced in opposing men whose craft was war, while they were mere craftsmen. The important factor of leadership, combined with fellow-feeling and a desperate need to survive, also played a crucial role in the outcome of the battle.

Some might say that battle-history is an old-fashioned form of military history, yet when it is done supremely well (as it is here), it is as an compelling and perceptive analysis of a past event as it is possible to achieve.

Matthew Bennett  
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

## Editor's Introduction

I first heard of the battle of Courtrai when I lived in Belgium in 1976–78. Interested in that nation's history, principally its medieval past, I read Patricia Carson's extremely well-written popular history, *The Fair Face of Flanders*.<sup>1</sup> With its historical description of Belgium as the 'slagveld van Europa' (battlefield of Europe), Carson's book became, for me, a military history. Unfortunately for the Belgians, such a history does not have many high-points. They often participated in the wars fought in their country. But rarely were they victorious. One of their greatest victories, indeed one which is still celebrated today, was fought on July 11, 1302, and became known as the Battle of the Golden Spurs, based on the extremely large number of golden spurs captured there – between five and seven hundred, spurs given to knights as tournament prizes. These were taken by their Flemish captors to the nearby Church of the Virgin at Courtrai where they would hang as trophies for eighty years until removed by descendants of those original knights after the Flemish defeat at the battle of Westrozebeke.<sup>2</sup>

The knights in question were French. Titularly the King of France, Philip IV (the Fair) at the time of Courtrai), was the king also of the Flemings. But it had rarely been a happy sovereignty, especially in the century prior to the Battle of the Golden Spurs. Both the count of Flanders and the large towns of the county rebelled frequently against their king. Indeed, two Flemish counts, Ferrand of Portugal and Guy de Dampierre, had been imprisoned after rebelling against (and losing to) the French king during the thirteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Still, before 1302, any rebellion which was made against the French was quickly and violently put down by their armies, with little or no penalty against the king or his people. In fact, more often than not, the French kingdom grew in size, with land frequently surrendered to the king as reparations for Flemish military losses; at one time, during the eleventh century, the county of Flanders stretched as far into modern France as St. Omer.<sup>4</sup>

But, in 1302, the previously justified confidence of the French was dashed by the Flemings at Courtrai. Flemish townspeople from throughout the county were told by their generals, sons and grandsons of the previous count, Guy de

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Carson, *The Fair Face of Flanders* (Ghent, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, in *Oeuvres de Froissart*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels, 1870), XIII:177–78.

<sup>3</sup> Ferrand was captured after being on the losing side of the battle of Bouvines, fought in 1214. See E. Warlop, *De Vlaamse edel voor 1300*, vol. 1 (Handzame, 1968), p. 404. Guy was captured in 1300. See David Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London, 1992), pp. 188–91.

<sup>4</sup> On the decreasing size of Flanders from the eleventh to the fourteenth century see Nicholas; and Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. I: *Des origines au commencement du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Brussels, 1902).

Dampierre, who was then languishing in French imprisonment, that they needed to gather their forces and defend their 'lands, livelihoods, and families.' Such rhetoric became reality when an army of townsmen gathered at Courtrai, stood powerfully in a massive solid line, and defeated wave upon wave of French knights and other cavalry.

The defeat at Courtrai was devastating to the French kingdom. Not only was their international reputation diminished, and the size of their forces depleted, but the French kingdom had to contend with the continuation of rebellion for more than two years. And, driven by this success, further Flemish and other southern Low Countries' rebellions would follow throughout the next two centuries.<sup>5</sup> The defeat at Courtrai may also have led indirectly to the Hundred Years War, with their English enemy more certain of contending against the French than before their 1302 debacle.<sup>6</sup>

My interest roused by Carson's brief description of the battle of Courtrai, I began researching the battle as an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University and as a graduate student at the University of Toronto's Centre for Medieval Studies – a discussion of the battle opened my PhD dissertation, *Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in the Southern Low Countries during the Fourteenth Century: A Historiographical Comparison* (1987) – I soon discovered the works of J.F. Verbruggen. Initially, this was his chapter on the battle which I first read in the 1977 English translation, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages from the Eighth Century to 1340*.<sup>7</sup> This led me to his earlier, more complete study of the battle, *De slag der guldensporen: Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van Vlaanderens vrijheidsoorlog, 1297–1305* (Antwerp, 1952), the book translated here.

To knowing medieval military historians, there is no doubt that Jan Frans Verbruggen, in his scholarly achievements, stands in select company with the greats of the field, Charles Oman, Hans Delbrück, Philippe Contamine, and Bernard S. Bachrach. Yet, because his principal choice of publishing languages, Dutch, is not read by most scholars, his scholarship has been known only in the few articles written by him in French or German, and the even fewer translations of his writings.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, this must change! In the words of Claude Gaier, himself

<sup>5</sup> See Kelly DeVries, 'Observations on the Rebellions of Southern Low Countries' Towns During the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries' (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> See Kelly DeVries, *The Hundred Years Wars, 1302–1485* (London, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> This was translated by General Sumner Willard and Lady S.C.M. Southern and was published by North-Holland Publishing Company of Amsterdam in 1977. It has since been republished in a second edition by The Boydell Press in 1997. The original is *De krijgkunst in west-Europa in de middeleeuwen (IXe tot XIVe eeuw)* (Brussels, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> This latter situation should change in the future, not only with the publication of this translation, but also from the annual appearance of translated articles which are to appear in *The Journal of Medieval Military History*. The first of these articles, 'Flemish Urban Militias Against French Cavalry Armies in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', translated by myself, will be published in 2002. (The original of this article, 'Vlaamse gemeentelegers tegen Franse ridderlegers in de 14de en 15de eeuw', appeared in the *Revue Belge d'histoire militaire* 24 (1981), 359–82.)

an impressive Belgian military historian, we need not only 'lire' (read) Verbruggen's works, but also 'relire' (reread) them.

