

Persistent corporations: Guilds and urban government in late-medieval Europe

The emergence of guilds is often regarded as essential to the political and economic rise of Europe, even though attention has also been drawn to their 'dark side': the fact that they benefitted particular groups to the detriment of society as a whole. Both interpretations, however, assume that guilds, owing to their design, were relatively flexible institutions and adaptable to changing political and socio-economic conditions. Following up on this, it is argued in this paper that in order to explain the historical significance of medieval guilds, more attention needs to be given to the guilds' interaction with other institutions and their institutional embeddedness, which is tentatively illustrated by comparing the extent to which political factors shaped the numbers, organisation and powers of the occupational guilds in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London.

In his masterful analysis of the city, Weber notes the pivotal role of sworn associations (*coniurationes*) in the formation of urban communities in Europe. In fact, the early medieval city itself was an oath-bound community with the legal status of a corporation that represented a spatially rooted association of citizens.¹ Another distinctive feature of the occidental city, compared to its oriental counterparts, was that clan allegiances and kinship ties were surmounted and individual citizens welded into a community founded on the principle of equality.² Urban communities in medieval Europe were, according to Weber, deeply rooted in Christianity: 'Denn ohne Kommensalität, christlich gesprochen: ohne gemeinsames Abendmahl, war eine Eidbrüderschaft und ein mittelalterliches Stadtbürgertum gar nicht möglich'.³

Occupational associations are arguably the best studied of the various manifestations of the *coniunctio* in medieval and early modern society.⁴ In recent years, a fierce debate has raged between revisionist historians and their critics about the economic and wider societal benefits of trade and craft guilds.⁵ This paper does not directly engage in this debate as to whether or not guilds offered effective answers to market or state failures, since it does not approach guilds as economic institutions in the first place. It rather aims to examine how these associations were embedded in pre-modern urban society, by means of a comparative analysis of their involvement in urban government. This cross-European comparison complements existing regionally specific studies to broaden the understanding of the guilds' non-economic roles and functions in medieval and early modern urban society.

The involvement of trade and craft guilds in late-medieval urban political, social and cultural life is well known, but less is known about the consequences of these non-economic

¹ M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der Verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen, 1976), pp. 736–738, 753–755. For the reception of Weber's essay on the city, see: H. Bruhns and W. Nippel (eds.), *Max Weber und die Stadt im Kulturvergleich* (Göttingen, 2000).

² Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, p. 753: 'Sie [die Schutzgilden] ersetzen vielmehr ihren Mitgliedern zunächst das, was ihnen in der frühmittelalterlichen Stadt besonders häufig abging: den Anhalt an einer Sippe und deren Garantie'. See, also: O.G. Oexle, 'Friede durch Verschwörung', in J. Fried (ed.), *Träger und Instrumentarien des Friedens im Hohen und Späten Mittelalter* (Sigmaringen, 1996), pp. 115–50.

³ M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 2 (Tübingen, 1988), p. 40; J. Lucassen, T. De Moor, and J.L. van Zanden, 'The Return of the Guilds: Towards a Global History of the Guilds in Pre-industrial Times', *International Review of Social History* 53.Supplement S16 (2008), pp. 5–18.

⁴ For example: J.R. Farr, *Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914* (Cambridge; New York, 2000); A. Kluge, *Die Zünfte* (Stuttgart, 2007).

⁵ For the main positions in this debate: S.R. Epstein, 'Craft guilds in the pre-modern economy: a discussion', *The Economic History Review* 61.1 (2008), pp. 155–74; S. Ogilvie, 'Rehabilitating the guilds: a reply', *The Economic History Review* 61.1 (2008), pp. 175–82.

activities for their organisation and functioning as cooperative institutions.⁶ The fortunes of guilds were, above all, inextricably linked to the political history of cities and towns. The emergence of guilds often antedated or coincided with the formation of communal authorities. This was, for example, the case in London, where craft guilds appeared in the early twelfth century, both before and independently from the mayoralty and the community of citizens. It is, as argued by Keene, precisely 'the deep-rooted nature of the crafts and associated guilds in the social and political organisation of London' that explains their long survival in the later English capital.⁷

This paper picks up on the topic of political participation: on the one hand, by comparing the degree to which occupational guilds in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London were involved in urban governance; on the other, by determining how this political involvement shaped the institutional characteristics of these associations. The underlying argument is that political and social explanations are as important as economic reasoning in understanding the persistence and pervasiveness of occupational guilds in medieval and early modern urban Europe. In order to substantiate this claim, the responsibilities of the guilds in civic electoral procedures will be analysed, as well as the representation of these associations in the cities' councils. Subsequently, the regulation of the guilds' activities by princely and urban authorities, and the mutual relationships between the guilds themselves, will be examined in order to assess what impact the guilds' political participation had on their internal organisation and functioning.

Guilds became essential for the functioning of the three cities in question as political communities. Their political role varied and evolved according to the equilibrium between different urban power groups, but in all cases the urban guild system was highly defined by political factors. The case studies should in no way be regarded as representative or exemplary cases from which general patterns for medieval Europe can be drawn; they merely offer a starting point for a comparative analysis of the broader role of guilds in urban society. The importance of understanding and comparing local circumstances (that is, the economic structure of cities and towns, and the pre-existing political-institutional context in which guilds were formed and evolved) to explain the degree of 'political leverage' attained by guilds in pre-modern Europe has been aptly demonstrated by Soly.⁸ His conclusions raise the question how the urban political-institutional organisation and the urban guild system co-evolved in pre-modern Europe. What role did occupational guilds play in the dynamics of power in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London? How did their political involvement affect their autonomy and responsibilities as well as their relation to each other?

[...]

Involving the guilds

By the end of the thirteenth century, professional and occupational groupings of all kinds had become firmly established in the fast-growing cities and towns across Europe. In many Italian cities, with Florence as a prime example, guilds grew rapidly in numbers during the thirteenth

⁶ C. Lis and H. Soly, *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden; Boston, 2012), pp. 329–330.

⁷ D. Keene, 'Livery companies: what, when and why?', in P. Wallis and I.A. Gadd (eds.), *Guilds, Society and Economy in London, 1450-1800* (London, 2002), pp. 171–4, at p. 172.

