

A Merchant Describing the City. Lodovico Guicciardini's *Descrittione di tutti I Paesi Bassi* as a source for the Urban History of the Low Countries

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Lodovico Guicciardini's *Descrittione di tutti I Paesi Bassi* (1567) is one of the most detailed and best documented contemporary descriptions of the Low Countries¹. As such its account has become an integrative part of the historical narrative on the history of the Low Countries. It distinguishes itself from other cosmographic sources of the Renaissance through its broadness and analytical approach and the rich and varied sources the author used. Although being a description of the whole of the Low Countries, his focus is clearly on the cities, and more in particular on Antwerp. Staying in Antwerp, one of the major commercial and cultural centres of the sixteenth century, for his business, Guicciardini spent many years collecting information. He used classical historiographic and geographic works, personal testimonies of merchants, intellectuals, travellers, and members of the Antwerp city council, and even archival sources, which he used with a critical sense that was not at all common in the period². Finally, his own testimony of the extraordinary wealth and economic dynamic of the city gives his work an additional value as a source of economic history. The *descrizione* therefore combines the virtues of a travel description with the erudition of a renaissance intellectual. Thus as far as the information given in the text it reflects the state of art of 16th-century geography, historiography, 'social and political science' art and economy on the Low Countries. Furthermore it is an authentic reflection of the foreigner's astonishment about the exceptional wealth and dynamic of sixteenth century Antwerp and the Low Countries, together with Northern and central Italy the major urban region of Europe. This reflection of an Italian

¹ *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi, altrimenti detti Germania Inferiore*. Anversa 1567 [296 pp.; f], 1581, 1587-1588, 1591, transl.: French: Anvers 1567, 1568, 1582 (transl. Francois de Belleforest); Amsterdam 1609; Arnhem 1613; Amsterdam 1625, 1641; German: Basel 1580; Frankfurt am Main 1582; English: London 1593, Amsterdam 1976 (facs.); Dutch: Amsterdam 1612, 1968 (facs.); Arnhem 1617; Amsterdam, 1648, 1672; Latin: Amsterdam 1613; Arnhem 1616; Amsterdam 1635, 1646, 1648, 1652, 1660.

² Claude Sorgeloos identified about 200 printed sources that Guicciardini cited. They include Greek and Latin classics, some medieval texts and a broad variety of sixteenth-century texts. C. Sorgeloos, *Les sources imprimées de la 'Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi' de Lodovico Guicciardini*, in: P. Jodogne, ed., *Lodovico Guicciardini (1521-1589): actes du colloque international des 28, 29 et 30 mars 1990*, Louvain, 1991 (*Travaux de l'Institut interuniversitaire pour l'étude de la Renaissance et de l'Humanisme*; 10), pp.37-98,

looking about the Low Countries is of particular interest from the point of view of the urban history. Both areas contributed importantly to the development of an urban society in late medieval and early modern Europe. The parallels as well as the distinctiveness can be analysed particularly well from Guicciardini's comments. In this paper the vision of the Florentine merchant-nobleman Guicciardini on urban life in the Low Countries, and particularly on cities as economic centres will be analysed. Moreover I will try to study the reception of his account in and the considerable impact on the later historiography on the economy of the Low Countries during the sixteenth century. The person of Lodovico Guicciardini as well as his major work has been subject to thorough study.³

Ludovico Guicciardini (1521-1589) was a member of a noble Florentine family active in trade, and nephew of the famous historian Francesco Guicciardini. He was sent to Antwerp in 1541 at the age of 20, in order to represent his family there together with his brother and he was to stay in that city until his death in 1589. While his career as a merchant was not very successful, he became a well-known writer whose four books sold very well, especially his major work, *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi*, published in 1567⁴. During his stay in Antwerp he not only collected rich information on art, literature, history, geography and science in libraries, but he also established contacts with merchants, noblemen, members of the Antwerp city council and scholars⁵.

The description of the Low Countries is one of the outstanding examples of sixteenth-century cosmography. More in particular it is a chorography or description of a particular country, comparable to Alberti's *Descrittione di Italia*, which probably served as a model for Guicciardini⁶. The study contains three levels of description: a general level in which the overall features of the Low Countries are described. This part is included in the first part of the description. In the second place, there is a description of the territorial entities making up the Low Countries, or provinces, and finally, the most detailed part is a topography of the towns and major villages.