J.F. Verbruggen was born in Tisselt on November 13, 1920. As a youth he was educated in the traditional Greco-Latin Humanities education at the *Koninklijk Atheneum* in Mechelen (Malines), after which he studied at the *Cadettenschool* (Military Academy) at Saffraanberg near Sint-Truiden (Saint-Trond) and at the *Koninklijke Militaire School* (Royal Military Academy) in Brussels, from where he graduated in 1939 and was commissioned as an officer in the Belgian army. His military service disrupted by the Nazi occupation of his homeland, Jan Verbruggen entered the University of Ghent where, in July 1944, he received a licentiate in arts and letters (history). Later study at the University of Ghent resulted in a Doctorate of Arts (*summa cum laude*) in 1951, and numerous academic awards and honors.

It was during this phase of his education, that J.F. Verbruggen began to teach others. His first assignment came in 1948 when he was engaged as a *repetitor* (instructor) in military history at the same *Koninklijke Militaire School* that he had graduated from almost ten years previously. In December 1954, he was raised there to the position of *docent* (teacher). Two years later, in September 1956, Jan Verbruggen was named a *gewoon hogeleraar* (regular professor) at the *Officiële Universiteit* (Official University) of the Belgian Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi in Elizabethstad. For the remainder of his academic career he lived in Africa. He taught at the *Officiële Universiteit* until July 1967, and, after those former Belgian colonies achieved their independence, he moved to the *Officiële Universiteit* of Burundi in Bujumbura, where he continued to teach until 1975. He also taught at the *Institut supérieur des cadres militaires* (the Greater Institute for Military Cadets) in Bujumbura from 1974 to 1976. Besides teaching at all of these institutions, Dr Verbruggen served as Dean of Arts and Sciences from 1956 to 1959 and 1963 to 1966 (in Elizabethstad) and from 1969 to 1971 (in Bujumbura).

While teaching in and administering at these institutions, J.F. Verbruggen continued to research and write medieval military history. He was assisted in these endeavors by grants from the *Koninklijke Militaire School*, in 1951, and the *Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie* (the Royal Flemish Academy), in 1953. And, in 1956–59, he received the very prestigious three-year prize for Belgian military history, awarded by the Department of Defense of Belgium. His numerous books also reflect this scholarly interest. They include (beyond the original of this volume): *De krijgkunst in west-Europa in de middeleeuwen (IXe tot XIVe eeuw)* [The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages from the Eighth Century to 1340] (1954), which was translated first into English in 1977 and also in 1997); *Het leger en de vloot van de graven van Vlaanderen vanaf het ontstaan tot in 1305* [The Army and Navy of the Counts of Flanders from the Beginning to 1305] (1960); *Het gemeenteleger van Brugge van 1338 tot 1340 en de namen van de weerbare mannen* [The Town Militia of Bruges from 1338 to 1340 and the Names of the Able-Bodied Men] (1962); *1302 in Vlaanderen: De guldensporenslag* [1302 in Flanders: The Battle of the Golden Spurs] (1977); *De kist van Oxford* [The Oxford Chest], written with B. Dewilde, A. Pauwels, and F. Warlop (1980); *Vlaanderen na de Guldensporenslag* [Flanders after the Battle of

the Golden Spurs] (1991); and *De slag bij Guinegate, 7 augustus 1479: De verdediging van het graafschap Vlaanderen tegen de koning van Frankrijk, 1477–1480* [The Battle of Guinegate, 7 August 1479: The Defense of the County of Flanders against the King of France, 1477–1480] (1993). In 1953, he also co-edited (with A.F.C. Koch) *De Annales Aldenburgenses over de gebeurtenissen in Vlaanderen tussen 11 juli 1302 en 25 April 1303* [The Annales of Aldenburg Concerning the Events in Flanders between 11 July 1302 and April 25 1303].

Yet, his interest in military history, in particular Low Countries' military history, does not stop with the Middle Ages. Being a scholarly product of Belgian military academies during the twentieth century, Verbruggen has naturally also turned his thoughts to the conflicts which occurred in his homeland during the last hundred years, namely World War I and II. This has led to an additional number of academic books, including among others: *Ronsele (24 et 25 mai 1940): La surprise allemande du 24 mai et la contreattaque belge du 25 mai* [Ronsele (24–25 May 1940): The German Surprise of May 24 and the Belgian Counterattack of May 25] (1966); *La bataille de Merkem, 17 avril 1918* [The Battle of Merkem, April 17, 1918] (1977); *Inval van de Duitsers en bezetting, 1914–1918, 1940–1944* [The Invasion and Occupation of the Germans, 1914–1918, 1940–1944] (1985); and *Van Sarajevo tot Versailles: Herdenkingsuitgave 75 jaar wapenstilstand, 1918–1993* [From Sarajevo to Versailles: A Commemorative Publication at the 75th Anniversary of the Peace Treaty, 1918–1993] (1993).

