Peter Stabel

Unlikely followers of fashion? Dressing the poor in late medieval Bruges

Dress is often considered as one of the main instruments of expressing individual or collective identity and status in public space. Already in his classic study in 1904 Georg Simmel has pointed at the mechanisms which turn fashion into a tool of social 'equalization', but at the same time he stressed that it also allows segregation and distinction. Fashionable dress is, therefore, situated in the tension between the ambition to conform for some (usually, but not exclusively lower social strata) and the ambition to be distinct for others (usually, but not exclusively higher social strata; Simmel 1904, 130-155; 2003, 238-45). Hence fashion or the willingness and social ambition to participate in changing taste for in this case dress and apparel, not only generates the material environment in which social cohesion or social fragmentation are constructed (for example by uniform dress or uniform colours for specific occupational groups and associations), but it is also used to define power relations between social groups. Strikingly most authors tackling these issues see the rise of fashion in exactly their own period (Rublack 2010 and Welch and O'Malley 2007 stress for example the importance of the Renaissance). Middle classes in society are considered as being very sensitive to such processes. In the work of Thorstein Veblen and Norbert Elias, fashion and clothing are part of what is in essence a diffusion process of emulation set by court and elite society. As such, this process tends towards trickle down effects, whereby processes of emulation and social discipline concur to mould material behaviour. In Elias' views this historical process is often steered by sumptuary legislation (Veblen 1899; Elias, 1983). Clothes are, in other words, both creating or blurring social boundaries and can, therefore be considered as instruments of class (re)production.

This process of ambiguity speeded up with the arrival of the modern era. The specialist of material culture in the transition towards modernity, Daniel Roche, saw clothing as still lacking agency in premodern society. Processes of class distinction were, at this time, still too dominant disallowing real material dialogue. It is in what Roche described as a new 'culture of appearances' during the final stages of the early modern period, that modern choices of distinction and social meaning were increasingly present in all social strata (and no longer only among elite groups). Clothing choices started to get defined by economic opportunity, by bourgeois culture, and by what Roche so eloquently phrased as «the laws of consumption and confusion», rather than by the fixed social positions of premodern Europe (Roche 1994, 513).

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But despite Roche's observations and the indeed fundamental societal changes of the late eighteenth century, clothing seems to have been, also in earlier periods, an important instrument of social aspiration. Wearing dress, colours and designs was used to claim or confirm social status as well as group identity. And like Simmel had already suggested in the early twentieth century, it is the middle strata of society that wanted to increase their spending on appearance. In a recent synthesis, Diana Crane, even goes as far as stating that fashionable clothes embody «the hegemonic nature of values» and, therefore, of power relations. Acceptance or refusal to wear dress in private or public space not only points at the social position individuals or groups want to take, but also at their relation to social values in general. Display of dress becomes, as such, an agent of social identity (Crane 2000, 235-44; De La Haye and Wilson 1999). Simmel had already described this urge for social identification in terms of a limitation of personal freedom. In the end, lacking means to participate competitively in the world of display, poorer people were inevitably also subjugated by the drive towards social emulation, but they participated in a process in which inequality can only be reinforced and they inevitably lost (Simmel 1904, 548). But such fatal competition also demonstrates that the process was not necessarily only top-down. In fact, processes of material appropriation and emulation are quite complex. Recently, it has been demonstrated for premodern cities in the Low Countries how particular objects moved their way up the social ladder as for example handkerchiefs and spittoons became common first among bourgeois households, and only later were taken over by noble households, therefore a process of 'civility' rather than of 'courtesy' (Baatsen et al. 2018). In eighteenth century Spain, the elites were not afraid of taking over dress codes that were common before among the working poor (López Barahona and Nieto Sánchez 2012).

Periods of increasing sensitivity for fashion (and increased investment in the process of material emulation) reinforced this stalemate for the less well-off. The later Middle Ages were exactly such a period of accelerating fashion cycles, when elite consumer demand – answering the fundamental shifts of standards of living in the post-Black Death era – steadily had to distinguish itself from supposedly threatening (urban) middle groups (Herlihy 1997). No wonder the period also witnessed intense sumptuary legislation. Even the southern Low Countries, where government interference in private spending had always been limited – the region was, of course, also manufacturing rich textiles –, experienced the first grand-scale attempt at organising and defining spending on dress at the end of the fifteenth century (Howell 2010). The question, therefore, remains whether poorer town dwellers in this period were anyhow touched by the increased pace of fashion (a process considered by Roche as starting only at the end of the Early Modern Period); whether they tended to conform already in this period to examples set by trickle-down effects, in what Georg Simmel has described as an utmost characteristic of middling groups; or whether they distanced themselves from this process and directed the little available consumption outside the bare necessities for survival towards other kinds of material surroundings or towards food and drink.

In order to answer such an ambitious and, because of the failing sources, also a very difficult questionnaire, a basic knowledge about the clothes poorer people

possessed and wore needs to be available. And it is this empirical foundation that is lacking for the period. Archaeological excavations do not yield enough representative traces of dress to be useful except for objects like shoes or leather garments. Moreover, urban archaeology cannot always define social backgrounds exactly and does only seldom allow close examination of social difference (Smith 2009, 309-32). Our knowledge tends, therefore, to be built on fiction and (mostly religious) moralizing and condescending comments by clerics and intellectuals on the one hand, and on iconography on the other hand. Both have in common, however, that they represent the vision of elites and of middle-class bourgeois on the poor, rather than that they strive to present what people really wore (Blanc 1989, 243-54). So only a detailed study of the material culture in inventories is likely to present us with such an image. But inventories of late medieval poor people are a contradiction in themselves: as a rule, the poor do not have a lot of worthwhile things to pass on to their heirs, or to be seized by creditors or the authorities. Luckily some exceptions to this rule allow us to get at least a fragmentary insight in the realities of poor dress, and fifteenth-century Bruges, the trading and textile emporium of Northwest-Europe, yields such an exception.