⁸ H. Soly, 'The Political Economy of European Craft Guilds: Power Relations and Economic Strategies of Merchants and Master Artisans in the Medieval and Early Modern Textile Industries', *International Review of Social History* 53.Supplement S16 (2008), pp. 45–71.

century, and the members of these associations increasingly sought to voice their political concerns. The Florentine occupational guilds, according to Najemy, 'unlike (...) other associations, represented (...) a specific political and constitutional program, based on some definite legal and corporate principles'.⁹ Processes of urbanisation and economic growth also led to a proliferation of more and less organised guilds in England, where a 'redefinition of such associations as institutions in the body politic of English towns' occurred in the late-thirteenth century.¹⁰ Finally, during the first half of the fourteenth century, craft guilds 'made some inroads in government in many of the important towns throughout the Low Countries', after their members had been involved in urban politics for a lengthy period of time.¹¹

Similar developments occurred in many other European cities and towns during the tumultuous decades preceding and following 1300, but they did not always effect a durable constitutional political role for guildsmen.¹² The fact that guilds emerged as interest groups actively vying for political influence from the late-thirteenth century onwards meant that their organisation and functioning were increasingly shaped by their interactions with other power groups within the urban political context. On the one hand, craft guilds were perceived as a threat to political and social order by the urban authorities and (merchant) elites, which tried to curb their influence and privileges; on the other, guilds could be mobilised by rulers and their contenders for a range of political ends.¹³ But the most significant consequence of the guilds' political ambitions perhaps concerned the liberty enjoyed by medieval tradesmen and craftsmen to form professional associations, as will be argued in what follows. Apart from altering the urban political order in Florence, Ghent and London, the artisans' pursuit of power also gave rise to newly strained relationships between larger and lesser craft guilds, reminiscent of the older tensions between the merchant and craft associations.¹⁴

How exactly did the growing political engagement of guilds play out in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London? In order to answer this question, it will first be detailed how these associations formally attained a role in the election of urban magistrates. In the case of Florence, the last two decades of the thirteenth century turned out to be decisive in this respect. Firstly, a new ruling body was formed in 1282, to put an end to decades of political factionalism and instability in the Tuscan city. The members of the new magistracy were all guildsmen who were overwhelmingly drawn from the major guilds. In the period from 1282 to 1293, for example, 90 per cent of the bimonthly elected *priores artium* belonged to six of the seven major guilds (*arti maggiori*), of whom 72 per cent furthermore were members of the guilds of the *calimala*, *giudici e notai*, and *cambio*, the international merchants and cloth refiners, the lawyers and notaries, and the bankers.¹⁵ Secondly, the number of associations to which a form of political participation was granted was limited to 21 guilds by 1293, with the promulgation of the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* in that year. This meant that of the 'dozens of more or less organized corporate bodies'

⁹ J.M. Najemy, 'Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence: The Successes and Ultimate Failure of Corporate Politics', *The American Historical Review* 84.1 (1979), pp. 53–71, at p. 55 note 6.

¹⁰ D. Keene, 'English urban guilds, c.900–1300: The purposes and politics of association', in P. Wallis and I.A. Gadd (eds.), *Guilds and association in Europe, 900-1900* (London, 2006), pp. 3–26, at pp. 3–4.

¹¹ M.R. Prak, 'Corporate politics in the Low Countries: guilds as institutions, 14th to 18th centuries', in M.R. Prak et al. (eds.), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries. Work, Power and Representation* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 74–106.

¹² Lis and Soly, *Worthy Efforts*, pp. 328–333.

¹³ H. Swanson, 'The Illusion of Economic Structure: Craft Guilds in Late Medieval English Towns', *Past & Present* 121 (1988), pp. 29–48.

¹⁴ S.A. Epstein, *Wage labor and guilds in medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill, 1991), p. 154.

¹⁵ J.M. Najemy, *Corporatism and consensus in Florentine electoral politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), pp. 23, 28–30, 40–41.

that aspired to a political role in the second half of the thirteenth century, only a few gained recognition and political influence.¹⁶ Five middle guilds joined the ranks of the seven major politically recognised guilds. The remaining nine *arti minori* were allowed to bear arms and a banner, but they played a secondary role in urban politics as they could not take part in the electoral processes of the commune.¹⁷

The political events in late-thirteenth-century Florence would have far-reaching consequences for the guilds' freedom of action in the later Middle Ages, even though the actual political influence of the majority corporations remained fairly limited, and swayed in accordance with the balance of power in the city. The procedures for electing the members of the *signoria* (the executive council comprising the *gonfaloniere di giustizia* and six – later eight – priors) and the two advisory councils (the *dodici buonomini* and the *gonfalonieri delle compagnie*), subject to fierce debates and political wrangling, as meticulously described by Najemy, were repeatedly altered and refined. Besides, even though all guild members became politically eligible citizens of Florence, only those belonging to the major guilds were elected to communal offices, thereby denying an equal distribution of power among the guilds. This dominance was twice interrupted by short periods of popular government, during which the minor guilds increased their power share at the expense of the major guilds and elite families.

This first happened in 1343, at a time when the commune faced a grave public debt crisis, giving the lesser of the 21 guilds especially an opportunity to gain influence on urban government. Two seats, for instance, were reserved for priors from the fourteen *arti minori*.¹⁸ The revolutionary events in 1378 are also a well-known example of popular government. With the support of disgruntled unskilled textile workers, mainly wool carders known as the Ciompi, a new guild government took over, which created three new associations for the numerous unorganised artisans and workers in the clothing and textile industries. The Ciompi, unsatisfied with the new arrangements, eventually broke ranks with the other guilds, but their revolt was crushed and the guild government remained in power until 1382.¹⁹ Such popular regimes were relatively short-lived, and the political influence of the guilds was further reduced after the ascent of a coalition led by Cosimo de' Medici in 1434, who effectively gained control over the civic electoral procedures and asserted leadership of the corporations. In sum, guilds remained the formal foundation of the Florentine republic, but despite the fact that guild membership had become a requirement for election to the *signoria*, and that all guildsmen were politically eligible citizens at the end of the thirteenth century, ordinary traders and artisans were rarely in a position to participate in the city's government during the later Middle Ages.²⁰

¹⁶ Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*, p. 23; J.M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200-1575* (Malden, MA, 2006), pp. 39–44, 74, 78, 81–82.

