



Blondé, Bruno and Jeroen Puttevils (eds.). Antwerp in the Renaissance

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Reviews

Blondé, Bruno and Jeroen Puttevils (eds.). *Antwerp in the Renaissance. Studies in European Urban History (1100–1800)*, 49. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. 315 pp., 68 ill., 4 tables. ISBN 978-2-503-58833-9 (hard-cover) €100.

In the mid-sixteenth century Antwerp was one of the most thriving cities in Europe. As the editors of this volume point out, “In almost no time Antwerp developed from a small medieval town with scarcely 7,000 inhabitants (1374) into the second largest city in Europe north of the Alps. At the short-lived pinnacle of its economic success in the mid-sixties the city was home to more than 100,000 inhabitants and temporary residents” (16). Among its booming population there were significant immigrant communities from England, Spain, France, and Italy, so much so that Antwerp became “a Babylon of cultural encounters” (12). The large Italian community in town (for the most part Venetian) played its part in turning the city into “A major hub for trade with Italy, [so that] the city served as a cultural bridge between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.” (11) Seeing that so much of Renaissance historiography is grounded, or at least influenced by studies on Italy, “Antwerp offers a unique non-Italian laboratory to question some of the assertions made in Renaissance historiography” (11). Scholars and students interested in confraternities will be drawn to two (possibly four) articles in the collection that help us refine our understanding of lay religious organizations north of the Alps.

In the first article, “Brotherhood of Artisans. The Disappearance of Confraternal Friendship and the Ideal of Equality in the Long Sixteenth Century” (pp. 89–105) Bert De Munck points out that “research on guilds and confraternities has developed more or less independently” (89), and then points to the blossoming of research on confraternities in the last few decades compared to a relative paucity of studies on guilds. Part of the problem lies in a somewhat artificial division we currently draw between guilds and confraternities that leads us to ignore the fact that, often, guilds functioned as confraternities and vice versa. To help solve this problem, De Munck seeks to “treat the Antwerp guilds as brotherhoods” (92), something that requires “a different perspective” (93) from that taken by historians of Italian brotherhoods. He argues that in Antwerp the changes that sixteenth-century confraternities underwent were not part of a “gradual formalisation and bureaucratisation of informal practices and customs” that led to “political elites gaining a firmer grip on these organizations” (as has been argued for some decades now for the Italian context), but were, at least in part, “bottoms-up answers to economic and demographic—in addition to political and religious—transformations” (93). To prove his

point, De Munck uses guild ordinances to examine “why certain norms were to be written down and why certain customs were formalised” (94). Having done so, De Munck concludes that “the Christian and confraternal brotherhood idea disappeared [in Antwerp] in favour of instrumental and bureaucratised corporative structures, the precise features of which resulted from political negotiations among different power groups (notably large and small masters, merchants, and urban authorities” (103). His research thus suggests that the increase in guild regulations “is related to a decrease in confraternal values, rather than the other way around” (103) and that, “rather than (local) political or ecclesiastical authorities gaining a grip, most evolutions at least came about at the instigation of masters, i.e. manufacturing artisans” (105).

In the next chapter, “‘And Thus the Brethren Shall Meet All Together’. Active Participation in Antwerp Confraternities, c. 1365–1650” (107–129) Hadewijch Masure asks a similar question, but reaches a different conclusion. Looking at guild members, their activities, ideologies, and guild governance, she concludes that the transformations that Antwerp’s confraternities and guilds underwent in the long sixteenth century were not the result of economic decline and the Catholic Reformation (as was the case, allegedly, in Italy), but of more internal factors specific to Antwerp itself and its social/urban environment. The nine confraternities she examined all became more exclusive over the course of the sixteenth century, but in different ways—some “became more closed, but continued to require the active participation of all members” while others “acted in exactly the opposite way, forming an active core next to a passive group, thus internally becoming more exclusive but acting more in public at the same time” (127). While such evolutions can be seen elsewhere in the Low Countries and in Southern Europe, the special case of Antwerp indicates that these changes were already taking place in the first half of the sixteenth century and well before the Catholic Reformation. The explanation, according to Masure, is to be found outside the religious reform movements (Protestant or Catholic). In her words, “The decreasing brotherhood ideal could be a result of the fast demographic growth in Antwerp, that could have led to a feeling of alienation” (128).

Two other articles, not strictly touching on guilds and confraternities, may also be of interest to our readers: Anne-Laure Van Bruaene’s “A Counterfeit Community. Rederijkers, Festive Culture and Print in Renaissance Antwerp” (153–171) and Herman Pleij’s “Literary Renaissance in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp?” (173–194), both dealing with the chambers of rhetoric that, in some ways, functioned as confraternities and/or guilds.

This collection of articles contributes to our greater knowledge and understanding of one of the most commercially important, culturally

vibrant, and demographically burgeoning cities of the sixteenth century. The articles examined above help refine our understanding of northern European trade and religious associations by presenting the special case of guilds and confraternities in Antwerp and arguing for their unique nature and developments.

It is unfortunate, however, that such an important book should suffer from three serious problems. The first two are scholarly in nature: one is the lack of an index, which makes it impossible to locate specific individuals, associations, guilds, or confraternities in the book; the other is the lack of a bibliography of cited texts at the end of each article. These two lacunae seem inconceivable in today's scholarly world, so one is left to wonder what could have prompted such unfortunate omissions. The third problem is physical: the font size in the book is so small that it makes reading the text a burden, not a pleasure. The font size of the footnotes, in particular is so small that it is next to impossible to read them; I had to use a magnifying lens to supplement my reading glasses in order to read the notes. I asked a young post-doc (ca. 32 years old) if she could read the footnotes and she, too, could not. My recommendation to colleagues wishing to read the book is to buy the PDF version and increase the screen view as necessary in order to be able to read text and footnotes without effort.

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Dierksmeier, Laura. *Charity for and by the Poor. Franciscan-Indigenous Confraternities 1527–1700*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press / Academy of American Franciscan History, 2020. Pp. xvi, 222 + 13 ill., 6 tables. ISBN 978-0-8061-6628-5 (hardcover) US\$55.

In *Charity for and by the Poor* Laura Dierksmeier investigates the role of post-reformation Franciscans in the rise of the networks of confraternities and other charitable organizations in early modern Mexico. Dierksmeier shows how the Franciscan missionaries established and promoted a charity system for and by the indigenous peoples of Mexico in the early colonial period. The creation of hospitals, orphan care, releasing debt prisoners and lending money to the poor could be considered a precursor to the modern-day welfare system. Dierksmeier seeks to investigate the uniqueness of indigenous confraternities and their hybrid practices and argues that the only way to understand the significance of these institutions is to study them in the context of their basic theological principles.

Dierksmeier's study offers an insightful view into the indigenous confraternities that differs from much of the scholarship available on Latin