The paradox of clothing in poor households

Research into the material culture of late medieval townspeople has amply demonstrated that textiles and clothing constituted key elements in people's possessions, and that they were decisive for the construction of social and cultural identities (Rublack 2010; Scott 2007; 2004; Piponnier and Mane 1996). Among the middle strata of urban society, data in wills and probate inventories have shown the crucial importance of dress in establishing and transferring material possessions (Lorcin 2007; Stabel *forthcoming*; Alexandre-Bidon and Lorcin 2003, 266-84). But also in the poorer strata of urban society, clothing not only constituted an important part of people's wealth (and probably was used as a kind of reservoir for sudden needs of liquidity), it seems that clothing also provided the most important means for constructing individual and collective identity in urban space (Howell 2010; Breward 1995, 7-40). Many forms of punishment for 'moral offenses' that became ever more frequent across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (adultery, prostitution, insults etc.) consisted in confiscating the perpetrator's gown, indicating that this was not only a very valuable item for the owner concerned, but in confiscating exactly it, it was also a way to attack a person's individual integrity and social reputation (Carlier and Stabel 2002, 241-62; Rousseaux 1999, 251-74; Maes 1986, 135-56).

But at the same time, scholarly work on standards of living never fail to mention that material possessions of poor people were not only very limited in both quantity and quality, but that poor people's dress was likely to be old and worn, made from raw textiles or at best dyed in easily fading colours (Dyer 1989; Sosson 1987, 17-39; Munro 2003, 185-297). Late medieval iconography points at a similar pattern. Often depicted in the scenes of daily life, which were omnipresent in the often lavishly illuminated calendars of fifteenth-century Flemish Books of Hours (not coincidentally a genre made for elite consumers), the poor were likely to be

dressed in anonymous, grey or faded costumes, designed for work and other practical purposes rather than intended to follow the latest fashion, which in the same images was the prerogative of the nobly born, the wealthy and the powerful (Mane 1989). Their blandness stands in stark contrast with the depictions of the rich garments of the urban elites and the nobility (Smeyers 1999; van Buren and Wieck 2011; Blockmans and Prevenier, 1998). Few would argue with the assessment that late medieval iconography, and surely miniature painting, depicted a top-down version of social hierarchies. At best the poor were associated with the teachings of Christ and his disciples, but in non-religious imagery (and even in Books of Hours, like the famous *Les très riches Heures* of the Duke of Berry by the Limbourg Brothers) the blandness of poor people's dress is often linked to uncontrolled sexuality or other kinds of undesirable behaviour (Dückers and Roelofs 2005; Easton 2008; Camille 2001). Unsurprisingly, research often states that the clothing of poor townsfolk was likely to be supplied either by poor relief institutions and intergenerational succession or the less well-off were dependent upon the omnipresent second-hand circuits. Market driven fashion cycles were in other words out of their reach (Maes 1986; Danneel 1987; Deceulaer 2008).

There is, however, a strange kind of paradox in these assumptions. On the one hand, dress constituted a privileged source for liquidity among poorer households, but on the other hand if clothing was present (or was represented in word and image), it seems to be worth next to nothing, and it is, therefore, not likely to have been of much use in creating a significant amount of liquidity in times of urgent need (McCants 2007). The problem is, of course, that neither of these assumptions has ever been tested thoroughly, and certainly not for the densely urbanized and highly commercialized Low Countries. The ways in which dress and textiles constituted a capital reservoir remains purely hypothetical if so little is known about their use and about the turnover of clothing in the second-hand circuits. On the other hand, it is difficult to consider the opposition between the shabbiness of poor people's dress in contrast with the ever more rapid fashion cycles of the upper and even middle layers of urban society, as long as systematic surveys of the material culture of the poor remain so rare. The few attempts to scrutinize the material culture and clothing of the late Middle Ages were until now limited to elite groups and the rise of fashion cycles at princely courts (Jolivet 2006; Piponnier 1970). At best some samples also discuss urban middle groups (Stabel *forthcoming*). Furthermore, the few studies that exploit the rare series of medieval inventories, are not very systematic in dealing with class differences, and tend to use broad social categories as 'bourgeois' and 'urban', rather than keeping track of social hierarchies (Piponnier and Mane 2001; Dubbe and Meischke 1980).

In this contribution we want to tackle these seemingly paradoxical issues and look at the clothing of poorer townsmen in Bruges, one of the largest and economically most important cities of late medieval Flanders. This region was characterized by the massive deployment of textile production (woollens and linens) from the eleventh century onwards and it was also a major hub for international trade in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Europe. It was a place where access to all kinds of fabrics, and perhaps more importantly, to knowledge about them and to fashion cycles must have been relatively easy and available to many. It will be argued, not

for the first time, that dress constituted for poor people an important part of their material culture, but by looking at the specifics of dress among the poor, it will also be stressed that it was equally paramount for constructing poor people's individual and collective identity. The investments the poor were prepared to make must have been relatively important, and, as such, poorer townsmen tend to follow (from a certain distance, of course) fashion cycles set by noble and urban elites (and the already mentioned emulative strategies of the middle classes). But above all, it shall be stressed that poor dress did not necessarily 'make' poverty. And it certainly did not constitute its outward expression. In the cities of the Low Countries, there seems to have been no such thing as a poor man's or poor woman's uniform of grey and shabby clothes. There was more to poor people in late medieval cities than just timeless and unfashionable designs, faded colours and worn fabrics. Clothing was as much part of the lives of the poor as those of their wealthier neighbours.

Poor relief and dress

Institutions dealing with charity provided besides food and occasional housing, also dress and bedcovers to a few poor city-dwellers (and even to relatively well-off pensioners, as charity evolved more and more into a form of social security for urban middle groups). The fact is well documented for many parts of late medieval Europe (Mollat 1978; Bologni et al. 2002). Moreover, different institutions took care of support and gave subsidies, food and textiles to the needing poor. Each of these institutions, which were mostly parish or guild based or were private foundations, had its own selection of poor: townsmen, guildsmen, parishioners and «prebend» holders (elderly people who had donated part of their possessions to a particular institution in return for support in alms-houses). The parochial poor relief systems (called «poor tables» or «tables of the Holy Spirit» in the Bruges sources), hospitals and the urban authorities provided not only so-called *aelmoesen* (alms, sometimes cash) and *provenen* (food baskets consisting of bread, vegetables, oil, butter, meat or fish depending the season, or leaden tokens which could be exchanged for food and fuel), but also shoes, dress and textiles (Tits-Dieuaide 1975; Blockmans and Prevenier 1976; 1978; for Bruges Galvin 1998; 2002).