¹⁷ Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*, pp. 43–45, note 2; Najemy, *A History of Florence*, p. 79; M.B. Becker and G.A. Brucker, 'The *Arti Minori* in Florentine Politics, 1342-1378', *Mediaeval Studies* 18.1 (1956), pp. 93–104. The role of consuls of the major guilds in the election of the priors also diminished after 1296.

¹⁸ Becker and Brucker, 'The *Arti Minori* in Florentine Politics', pp. 94–102; Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*, pp. 133–134, 147–149.

¹⁹ Najemy, *A History of Florence*, p. 163; J. Najemy, 'Audiant omnes artes. Corporate origins of the Ciompi Revolution', in *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi: un momento di storia fiorentina ed europea* (Florence, 1981), pp. 59–93; cf. P. Lantschner, 'The "Ciompi Revolution" Constructed: Modern Historians and the Nineteenth-Century Paradigm of Revolution', *Annali di Storia di Firenze* 4 (2009), pp. 277–97.

²⁰ R.A. Goldthwaite, *The building of Renaissance Florence: an economic and social history* (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 272–273; cf. F. Franceschi, 'Intervento del potere centrale e ruolo delle arti nel governo dell'economia fiorentina del Trecento e del primo Quattrocento. Linee generali', *Archivio storico italiano* 151 (1993), pp. 863–909, at pp. 883–890, 896, 907–909. See, for the participation of the guilds in the scrutinies of

It took a long struggle for the craftsmen in Ghent – a city dominated by the textile guilds, in contrast to Florence and London – to assert their voice in urban government. The famous participation of the Flemish guilds (*ambachten*) in the county's revolt against the French king during the Anglo-French wars of 1294-1303, whereby the French cavalry was defeated in the Battle of the Spurs on 11 July 1302 near the town of Kortrijk, is generally considered a watershed in the political involvement of the artisan guilds, even though their ambitions were older, and it still took several decades for their formal say in the towns' governments to play out.²¹ It was only after 1360 that power relationships stabilised in Ghent, and a new constitutional order was settled. According to the new procedures for electing the 26 members of the city's two benches of aldermen, the wealthy, politically privileged citizens (the *poorterij*), in conjunction with the count, chose six aldermen, the weavers' guild appointed ten members, and the 53 lesser guilds together elected the remaining ten members. These arrangements developed over the course of the fourteenth century and reflected the power relationships between the three 'members' of Ghent's body politic, and, as argued by Boone, should be understood as a form of conflict management.²²

Ghent's benches of aldermen were dominated by the large and powerful guild of the weavers, but it was not without a struggle that they obtained this position. Until 1361, the weaver-drapers were enmeshed in an often violent strife with the fullers, who subsequently lost their guild's autonomy and the privilege of political participation.²³ Similar to the developments in Florence, the number of politically recognised guilds became fixed in the early 1360s, as the power balance and the relation between the guilds were determined. Attached to the weavers' guild were four minor groups of textile workers, which did not play a negligible political role, while the 53 lesser guilds represented artisans from about a hundred different occupations.²⁴ As a consequence, the political influence of the guilds was not equally distributed, nor were all artisans of the same profession organised in a recognised association.

Ghent's political landscape, however, differed fundamentally from Florence's, due to the fact that the former city was subjected to an overlord, the Count of Flanders. Revolts of the Flemish cities against the authority of the count occurred repeatedly throughout the later medieval period. On the one hand, the cities sought to defend their political and economic autonomy against the centralising efforts of the count; on the other, the cities themselves were, often simultaneously, riven by violent struggles for power between the guilds, or by uprisings of craftsmen and labourers deprived of a political voice against the urban elites in times of hardship. Ghent, for example, experienced prolonged political unrest during the Ghent War of

candidates for communal offices: Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*, pp. 277–279; Najemy, *A History of Florence*, pp. 129–130.

²¹ C. Wyffels, *De oorsprong der ambachten in Vlaanderen en Brabant* (Brussels, 1951), pp. 24–25; M. Boone, 'Les métiers dans les villes flamandes au bas Moyen Âge (XIVe-XVIe siècles): images normatives, réalités socio-politiques et économiques', in P. Lambrechts and J.-P. Sosson (eds.), *Les métiers au moyen âge. Aspects économiques et sociaux* (Louvain, 1994), pp. 1–21, at pp. 6–8.

²² M. Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen ca. 1384-ca. 1453: een sociaal-politieke studie van een staatsvormingsproces* (Brussels, 1990), pp. 36–39, 48, 52; J. van Leeuwen, *De Vlaamse wetsvernieuwing: een onderzoek naar de jaarlijkse keuze en aanstelling van het stadsbestuur in Gent, Brugge en Ieper in de Middeleeuwen* (Brussels, 2004), pp. 32–37.

²³ M. Boone and A.J. Brand, 'Vollersoproeren en collectieve actie in Gent en Leiden in de 14de-15de eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 19.2 (1993), pp. 168–92; J.H.A. Munro, 'Gold, guilds and government. The impact of monetary and labour policies on the Flemish cloth industry, 1390-1435', *Jaarboek voor middeleeuwse geschiedenis* 5 (2002), pp. 153–205, at p. 162.

²⁴ Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen*, pp. 59, 76–78; J. Dambuyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen: aspiraties, relaties en transformaties in de 16e-eeuwse Gentse ambachtswereld* (Ghent, 2002), pp. 23–31.

1379-1385, and the revolts against Duke Philip the Good (1449-1453) and against Emperor Charles V (1539-1540).²⁵ The latter two rebellions ended in bitter defeat; the guilds lost their political privileges between 1453 and 1477 and again in 1540. The Emperor also reorganised Ghent's guild system, abolishing nine guilds and clustering the remaining 49 into 21 new occupational organisations.²⁶

Medieval London never achieved the degree of autonomy enjoyed by Florence and Ghent. It was by far the largest city in England, but its complex relationship with the relatively powerful Crown placed a check on its political and economic ambitions.²⁷ Ties between the Crown and occupational groupings existed in London at least as early as the eleventh century; for example, by 1130-1131, the weavers were among the guilds paying annual sums to the king.²⁸ Despite these early peculiarities, the later history of the relationship between occupational guilds in London is less exceptional than is sometimes thought. From the late-thirteenth century onwards, the (major) guilds exerted considerable influence on the city's government, and the municipal authorities increasingly involved the guilds in administrative matters.²⁹ As the London guilds' political, military, administrative and economic responsibilities grew in the later Middle Ages, the two recurring issues of contention were – as one might expect – the role of the corporations in civic electoral procedures and the power struggle among the major and lesser guilds.