³ Especially useful for the understanding of his work is the conference volume of a conference organised at Antwerp and Brussels in 1990; Jodogne, ed., *Lodovico Guicciardini*

⁴ *Hore di Recreazione*, Antwerp, 1565; *Comentarii delle cose piu memorabili seguite in Europa: specialmente in questi Paesi Bassi, dalla pace di Cambrai: del MDXXIX insino a tutto l'anno MDLX libri tre*. Antwerp 1565 [232 pp.]; Venezia 1565, 1566. *Precetti e sententie*, Antwerp, 1585.

⁵ H. Zwager, Introduction of the facsimile edition of *Beschryvinghe van alle de Neder-Landen anderssins ghenoeemt Neder-Duytslandt*, transl. C. Kiliaan, Haarlem, 1968, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ Leandro Alberti, "Descrittione di tutta l'Italia, et isole pertinenti ad essa. Di fra Leandro Alberti bolognese. Nella quale si contiene il sito di essa, l'origine, & le signorie delle citta, & de' castelli; co' nomi antichi, & moderni; i costumi de' popoli, & le conditioni de' paesi", Bologna, Giaccarelli, 1550.

Topography and chorography, as opposed to the more general levels cosmography and geography, can be distinguished through the focus, but also through the more descriptive and analytical approach of the topography, while the chorography is rather a portrait of the area under consideration.⁷ The topography is the description of one particular place, in most cases a city. The topographic aspect is the most elaborate and receives the most attention of Guicciardini. Hence the description is at the same time a praise of the urban society of the Low Countries in general and of the outstanding position of Antwerp as a commercial, financial and industrial as well as a cultural and artistic centre in particular. Antwerp is the focus of the study and is covered in more depth than the other cities. At the same time it serves as a model, a *pars pro toto* for the cities of the Low Countries. Many factors that are exemplified in the description of Antwerp can be applied to other cities as well. So, for example he refers to the fact that foreign merchants have a high degree of liberty in Antwerp, because the city respects their freedom *as they do in all the Low Countries*. In the description of Leuven, a brief summary of the urban government is given, while for a more detailed description the author refers to the example of Antwerp: "*...nous donnons un model & exemple en la Description d'Anvers qui peut servir à toutes les autres villes de Brabant.*"⁸

The description of Antwerp

The description of Antwerp is the most detailed part of the book. While other cities are discussed on average on one to three pages, the section of Antwerp covers no less than 65 pages in the first edition and even 99 in the French edition of 1582⁹. Guicciardini's original intention was to write only a description of Antwerp, but eventually it grew out to become a description of the whole of the Low Countries¹⁰. This explains why the section on Antwerp is the core of the book, which is also much more elaborate and detailed than the other sections. Guicciardini himself tells us that

⁷ Ph. Desan, Lodovico Guicciardini et le discours de la ville au XVI^e siècle, in: Jodogne, ed., Lodovico Guicciardini, p. 137.

⁸ L. Guicciardini, Description de tous les Païs Bas autrement dict La Germanie Inferieure ou Basse allemande, Amsterdam, 1641, p. 72. This edition is available on-line at the website of the French Bibliotheque Nationale.

⁹ F. Hallyn, Lodovico Guicciardini et la topique de la topographie, in: Jodogne, ed., Lodovico Guicciardini, p. 153.

¹⁰ "Ma première intention fut tant seulement de faire la description de cette vostre ample cié & patrie" p.79.

the city provides more material worthwhile a closer description than an entire province. Furthermore the form of government of Antwerp serves as a model for the cities of all the Low Countries, and even for large parts of Germany and Northern Europe¹¹. The description follows a classical structure inspired by the topic of rhetoric¹²: It starts with a discussion of the origins of the town as well as of the name. Here the legend of the giant Antigon cutting of the hands (hand-werpen = Antwerpen) of travelers is presented as well as the alternative etymology of *wharf* (aanwerp). Then, the favorable location of the city on the river Scheldt is mentioned which makes it according to the writer a particularly practical harbour. As for the topography of the city, the position of the three subsequent town-walls is presented in detail, especially the new fortifications built in 1543 as well as, in the second edition, the citadel built by the duke of Alba¹³.