In the first half of the fifteenth century, the urban authorities in Ghent gave each year a kind of uniform to some selected poor citizens (clothing made from black fabrics with white lining, the city's heraldic colours) while some orphans received white cloth. From the city accounts of 1436 onwards the distribution of *aerme lakens* («woollens for the poor») appears regularly. A heraldic sign with the arms of the city was attached to the dress (Maes 1986; Bonenfant 1996). The same procedure can be found in Bruges where outer garments (*kerels*) were given to some selected poor. The garments were given with the city's arms attached to them (Gilliodts-Van Severen 1876, IV, 83). In the fourteenth century the city donated occasionally also confiscated woollen textiles (which did not fit the standard requirements of the local cloth industry) to parochial poor relief institutions in the central parishes of Our Lady and Holy Saviour (Galvin 1998, 58). Hospitals also distributed garments or had clothing given to them (or left by deceased patients)

sold in a public auction, for example in the hospital of St John's in Bruges (Maréchal 1978).

But these scattered examples cannot hide that the parochial poor relief institutions, the main outlet for charity in late medieval Flemish cities, only rarely distributed textiles or clothing. 'Clothing the naked' was not on their list of top priorities. Attention of parochial poor relief was primarily focused on the distribution of food (and to a lesser extent of peat, the main source of fuel). In medieval Ghent, there seems to be a tendency whereby only the wealthier, centrally located parishes distributed dress, while the parochial 'tables' in the more peripheral and poorer quarters seem only to have distributed food (Maes 1986; Nicholas 1987). In Bruges a similar pattern appears, although the link with the poverty rates in each parish cannot be established as such. For nearly all central parishes of the city, accounts of the parochial poor relief of the fifteenth century have survived (S. Giles, S. James, S. Walburga, Our Lady, Holy Saviour: Galvin 1998). The accounts often give a lot of details about the distribution of food and fuel to the parochial poor. Usually on Sundays and holidays, baskets of bread and meat were distributed to selected poor. Occasionally the food package also contained peas and butter, and during Lent also herring or other fish. It is striking that only one of the parochial institutions explicitly mentions the distribution of textiles. In the parish of Our Lady, from the account of 1483 onwards, each year a sizable sum is spent on the purchase of linen (Galvin 1998, 57-8).[1] Before that date the Poor Table of Our Lady had distributed only a limited amount of linen in the 1410s (30 ells) and again in the 1470s (more than 130 ells each year). Linen was used to make what were likely undergarments for the poor. In the account of 1470, a tailor is paid to make shirts and breeches. In the other parishes, however, no clothing is mentioned at all. Only shoes were distributed regularly in both the parishes of Our Lady and its neighbour, the parish of the Holy Saviour. In the latter parish the number of distributed shoes was between 15 and 25 pairs each year, and occasionally it rose to 36 pairs, a number that cannot have satisfied the demand of the destitute in this large parish (Galvin 1998, 57). None of the dozens of alms-houses, scattered all over the city, seem to have given away clothing. They spent their money for consumables almost entirely on the preparation of food (ingredients for the ubiquitous *potage*) and on fuel for their pensioners. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that dress was not among the main concerns of the urban poor relief institutions in Bruges, nor of any other late medieval Flemish city for that matter.

Only the urban authorities themselves seem to have distributed outer garments, and they were also keen on making a very public statement, using heraldic colours and coats of arms. If parochial institutions distributed any clothing at all, it seems to have been exclusively linen for undergarments. This does not mean, however, that outer garments were not channelled through the poor relief institutions at all. Some hospitals seem to have been active in distributing dress (of deceased people?) or in organising auctions as an alternative for the regular second-hand markets. Neither the 'urban' distribution of garments, nor the parochial and hospital initiatives can, however, have been very substantial, and furthermore they only reached a very lim-

[1] Bruges, OCMW archives, Poor tables of Our Lady, R1-9.

ited part of the urban poor. It is, therefore, safe to assume, that in the cities of the southern Low Countries the poor got hold of most of their clothes through regular first- or second-hand market circuits (or through inheritance or personal gifts), rather than through collective charity and that if dress was distributed by charity, it cannot have been representative for the wardrobe of the city's poor.

Inventories and the urban poor: the case of Bruges 1438-1442

Since accounts from poor relief institutions and other sources on public welfare are only marginally interesting for assessing the dress of poor townspeople, it is to inventories of material belongings that historians must turn. But (probate) inventories often fail to present us with a reliable picture of the material culture of poor people. Since their existence and registration depends on the presence of a substantial number of material objects and on the value to be transmitted, inventories of poor people tend to be invariably scarce, those of the very poor non-existent. There is, however, an exception to this rule: the estates described in the bailiff's accounts of mid-fifteenth-century Bruges. They list the property of inhabitants of illegitimate birth for the period 1438-1443.[2] Their estates were seized by the bailiff because of the Count of Flanders's privilege that the estates of persons of illegitimate birth who died without direct heirs (children from a legitimate marriage) were forfeit (Carlier 2001). In Bruges and its region, this privilege was mitigated by the fact that if there was a surviving spouse, the count would be content with half the estate. In 1289 Count Guy of Dampierre had given this right to the city government (and henceforward it was never put to practice with great enthusiasm). But after the city's revolt against Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy in 1436 was crushed, one of the minor penalties the Burgundian duke inflicted on his disloyal city was to claim again the *bastard's privilege* (Dumolyn 1997). He put the *schout* (bailiff) Jacob Scaec, his main representative at the local level, in charge of receiving the tax (Van Rompaey 1967). In the first years (until 1442) the estates have been carefully registered, with great detail for the real estate, outstanding debts and material goods, and for the person to whom the estate eventually was sold (usually a relative of the deceased). In 1443 the entries in the bailiff's accounts become more summary and they only give the name of the deceased, the buyer of the estate and the total amount (the same level of detail that was also in the city's accounts before 1437) and they are, therefore, no longer useful for studying material culture.