The number of J.F. Verbruggen's articles in all chronological fields and genres of history is equally imposing.<sup>9</sup>

Such a bibliography is impressive. What is perhaps even more impressive than the numbers of works in his bibliography, is that so many of these books and articles have had a significant impact on historical scholarship. Several medieval military historians have learned the Dutch language solely to read Verbruggen's texts. Numerous libraries and interlibrary loan offices within them have been inundated by requests to find his less easily accessible books and articles. A Book Prize, for the Best Book in Medieval Military History, has also been established in his name by De Re Militari, the society of Medieval Military History. No serious medieval military historian can even begin to think about the subject without first acquainting themselves with his writings. It would be nice to see this translation as the beginning of a trend in academic publishing which would see the translation of the rest of Verbruggen's impressive literature. I remember, however, in talking with the late General Sumner Willard, who, together with Lady Southern, translated *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages from the Eighth Century to 1340*, that he had expressed a similar feeling when he first translated that book in 1977. So maybe it will not happen; but it should, and I would be happy to spearhead such an effort.

<sup>9</sup> Among Dr Verbruggen's current activities is his editorship of the journal of the Genootschap voor geschied- en oudheidkunde te Vilvoorde [Society for the History and Antiquity of Vilvoorde], which appears several times a year. He has also written a number of this local journal's issues, devoting his research and writing to many non-military events.

Of course the question must be asked: why is this book translated here? Why translate a book written solely about what seems from the outset to be a relatively unimportant medieval engagement. Certainly, it does not carry the weight of an Milvian Bridge, Adrianople, Hastings, Manzikert, Bouvines, Crécy, or Agincourt. Or does it? Hopefully, I have answered that question at the beginning of this introduction. But if not, read on. Undoubtedly, you will understand what I, Dr J.F. Verbruggen, and numerous other medieval and military historians have: Courtrai, the Battle of the Golden Spurs, is incredibly important for the entire history of the later Middle Ages, especially for what was to follow between the Low Countries and France throughout the next two centuries, and, by extension, what was to follow between England, the Low Countries, and France during the Hundred Years War.

I know that should be the end of this introduction, but I cannot pass up the opportunity of adding a personal note. Although I had long come to know Dr J.F. Verbruggen through his bibliography on which I had feasted for more than two decades, it was not until I became involved in this project that I came to know him personally. I can truthfully say, through my correspondences and meetings with him, that there is no more astute and sharp a scholar and no more generous and kind a man as I have found anywhere in my dealings with fellow-academics. I have enjoyed his and his wife's hospitality, and I have profited from his intelligence and hard work.

Kelly DeVries  
April 2002





## Foreword to the 1952 Edition

Stripped of all simplistic romanticism, the Battle of the Spurs still retains its prime importance in our history. One barely needs to be reminded of this: it is something that every Fleming is aware of. The event also had far-reaching consequences for the course of world history: the hegemonic position that France had attained in Western Europe during the thirteenth century received its first powerful blow.

For those interested in the study of history, conceived, first and foremost, as an attempt to understand past events, such an unforeseen and, for those living at the time, almost unbelievable occurrence demands explication. And this presumes serious historical research. Certainly, much has been written about the Battle of the Spurs. Amid the works and articles in journals devoted to the subject there are some very thorough scientific contributions. A few have even opened the way for further study, among them two critical studies by Henri Pirenne and the two works by Victor Fris.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, many significant problems remained unsolved and certain conceptions of the events continued to be held as valid, even if difficult to reconcile with what is known of the art of warfare in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, our knowledge of the history of Flanders, France and the Low Countries in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has progressed markedly in recent years. Common perceptions concerning the Battle of the Spurs, and the events with which the battle is associated, need to be corroborated with results gained.

Dr J. Verbruggen had the courage to take up this most difficult task. His technical experience gained as an officer and his well-grounded knowledge of the sources and of scholarly contributions have enabled him to finally construct an acceptable version of the events. Dr Verbruggen was also aided by his equally well-founded knowledge of army organisation and tactics in the Middle Ages that has been demonstrated in a series of remarkable preparative studies. The work that he is now presenting to the public builds on new research into all the narrative and non-narrative sources, published or unpublished, and even on iconographic sources. The research has done full justice to the mutual relations between the accounts of the battle. This enables the authority of evidence given and information about the events to be determined with a degree of certainty or probability that has not been attained before. What is more, due to lengthy research on the tactics employed by cavalry and foot-soldiers in the Middle Ages, the author is better able

<sup>1</sup> Henri Pirenne, 'La Version flamande et la version française de la bataille de Courtrai', *Bulletin de la commission royale* [henceforth *BCRH*], 4th ser., 17 (1890), 11–50; Pirenne, 'La Version flamande et la version française de la bataille de Courtrai – Note supplémentaire', *BCRH*, 5th ser., 2 (1892), 85–123; V. Fris, *De slag bij Kortrijk* (Ghent, 1902); and Fris, *Vlaanderens vrijmaking in 1302* (Ghent, 1902).

than his predecessors to understand and determine the various operations as well as localising them in time and space.

I believe that every Fleming – and for that matter even Belgian too – will be grateful to Dr Verbruggen for what he has achieved in making better known one of the most important as well as one of the most glorious events of our national history. However, I admit that I attach even more importance to the author's elucidation, through the completion of his task, of our knowledge of world history, as well as to his never deviating from the most strict standards of objectivity. He has remained true to that principle laid down by Cicero which remains the condition of any true history: *ne quid falsi dicere audeat, ne quid veri non audeat historia*.