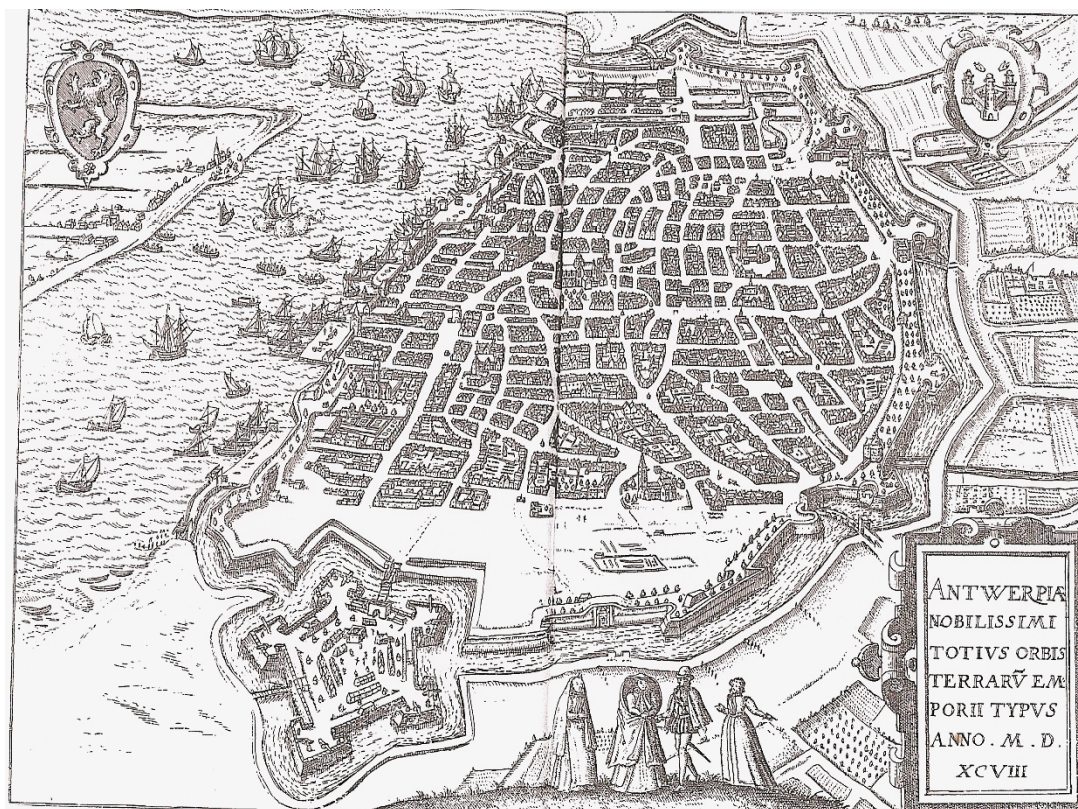


Figure 1: View on Antwerp, 1598, in: Guicciardini (Dutch edition, 1612)

¹¹ Description, p.82.

¹² Hallyn, o.c., 154.

¹³ Description, p. 85-88.

After this general situation of the city, the description continues with an enumeration of its elements, i.e. streets, squares and buildings. The harbor with its wharf along the Scheldt and the different docks, which offers, according to Guicciardini, a spectacle of numerous ships of all types from all countries and full of all kind of merchandise, is presented as well as the great number of ample and straight streets, and numerous squares, among which the main square (Grote Markt) and the Exchange, which is described as the most beautiful (p.90).

EN Anvers y a vingt & deux places tant grandes que petites : la plus grande est celle des Seigneurs ; & la plus belle est celle des Marchands qui est appellé la Nouvelle Bourfe ayant deux Touts & Horloges, & si belle que pour la retraite des Marchands à grand peine s en trouve il de pareille ailleurs ; estant libre de passage, de chariots & chevaux & de tout autre destourbier & empeschement : & en icelle ses loges & boutiques tres-belles closes de toutes parts, & esquelles on entre & sort par quatre portes : & au dessus desquelles loges y a d'une mesme longueur & espace de tres-grands logis couverts & pleins de boutiques de tous costez, lesquels on appelle le Pant des Peintures, pource que c'est là qu'on en vend de toutes sortes & façons : & fut cette Bourfe fondée l'an de nostre salut 1531. Or n'est ce pas chose de peu de consequence, ny indigne qu'on la sçache.