In this way the *bastard's privilege* allows us a window of about five years, in which the estates of 83 Bruges citizens of illegitimate birth were seized and their inventories listed in the bailiff's accounts, 78 of which contain enough detail about the movable wealth for a detailed analysis of the property. The chronological distribution of these 78 useful inventories points at a clear concentration in the first years after the taxation had returned to the comital authorities. More than 60% of all inventories were registered in the six first accounts (covering approximately two years). Undoubtedly the phenomenon can be linked to an operation of catching up

[2] State Archives Brussels, Chambres des Comptes, 13773-13774.

the arrears in the previous period of political turmoil, but the high numbers in 1438 and 1439 are primarily the result of a severe plague that hit Flanders in these years (Stabel 1995, 66-8; Thoen and Devos 1999, 29-33). In other words, death arrived very suddenly, which makes it unlikely that a lot of tax evasion had taken place before the goods could be seized. This improves the quality of the sources for analysing movable wealth to no small extent.

It is, of course, very hazardous to make an analysis of the social profile of the relatively small group of Bruges citizens of illegitimate birth. The inventories contain many useful indicators, material culture and housing being the most obvious. Objective 'internal criteria', such as the number of rooms in the inventory, which has been used to assess probate inventories in the Early Modern Period, do not seem useful yet in the late Middle Ages, as the internal organisation of the house was still in a process of change. External criteria, such as taxation lists are not available for this period. At this stage of research, for pragmatic reasons the assessed value of the estate was used. This assessment can be considered as a careful balance by the bailiff of the assets (real estate, outstanding loans, cash, and material possessions) and liabilities (in first instance debts of all kinds) in the confiscated estate. Many studies dealing with probate inventories have already pointed at patterns that may disturb the use of contemporary valuations of estates. They rely heavily on the administrative skills of the officials, but most of all inventories depend also on cyclical patterns, whether seasonal (harvests in the countryside, trading season in cities) or related to life cycle patterns. Not only the total amount of the assessment, but also the relationship between assets and debts can be strongly influenced by both patterns, and this seems indeed to be the case for the relatively rich households that ran up in debt.

Tab. 1. **Inventories of Bruges citizens of illegitimate birth, 1438-1444 (in £ parisis = 20d Flemish or, the equivalent of 2.5 day's wages of a skilled craftsman in Bruges) N=78 (total £11,352 12s)**

	% of all wealth	Mean	Median
Total		£145.5	£48
Q1	2.5%	£14	£12
Q2	6.4%	£37	£36
Q3	13.7%	£80	£72
Q4	77.4%	£451	£276

The bailiff was often very pragmatic in his assessment and sold most estates to the surviving spouse or to a close relative, people with a vested interest, emotional or economic, to safeguard the integrity of the estate. Although it is always mentioned that the estates were sold to the highest bidder (*comme au plus offrant*), the remarkable presence of family members among the buyers already points at the fact that the bailiff looked among the close relatives of the deceased for a quick and easy return, avoiding a cumbersome selling procedure. Eventually close relatives

were probably also inclined to pay more for emotional and practical reasons and to keep particular goods and property in the family. Other elements need also to be considered. It is very probable that not all illegitimate inhabitants of Bruges appear in the bailiff's accounts. It can be safely assumed that the very poor do not appear, because it was not worthwhile for the bailiff to seize their modest properties. The threshold, however, was very low. The smallest estates were sold for only £6 parisis, which amounts to a mere 15 day's wages of a skilled carpenter or mason. The richest estate was assessed at £2,160 parisis. Hence the bracket spans from 5,400 day's wages of a skilled artisan to 15 days (360/1), with an average of 363 day's wages and a median of 120 (Sosson 1977; Munro 2005, 1013-1076).

The social distribution of the estates points at levels of inequality that clearly exceed those of the late fourteenth-century taxation lists studied by Ingrid De Meyer and others in the 1970s, with a larger share of the wealth in the hands of the richest estates, but if the richest estate (Joris Kempe who lived close to the church of Saint Donatian in the political heart of the city) is taken away, the social distribution looks much like that of the tax lists in the late fourteenth and late fifteenth century (De Meyer 1974). Hence, we can assume that the inventories reflect more or less the distribution of fiscal hierarchies in this period. Occupational data are mentioned only rarely in the confiscation files. A prosopographic study will probably reveal a much more detailed survey soon, but for the moment only 22 occupational titles are known (about a third of the sample). The poorest group (Q1) includes some skilled craft artisans (a mason and a tailor), but unskilled workers seem to dominate: two *brouteurs* (carriers of goods or more generally labourers) and one servant girl (Lisbette Coppaerds, servant in the household of Rijkaert De Vlietsnidere). The group also contains modest clergymen (one priest and one curate, brother Giselbrecht Van Olsene, curate of the church of St. James outside the walls). Not surprisingly occupational titles become more numerous and more specialised in the more well-off estates in the wealthier quartiles Q3-Q4. These were usually located in large to middle-sized houses in the central parts of the city, while the housing of the poorer deceased is mostly branded as «small houses» or «rooms» in the urban periphery close to the city gates and walls.

The gender relations demonstrate a more or less even and normal distribution among men and women, but the estates of (single) women tend to be concentrated particularly among the poor and less wealthy estates (62.5% in the poorest quartile; 43.75% in the richer Q3 and Q4), while male estates are clearly dominant in the middle class and among the wealthier estates. The gender relations do not, however, reveal automatically a lot about the gendered nature of possessions, as the whole household is liable to the tax, not only the goods left by the illegitimate partner. It is, therefore, also necessary to look at single households separately. Somewhat less than half of the estates were owned by singles, a very substantial number (but, of course, only childless households were confiscated). It is striking, however, that the percentage of single households is much higher among the lower groups 56 and 62%, with many single women. These women were not widows, who tend to be particularly present among the wealthier inventories. The high level of female estates in the lower groups is, therefore, the result of a high proportion of single women, probably young girls who were not (yet) married and who probably owned

their living as a servant girl. Because these were people without children, in average, they were much younger than normal probate inventories, a phenomenon exacerbated by the suddenness of plague mortality.