Prof. Dr F. L. Ganshof

## Acknowledgements (to the 1952 edition)

Although many works have already been devoted to the Battle of the Spurs, much concerning the period 1297–1305 still remains unknown. There is, indeed, no complete scientific study of the war from the viewpoint of the history of Flanders. A French scholar, Funck-Brentano, dealt with this period in a lengthy work, *Philippe le Bel en Flandre*, that, unfortunately, approached the subject from the French perspective. Despite the overwhelming mass of documents of which this historian made use, the work was misconceived at the very outset. Funck-Brentano was too favourable to the King, part of whose activities he then related. What is worse, much about the conditions and circumstances of Flanders was either misunderstood or completely distorted. One suspects that his rash generalisations were, at times, intentional. Although many corrections to the work have already been published, numerous misapprehensions continue to have an insidious effect upon our own historiography.

Fully recapturing the history of Flanders' War of Liberation requires lengthy research. This is especially so, and ultimately essential, if one seeks to consult all unpublished documents on this period as well as taking account of the key aspects of life throughout the Principality of Flanders. Readers will be aware of the problems thrown up by the most well-known events in the war and will thus understand the work required in detailing the whole war. While elucidating the Battle of Courtrai here, in other works I have detailed the equally interesting battle that took place at Mons-en-Pévèle.<sup>1</sup>

This book approaches the subject from the viewpoint of military history. However, in order to draw up a scientifically valid work in this area, it was naturally not sufficient to limit myself to strictly military aspects. Readers will understand that my research has been undertaken as liberally as possible, since, ultimately, the army, and most of all the armed forces of 1302, presented a reliable picture of society at that time. The social circumstances of those living in that period must first be understood before making statements on the military aspects.

Some of the results of my research may perhaps appear surprising to many readers. I have always striven to reproduce this episode in history with the strictest objectivity. I have neither allowed myself to be led by any preconceived idea, nor by a socio-economic interpretation of the events, nor by any tendency to stress the

<sup>1</sup> Published as 'De slag bij de Pevelenberg (18 aug. 1304)', *Bijdragen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 6 (1952), 169–98 and *Het Leger. De Natie*, 7 (1952), 258–62, 338–42. [Translator's note: the Battle of Mons-en-Pévèle is referred to in Dutch as the Battle of Pevelenberg.] See also J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages from the Eighth Century to 1340*, 2nd edn., trans. S. Willard and R. W. Southern (Woodbridge, 1997), 198–203.

role of specific figures. Furthermore, I have not kept overstressing the national importance or a national interpretation of the war. On several occasions in the course of editing, the sources employed obliged me to correct an earlier opinion as well as making significant changes to previous interpretations. I was confronted with very complex ideological movements and impelling forces in the minds of the combatants of 1302 that cannot be reduced to a simple schema. I have constantly endeavoured to avoid that danger referred to by Dr Blockmans as generalising in this 'fragment of convulsive Flemish life and strife of the past'.

There were already many works on the battle of 11 July 1302. Although I felt obliged to offer a different presentation of events from that given in such studies, it is undeniable that most of them were of great service to me. I was able to avoid certain mistakes as a result of predecessors dealing with the same problem. Thus, I apologise in advance for criticism given and am grateful for all the useful material I gained from the studies. I take complete responsibility for my own personal opinions and mistakes.

It is with great pleasure that I am able to thank all who helped me. My teacher, Prof. Dr F. L. Ganshof, agreed to enrich this work with his foreword, for which I am most grateful. I am, however, infinitely more indebted to him for the historical training he gave me as well as the sympathetic approach and encouragement with which he constantly followed and motivated my research. I was always able to rely upon his help in overcoming difficulties.

I have dedicated this work to Prof. Dr H. van Werveke, one of my professors at the University of Ghent. During his seminars he gave me a full initiation in the sources and works on the Battle of Courtrai. In addition to this, he took the trouble to carefully examine my preparatory studies and helped me by providing much useful additional material and ideas.

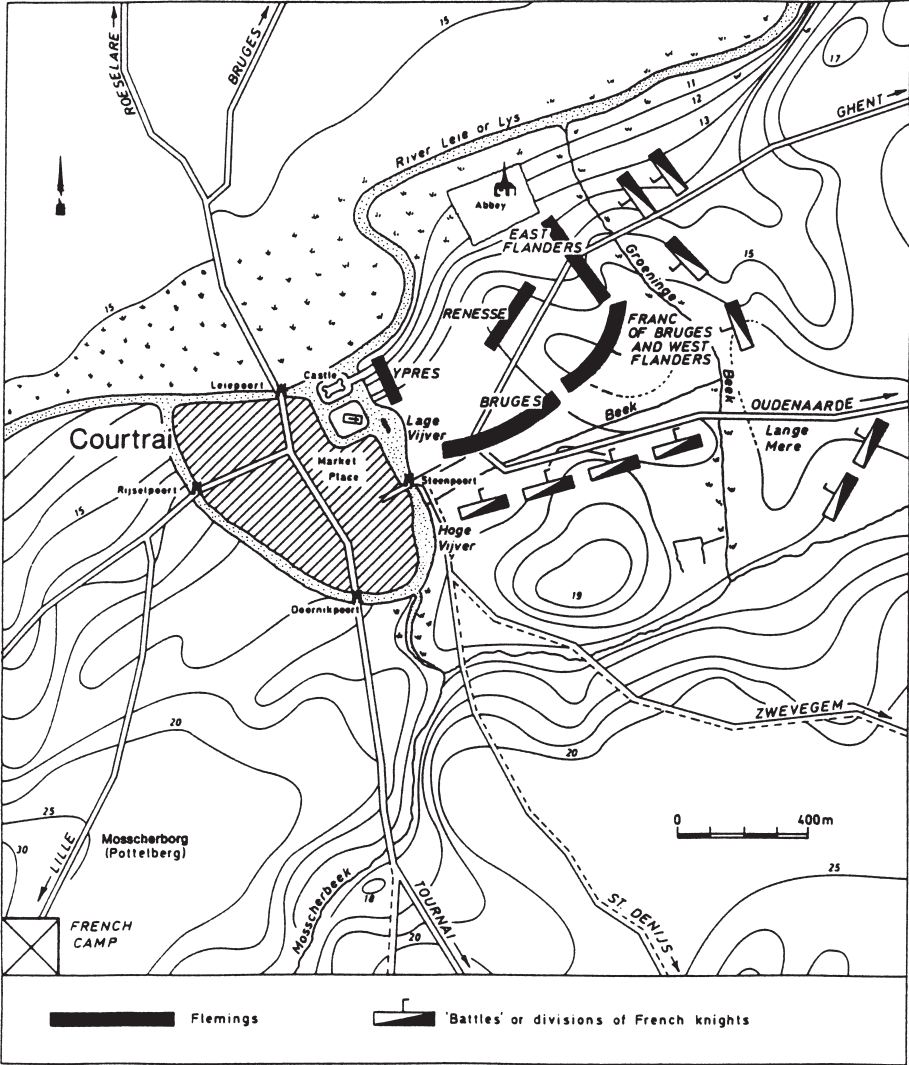
I am also much indebted to Prof. Dr J. Dhondt who continually supported me with advice and encouragement. The discussions that I had with him on the results of my research were always most beneficial to me.