The election of London's mayor was an event during which political tensions often surfaced. In 1293, the mayor was elected by twelve good men (*probi homines*) from each ward, but it remained a matter of contention throughout the later Middle Ages how many representatives from the wards should be summoned to attend the annual mayor's election. The role of the London guilds – initially known as *misteries* and later as companies – in these elections was only recognised in 1467, when guild wardens or masters joined the members of the common council and the other 'good men' to elect the mayor and sheriffs. Two further decisions were taken by the court of aldermen in 1475: not only the wardens but also the liverymen of the guilds were to be summoned for the annual election of the mayor, and it was ruled that the two nominees for this office should no longer belong to the same company.³⁰ These arrangements concluded a long struggle of the guilds for political recognition. The major guilds had already exerted considerable influence on London's government from the early fourteenth century onwards, since the elected mayors and aldermen were overwhelmingly guildsmen. However, the city's aldermen were drawn from the 24 (and after 1394, 25) wards, and not elected by the guilds, while the mayor was, until 1467, chosen only by a limited

²⁵ M. Boone and M.R. Prak, 'Rulers, patricians and burghers. The great and little traditions of urban revolt in the Low Countries', in K. Davids and J. Lucassen (eds.), *A miracle mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European perspective* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 99–134, at pp. 100–113; J. Dumolyn and J. Haemers, 'Patterns of urban rebellion in medieval Flanders', *Journal of medieval history* 31.4 (2005), pp. 369–93, at pp. 376–382.

²⁶ See, for the so-called *Concessio Carolina*: Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 34–37.

²⁷ D. Keene, 'Medieval London and its region', *London Journal* 14 (1989), pp. 99–111.

²⁸ Keene, 'English urban guilds', pp. 8, 11–16, 19; E. Veale, 'The "Great Twelve". Mystery and Fraternity in Thirteenth-Century London', *Historical Research* 64.155 (1991), pp. 237–63, at pp. 239, 261–263.

²⁹ M. Davies, 'Crown, city and guild in late medieval London', in M. Davies and J.A. Galloway (eds.), *London and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Derek Keene* (London, 2012), pp. 241–61, at pp. 249–252; A.F. Sutton, 'The Silent Years of London Guild History before 1300: the Case of the Mercers', *Historical Research* 71.175 (1998), pp. 121–41, at pp. 131–137.

³⁰ R.R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of letter-books preserved among the archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall. Letter-book L: Edward IV-Henry VII* (London, 1912), f. 113r (13 September 1475); C.M. Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages. Government and people, 1200-1500* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 148–151.

electorate comprising the wards' good men.³¹ In practice, both procedures meant that civic elections could still be dominated by a small group of wealthy men. Almost all mayors and aldermen were members of the wealthier mercantile companies – the vintners, fishmongers, drapers, mercers, grocers and goldsmiths –, while very few members of the artisan guilds found their way into the court of aldermen or the court of common council, an elected representative body that emerged in the fourteenth century.³²

The political involvement of London's companies was not fundamentally different from that of the guilds in Florence and Ghent, albeit that it took longer for the former to establish a formal position within the urban political order. As a consequence, the evolution of London's guild system took a slightly different course. From the fourteenth century onwards, many trade and craft associations did secure formal recognition from the Crown (often to the dissatisfaction of the mayor and aldermen, who wished to approve the guilds' ordinances before they were promulgated), but the number of incorporated companies was never restricted for political reasons, even though a hierarchy emerged among the corporations at the end of the fifteenth century. The order of precedence of the 'great twelve' livery companies became permanently fixed in 1531-1532; not coincidentally, this process of consolidation was exactly in the same period in which London's constitutional framework became more clearly defined. Generally, about fifty companies out of the over 110 occupational associations mentioned in London's medieval sources were organised enough to play some role in the government of the city during the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³³

Organising the guilds

This brief excursion demonstrates that, leaving aside all the local specificities, a few similar issues were at stake in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London: the representation of corporate interests in urban government and the closely linked rivalry between the occupational associations. It was perhaps not their political ambitions as such that shaped the position of the guilds in these cities, but rather the electoral responsibilities that they obtained. If this was indeed so, then political motives as much as economic or demographic factors determined the late-medieval history of urban guilds. How far can this argument be convincingly pushed for the three cities in question?

Florence, Ghent and London already had rather developed and diversified economies around 1300; many occupational associations existed in a more or less organised form before this date – often as religious confraternities. It might, therefore, be argued that the economic need for creating new associations was less pressing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

³¹ The central role of the ward in the election of aldermen in London was not absent in Florence and Ghent. The electoral procedures in Florence were directed at balancing the interests of the guilds, but also of those of the city's different administrative units: initially, the six *sesti* and, after 1343, the sixteen *gonfaloni*, in which the new *quartieri* of the city were subdivided. Wards or other administrative organisations were not directly involved in the election of aldermen in medieval Ghent. The weavers' guild, however, knew its own division of the city into 23 wards, of which the *gezwoenen* participated in the election of the guild's deans. Some of the lesser guilds also ensured that their deans and jurors equally represented the parishes or wards of the city; Najemy, *A History of Florence*, pp. 53–50; Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen*, pp. 61–67, 87.

³² G.A. Williams, *Medieval London. From commune to capital* (London, 1963), pp. 190–195; Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 130, 136–139, 230–232; A.B. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, 1 (London, 1908), pp. 329–331, 358–361.

³³ Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 206–211, 229–230, 233; M. Davies, 'Artisans, guilds and government in London', in R. Britnell (ed.), *Daily Life in the Late Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1998), pp. 125–50, at pp. 126, 134–135.