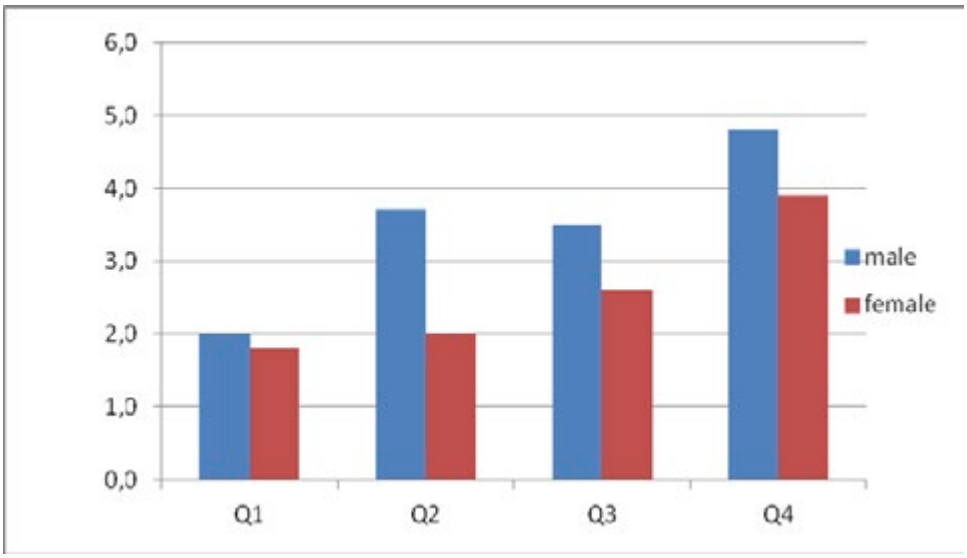
Dress in the poor Bruges inventories

The first striking feature is that clothing was very prominent in the material culture of all Bruges households, rich and poor, male and female. Nearly all inventories have impressive listings of often a very wide variety of dress. The most important conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that Bruges bourgeois, wealthy and cosmopolitan as they may have been in an international business centre, did not wear silk dress, nor owned much silk except for some specific clothing accessories. Although the nature of the fabric used in dress is only rarely mentioned, if it is recorded it always concerns clothing made from woollen cloth (or lined with linen). Accessories like gloves, hats, etc. were clearly not on the bailiff's list of items to be registered. Exception was made for very expensive accessories made of precious metal or silk. But no gloves or shoes appear among the confiscated items. Nor do undergarments of whatever nature. Linen, despite being one of the core industrial goods manufactured in Flanders, was strangely absent from the inventories. Perhaps because the resale value was too small, but also perhaps of the peculiar circumstances of the seized goods in a period of plague and the fear of contagion. Items that came in close contact with body fluids were not listed at all. But the source does not reveal that they were perhaps burned as a precaution against contamination.

Fashion in the 1430s and 1440s still required the *houppelande* or *kerel*, a grand garment in-between a cloak and a tunic often with very elaborate sleeves and lining, which was worn by both men and women and that had been around since the late fourteenth century. The *houppelande* in the Bruges estates was made of woollen cloth or (only occasionally) of mixed fabric; it was often lined with linen or fur on the edges or the sleeves, and, most of all, it required a (sometimes silk) belt in order to make a perfect fit to the body. The *houppelande* is omnipresent in the Bruges inventories, both in the higher and, strikingly, also in the lower strata of society, both for men and women (although the cut of a woman's *houppelande* was of course very different from a man's). Almost 90% of the wealthy inventories contain the garment, in lower and middle groups (Q1 and Q2) the proportion varies between a still impressive 70 and 78%. In general, woman's inventories were more likely to contain *houppelandes*. Except for the lowest strata where an average inventory had two *houppelandes*, the average number of *houppelandes* in female estates was much lower than in male inventories, in the middle strata of urban society, where men have almost two times as many *houppelandes* as women (3.6 vs. 2.3). The wider range of this attire in male inventories is also noticeable in the wealthiest bourgeois households, but the difference between men and women is less outspoken. An average male inventory in the highest quartile contains 4.8 *houppelandes*, women own almost 4. The significance of the *houppelande* in male estates is striking. Although women had a critical role to play in public life in the cities of the late medieval Low Countries,

because of their relative advantageous juridical status in this part of medieval Europe, they were heavily involved in economic and cultural life, but they had been ousted from most craft guilds by the late Middle Ages and they were, of course, hardly active in the city's political life (Stabel 2015; Hutton 2011; Howell 1998). The smaller numbers of garments among women, from very poor to very rich, may have been caused by the necessity of men to possess more representative attire for public occasions in the guild and civic ritual.

Graph 1. **Average number of houppelandes per inventory**



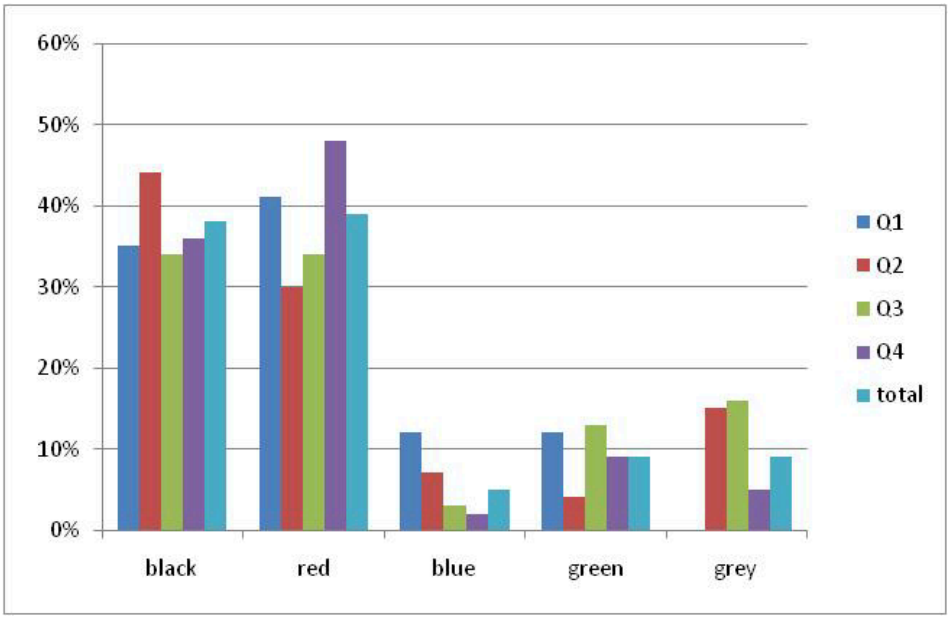
Although the garments often receive a lot of attention and their value is regularly indicated by qualifications, only 8% of all *houppelandes* are described as «shabby», «old» and «faded». In the lowest quartile this percentage is only slightly higher, 14%. But the figure remains relatively low. Dress in the lower strata of Bruges society is clearly not associated automatically with old and worn fabrics (Spufford 2000; 2003).