I also thank Prof. Dr E. Strubbe who helped me on numerous occasions during my research in Bruges. His suggestions were of great importance to me.

At the Royal Military School I am, equally, very much indebted to Colonel S. B. H. H. Bernard, professor of military history. He gave me constant encouragement and all manner of support; and at the same time, he ensured that I had the necessary free time for research, and for revising and correcting this present work. I also give warm thanks for their willing help to my colleagues and friends, Captain A. Broekmans and Commander E. van der Molen, both tutors at the Royal Military School.

Dr Jos De Smet, assistant curator of the Algemeen Rijksarchief in Bruges, never failed to support me with his extensive and first-rate knowledge of the history of Bruges. Furthermore, he allowed me to make repeated and lengthy use of his copy of the unpublished town accounts of Bruges in the period prior to 1302. This was an invaluable help to me. Mr C. Didier, Master of Philosophy and Literature, permitted me to read his unpublished dissertation on the Bruges communal army. Thanks to his work, I immediately had at my disposal a solid basis that was of very

great service in my research into the army of the Count in Flanders. In identifying the coats of arms on the carved Flemish chest at New College, Oxford, I was always able to rely upon the willing help of Dr J. Bolsée, curator of the Algemeen Rijksarchief in Brussels. Mr Piétresson de St Aubin at the Archives départementales in Lille gave me much support with his customary willingness. At the Algemeen Rijksarchief in Ghent I was aided by my friends, Dr M. Gysseling and Dr C. Wyffels. In Bruges, I am much indebted to Mr R. A. Parmentier, curator of the town archives and his assistant, Mr A. Schouteet. In Courtrai, the librarian, Dr J. Soete, and his assistant, Mr J. M. Bertelee, helped me in scrutinising the archives so badly damaged during the war. I am especially grateful to the town engineer, Mr J. M. L. Demeyere, who, in addition to many interesting details, provided me with two maps of the Groeninge stream. One map indicated the situation before 1950 and the second presented the current course of the stream. My friend, Mr H. Thomassen, teacher at the Royal Cadet School, took the trouble to read my manuscript and helped me with numerous corrections in language and form. I would like to thank all of them most heartily.



Plan of the battle of Courtrai

## Preface: 'An almost impossible event . . .'<sup>1</sup>

On 11 July 1302, beneath the town walls of Courtrai, the most splendid army of knights in all Christianity, the flower of French nobility, was thoroughly defeated by Flemish rebels, by common workers and peasants. The superbly trained noblemen who had devoted their whole life to the military profession and were fully experienced in fighting on horseback in close ranks were led by an able commander, the Count of Artois, victor of various campaigns. They were defeated in three hours by men who had little experience of warfare and belonged to the lowest classes of society at that time, men who lived by the unremitting labour of their hands. This army of brave and robust workers – men with 'dirty fingernails': weavers, fullers, and peasants – all fighting on foot, was under the command of able leaders and possessed excellent weapons. They put a sudden end to the centuries-old myth of the invincibility of proud and wealthy knights. It was a major blow to the honour and glory of the French noblemen. They were the finest knights of that time, belonging to the most powerful state in Europe, and had not known defeat in the West since before their victory at Bouvines (1214).

'It was an almost impossible event' noted the Florentine banker, Villani, who deemed it necessary to detail closely this military exploit, as it was both new and remarkable.<sup>2</sup> When the news of the Flemish victory reached Rome, Pope Boniface VIII was awakened in the middle of the night to read the report.<sup>3</sup>

Not only was this most astonishing news recounted in Italy, but also in Tyrol, in Austria near the Swiss border, in Germany, in England and in Scotland. In England, the Flemish victory was even put to music in a folk song.<sup>4</sup> Memory of this splendid military exploit remained so vivid that when Scottish foot-soldiers crushed an English army of knights in similar circumstances at Bannockburn in 1314, two English chroniclers compared the victory to the Battle of the Spurs.<sup>5</sup> Sir Thomas Gray of Heton simply claimed that the Scots followed the example of the Flemings in fighting on foot at Bannockburn. Later, a third English chronicler,

<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Villani, *Historie fiorentine*, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, xiii, ed. L. Muratori (Rome, 1728), col. 388.

