

# **HENRI PIRENNE (1862-1935): A BELGIAN HISTORIAN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL SCIENCES**

## **INTRODUCTION**

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Many topics are worth to be discussed when it comes to the life and work of Henri Pirenne (1862-1935). Combining exceptional professional success, family tragedies, a dramatic wartime experience and illustrious stays abroad, his biography could almost be the screenplay for a film. His *Histoire de Belgique*, which he published in the early decades of the twentieth century, was regarded as a model of innovative national history. His ideas about the development of the medieval city were equally influential, and his thesis on the influence of Islam on European history initiated a debate that continues today. His intellectual reputation extended far beyond the borders of his own country, inspiring a whole generation of French historians, and numerous other European and American intellectuals too. The Belgian historian is now established as one of the twentieth century's greatest historians, whose significance continues to be recognised even outside his discipline.

In 2008-2009 the University of Ghent and the Free University of Brussels co-organised a number of events to commemorate and re-evaluate the scientific heritage of Henri Pirenne. Starting point was an academic ceremony, followed by the exhibition *Henri Pirenne and Mahomet et Charlemagne: genesis and contingencies of a historical hypotheses*. The exhibition, that found its reflection in the internet site [www.henripirenne.be](http://www.henripirenne.be), concentrated on the genesis, the reception and the recuperation of the famous Pirenne-thesis about *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, a thesis that continues to inspire and provoke historians throughout the world. Concluding the "Pirenne-year" was the two-day colloquium *Henri Pirenne (1862-1935): a Belgian historian and the development of historical and social sciences*.

As its title suggests, the main focus of the colloquium, organised in Ghent and Brussels on March 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> 2009, was the importance of Pirenne's historical writing on the broader development

of the historical and social sciences. In what sense did Pirenne was a social-economic historian? What did he derive from social and economic sciences, what did he add to them? As the professionalisation of these disciplines and their influence on historical writing was strongly interconnected with the modernisation of science and scientific life in general, attention was also paid to the “modern” character of Pirenne’s historical practice and to his ability for “community building” and developing efficient professional networks for himself and his pupils. Finally, the image of Pirenne as a “national historian” could not be left untreated, as it still dominates the discourse about the historian and as it both undermined and reinforced his status as a historiographic renewer. The contributions compiled in this issue have thus been classified in four chapters that treat some of the main qualities or merits which are generally attributed to Pirenne.

First to be examined is the label of Pirenne as a social-economic historian. Not only did he write a number of explicitly economical studies, such as the famous article *Les périodes sociales du capitalisme* (1914), all of his work is claimed to have had a strong social-economic perspective and continues to inspire economist thinkers up till today.

According to *Martha Howell*, Henri Pirenne can indeed be seen as one of the founding fathers of a “commercial school” of economists. Although partly inspired by Marxist literature, Pirenne was first and foremost influenced by the progress-oriented narratives and the economic determinism of liberal economic theory. In his view - a “patently ideological” one, as she calls it – it was freedom that led to commerce, and commerce that led to the rise of a capitalist spirit. Nevertheless, he was more a political and social historian than an economic one. Moreover, Howell will argue that there are two important missing links in Pirenne’s economic theory, as he neglected to study the impact of consumption on economic development and as he overlooked the part women played in economic development.

*Eric Thoen and Erik Vanhaute* examine the origins of Pirenne’s methodology and ideas and the influence of his work on economic history until present. They situate Pirenne’s development as a historian within the context of the evolution of “economic history”, a discipline that was still emerging in the field of “economics” during his studies and early career. Pirenne contributed to its development as a mature discipline of history and played an important part in the evolution towards an implementation of positivism (laws, processes) in history, heavily

influenced as he was by positivist German historiography. The “German historical school” used an “historical” approach to explain economics and was heavily influenced by sociology and psychology. Pirenne became the intermediary between this trend in German economics and economic history in the rest of the Western world. His ideas and methods formed a bridge which helped create a new economic and social history in France, the Anglo-Saxon world and the rest of Europe.

*Kaat Wils* explores the disciplinary boundaries of history and the social and economic sciences around 1900. The modernisation of historiography gave way to a growing interest among historians for sociology and its methods. The kind of social and economic history Pirenne envisaged came very close in its content to the boundaries of sociology, even though Pirenne’s interest in sociological works was rather small and always instrumental to his own work as a historian. For Pirenne, sociology and economics were labelled as theoretical and abstract but usefull suppliers of ideas or hypotheses to historians. An attraction did exist in the opposite direction, however: Pirenne’s work was recognised and praised by many who were promoting sociology as an independent discipline, such as the Durkheimian sociologists or the members of the Institut de Sociologie Solvay in Brussels. Because sociology was a very diffuse discipline without specific methodology or content, the boundaries between sociology and history remained unclear and every historian could be “his own sociologist”.