In the accounts, the material objects are not valued separately. No other indicators of value are present than 1° the presence of fur in lining on edges and sleeves, and 2° the colour of the garment. Sadly, the quality of the woollen fabric is never discussed in the surveys of material belongings. Once textiles are turned into dress, they almost immediately seem to lose their identity. Of the qualifications in the source, fur is obviously the best proxy for value. Unsurprisingly, the presence of fur becomes more important as the average wealth of the household increases. In the poorest group only four inventories contained furred *houppelandes* (and only one in each inventory). Except for one marten fur, these are described by the bailiff as *fourrures simples*, simple furs, probably rabbit. Still, one in five of all *houppelandes* in the poorest quartile were lined with fur. It is striking that women, and mostly single

women, tended to own more furred *houppelandes* in the lower strata of Bruges society than men. But fur was particularly present in the middle strata of society. In the middle groups (Q3), fur clearly had become an element of distinction and half of the households had them. As such, middle groups invested relatively more in these kinds of prestigious garments than other groups. Fur as such seems to have been the identity maker of middle class and they invested also in quantity, rather than quality. Even in middle class families simple (rabbit?) furs dominate, besides the occasional Russian squirl, marten and lamb (*agneaulx)*. For the wealthier households it is quality, rather than quantity which gives status, so these households tend to possess more clothing lined with expensive furs like marten and Russian squirl, most of them imported from the Hanseatic territories in Eastern Europe (Delort 1978).

Colour seems to be less socially distinctive. Of course, the quality of dyeing is of crucial importance for the real value of the garments, but sadly the inventories contain too few remarks about the depth and richness of colours. The distribution of colours resembles very much the pattern set by court fashion in the middle of the fifteenth century (de Mérindol 1989, 221-51). Blacks and reds are particularly dominant across all social layers. This should not necessarily surprise. Although deep black and bright kermes red tend to be highly expensive colours in the top range of dyeing, there are also cheaper alternatives and the main dyestuffs for these colours, madder and woad, were readily available in the southern Low Countries. The former was grown in the coastal areas of Flanders and Zeeland, the latter in Walloon-Flanders (Munro 2007, 55-95; Stabel, *forthcoming*).

Graph 2. **The colour of the houppelande in Bruges in the late 1430s and early 1440s**



The most striking phenomenon is that there seems to have been no significant social difference in the use of black and red. Blacks seem to be more present in middle class inventories, reds among both the poorest and wealthiest inventories. But of course, red is not always the same. The Bruges inventories distinguish between two kinds of red fabrics: *sanguine* (colour of blood) and *vermeil* (vermilion): the stock of inventories contains 32 houppelandes that are described as *sanguine*, while 16 are made of vermillion cloth. Poorer households tend to have more of the latter (20% of all vermillion garments can be found in the poorest quartile) and less of the former: there is only one *houppelande* in the poorest quartile that is described as «blood red». It was lined with very simple furs (probably rabbit) and it was owned by Katherine, the wife of Pieter Andries, who had three *houppelandes* in their house (one male garment, and two for which gender was not specified). It is, therefore, likely that *sanguine* fabrics were dyed in more saturated colours, adding for example brazilwood to the normal madder, and that they were more expensive than the vermilion fabrics.

Other colours than black and red are socially more distinct. Blue was more present in the lower strata of Bruges society, grey among the middle groups. This profile is also gender sensitive. The dominant colours of black and red are equally distributed among men and women (although men tend to slightly prefer black over red). The poorest men seemed, however, to have a great preference for blacks (50%), the poorest women for reds (44%). But the pattern is confusing as these preferences are reversed in the lower middle groups Q2 where men preferred reds (58%) and women blacks (40%); The richest men clearly preferred black (39%), the richest women red (39%: widows wore red in this period). So, no clear gendering of the dominant colours can be acknowledged. For the other colours such a gendered pattern, however, does clearly appear. Blue and green *houppelandes* for example are nearly always owned by women and above all by poorer women in Q1, and only occasionally by men (and only in the middle social strata). Perhaps the fact that clothes tended to stay longer in the possession of poorer people (at the end of the chain of use) can explain the longer presence of 'outdated' colours. But as such quantitative differences remain slim and incoherent.

Of course, the *houppelande*, though the most widespread of the confiscated garments, was not the only type of dress mentioned in the inventories. A late medieval wardrobe was highly diversified, also in poorer households. The types of outer garments mentioned include the *cloque* (a cloak mostly associated with women), the *cote, cotelette* or *cotron* (a preponderantly woman's tunic or dress), the *huque* or *heuk* (a cape or overcoat with or without hood worn mostly by men), the *surcot* (a man's or woman's bodice worn above the *cote* or *cotelette*), and finally the male *pourpoint* (doublet). The most widespread across the social strata of Bruges was the *huque* (more than 50% of all inventories, but particularly numerous in the wealthier households) and the *cotte* (in particular the subtype of the *cotron*: less than 50%) and the *surcot* (about 40%, but not numerous in poorer households and present in most wealthier inventories). It is unsurprising that the *cote* appeared above all in female households, and mostly in the upper strata of Bruges society, and that the doublet is present in male households (again with a strong social bias in wealthier and middle-class household). Women owning doublets were either married or widowed. Most

households had between one or two pieces of such types of clothing. Only the wealthier households had as a rule two or three *huques*. As to colours, a slightly different pattern from the *houppelandes* emerges: black is much more dominant for the other outer garments (in particular for the overcoats like the *huque* and the *cloque*), while the distribution of other colours for dresses, doublets and bodices is much more even. Black and red are still, and by far, the most fashionable colours, but greens, greys and blues are more visible.

Finally, the inventories also count headwear, and among these head coverings that formed an integrated part with clothing, hoods (*chaprons*) and the so-called *faille*, which could point at a typically Flemish woollen garment that covered the back of the head and the shoulders (as such it is in between garments and headwear and it is usually associated with older women: Sturtewagen 2016). Most types of headwear seem to have been gendered, except for the *chaprons* which were ubiquitous, whatever the gender of the deceased: in the poorer households they appear in 70% of the inventories, in the richer households this rises to 85%. *Failles* seem to be socially more distinct: they appear in only 18% of the poorer female households, while it is present in half of the middle class and wealthy households (but the gender bias is less explicit in this case).