Moreover, the demographic development of Florence, Ghent and London in this period gives little reason to assume that this factor should have influenced the number of guilds.³⁴ The number of occupational associations had increased correspondingly with the rapid growth of the cities in the thirteenth century, but the sharp fall in the urban population in the mid-fourteenth century and its slow recovery up until the late-fifteenth century did not affect the number of guilds in a noticeable way.³⁵ Nevertheless, the fifteenth century has been characterised as ‘the heyday of the city companies of London’, a period during which the capital city did not escape recession and stagnation, despite profiting from the difficult demographic and economic conditions experienced by other English cities and towns during this century.³⁶

These tentative conclusions strengthen the argument that, indeed, the integration of the trade and craft guilds in the cities’ constitutional order led to the formation of an inflexible guild system which could not easily adapt to changing economic realities. Yet, economic factors were obviously not entirely absent in the later medieval period. The make-up of the formally recognised guilds changed over time in accordance with economic circumstances, and some artisans also organised themselves one way or another outside the guild system. In Florence, for instance, the composition of each of the 21 guilds was certainly not static from 1293 till 1534, when the new Medici-led government reorganised the fourteen minor guilds into four *università*.³⁷ Almost all Florentine guilds united guildsmen of different occupations, and should therefore be understood as conglomerates or ‘umbrella guilds’ with a heterogeneous membership.³⁸ This is illustrated by the example of the physicians, apothecaries and spice importers who initially formed the guild of the *medici e speziali*; the *merciai*, or shopkeepers, joined as a third and equal division soon thereafter, in 1296, while several other groups of craftsmen were later affiliated with the guild as second-tier members, such as the saddlers,

³⁴ Florence probably lost half of its estimated population of 100,000-120,000 inhabitants during the Black Death. This number had fallen to 37,144 by 1427, but Florence’s population rose steadily from the late-fifteenth century onwards; the city had 59,000 inhabitants by the mid-sixteenth century. Medieval Ghent had an estimated population of 64,000 in the mid-fourteenth century. The Flemish city, less severely hit by the Black Death, counted approximately 45,000 inhabitants around 1500. London’s population passed the 80,000 inhabitants mark in the early fourteenth century. The city’s size was probably reduced by half after the Black Death, but London had an estimated 55,000 inhabitants in 1520. Thus, the three large cities were of comparable size around 1500, and – with the exception of London – belonged to the most densely populated and urbanised regions of Europe. M. Ginatempo and L. Sandri, *L’Italia delle città: il popolamento urbano tra Medioevo e Rinascimento (secoli XIII-XVI)* (Florence, 1990), p. 148; P. Stabel, *Dwarfs among giants: the Flemish urban network in the late Middle Ages* (Louvain, 1997), p. 31; Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 237–238.

³⁵ See, for the complex relationship between demographic developments and the number of guilds in the Low Countries: B.D. Munck, P. Lourens, and J.M.W.G. Lucassen, ‘The establishment and distribution of craft guilds in the Low Countries, 1000-1800’, in M. Prak et al. (eds.), *Craft guilds in the early modern Low Countries. Work, power, and representation* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 32–73, at pp. 64–66.

³⁶ C.M. Barron, ‘London, 1300–1540’, in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, 1 (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 395–440, at p. 429; P. Nightingale, ‘The growth of London in the medieval English economy’, in R.H. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds.), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 89–106, at pp. 99–106.

³⁷ A.J. Doren, *Studien aus der Florentiner Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Vol. 2: Das Florentiner Zunftwesen vom vierzehnten bis zum sechszehnten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1908), p. 767; L. Cantini, *Legislazione toscana raccolta e illustrata dal dottore Lorenzo Cantini*, 1 (Firenze, 1800), pp. 102–108. Doren erroneously mentions five instead of the four *università*. The original *membra* remained relatively autonomous within these new organisations, but their members were no longer eligible to public offices – efforts to achieve this in the fifteenth century had been abortive.

³⁸ R.A. Goldthwaite, *The economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore, 2009), pp. 342–349.

barbers, painters and wax-workers, amongst others.³⁹ This complex structure was a breeding ground for strife and friction within the guilds; often the principal *membra* tried to impose their control over the subordinated associations, which, in turn, sought to maintain some degree of autonomy.

Furthermore, changing economic fortunes affected the internal composition of the guilds. In the thirteenth century, several corporations of retailers of luxury (textile) items were organised into the guild of Por Santa Maria, but with the growth of the silk industry, the guild became dominated by the *membrum* of the silk manufacturers (*setaioli*) by the end of the fourteenth century. The guild was even commonly known as the *arte della seta* from the early fifteenth century onwards, even though it still comprised a variety of retailers and producers of cloth amongst its ranks, as well as artisans belonging to several secondary occupations in the silk industry.⁴⁰ Given the loose structure of the guild conglomerates, it was not uncommon for groups of artisans to change alliance or form their own informal confraternity. The tailors were initially attached to the guild of Por Santa Maria, but, after the establishment of the first guild republic, they aligned with the *arte dei rigattieri* in 1296. It took the tailors decades to improve their membership rights within this guild, to be allowed to participate in the elections of consuls in 1350 and to become officials of the guild in 1376.⁴¹ The tailors eventually also organised themselves into a religious confraternity, that of San Paolo dei Sarti, in 1435, which built an oratory and a hospital. The Florentine authorities were suspicious of any associations of artisans and workers under the pretext of religion, especially in the fourteenth century, but at least seventeen other artisan confraternities were founded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which remained under strict control of the guilds and the *signoria*. Among the artisans and workers who were excluded from the membership of the official guilds, the scissor and knife-makers, dyers, tailors, and wool-carders and shearers took the initiative to form confraternities in the fourteenth century.⁴² However, it is still unclear whether these organisations actually fulfilled any economic functions beside their core social and religious roles.

The developments in Florence are in some ways comparable with those in Ghent. Together, the weavers' guild and the 53 minor guilds that consolidated their position in the Flemish city in the 1360s represented a hundred occupations during the later Middle Ages. Consequently, about a third of the minor guilds were composed of artisans of two or more different professions. Thirteen of the nineteen mixed corporations had a compound structure, within which each member remained independent in terms of economic activities. The guild of the masons, for example, had two members, the bricklayers and the stone dressers, while the smiths' guild even counted twelve different professions.⁴³ The make-up of the official guilds changed over time, as a result of the evolving economic conditions. For example, the bonnet makers joined the mercers' guild as minor members in 1460, without participating in the guild's

³⁹ Najemy, 'Audiant omnes artes', pp. 78–79; R. Ciasca (ed.), *Statuti dell'Arte dei medici e speziali* (Florence, 1922).

⁴⁰ Goldthwaite, *The building of Renaissance Florence*, pp. 285–288; P. Pieri, *Intorno alla storia dell'arte della seta in Firenze* (Bologna, 1927); U. Dorini (ed.), *Statuti dell'Arte di Por Santa Maria del tempo della repubblica* (Florence, 1934).