The second label to be scrutinized is that of Pirenne as one of the first “modern” historians. By having studied in Germany and France, his contemporaries considered Pirenne to be one of the godfathers of modern historiography. Pirenne himself enjoyed being seen as a bridge builder between the two scientific leading countries of his time. Vigorously, he published articles in both French and German historical magazines, he wrote letters to befriended historians from his study time in both countries and set up exchange programs for his pupils.

*Jo Tollebeek* considers both Pirenne and his colleague Paul Fredericq to be the personification of the new historiographical ambitions around 1900: the “*nouvelle histoire*”. They felt themselves to be the embodiment of a modern historiography that had a revolutionary character, that was breaking prevailing norms and championing new ambitions. According to Tollebeek, Pirenne

succeeded in realising the new historiographical ambitions better than Fredericq on many counts. This was evident in the reception of his work, his power and influence, the social capital he acquired, his successful training of pupils, his social standing and prestige. However, from at least a number of viewpoints the less successful Fredericq was more modern than Pirenne. This was especially noticeable in the significance he accorded to archive work and in his collective approach to historiography, as modern history writing was a matter of teamwork. It was Pirenne, however, who came to be regarded as a quintessentially modern historian, not the least because the well-documented relationship between Pirenne and the *Annales*-historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèbvre gave way to a deterministic reading of Pirenne's work and historiographical practice.

*Jean-Louis Kupper* examines the special bond between Pirenne and his teacher Godefroid Kurth, a bond which generated a university collaboration which principally benefited Pirenne. Kurth played a decisive role in the successive stages of Pirenne's brilliant ascension within the scholarly world. The tandem Kurth-Pirenne was so rich in possibilities and influence, Kupper argues, that it could win each stage of the competition, in the university world of Liège and Ghent, within the Academy, and in political circles, whether Catholic or liberal. In his profession as a historian too, Pirenne owes a deep debt to Kurth's rigorous technique and solid scientific methodology. Moreover, Kupper argues that Pirenne's *Mahomet et Charlemagne* is nothing more than a vibrant tribute to *Les origines de la civilisation moderne*, the now forgotten work of his master.

The central question in the article of *Geneviève Warland* is how to describe the intellectual transfer from Karl Lamprecht to Pirenne in the area of *Kulturgeschichte*. It is clear that Pirenne borrowed some concepts and aspects of Lamprecht's *Kulturgeschichte*, but unlike Lamprecht he placed the explanatory factor in history in economics, not in psychology. Moreover, in his defense of Lamprecht's *Kulturgeschichte* Pirenne made sure to emphasize only those elements that were quite consensual and avoided irritating the German historicist school. Both Lamprecht and Pirenne were very active in the scholarly and scientific development and the internationalisation of the historic discipline. They shared in a community of thought which conceptualised history as the study of primarily social phenomena, using methods borrowed from the social sciences and employing comparison as a fundamental research method of

*Kulturgeschichte*. But the use of *Kulturgeschichte* in Pirenne's work was selective and partial and hence a typical case of an intellectual transfer.

In the third chapter we will look more closely to the accomplishments of Pirenne as a teacher and "community builder". That Pirenne was a gifted narrator and that he could easily captivate any audience – students, colleagues and non-academic listeners alike – is sufficiently known. More interesting is the way in which Pirenne managed to launch the careers of some of his pupils, careers of which the success would shine back on their master, thus adding to Pirenne's prestige as a teacher.

*Marc Boone* and *Claire Billen* explain why, despite the kin-like bonds between masters and students amongst historians at that time, the relationship between Pirenne and his pupil Guillaume Des Marez was specific and singular. Even though Des Marez has repeatedly endangered his relationship towards Pirenne, his master always remained loyal to his student. Their long and collaborative friendship began when Des Marez enlisted to follow Pirenne's seminar in 1892. Impressed with Des Marez' abilities, Pirenne developed the ambition to construct a career for him worthy of his talents. The fundamental problem facing Des Marez and Pirenne eager to launch his student's career, was how to become a recognized member of the scientific community when one is lacking both the right ancestors, and the necessary capital, and when one has no useful access to the deciding circles that dispose of assignments in scientific institutions and of the budgets that go with scientific success. As Boone and Billen argue, Des Marez therefore could only succeed as the creation of a person or a group – in this case of Pirenne and of a particularly complex network: that of Brussels liberalism. Des Marez embodied the entrance of the Belgian scientific milieu into the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a new world in which one can become university professor without belonging to a social elite.