Guicciardini goes on by mentioning the number of 42 churches, abbeys, hospitals and other holy places. The greatest part of this section is dedicated to the Our-Ladies Church, the later chathedral. Besides describing the building he refers to the relics conserved in it, processions and the different confraternities, armed guilds, rhetoric chambers and craft guilds and their chapels. Then follows a long excursion on the Order of the Golden Fleece, with a list of all its members, on the occasion of the 1556 chapter that was celebrated in the church.



Figure 2: The Oosters Huys or Hansa house, Guicciardini, Description, (edition 1641)

The text continues with a list of outstanding buildings, such as the meat hall, the tapistry hall, the Hansa-house and others. This section is introduced with an interesting comment on the high housing prices in the city: the town contains more than 13500 houses, and there is space for ca. 1500 more. But although being thus one of the most populous and best built towns of Europe, the high frequency of people makes that housing prices are the highest Guicciardini had seen in any other town except in Lisbon.¹⁴ The town hall, the major public building serves as a frame for the description of the privileges and the governmental structures of the city. The rise of Antwerp to its present privileged status is explained in three subsequent stages. First, the establishment of the Brabant fairs, which attracted international trade already from the late Middle Ages on. Second, the fact that in 1503 or 1504, the Portuguese reached the Indian Ocean and imported spices and other oriental goods, which had before been imported via the Red Sea, Beirut, Alexandria and Venice, and distributed them via Antwerp. This attracted in its turn Southern Germans and after 1516 the rest

¹⁴ Description, p. 104.

of the foreign merchants who had before resided in Bruges. Finally, the new fortifications, which were built after 1543, led to great scale immigration to Antwerp because of its increased security. This led the author to one of the most cited phrases on sixteenth-century Antwerp:

"Par ce moyen cette ville a été (en peu de temps) tellement augmentée, & agrandie que, Paris excepte, à peine trouverez vous Cité deça les Monts, qui la surpasse, ny en richesse laquelle par plusieurs voyes & manières, donne faveur, force & vigueur à tout le reste de ces Pays-Bas; & sans mentir, c'est une Cité qu'on peut (en quelque sorte qu'on la considère) mettre entre les principales de l'Europe, mais la première presque du Monde, quant à ce qui concerne le fait & trafic de marchandise." (p. 110)

What follows can be named 'memorable events'. In this section four major events in the recent history of the city are narrated. The popular unrest of 1476, the attack on the city by Gelre troops led by Maarten van Rossem in 1542, the entry of prince Philipp (the later king Philipp II) in 1549, which is described at length with a citation in full-length of the oath of the prince and including a comment on the differences among the *nations* of foreign merchants concerning their order in the ceremony. Finally another popular unrest is mentioned that took place in 1554, on the occasion of an ordinance imposing the brewers to settle in the newly urbanised part of the city called *Nieuwstad* and an increase of taxes on beer¹⁵.

Another major point of interest of Guicciardini is the form of government. Antwerp has according to him the ideal form of mixed government between monarchy, aristocracy and democracy that had been proposed by Polybios, at least if it were always duly exercised. He therefore gives a long and detailed overview of the institutions and the working of the urban government, including the major officials, councils and urban law courts¹⁶. On this point he is very well informed by means of his close contacts to the urban elites and probably his access to official documents¹⁷.

¹⁵ See H. Soly, "De brouwerijenonderneming van Gilbert Van Schoonbeke." In: *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis/Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 46 (1968), p. 337-392; 1166-1204 and Idem, *Urbanisme en kapitalisme te Antwerpen in de 16e eeuw, de stedenbouwkundige en industriële ondernemingen van Gilbert van Schoonbeke*. Brussels, 1977.

¹⁶ Description, pp. 114-138; for a detailed survey of the Antwerp city government see: R. Boumans, *Het Antwerps stadsbestuur voor en tijdens de Franse overheersing. Bijdrage tot de ontwikkelingsgeschiedenis van de stedelijke bestuursinstellingen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, Bruges*, 1965.

¹⁷ Sorgeloos, "Les sources imprimées", p. 70-71.

In the margin of the description he also refers to the different confraternities and guilds, which leads him to an enumeration of outstanding artists of the Low Countries, which became notorious among art historians. Finally, a series of famous personalities, noble families and the major crafts of the cities are presented.

The text is completed with illustrations, that is, a view of the city and prints representing some of the most significant buildings, i.e. the cathedral, the Exchange, the Hansa house and the town hall¹⁸.