<sup>2</sup> Villani, cols. 388 and 391.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles le Muisit, *Chronique et annales*, ed. H. Lemaître, Société de l'histoire de France [henceforth SHF] (Paris, 1905), 68.

<sup>4</sup> There are several editions of this poem: Rossell Hope Robbins, *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York, 1959), 9–13; *Political Songs of England*, Camden Society, vi, ed. Thomas Wright (London, 1839), 187–95; *Chants historiques de la Flandre, 400–1650*, ed. Louis de Baecker (Lille, 1855), 161–72; and *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* [henceforth MGH SS], vol. 28 (Hanover, 1888), 496–9.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Gray of Heton, *Scalachronica*, ed. J. Stevenson, Maitland Club, vol. 40 (Edinburgh, 1836), 142; and *Vita Edwardi Secundi Auctore Malmesburiensi*, ed. W. Stubbs, in *Chronicles of the Reign of Edward I and Edward II*, Rolls Series, 2 (London, 1883), 206.



who had a clear view of the evolution of the art of warfare, likewise referred to the similarity of the Battle of the Spurs to the Battle of Bannockburn.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the superb Liégeois historian, Jean le Bel, placed Benevento (1266), Courtrai (1302) and Crécy (1346) as being on a par with respect to the great number of princes killed in a day.<sup>7</sup>

In this time and age it is only with difficulty that an idea can be formed about the effect of this glorious event upon the minds of the impressionable people of that period. In countries that were not involved in the war it was noted mockingly, and with thinly disguised pleasure, that the honour and glory of the illustrious French knighthood had sunk dramatically.<sup>8</sup> 'The shame of this shall last for centuries!'<sup>9</sup> It was an immense loss of prestige for the mighty kingdom.

In France itself amazement and despair dominated. In 1300 one of the most adamant supporters of the policy of conquest, a royal advocate, had written a treatise aimed at shortening the wars against neighbours and rebellious vassals: 'One cannot believe that a prince, now alive and in possession of full powers of comprehension, would dare lie in wait for the royal army in order to enjoin in pitched battle. This would be even less the case with a count or lord who knows the knightly army of France.'<sup>10</sup> However, around 1305, the same advocate, Pierre Dubois, was to remark 'I do not believe that a person with full powers of understanding could believe it possible today, for a single prince to rule the whole world, and for everyone to obey him. If one were to strive for this then innumerable wars, rebellions and disputes would break out and it would be impossible to control them.'<sup>11</sup> Between 1300 and 1305 a great deal had occurred: the county of Flanders, having been seized, had its own prince once again. The defeat of 11 July 1302 had made the French leadership so uncertain that, for the time being, they avoided battles in the open field. They retreated on several occasions without fighting (at the end of September 1302 and on 10 July 1303) and, finally, had a battle forced upon them at Mons-en-Pévèle (18 August 1304).

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey le Baker, *Chronicon*, ed. E. M. Thompson (Oxford, 1889), 7–9. On this subject see Sir Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (London, 1924), II:113; T. F. Tout, *The Place of the Reign of Edward II in English History*, 2nd edn (Manchester, 1936), 226; and the same author's understanding of developments in military strategy, 'The Tactics of the Battles of Boroughbridge and Morlaix', *English Historical Review*, 19 (1904), 225.

<sup>7</sup> J. le Bel, *Chronique*, ed. J. Viard and E. Depréz, SHF (Paris, 1904–5), II:109.

<sup>8</sup> Villani, col. 388.

<sup>9</sup> Petrus de Langtoft, *Ex Chronico Rythmico*, ed. F. Liebermann, in MGH SS, 28 (Hanover, 1888), 660.

<sup>10</sup> Natalis de Wailly, 'Mémoire sur un opuscule, intitulé: Summaria Brevis et Compendiosa Doctrina Felicis Expeditionis et Abbreviationis Guerrarum ac Litium Regni Francorum', *Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, 18.2 (1855), 441; and Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, MS Lat. 6222c, ff. 5–5v.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Dubois, *De Recuperatione Terre Sancte. Traité de politique générale*, ed. C. V. Langlois, in Collection de textes pour servir à l'étude et à l'enseignement de l'histoire [henceforth CTEH], 9 (Paris, 1891), 54. For the quotations see also L. Delfos, *1302 door tijdgenooten verteld* (Antwerp, 1931), 79, 111 n. 58.

Thus, it is not surprising that immediately following the events a French explanation of the terrible defeat arose that was intended to save the honour and glory of French nobility. In Flanders the great victory was glorified and presented as a just reward for the boldness of the townsmen and the competence of the commanders. In both camps preparations were under way for further battles and it was most important that all subjects were made to contribute. Both opponents, therefore, presented the events in the most favourable light in such a way that victor and vanquished contradict each other at times. Unfortunately there were no witnesses who could have functioned as adjudicators in this awkward dispute by resolving the matter on account of their authority.

However, this famous battle does not just pose problems for military and national history. The battle is a milestone, politically and socially, which secured the autonomy of Flanders. In the towns the patricians lost power and democratic government was instituted. Furthermore, the great victors of 11 July were, without a doubt, the lowly members of the guilds. By then they were accustomed to defending their rights with weapons in their hands, and, as time went by, they increasingly resorted to them if they were not able to attain their goals by other means. Later, social disturbances were to take on a more bloody character as a result of this.