Fashion accessories and jewellery in the inventories

Medieval dress was not limited to body wear or headwear, all kinds of clothing accessories that completed outfits were equally important as social denominators. The Bruges inventories do not mention a whole range of accessories in fabric or leather like hats, shoes, gloves and belts. These were probably considered as not valuable enough to be mentioned separately, and they were ranked among the «objects of little value scattered throughout the house» (*meubles de petite valeur qu'on trouve aval la maison*). But the inventories do, of course, mention the very valuable items in precious metal or silk. These items should probably not be understood primarily as a kind of capital good that could easily be pawned or turned into money (although some items like jewellery had probably such a function). From the analysis of the inventories, it clearly becomes apparent that tableware, in particular pewter or tin hollowware, which was omnipresent in the inventories in all social strata, and silverware in the wealthier households (most notably goblets, cans, plates etc.), was much more practical (and stable in value) and, therefore, much more used for such a purpose. As such the capital function of expensive accessories did not differ that much from that of ordinary clothing. There is no doubt that fabrics, and certainly the woollen cloth and furs in the ubiquitous *houppelandes*, had an important resale value. The fact that they are mentioned with such detail, while for example the (linen) undergarments or shoes, leather belts or purses are not mentioned at all, points at this important financial aspect of clothing and the possibilities for re-use on a second-hand market for dress.

Compared to clothing itself, accessories – or rather accessories with a high resell value – are surprisingly scarce, even in middle class and wealthy inventories. It is possible that because of their small size, these items *par excellence* could escape the

control of the bailiff, more so because, as already has been stated, most of the assets were bought either by the surviving spouse or by close relatives, exactly the persons who had probably easy access to the goods just before or right after death. The almost complete absence of purses with cash money in the inventories can probably be explained by a similar kind of tax evasion. Despite these methodological problems it is, nonetheless, clear that valuable accessories are more present in wealthier households (almost half of the sample) than in poor households (only 15% of poor households). Middle class households are, equally unsurprising, in between these two extremes. Although the methodological problems of small numbers become acute in this case, valuable accessories seem to be important in particular for women in the very low and the very high social strata. In the former group it is single women, in the latter widows that pay a lot of attention to such items. In the middle classes, clothing accessories can mostly be found in male households. Female households interested in valuable accessories are again to be found particularly among single women.

Tab. 2. **Clothing accessories in silk and precious metals (% of inventories)**

	Total	N	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Total	26.0	77	15.0	22.2	25.0	42.1
Men	25.0	36	11.1	25.0	30.0	33.3
Women	26.8	41	18.2	20.0	20.0	50.0
-single women	25.0	16	28.6	20.0	33.3	0.0
-married women	20.0	20	0.0	20.0	16.7	33.3
-widows	60.0	5	0.0		0.0	100.0

Which kind of objects were registered as valuable accessories? If anything, it is not leather objects. Only one inventory, and surprisingly in the category of wealthy households, mentions a leather belt, probably a finely decorated belt of exceptional high value, because leather belts must have been present in all households, as were other leather items like shoes, purses, gloves etc., none of which appear in the inventories. The only other leather objects are related to the numerous stocks of arms and armour present in the Bruges inventories, which are not dealt with in this contribution (Stabel 2011, 1049-74). But belts (*courroies*, *ceintures*) do figure among the valuable items recorded by the bailiff. They are described as silver belts, gold plated belts or belts with silver- or gold-plated buckles. Belts of precious metals were popular (*courroie dargent, ceinture dargent*). Almost one quarter of all middle class and wealthy households had them (and the richer one got, the more one was inclined to own them). There seems, however, not to be a distinct gender pattern. Both men and women possessed these belts, which must have completed the outfit of *houppelandes* and other garments. Five households (one among the poor inventories, one middle class and three wealthy households) possessed *tissus*, silk belts or ribbons used to hold in place outer garments. The *tissues* had small buckles and were

adorned with nails in precious metal (*clous*). These (mostly black) silks described as *tissut ferré d'argent*, *noir tissut tout au long fouré d'argent*, *noir tissut tout au long fouré dargent*, or *petit tissue dargent* were clearly imported (Italian?) fabrics (silk, silver cloth). There is no gender difference as to who owns these silks. Both men and women had them. At least one of them was black silk, but all of them were lined with or woven with silver thread, which made them very expensive items. They are the only representatives in this bourgeois milieu of the silk fabrics or gold and silver cloth that were ubiquitous at the duke's court and that were commonly traded at the Bruges market by Lucchese and Florentine merchants and financiers. They are, therefore, the exception to the rule that there was a clear divide between dressing the nobleman (and woman) and dressing the city dweller. These silk or silver belts seem to be, however, well outside the reach of poorer households. It is probably not a coincidence that the only woman to have owned such a silk ribbon in the lower categories was a domestic servant. Possibly she got it as a gift from her master or mistress. Servants often received clothing and accessories as a gift (De Groot 2011, 1-15). The *houppelandes* of poorer Bruges citizens must have been tied together with belts made from leather or more common fabrics.

Jewellery is very exceptional in the inventories. The bailiff managed to get hold of these precious objects in only some households. Some inventories contained silver rings, and one had stock of precious stones for an amount of no less than £10 Fl. (the equivalent of a year's wage of a skilled artisan). Other items seem to be randomly recorded: one inventory in the lower middle-class group contains a silk purse (an item that must have been much more widespread in the wealthy and middle-class households). Other types of purses – the guild of the purse-makers in late medieval Bruges was among the very specialised fashion guilds to do relatively well in the late Middle Ages – are completely absent. Obviously, none of these valuable objects appear in the poorest inventories.

The industrious poor? Financing social emulation

These findings are despite all the obvious differences of the material culture between richer and poorer households, nonetheless surprising. Being poor in late medieval Bruges was not necessarily equal to only being able to afford poor food (meat consumption was already high in the early thirteenth century and it did certainly not diminish around 1400: Soens and Thoen 2010, 495-527), poor housing or poor clothing (Stabel, *forthcoming*). Even very poor Bruges citizens apparently were able to share a material culture common also to the wealthier citizens. But most of all, poor Brugeois would look similar to their better-off neighbours. They participated in the same fashion trends, they wore the same types of garments, they wore the same colours, and they had the same preference for garments lined with fur. It does not mean that they wore the same clothing, only that their clothing, just as today's jeans, was very similar and based upon similar typologies, similar colours and similar designs. This means that even poor people were willing to invest in order to conform to generally accepted standards of appearance. Differences between rich and poor were therefore defined by secondary differences in the quality of the col-

our, the craftsmanship of the tailor or other artisans, the density and shine of the fabric, the nature and cost of the furs used. Poorer people will have used, of course, much more secondary circuits to acquire their clothing also.