⁴¹ C.C. Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* (Baltimore, 2011), pp. 18–23.

⁴² J. Henderson, *Piety and charity in late medieval Florence* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 37, 40, 45–46, 426–428, 469. Some of the confraternities were organised according to ethnic origin, for example, the Lucchese silk-workers founded the confraternity of San Marco in 1405 or 1450, while the Flemish weavers established the confraternity of Santa Barbara in 1443.

⁴³ Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen*, pp. 81–83; Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 24–26.

government, nor paying the full membership fee. The knife makers, on the other hand, left the guild in 1511, after numerous conflicts with the other main members, the mercers, the wax candle makers and the scabbard makers.⁴⁴ Secondly, at least sixteen formally unrecognised artisan organisations were active in Ghent in the period from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Organised in the same way as their recognised counterparts, some of these associations even obtained a monopoly on their trade or craft from the urban authorities, but none of them enjoyed the right to political participation.⁴⁵ Finally, after re-clustering of corporations in 1540, the 49 remaining guilds retained their statutes and autonomy within the new 21 umbrella organisations.⁴⁶

London's guild landscape remained more fluid in the later Middle Ages, which is manifest from the rivalry and cooperation among the trade and craft organisations. The civic electoral procedures were often at stake in the strife between guilds, which sought to direct the city's policy in favour of their own economic interests. However, these complex conflicts were not just between mercantile and artisan guilds, since occasional coalitions were struck between different companies and interest groups when confronted with changing political and economic realities. This was the case in 1376, when some constitutional changes were made on the instigation of John of Northampton, a draper, giving the guilds the right to elect the members of the common council, until the old order was restored seven years later with the election of Nicholas Brembre, a grocer, as mayor of London.⁴⁷ A similar conflict arose in 1443 out of an economic dispute between the drapers and the tailors. The latter artisan company did not provide any alderman until 1435, when Ralph Holland was elected alderman, and who subsequently made three unsuccessful bids to be elected mayor. In his pursuit of political power for his craft, which led to a riot in 1441 and culminated in the rebellious year of 1443, Holland contested the election of mayor by a restricted common council, but vainly strove to reform the electoral procedure.⁴⁸

In the absence of direct political influence, smaller companies resorted to lobbying the city and the Crown. Moreover, several occupational groups amalgamated to form larger and more secure groupings from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards. For example, the company of the leather sellers incorporated the tawyers in 1479, the glovers and pursers in 1502, and the pouch makers in 1517, while the wiredrawers and pinners merged to form the new company of the wiresellers in 1497.⁴⁹ In short, the London guilds had to be sufficiently well-organised, and required a considerable membership to secure their place in relation to the other guilds and the urban authorities. For this reason, they also sought official recognition from the

⁴⁴ E. van der Hallen, 'Het Gentse meerseniersambacht (1305-1540)', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 31.1 (1977), pp. 77-149, at pp. 83-85.

⁴⁵ Dambuyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 31-34. The artisan organisations were distinct from religious confraternities by their homogeneous membership and welfare provision to members.

⁴⁶ See, for the statutes: Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ms. 58.

⁴⁷ P. Nightingale, 'Capitalists, Crafts and Constitutional Change in Late Fourteenth-Century London', *Past & Present* 124 (1989), pp. 3-35, at pp. 18-19, 31-34; Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 230-232; F. Rexroth, *Deviance and power in late medieval London* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 131-141, note 38. It was decided in 1376 that the greater mysteries would each elect six members of the common council, while the lesser guilds would elect four members, but this decision was reversed in 1383; A.F. Sutton, *The mercery of London. Trade, goods and people, 1130-1578* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 107-109.

⁴⁸ C.M. Barron, 'Ralph Holland and the London radicals, 1438-1444', in R. Holt and G. Rosser (eds.), *The English Medieval Town. A Reader in English Urban History, 1200-1540* (London, 1990), pp. 160-83.

⁴⁹ Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 228-230; B. Megson (ed.), *The pinners' and wiresellers' book, 1462-1511* (London, 2009), p. xi.

urban authorities as well as the Crown, by which the companies became incorporated bodies.⁵⁰ Overall, the London traders and artisans enjoyed more flexibility in organising themselves in officially recognised occupational associations as compared to their counterparts in Florence and Ghent.

Monitoring the guilds

The guilds' involvement in urban politics and governance obviously means that their economic functioning cannot be understood in isolation from their political activities. The interesting question to what extent the guilds managed to regulate and control the urban economies will not be addressed here.⁵¹ Instead, the focus is on the question how and why the rulers of late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London sought to monitor the trade and craft associations.

Apart from limiting the number of recognised corporations, the urban authorities in Florence, Ghent and London could control the guilds in varying ways, ranging from approving their statutes and ordinances to influencing the appointment of the guilds' wardens. Comparatively, the Florentine ruling elite established the strongest control over the guilds, thereby ultimately excluding non-elite guildsmen from having any real influence on the city's government. By the end of the fourteenth century, according to Najemy, the Florentine guilds 'were reduced to offices of the state, subordinated legally and constitutionally to a sovereignty in which they no longer had any part'.⁵² Until a reform of the communal and guild elections in 1328-1329, the guilds were autonomous regarding their governance and elections, but during the fourteenth century many guilds experienced power contests between elite members favouring a smaller membership, and non-elite members striving for more political participation.⁵³

The *Universitas Mercatorum*, an organisation formed by the merchants and bankers of the five major guilds guarding the interests of Florence's elite families, played an important role in imposing 'oligarchic control' over the *arti minori*.⁵⁴ In the first place, guild officials, freely elected by the guild members until 1382, had to be approved by the *Mercanzia*, which further obtained the authority in 1393 to appoint the guild consuls and *consiligieri* directly. With the general reform of the guild statutes in 1414, the consuls were formally referred to as state rather than guild officials.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the fourteen minor guilds lost the right to regulate their internal affairs, and their economic regulations became – at least in theory – subject to approval

⁵⁰ G. Unwin, *The guilds and companies of London* (London, 1908), pp. 87–88, 163; Sharpe (ed.), *Letter-book L: Edward IV–Henry VII*, pp. XVI–XXII.