Throughout the text, Guicciardini's interest in trade is obvious. However, it is in the last part of the description of Antwerp that he concentrates exclusively on trade. His "discourse on the merchants and on their trade" starts as follows:

"Puisque nous avons parlé & discouru & du gouvernement de la ville & de moeurs & façons de vie des habitants en icelle: c'est raison que nous arrestons on peur sur le trafic, affaires & manière de faire qui font entre les marchands estrangers, trafiquantes en cette ville: veu mesmement que son principal fondement consiste en la marchandise, & qu'icelle est illustrée, & agrandie & enrichie par les estrangers." (p. 149)

The trade of the city has its foundations in the merchandise, and the latter is made more prestigious, enhanced, and richer by the foreigners. Guicciardini praises the multicultural sphere in the city, which also had the advantage that one could obtain news from the whole world¹⁹.

"De sorte que c'est un cas merveilleux, de voir un tel meslange d'hommes, de si diverses humeurs, & qualitéz: & plus encore d'oir, & s'il vous plaist, imiter le naturel, façons de vie, & coustumes de plusieurs nations loingtaines; & par ce moyen avient il, que pour le grans nombre d'estrangers qui abordent icy, on sçait toujours en Anvers des nouvelles de tout ce qui passe par le reste des Provinces de l'Univers." (p. 149)

¹⁸ The number and quality of the illustrations differs between the different editions.

¹⁹ The importance of information for the rise of commercial centres has recently been stressed by C. Lesger, *The Rise of the Amsterdam Market and Information Exchange: Merchants, Commercial Expansion and Change in the Spatial Economy of the Low Countries, c. 1550-1630*. Burlington, 2006; see also M. Limberger, 'No town in the world provides more advantages': economies of agglomeration and the golden age of Antwerp' in: P. O'Brien et al. (eds.), *Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe. Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London*, Cambridge 2001, p. 39-62.

As the most important merchants in the city he cites the Fuggers. This brings him to the role of the financial market of Antwerp, the functioning of which is thoroughly explained. He mentions the presence of representatives of various European states in order to obtain loans from the merchant bankers at the Antwerp money market as well as the daily practice of financial transactions at the Antwerp exchange. Guicciardini is quite critical concerning abuses of speculation and manipulation of exchange rates, which seem to have been daily practice. Nevertheless, he insists that in spite of these practices the bulk of the commercial transactions consists of the purchase and sale of a great variety of commodities.

Therefore Guicciardini gives a detailed list of products imported and exported from the major trading partners of the Low Countries. Italy figures as major provider of silver and gold thread, as well as as transit market for Levant goods, such as silks and spices. Spain and Portugal provide Asian and American goods, in exchange with European materials. Even France, which broke the Portuguese monopoly of trade with Brazil is mentioned as a provider of Brazilwood, "which it fetches with much trouble from America, from the land called Brazil, which belonged to the Portuguese". On the other hand, the Low Countries and England provided in first place woollen cloth, the Low Countries moreover exported a broad variety of luxury goods, among which tapestries, paintings. In short, Guicciardini gives a survey of the interregional and even transcontinental trade flows of the major European centre of trade. He even attempts a general estimate of the trading values of the major products, which was sufficiently reliable as to be used by W. Brulez as the basis of a quantitative study of the balance of trade of the Low Countries during the sixteenth century²⁰. Hence, Italian gold and silvercloth and –threads and silk made up for ca. 3 million golden crowns, German fustians for 600 000 crowns, Rhine wine for 1,5 millions, Grain and other imports from Denmark and the Baltic 1.680.000 cr., French wine 1 million, woad 300.000 and Brouage salt 180.000 cr., Spanish wool 625.000 cr., Portuguese spices more than 1 million, and finally 250.000 crowns for English wool, and 5 million for English cloth.

²⁰ W. Brulez, "De handelsbalans der Nederlanden in het midden van de 16e eeuw", in: *Bijdragen voor Geschiedenis der Nederlanden XXI* (1966/67) pp. 278 -310.

The long and detailed description of Antwerp is clearly the result of an intimate knowledge of the town, its topography, political structure, history and economy combined with the critical spirit and literary background of a renaissance intellectual. Furthermore, from his position in Antwerp he provides an extraordinary survey of European trade and finance in the middle of the sixteenth century. This is certainly the most relevant part of Guicciardini's text, and it therefore serves as a basic source for the history of sixteenth-century trade in the Low Countries.