The Flemish revolt and the Battle of Courtrai had both a direct and indirect influence on such matters in other principalities in the Low Countries. In Tournai, in cities in Brabant, in Liège: everywhere the guildsmen sought recognition as political bodies as well as a say in the administration of the towns. Weavers in Tournai corresponded secretly with those in Ghent and Lille. In Namur, a charter was granted to the butchers, thus recognising the trade. There were revolts in Brabant, in Brussels, Louvain, Zoutleeuw and 's Hertogenbosch with the common people coming to power for a while.<sup>12</sup> In Liège the sons of the patricians were called the 'enfants de France'; the Leliaarts of Flanders, those Flemish supporters of the King of France, and the Liégeois tradesmen rebelled against the collection of a tax.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the Flemish invasion of Holland (1304) brought the guilds to power in Utrecht,<sup>14</sup> this being an indirect consequence of the victory of 11 July 1302.

The Battle of the Spurs, as such a surprising and tumultuous event, gave rise to contradictory accounts and explanations. Due to its national, political and social importance one should, in approaching explanations given by those living at the time, pay careful attention to the personality of the chronicler, to his nationality, to his political and social conceptions as well as to his personal sympathies.

Even today scholars do not completely avoid such manifold influences in illustrating the importance of the battle or in judging its political effects and deter-

<sup>12</sup> See, among others, Hans van Werveke, 'De steden', in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, II:414.

<sup>13</sup> F. Vercauteren, *Luttes sociales à Liège (XIIIe et XIVe siècles)* (Brussels, 1943), 66, 70; and Vercauteren, 'Het prinsbisdom Luik tot 1316', in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, II:348–9.

<sup>14</sup> Van Werveke, 'De steden', 414; and J. F. Niermeyer, 'Het sticht Utrecht en het Graafschap Holland in de dertiende eeuw', in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, II:304–5.

mining the numbers of participants from the different classes in society at that time. As a result, a difficult problem arises over historical methodology, not only with respect to the sources, but also to the historical works.

This work will proceed as follows: a general introduction will detail the circumstances prevalent in the county of Flanders at the end of the thirteenth century, the war between Guy de Dampierre and Philip the Fair and the rebellion of 1302. Following this, the battle at Courtrai will be examined. A first part will discuss the historical studies devoted to the battle, and the sources available. After listing the chronicles, the work will explore how accounts given by those living at that time were examined and used by historians from the end of the nineteenth century until the present day: how they were interpreted; how a critical account was drawn up on the basis of the information they had acquired. This will lead to an account of the approach taken in researching this subject. At the same time, the reader will gain insight into the nature of historical sources as well as the difficulties with which a researcher is confronted when using chronicles from the Middle Ages.

Following the examination of the methodologies used by predecessors and an explanation of the current method of research, a detailed study will be given of the sources looking at how a Flemish and French version of the battle arose. Subsequently, each source is examined separately.

The second part looks at the history of the events of 1302. The terrain at Courtrai, the composition and numerical strengths of both armies, the events following the Bruges Matins (18 May 1302) until 11 July, or the first phase in the war of liberation of 1302, will be examined. Finally, the culminating point of the campaign will be analysed: the Battle of the Spurs. This is then followed by a general conclusion.

# Introduction

## Flanders at the End of the Thirteenth Century

From the tenth century to the beginning of the fourteenth century, Western Europe experienced steady progress in all spheres of the economy. The population grew steadily, thus increasing the number of both consumers and workers, as well as encouraging trade and industry. At the beginning of the period, almost all of the population lived from agriculture and was settled in the countryside; at the end, a considerable number lived in the towns. Trade and industry had grown markedly since the eleventh century, giving rise to increased prosperity in which the inhabitants of the small towns, villages and countryside shared. Land was continually being won from the sea, marshes drained, desolate ground and pasture cultivated. Where once there had been forests, there was now arable land; much progress had been made in agriculture. These four centuries of continual advance did have their crises: famines, epidemics, floods, and so on, but the disasters were, nevertheless, limited geographically and could not interrupt the general course of progress.

The fourteenth century contrasted sharply with this. Repeated famines and epidemics devastated the whole of Western Europe. A widespread famine arose in 1315 and raged until 1317. The Black Death claimed thousands of victims from 1347 until 1351. Only a few regions avoided the direct consequences of such disasters. The general crisis that thus arose was felt everywhere. Unlike in earlier periods, there was no growth in population, not even in the towns; and scarcely any new arable land was won.<sup>1</sup>

All indicators point to the fact that the economy, at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century, had reached its highest point of development with the limited technical means which artisans and farmers possessed at that time. It is during this period of prosperity that Flanders experienced one of the most important phases in its history.

### General conditions in the county of Flanders

The favourable geographical position, the industry of its people and the enterprising spirit of its merchants ensured for the county of Flanders, under the wise government of several powerful princes, a very special position in Western Europe. It became an example of a land with towns comparable to Italy, a situation not to be found elsewhere north of the Alps. Ghent and Bruges were among the largest towns of that time, second only to Paris. Having their origins in a first enclosure, of eighty hectares in Ghent and seventy hectares in Bruges, both towns grew by the late thir-

<sup>1</sup> E. Perroy, 'Les Crises du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 4 (1949), 167–82; and H. van Werveke, 'Inleiding', in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, II:xi.