⁵¹ See, for this topic: Franceschi, 'Intervento del potere centrale', pp. 863–909; G.A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 57; E.M. Veale, 'Craftsmen and the economy of London in the fourteenth century', in R. Holt and G. Rosser (eds.), *The Medieval Town: A Reader in Urban History, 1200–1540* (London, 1990), pp. 120–40; J.R. Kellett, 'The Breakdown of Guild and Corporation Control over the Handicraft and Retail Trade in London', *The Economic History Review* 10.3 (1958), pp. 381–94.

⁵² Najemy, 'Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence', pp. 70–71; Goldthwaite, *The economy of Renaissance Florence*, pp. 346–347: '...guilds became the routes to political activity rather than themselves agents in the political process.'

⁵³ Najemy, *A History of Florence*, pp. 124–132.

⁵⁴ A. Astorri, 'Note sulla mercanzia fiorentina sotto Lorenzo dei Medici. Aspetti istituzionali e politici', *Archivio storico italiano* 150 (1992), pp. 965–93, at pp. 967–971.

⁵⁵ Franceschi, 'Intervento del potere centrale', pp. 887–890; Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus*, pp. 51, 136, 167, 178–179, 241, 279; J. Kirshner, 'Paolo di Castro on "Cives ex Privilegio". A controversy over the legal qualifications for public office in early fifteenth-century Florence', in A. Molho and J.A. Tedeschi (eds.), *Renaissance. Studies in honor of Hans Baron* (Florence, 1971), pp. 227–64, at p. 245; N. Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici (1434 to 1494)* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 199–202, 214–215, 221–223.

of the urban authorities. Finally, the communal authorities increasingly appointed officials who fulfilled economic and legal tasks that were, up until then, within the competence of the corporations.⁵⁶

The extent to which the fifteenth-century Florentine authorities meddled with the guilds' internal affairs was not fundamentally different from the practices in Ghent and London, although political motives to control the guilds weighed differently in the latter cities. The Ghent guildsmen were free to elect their wardens and other officials without interference from the urban authorities or the Count of Flanders. Electoral procedures varied among the guilds; they were mostly indirect and aimed at an equal representation of the members. The office of wardenship was an important stepping stone towards being elected as an alderman of the city, but generally the mobility among guild officials was high.⁵⁷ The *Concessio Carolina* of 1540 radically changed the appointment of guild officials by stipulating that the count would annually appoint a head of each of the 21 guild organisations, whereas the two *gezworenen* (sworn men or jurors) of each guild were to be selected by the city's bailiff and the aldermen from a shortlist of four candidates presented by the guilds' head and the outgoing *gezworenen*.⁵⁸

London's trade and craft associations were free from interference from both the royal and the municipal authorities with regard to the election of their wardens or masters. However, the statutes and ordinances of the guilds in Ghent and London, which laid down the rules for self-government and internal organisation, were subject to approval by the same authorities. In a few cases, by obtaining royal or municipal approval of their statutes, London companies played the Crown against the council of aldermen to gain certain privileges or to strengthen their position in relation to other guilds.⁵⁹ Charters, arms, banners and guild halls gave expression to the guilds' identities, and therefore conveyed important symbolic value. It was for this reason that, after the vain rebellions of Ghent against the princely authority in 1453 and 1540, the banners of the guilds were confiscated and guilds' political privileges rescinded as part of the city's submission to Duke Philip the Good and Emperor Charles V respectively.⁶⁰

It may seem paradoxical, that the major guilds in power in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London were keen to monitor other occupational associations, but the guilds were far from a homogeneous front: witness also the suppression of lesser guilds and new associations that could and did at times challenge their subordinate position in the urban guild system. The political order was inherently unstable, as economic competition between the guilds easily translated into political rivalry; the discontent of the guildsmen and workers excluded from the political arena was a recurring threat for the existing balance of power. Even when leaving economic arguments out of then account, the incumbent elites had political reasons enough to oversee the internal affairs of the guilds to ensure that they would not pose a threat to the authority of the priors of Florence, the aldermen of Ghent and the mayor of London.

The relationship between the municipal authorities and the guilds was double-edged in these cities, because the corporations became an essential part of the urban body politic. The guilds achieved a constitutional role in the election of the magistrate; and, closely related to this, guild membership became the main, or even only, route to citizenship and eligibility for political

⁵⁶ F. Franceschi, 'Note sulle corporazioni fiorentine in età laurenziana', in *La Toscana al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, 3 (Pisa, 1996), pp. 1343–62, at pp. 1344–1345.

⁵⁷ Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen*, pp. 67, 83–93; Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 270–277.

⁵⁸ Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 294–295, cf. 31, note 10.

⁵⁹ Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 209–211.

⁶⁰ P.J. Arnade, *Realms of ritual: Burgundian ceremony and civic life in late medieval Ghent* (Ithaca, 1996), pp. 117–121; Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 169–171.

office. In Florence, guild membership was a condition for practising certain economic activities, but above all it gave the inheritable right to political participation.⁶¹ Some guildsmen were only guild members in order to pursue a political career, without having any link with the trade or craft of that corporation (despite repeated prohibitions), a fact which caused friction within the guilds. The growth of the guilds' membership in the early fourteenth century resulted in an increased number of eligible citizens for communal offices, and although the political elites devised barriers of all sorts to maintain their position, mobility was still relatively high among the political offices during this century.⁶²

London obtained a royal charter in 1319 stipulating that to become a freeman one must be admitted as member to one of the misteries or obtain the consent of the whole commonalty. In practice, citizenship was only obtained through guild membership in the later medieval period, either by apprenticeship or by purchase, meaning that the London guilds achieved control over legal entry into the city's economy, and consequently urban politics.⁶³ In Ghent, guild membership became an important means of access to the bench of aldermen, but not the only one, since the *poorters* – the politically privileged landowning citizens – enjoyed these rights as well. Some members of the *poorterij* even enrolled into guilds, in particular the guild of the brokers, to gain eligibility for the election of aldermen.⁶⁴ As in late-medieval Florence and London, citizenship was not a prerequisite for guild membership in the Flemish city; rather, guild members were regarded as full citizens.⁶⁵ Aspiring citizens thus had to pay a matriculation fee to become a guild member, but the status of citizenship itself was free of charge.

