

Peter Stabel, *The Fabric of the City. A Social History of Cloth Manufacture in Medieval Ypres, Turnhout (Brepols) 2022, 278 p. (Studies in European Urban History [1100–1800], 59), ISBN 978-2-503-60051-2, EUR 94,00.*

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Dörte Eriskat, Berlin

»Cloth has created the dense urban network in which people in present day Flanders and Northern France still live« (p. 11), Peter Stabel states in »The Fabric of the City. A Social History of Cloth Manufacture in Medieval Ypres« investigating the dynamics at the very heart of this process: the medieval cloth industry of Ypres. »While cities such as Florence in Tuscany or nearby Ghent, Brussels, Leiden and Mechelen may have enjoyed a similar reputation, and Ypres' dominance as a cloth city started earlier and lasted longer« (p. 20), Stabel writes, »Bruges and Ghent as well as cities of Walloon Flanders (now in the Département du Nord de France), however, enjoyed much more interest among scholars« (p. 18). Yet surprisingly »no real up to date synthesis of this great industry is available, and even less work has been done on the social history of cloth manufacture in Ypres« (p. 12), Stabel notes. To fill this gap, Stabel presents a case study of Ypres' medieval cloth manufacture, examining the social consequences of industrial expansion. Throughout his book Stabel demonstrates that the focus on social mechanisms of the most industrialised city in the Low Countries offers a new perspective on the driving forces that shaped not only the social identity and economic potential of the various stakeholders in the cloth industry of Ypres but also urban society in general.

Stabel's book is organised by topic, and in each chapter he is examining the role of the various stakeholders within Ypres' cloth manufacture: the merchants entrepreneurs, clothiers (*drapiers*), skilled workers and unskilled workers. Famous for its luxury woolens exported all over Europe and to the Levant, Stabel puts the industrial cycle of growth and decline of Ypres' cloth manufacture in a broad geographic and socio-economic context, focusing on its multilayered inherent dynamics, as opposed to promoting an image of decay as former historiography tended to do. At the centre of his study Stabel thus is analysing the changing role of the various stakeholders in the cloth industry, their interaction and their interdependencies within the *chaîne opératoire* and in the framework of the other cities of the Low Countries involved in manufacturing woolens from the 12th to the 16th century.

Due to lacking sources for the early period, we only have a rather impressionist view of Ypres' cloth manufacture. The picture however becomes much clearer with tax data (1325–1326) and



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

census (1431), put forward by Stabel. These shed light on the city's social profile, characterised by high rates of inequality. Along with mainly guild statutes, guild militia lists (Ypers 1431, Bruges 1436) and archaeological finds, Stabel is investigating who were the actors adapting Ypres' cloth manufacture and cloth trade very successfully to fundamental structural changes, to shifting markets and changing consumer behaviour and what were the social consequences of these entrepreneurial strategies. Mercantile capital not any longer directly involved in the main stages of the production, the clothiers (*drapiers*) in this process identified as »pivotal actors around which the industry was organised« (p. 254), guilds »more than usually admitted in recent historiography: institutions defining class relations« (p. 152), Stabel unravels these groups in search of a permanent equilibrium, benefitting from it, hence shaping urban society and society in general. These dynamics are key to understanding how despite fundamental structural changes and political turmoil Ypres' cloth manufacture could remain for almost two centuries successful and why political equilibria and the balance of power in Ypres barely changed, Stabel convincingly analyses. Those who lost or paid the cost of the specialisation on luxury woollens, were unskilled workers mostly women, who had a significant role in the cloth manufacture before the late 13th century, as Stabel shows tackling gender inclusivity in the Ypres' cloth industry (chapter 8 »Whether He or She« cloth and gender).

The reorientation of the industry towards more expensive woollens not only required more skilled workers and guaranteed the economic success of Ypres' cloth manufacture in a long run, as Stabel argues, but also shaped the social identity of those who had implemented it: the clothiers (*drapiers*) together with the guilds, both linked by the same interest to provide standardised high quality. Quality control and stricter regulation of the very complex manufacture process became more and more important. Based on a variety of sources, the author gives a very detailed description of how this impacted the organisation of labour and every single one of the up to fifty different stages of the complex cloth manufacture. Textile historians, scholars and students will much enjoy the detailed terminological interpretation presented by Stabel, especially as the reading is eased by an extensive glossary. The data of Ypres' vibrant cloth manufacture are corroborated by archaeological excavations (Marc Dewilde) of the Verdronken Weide, located in the St. Michiel suburb. These precious archaeological finds beautifully illustrate the impact of Ypres cloth manufacture and its industrial expansion on the spatial organisation of textile production. The clothiers (*drapiers*), the main coordinators of the manufacturing process and the craftsmen they controlled and very much present in the suburbs until 1389, illustrate the mentioned dynamics between the various stakeholders in the cloth industry as well as the functional division of labour between the inner city and the suburbs. Further prosopography research, suggested by Stabel, is very likely to provide further evidence.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

»The Fabric of the City. A Social History of Cloth Manufacture in Medieval Ypres« is a valuable up to date synthesis of the scattered archival data relating to the urban history of medieval Ypres and a comprehensive history of Ypres cloth's manufacture. Focusing on the dynamics that shaped the social identity and the economic potential of one of the most industrial medieval cities in the Low Countries, Peter Stabel draws a nuanced picture of what made the »Fabric of the city« and a social history of cloth manufacture in medieval Ypres.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)