teenth to early fourteenth century to towns of, respectively, 644 hectares and 430 hectares. From an earlier population of a few thousand, the number of inhabitants increased by the middle of the fourteenth century – or even, it appears, by the end of the thirteenth – to 56,000 in Ghent and 36,000 in Bruges. There may even have been somewhat more than 36,000 inhabitants in Bruges, since the figure for the middle of the fourteenth century was heavily influenced by the high death rates in 1316. In Ypres the population was estimated at 20,000 to 30,000 at the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The five larger Flemish towns, Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Lille and Douai, owed their prosperity to commerce and industry. Precious types of woollen cloth were produced and exported to five major areas: England, the Rhine region, north Germany, the east of France and Italy, the west of France and the Iberian peninsula. From there the splendid materials were distributed to a great part of the world as known at that time. At the end of the thirteenth century, important changes took place in the trading activities of Flemish merchants. Occasionally, they were pushed to the side by foreign merchants who came to collect the woollen cloth themselves or brought wool to Flanders. In comparison with the thirteenth century, Flemish merchants in the fourteenth century travelled much less frequently to far-away regions.<sup>3</sup>

This did not stop there being a great degree of prosperity in Flanders at the end of the thirteenth century as a consequence of the cloth industry. Primarily located in the five major towns, the industry also allowed smaller towns to flourish and, furthermore, was widespread throughout the countryside. Woollen cloth was, during these centuries, one of the most particular export articles, and was in demand everywhere. In addition, Flemish towns possessed an advantage in that they were complementary in the production of various types of cloth and did not compete with each other. At the same time, production was carefully controlled by the town authorities, ensuring that materials possessed a highly regarded quality. Continual emphasis was placed on the fact that the cloth ought to contribute to the town's honour. However, towards the end of the thirteenth century, Flanders gradually lost the great lead it had enjoyed over other principalities in the Low Countries. The cloth industry and the manner in which trade was conducted were of great social and political influence.

<sup>2</sup> F. L. Ganshof, *Over stadsontwikkeling tusschen Loire en Rijn gedurende de middeleeuwen*, Verhandelungen van de Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie (Antwerp, 1941), 44, 58; van Werveke, 'De steden', 402; van Werveke, 'Het bevolkingscijfer van de stad Gent in de veertiende eeuw', in *Miscellanea L. van der Essen* (Brussels, 1947), 345–54; van Werveke, *De omvang van de Ieperse lakenproductie in de veertiende eeuw*, Mededelingen Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie (Antwerp, 1947), 13; J. Demey, 'Proeve tot raming van de bevolking en de weefgetouwen te Ieper van de XIIIe tot de XVIIe eeuw', *Belgisch tijdschrift voor philologie en geschiedenis*, 28 (1950), 1040; and J. De Smet, 'L'Effectifs des milices brugeoises et la population de la ville en 1340', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 12 (1933), 636.

<sup>3</sup> Van Werveke, 'De opbloei van handel en nijverheid', in *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, II:417–26.

### The social and political consequences of trade and industry

The influence of the cloth industry upon town life in Flanders was so great that artisans working in the wool industry constituted more than half the male population in predominantly industrial towns such as Ghent and Ypres. In a trading centre such as Bruges, where merchants from many nations met, wool artisans – weavers, fullers, wool shearers and so forth – made up approximately one third of the male population. The emergence of such a class of specialised artisans also encouraged the development of other crafts whose members worked to fulfil local needs – they included the bakers, butchers, carpenters and so on. Alongside this, in certain towns, the shipping industry developed, and its importance grew to the extent that Flemish merchants were increasingly less likely to sell their goods themselves in distant regions; they preferred to entrust the precious cargo to shippers. Bruges also flourished with brokerage which was the most important craft after the weavers and fullers in terms of numbers employed in it.<sup>4</sup>

During the course of the thirteenth century the people, referred to as the *gemeen*, the commoners, attained an ever greater degree of prosperity and became aware of its power in the towns. Accordingly, they came into conflict with the political rulers, the patricians who, at the same time, were their employers and often their landlords. Such rich burghers (*poorters*) owed their privileged position in law to full rights of ownership of part of the town territory, such as Ghent, or to the fact that they belonged to the merchants' guild, such as the London Hanseatic league in Bruges. At the end of the thirteenth century, one would have to include those burghers who possessed three hundred pounds, although five hundred pounds was required in Ypres.<sup>5</sup> This privileged class had succeeded in making the office of alderman hereditary among its members. They did not just possess power with respect to the town administration, but also to the regulation of work and production. Almost all of them were not only merchants, but also entrepreneurs. As merchant-entrepreneurs the patricians employed workers in the wool industry. They provided the wool that was used by artisans, and subsequently took back the cloth produced to sell it. Workers were mere wage labourers. A merchant-entrepreneur used all means available to hold prices at a minimum, while keeping down wages and exploiting workers. On occasion, stones were put in the wool sacks so that workers would not receive the amount of material ordered and could not deliver the desired quantity of cloth. At times, the wool at the bottom of the sack was of lower quality than that at the top. Merchants sometimes paid workmen in kind, with wool, grain and other products. Some workers only received part of their wages with complaints made by workers going unheard as town judges belonged to the

<sup>4</sup> Van Werveke, 'De steden', 408–9; and J. A. van Houtte, 'Makelaars en waarden te Brugge van de 13e tot de 16e eeuw', *Bijdragen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 5 (1950), 1–30, 177–97.

<sup>5</sup> F. Blockmans, *Het Gentsche stadspatriciaat tot omstreeks 1302*, Rijksuniversiteit Gent: Werken uitgegeven door de Faculteit Wijsbegeerte en Letteren, no. 85 (Antwerp, 1938). See also J. De Smet, 'Rond een Brugs poortersgeslacht van de XIIIe eeuw', *Biekorf*, 51 (1950), 10–11.