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Adriaan Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities in North-West Europe*. Trans. Alison Mouthaan-Gwillim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xiii + 174 pp. Maps, bibliography, and index. \$54.95 (hc). ISBN 0-521-46491-9 (hc), 0-521-46909-0 (pb).

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

Two areas of Western Europe were especially urbanized in the High Middle Ages: Italy and Flanders/Brabant. Italy's cities have frequently been studied, doubtless because their urban civilization in the twelfth century is considered a prelude to the Renaissance. Flanders' cities in contrast have received much less attention, even though Henri Pirenne, who essentially invented the field of medieval economic history at the beginning of the twentieth century, used them as his model of how the commercial economy developed in the aftermath of the Viking invasions.

In this volume, Adriaan Verhulst gives a survey of the history of the cities of Flanders/ Brabant (the region characterized as "north-west Europe" in the title) from late antiquity through the twelfth century. He concentrates especially on fifteen cities, most of which are located in modern Belgium, though a few are in the southern Netherlands or the northernmost parts of France. Much of the information on these cities in the early Middle Ages comes from archaeology, and Verhulst surveys what excavations have revealed of settlement patterns and urban development. The book has maps for all his cities, showing their Roman settlements (most had some) and medieval churches and walls.

Because the book is intended as an overview, the first in decades to survey so long a period in Flanders, Verhulst does not attempt to develop a novel thesis. Rather, he looks in turn at the towns that existed in the region during the late Roman Empire, most of them quite small; at the breakdown of urban civilization in the sixth and seventh centuries; at the slow emergence of new trading centers during the Viking Age, most only tangentially related to the Roman *civitates*, although they might be located almost in the same places; at the growth of cities in the tenth and eleventh centuries; and finally at twelfth-century Flemish cities as centers of commerce, of industrial production (primarily wool cloth), and of communal liberties.

It is clear that Pirenne's shadow, even after a century, still stretches long over Belgian history—or at least does so for Verhulst, who himself has been publishing in the field for some fifty years. His principal arguments over how the histories of these cities' growth should be interpreted are developed to counter theses originally advanced by Pirenne and his students. While Pirenne had assumed that the towns that first began to grow in the region in the eighth and especially ninth century had their start as fortresses, erected against Viking attack, Verhulst argues convincingly that these towns instead had their start as trading settlements, linked with nearby religious foundations. These loci might be fortified against the Vikings, but they predated the raids and continued to function even during them. In the same vein, he argues against Pirenne that the men who moved to these new towns as they became true cities were not long-distance traders from far away but rather men from the immediate region. He gives local circumstances and requirements more credit for urban development than had Pirenne, and thus does not believe that medieval cities were founded solely in reaction to a ninth-century revival of the long-distance Roman trade that had broken down with the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

In his conclusion, Verhulst draws some parallels between the medieval cities in modern-day Italy and Belgium and asks what made the latter region such an important economic center in the High Middle

Ages, even though Flemish cities did not enjoy the same continuity from Roman civilization as did Italian cities. He states that geography played a key role: the Somme, Meuse, and Rhine rivers provided easy transportation, while the area's proximity to the English Channel made it a natural locus for international trade. In addition, the rich soil of the region meant that there would always have been a large population, ready to move to cities once the opportunities were there.

This will be a useful book for scholars of medieval economic history. Its major conceptual flaw is an uncritical use of the term "feudalism." For Verhulst, it seems synonymous with noble lordship, since all castles are "feudal" castles, and yet feudalization, according to him, somehow encouraged industrialization. One might have thought he was using feudalism as a synonym for the manorial exploitation of peasants, except that he says that a manorial breakdown that took place precisely during a new feudal age encouraged urban growth. "As a result of the weakening manorial system and the feudalization of rural society . . . industry . . . began to secure a foothold" (p. 69). When the term makes his meaning so murky, one would have preferred that he avoid it altogether.

Although well-translated and uncomplicated, the book may still prove difficult going for those who do not already know the general outlines of medieval urban development and the historiography of the field. Its availability in paperback suggests that Cambridge is hoping for widespread class adoption, but the book, much narrower in focus than the title suggests, would be baffling to undergraduates. It should not be wasted on those to whom one would have to explain everything from what numismatics entails to what is a hanse, all of which the author assumes the reader already knows, but should rather be seen as the mature summation of two generations of scholarship by one of Belgium's leading medievalists.

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