Given the involvement of the guilds in urban politics, their important economic functions and their sometimes sizeable membership, it comes as no surprise that these associations evolved into complex and hierarchically organised institutions with extensive internal regulations laid down in statutes and ordinances. Membership was only in theory voluntary for the majority of the members who sought to practice their trade or craft; they also had little or no participation in the governance of their guild. The government of the Florentine guilds, as for example the *arte dei maestri di pietra e di legname*, the guild of the masters in stone and wood, ended up in the hands of a small elite group that controlled the elections of the guild consuls.⁶⁶ The guilds of London and Ghent were not instruments of politics to the same degree, but these associations knew their own internal (socio-economic) stratification; the guilds masters, or, in the case of London, liverymen, enjoyed a privileged position with respect to ordinary members.⁶⁷

⁶¹ G. Guidi, *Il governo della città-repubblica di Firenze del primo quattrocento*, 1 (Florence, 1981), pp. 100–101, 112–127. Dual guild membership was not unusual in Florence, both for economic and political reasons. Traders and artisans could also join multiple guilds in late-medieval Ghent and London.

⁶² J.M. Najemy, 'Florentine Politics and Urban Spaces', in R.J. Crum and J.T. Paoletti (eds.), *Renaissance Florence: A Social History* (New York, 2006), pp. 19–54, 483–91, at p. 28; J.F. Padgett and P.D. McLean, 'Organizational Invention and Elite Transformation: The Birth of Partnership Systems in Renaissance Florence', *American Journal of Sociology* 111.5 (2006), pp. 1463–568, at pp. 1497–1498, 1505.

⁶³ Williams, *Medieval London*, pp. 282–284; Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 205–206, 230–231.

⁶⁴ Van Leeuwen, *De Vlaamse wetsvernieuwing*, p. 35, note 75; Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen*, pp. 42, 58–59.

⁶⁵ M. Boone, 'Droit de bourgeoisie et particularisme urbain dans la Flandre bourguignonne et habsbourgeoise (1384-1585)', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 74.3 (1996), pp. 707–26, at pp. 709–714.

⁶⁶ Goldthwaite, *The building of Renaissance Florence*, pp. 272–286.

⁶⁷ Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, p. 179; Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 214–216; S. Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 217–218.

Concluding remarks: institutional complementarities

The struggle of the occupational associations in Florence, Ghent and London for a voice in the cities' governments had several outcomes. Formally, the guilds in the Tuscan city achieved the highest degree of political involvement, since the government of the Republic was based on the participation of the 21 guilds after 1293. The trade and craft guilds in Ghent also gained a fixed representation in the city's government, even though they still had to cope with the *poorterij* and Flemish comital power. Finally, the companies of London consolidated their constitutional role in the election of the mayor in the third quarter of fifteenth century, but almost all mayors and aldermen were guildsmen from the early fourteenth century onwards, without the guilds having a role in their elections. Apart from the formal participation of guilds in urban government through the eligibility of their members and the civic electoral systems, the guilds naturally also had informal influence through petitioning, lobbying and social networking, the importance of which can only be revealed by more detailed research.

In the three cities in question, the guilds seized their opportunity to become a vital part of the urban political order, but the tradesmen and artisans also paid a price for their political involvement. Firstly, the right of voluntary association was eventually restricted, particularly in Florence and Ghent, where the number of recognised guilds became fixed, but also in London, where a rigid guild hierarchy emerged. Moreover, the authorities sought to extend their control over the guilds both for economic as well as political reasons, affecting the autonomy of the corporations. Finally, the guilds' political involvement fuelled competition between those that strove for power, and increased the socio-economic disparities between and within the corporations. The degree to which these developments occurred varied according to local circumstances.

This account of the political participation of occupational associations in later medieval Florence, Ghent and London is not new as such. The main point, however, is not only that the guilds' political involvement constantly impacted on their autonomy and organisation, but also that the guilds' persistence was related to their becoming closely interwoven with the urban political system and social fabric. The history of guilds is therefore overdetermined, and a universal explanation cannot be given for the multiplicity of tasks that medieval guilds fulfilled over time. The urban context in which these institutions functioned was not merely economic in nature, because at certain times political factors turned out to be more decisive for the guilds' forms and functions. Hence, a better understanding of the political economy of medieval cities and towns is necessary to explain the number of guilds that were formed, as well as their institutional characteristics and various functions.⁶⁸

Unquestionably, guilds exercised a variety of important economic functions, including regulating production and trade, controlling the labour market, developing human capital and disseminating innovative technologies. In the case of Florence, Ghent and London, however, the political involvement of guilds was arguably more important than their economic power for the outcome of their medieval history (their social activities is a third factor that is left out of this account). The specificities of the different historical trajectories can be further determined by juxtaposing the developments in the three cities. This approach underscores the fact that, ultimately, the various, often expiative functions of guilds can only be understood by interpreting them in the specific context in which they emerged, evolved or disappeared. The characteristics of the guilds were not fixed, but were continuously shaped by their interaction with other

⁶⁸ See, for approaches addressing the co-evolution of political-institutional and socio-economic developments: Padgett and McLean, 'Organizational Invention and Elite Transformation'; Soly, 'The Political Economy of European Craft Guilds'.

institutions and the dynamics of the political, economic and social environment in which they were embedded. The long survival of guilds was therefore not determined by the particular way in which they were structured, nor by the urban political and economic context of which they were part, but rather by the way in which these institutions and their environment became adapted to each other. This leads to the postulation that the late-medieval guilds and other urban institutions were to a more or lesser extent complementary, either reinforcing or compensating for each other's effects.⁶⁹ The emergence of complementary institutions, however, did not a priori entail the better performance of these institutions.

The temporary institutional congruence between the guilds and political institutions in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London raises the question how changes in the guilds' organisation, functioning and powers, as well as in the wider institutional configuration, came about. So far, exogenous political factors seem to account for these changes. This was most clearly the case in Florence and Ghent, where the incorporation of the guilds into the urban constitutional order occurred in a number of steps, but also in London where the companies obtained their political role more gradually. In the new power constellation that emerged, political and economic rivalry reinforced each other, promoting the economic activities of some guilds (and of interest groups within these associations), and impeding those of others. However, it was precisely during periods of institutional change that guildsmen themselves had the opportunity to devise new rules and to implement existing ones in novel ways. Further research is required to ascertain in which political and economic contexts tradesmen and artisans had these opportunities, and seized them.

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⁶⁹ This draws on: C. Crouch et al., 'Dialogue on "Institutional complementarity and political economy"', *Socio-Economic Review* 3.2 (2005), pp. 359–82.