The other cities of the Low Countries

The description of the other towns of the Low Countries does not reach by far the same degree of precision and completeness. Here the most important characteristics of each city are shortly summed up, but hardly discussed in-depth as in the case of Antwerp. The cities are discussed in a hierarchical order, within the sections of the respective provinces. Hence, within the duchy of Brabant, which is discussed first, Leuven, historically the first town within the duchy is followed by Brussels, Antwerp, and 's-Hertogenbosch. After these major cities, which were represented in the Estates of Brabant, followed the secondary towns, among which Tienen, Zoutleuw and Nivelles had a privileged status and are therefore discussed before the rest. The other principalities of the Low Countries, with the respective towns are discussed in geographical order, from east to north, and then from west to south²¹.

The structure of the descriptions of the other cities is in principle the same as for Antwerp; a general description of the location of the town, its topography, its major buildings, the organisation, famous personalities, history and economy. However, according to the information available and to the importance of the different aspects, some fields are elaborated more deeply, while others were only shortly mentioned or skipped altogether. Hence, the description of Brussels starts with the mention of its origins as a ducal residence, followed by a reference to its favorable situation near the forest of Zoniën and along the river Zenne, and especially the recently-built canal connecting the city with Antwerp and the sea. The town has two town walls with a circumference comparable with that of Louvain, although Brussels has many more inhabitants. The city also has beautiful churches and palaces and 52

²¹ Brabant, Gelre, Zutphen, Overijssel, Groningen, Friesland, Holland, Utrecht, Zeeland, Flanders, Walloon Flanders, Tournai, Artois, Hainaut, Luxemburg, Namur, Liege.

craft guilds organised in nine groups, called nations. The most renowned are the armour-makers and tapistrymakers for the outstanding quality of their products. Although the citizens are very wealthy and have considerable incomes from real estate and rents, Brussels is only the second town of Brabant behind Leuven. The stress is clearly on the residential function and the location of Brussels, and the economically most important features were the canal to Willebroek and the high-quality armours and tapestries. However it is remarkable, that Brussels receives no special attention as capital city. Although the central institutions are discussed in the general description of the Low Countries, the palace of the dukes of Brabant, where the governors of the Low Countries resided, is not even mentioned explicitly, neither is the impact of the presence of the court and the central institutions²².

Among the cities of Holland, Dordrecht, the oldest city and the first among the towns' representatives in the Estates of Holland is described first. Dordrecht owed its wealth to the staple of Rhine wine and grain, which offers an occasion for Guicciardini to give a more general definition of staple rights. Amsterdam is only the fifth city to be described, after Dordrecht, Haarlem, Leiden and Delft. However, as the second biggest commercial centre of the Low Countries, it is described in the most outstanding qualifications concerning its beauty, the great number of ships constantly entering and leaving its harbour, the wealth of its citizens, its shipbuilding and drapery:

"Tellement que & pour raison de l'air, de l'eau, de l'assiette du lieu & pour la commodité & grand nombre de canaux, desquels il y a presque par toutes les rues & pour autres occasions; cette ville se rend semblable presque à la Cité de Venise." (p. 316)

The Hague, on the other hand, the residence of the counts of Holland and the see of the central institutions of the county is referred to as a village without town walls. However, as Guicciardini remarks, it is the greatest and most beautiful village of Europe.

²² This can be explained partly through the fact that the role of European capital cities increased especially in the seventeenth century, cf. P. Clark and B. Leptit, eds., *Capital cities and their hinterlands in early modern Europe*, Aldershot, 1996 (Historical urban studies; 1996:1).

In Flanders, Bruges is said to be a former commercial centre, with a splendor comparable to Antwerp. But in 1516, the merchants left the town for Antwerp, so that the trade is now much reduced. There are still some Spaniards importing wool, and in 1558, the English transferred their wool staple from Calais to Bruges. Furthermore, the city has a diversified textile industry. Guicciardini hence sees clearly the transfer of international trade from Bruges to Antwerp, although unlike economic historians of the last decades, he does not go into detail on the factors contributing to this transition, but simply mentions that the merchants left the city²³.