*Christophe Verbruggen* and *Lewis Pyenson* discuss the influence of Henri Pirenne and historian of science George Sarton upon Hendrik De Man, one of Pirenne's most brilliant pupils. All three men were modernists, as they shared a critical realism about the world and welcomed innovation, illustrated by their strong attraction, before 1914, to the German social historian Karl Lamprecht. They also found a common interest in medievalism. Verbruggen and Pyenson argue

that De Man drew some of his crucial ideas from both Pirenne and Sarton. He followed Pirenne's view about the rise of capitalist structures in medieval Europe. One of De Man's pre-war ambitions had been to become a citizen of the world, not because he denied nationality or even patriotism, but by being proud of his home country being a microcosm of Europe, an idea he borrowed explicitly from Pirenne. To advance his academic dreams in the US after the War, with the help of Pirenne who was then rector of the University, De Man obtained a doctoral degree in history at Ghent. In 1926, it came to a fundamental break with Marxism when he abandoned class struggle as a revolutionary strategy, following Pirenne's insight that a mechanical and rational interpretation of class solidarity was inadequate. If Pirenne's socio-economic focus and his pledge for comparativism were the inspirational sources behind the *Annales*, his modernist medievalism was the guiding spirit for the thought and work of Hendrik De Man.

The last chapter will focus on the prevailing image of Pirenne as “our national historian”. The four parts of Pirenne's national synthesis *Histoire de Belgique* that were published before 1914, made him a *monstre sacré* of the Belgian intellectual and even political establishment. After the First World War and his return from exile as a ‘war hero’, that status only increased. He was now chronicled not only as the man ‘who had been able to capture the Belgian soul’, but at the same time as a fully ‘impartial’ historian, and thus apt, from the viewpoint of different political angles, to be presented as a national icon.

*Pierre Raxhon* inspects if the Pirenne agenda was overflowed with commemorative activities and what the historian's role has been in the transmission of patriotic values. His examination shows that Pirenne wrote few texts which were listed on the programs of commemorations or made explicit reference to commemorations, that he gave few speeches and took on few lectures connected to commemorations. The centenary of Belgium remains one of the only moments which inevitably retained the attention and the energy of Pirenne. Thus, he argues, Pirenne was not a commemorative fool, nor an automaton of a State in need of celebrations. It is notable that Pirenne produced more historiography for commemorations of institutions than for celebrations of past events evoked in a national context. For Raxhon, Pirenne doesn't leave the impression of a commemorative opportunist, neither for ideological motives nor for financial reasons or social prestige. In counterpoint, as from 1912 onwards, there were ardent

events held in his honour. These commemorations or celebrations for Pirenne, during his life and after his death, are opportunities to understand better the man and his work.

*Sophie De Schaepdrijver* focuses on Pirenne's "unfinished business" with the war. After the war, Pirenne had been lionized as an emblem of national resistance. In his discourses and his work on the war (that covered a time span from 1919 to 1928), he specifically dismissed the "racist principle" and the "greater German imperial idea" that he had pointed out as the driving forces behind Germany's conduct of the First World War. Pirenne remained uncomfortably aware of the resilience of "race theory" as he noted that German historical scholarship was increasingly framed by essentialism, by a *völkish*-national perspective. In Belgium, the punitive drive against "unpatriotic" behaviour that accompanied the triumphant return of the Belgian state after the war fuelled an ethicized redefinition of the language question. De Schaepdrijver argues that in the process, Pirenne's confidently liberal interpretation of the occupation came to be discredited as belonging to war discourse. Together with the historiographic shibboleth of Pirenne's "finalist" view of Belgian history, this resulted in a rejection of his contemporaneist vision which is now the dominant perspective. It was precisely his robustly patriotic perspective that enabled him to pinpoint "that theory of races" as one of the war's totalising dynamics.

In his article about the construction and deconstruction of the Pirenne phenomenon, the final article of this issue, *Walter Prevenier* presents a number of theses for further examination. For him, the construction of Pirenne as a prominent historian and a "founding father" of the Ghent historical school is a perfect example of a successful mythologisation. Pirenne had the perfect personality to develop into a mythological icon. His reputation already got mythical proportions at a relatively early age as a result of his talent as a pedagogue, a causeur and a tireless network-tiger. But the mythologisation process of Pirenne as the father of the "Ghent school" was in many ways a construction by his direct alumni, and the image of Pirenne as the icon of the nation-state Belgium is only partly correct as well. Although Pirenne had not primarily a nationalistic, but a cosmopolitan perspective in mind and although his *Histoire de Belgique* had been, before the war, essentially a scientific success story, by the war it suddenly got the colour and the tone of a political statement. It is still unclear, Prevenier concludes, if it is Pirenne who invented "*la Belgique éternelle*", or if it is "*une certaine Belgique*" that constructed "a certain Pirenne".

The socio-economist historian, the historiographic renewer, the network tiger and the national icon: Pirenne was a man of many labels, and they all added to the image of Pirenne as a “scientific hero”. By examining these topics from the viewpoint of current academic research, the authors do not only wish to bring homage to the scientific heritage of the historian, but they also hope to open new research perspectives, to revive the intellectual debate and to re-adjust the prevailing, all too iconic image of Pirenne.