As in the description of Antwerp, Guicciardini pays particular attention to international trade, as the descriptions of Amsterdam and Bruges show. However, towns are also referred to as producers of specific goods. These can also be products from the town's surroundings and be marketed through the city. Thus, Ghent is essentially presented as a centre of cloth production:

"la chose principale qu'ils tissent sont des toiles grosses, desquelles & des fines & deliées ils font tres grande quantité, comme on fait encore par le reste du pays Flamand: tellement que cette marchandise des toiles est estimée entre les principales richesses de cette Province" (p. 433)

Lille combines important commercial and industrial activities:

A present cést une belle & riche ville & bien batie & peuplée, ou se tient bon nombre de noblesse & plus encore de marchands qui font grand traffic de diverses choses: y a encore des artisans fort ingenieux, lesquels font des labours industrieux de diverses marchandises; & sur tout des sarges, demy ostades & grograins à la façon de Levant & iceux de plusieurs pris et sortes; de manière que pour le traffic de marchandise & les mestiers exercez en l'Isle (= à Lille), on la tient aussi pour la principale, pour le fait des marchands, après Anvers et Amsterdam, entre toutes les villes des Pays Bas sujets au Roy Catholique (p. 480).

²³ For a recent analysis see: R. van Uytven, 'Stages of economic decline: late medieval Bruges', in: J.-M. Duvosquel & E. Thoen, eds., *Peasants and townsmen in medieval Europe. Studia in honorem Adriaan Verhulst*, Gent, 1995, pp. 259-270.

Thus Guicciardini integrates long distance trade and local economy in its description of the Low Countries and thus gives a quite coherent survey of the economic functions of the towns of the Low Countries and also shows their interconnectedness. This can best be illustrated with an example of Bergen-op-Zoom and its relation with Antwerp. Bergen-op-Zoom, for example, which was, together with Antwerp, the site of the Brabant fairs, lost its commercial attractiveness after the rise of Antwerp as a permanent market in the sixteenth century²⁴. Guicciardini comments on this decline as follows:

"La ville de Berghe est bonne, bien que le temps passé elle à été beaucoup meilleur, lors que les foires, privilégiées & octroyées à cette place dez toute antiquité, y estoient fréquentées. Là où à présent on y fait pas grand cas de trafic, à ce obstant le voisinage & grandeur d'Anvers, laquelle fournit tout le pays l'avoisinant: d'autant qu'il n'y a foire ni marché extraordinaire en tout le pays, qui ne soit surmonté, en toute chose, par le cours du marché ordinarie d'Anvers." (175)

The urban historian can approach Guicciardini's *descrittione* in various ways. Through its encyclopedic structure the description forms a reference for a broad range of historical data on most places of the Low Countries. These range from geographical features to etymological, historical and particularly economic facts, biographical information of illustrious inhabitants of the places in question. Of course, most of these data have been integrated in the modern historical and encyclopedical literature so that the value of this information consists rather in the fact that it constituted the degree of knowledge available to the wider late 16th-century public on the Low Countries. Another way to approach the text is to look on the selection and focus made by Guicciardini in his description. For the Florentine merchant, trade plays of course a major role, but also politics, art and science, while other aspects are treated much less, which becomes particularly obvious in the field of religion which is hardly mentioned. This is astonishing if one considers the great importance that the religious question had in the history of the sixteenth century. One can hardly believe that Guicciardini did not realize the tensions in Antwerp, especially when one considers that his book was published in 1566, only one year after the Iconoclasm of

²⁴ Blondé, B. & Van Uytven, R., 1996. 'De smalle steden en het Brabantse stedelijke netwerk in de Late middeleeuwen en de Nieuwe Tijd', *Lira Elegans*, 6, 129-182.

1566²⁵. In fact, many authors have criticized Guicciardini for this lack of interest in religious questions and have even suspected him of protestant sympathies. While a great part of the information contained in the description comes from written sources, and can therefore also be found in other sources, the survey of the economy owes much to the background and expertise of the merchant Lodovico Guicciardini and information from his numerous relations among the merchant community in Antwerp. Although some of his quantitative estimates may be unprecise for our standards, and although he has not the same insight into historical processes as some 20th-century historians do, his view on urban society in general and on the urban economy in particular are highly instructive and form therefore an inspiring source for the urban historian.

²⁵ Marnef, G., *Antwerp in the age of Reformation: underground Protestantism in a commercial metropolis, 1550-1577*, Baltimore, Md, 1996 (The Johns Hopkins University studies in historical and political science; 114:1).