But how can we explain this common clothing culture. Several reasons for the pattern will probably have played their role. Because of the lack of similar source materials elsewhere in the Low Countries, and of similar analyses for other parts of Europe, these reasons are up to a certain point hypothetical, and based on circumstantial evidence, rather than real hard proof. First, the pattern can probably be explained partly by local exceptionality. Bruges was after all a wealthy and thriving city, even in the 1430s, a period of plague and political unrest. Bruges was the textile emporium of Northwest Europe, and all expertise and knowledge about fabrics and fashion came together in this commercial hub, as did, of course, the textiles themselves. A second partial explanation can probably be found in the development of fashion itself. The early fifteenth century may have been an exceptional freak moment for the fashion of outer garments. *Houppelandes* or *kerels* were already prominent in the late fourteenth century in court and noble elite circles, and they would remain popular well into the 1430s when gradually other types of outer garments (*robes, huques*, etc.) would take over. Moreover, the houppelande was a very flexible piece of garment, that could be changed by adding different sleeves or lining or by giving it a different colour altogether. It could therefore be adapted to shorter fashion cycles easily. It was flexible by its very nature, and this flexibility made trickle down easier. It allowed fashion to reach also the lower levels of income. A third reason for the pattern may have been the urban culture in the Low Countries in general. The cities of the Low Countries were characterised by high levels of political, cultural and social negotiation between the different stakeholders in society. The Dukes of Burgundy and their urban subjects, the city authorities and the urban population, the guilds and their members (crafts, fraternities, military associations, rhetoricians, etc.), all needed to invest in social dialogue. Cities were as such platforms for social negotiation, and such dialogue needed to be lubricated by common identities and shared values. Dressing in similar ways may have been just one of the tools providing these common standards (various contributions in Blondé et al. 2018).

It is not surprising, however, that the most important reason must be sought also in changing standards of living. The period around 1400-1450 was a period marked by rising real wages and higher standards of living, throughout Europe. Although there are reasons to assume that these developments did not particularly create an exceptional period in the Low Countries -real wages were already at a high level around 1300 in the urbanized Low Countries, although there was a sharp decline in the first half of the fourteenth century-, the period of the 1360s-1390s and again in the 1430s-1460s were characterized by rising real wages (Sosson 1977; Geens, *forthcoming*). Moreover, these rising real wages do not necessarily tell the whole story. The Bruges tax registers of the early 1390s demonstrate that even in this period of real high wages, wage earners, such as textile craftsmen and people working in the building trades, were commonly situated at the lower ends of wealth (Stabel, *forthcoming*). The higher income middle classes of small commodity producers and retailers were dominant in the city, where, of course, also wealthy mercan-

tile elites thrived. So, if the purchasing power of wage earners in late medieval Bruges had risen, the standards of living of craftsmen-retailers had probably risen even more.

But the rising real wages do not tell the whole story, of course, as is so often assumed in historiography. Also the willingness to invest time in work is important. Sadly, even less is known about labour temporalities. Recent research by Sam Geens for rural Flanders (and the region around Bruges in particular) has, however, allowed to draw a picture of what could be called a late medieval 'industrious revolution' (Geens, *forthcoming*; Blondé, Geens and Stabel, *forthcoming*). In the wake of rising real wages in the late fourteenth century, we see that investment by wage-earners in work time declined. There was, therefore, clearly a leisure preference: people exchanged higher income for less work time. But the decline of labour time happened at a slower pace and to a lesser extent than the rise of the real wage. So, people also sacrificed leisure to raise their income, and, as is suggested by the pattern of material culture in Bruges, to enjoy a more elaborate material culture, and to participate in fashion cycles (see also Blondé et al. *forthcoming*).

But higher standards of living do not explain alone the patterns of clothing among the Bruges poor, of course. Why would the poor choose for clothing to spend their improved purchasing power on? Overall, across late medieval Europe, there seems to have been a greater willingness to engage in a more elaborate material culture. This pattern has already been identified for earlier periods as well, so well before the changing standards of living of the post-Black Death period (Smail 2016; Dyer 1989). It is striking that the material profluence in the Bruges inventories of the late 1430s even in lower income households, not only concerns dress, but also other goods such as pewterware and comfortable furniture with cushions etc. Many of these items were also fungible, and particularly pewter and dress were used not only for pawning or resale, but also as collateral for the ubiquitous credit arrangements we also find in the same inventories (Stabel, *forthcoming*). Many households, certainly in the poorer layers of society, did not have yet real estate that they could mortgage, nor would they probably ever have real estate, so for many the *renten* or annuities were out of reach as the main credit instrument. In come clothing and pewterware: goods of relative stable value (certainly if the clothing was made of fabrics of the *draperie ointe*) that gave lustre, elegance and sophistication, yet that could be used also for getting access to credit arrangements. A perfect tool for cities where social negotiation was necessary continually on several fronts.

The final question must, however, be: did it last? Recent investigations in the material culture of Bruges in the final decades of the final decades of the fifteenth century (Sturtewagen 2016) shows higher levels of differentiation. Bruges citizens start to wear other fabrics: expensive silks, but also cheaper mixed fabrics. The range of clothing typologies seems to increase and the durability of fashion to decrease. The late fifteenth century saw in other words the end of the late medieval clothing consensus. Real wages started to drop also; silk entered bourgeois society ending the divide between noble silk and bourgeois wool; visual social distinctions became more significant; the cheaper fabrics in fashion had a much shorter life cycle than the heavy medieval woollens and were, therefore, less apt for maintaining status on second-hand markets; more complex and less standardized clothing de-

signs appeared also, which could less easily be transformed and adapted to the latest fashion. It is likely that the poorer strata in society were no longer capable at living up to the clothing consensus, nor to follow any more closely the fashion cycles. Paradoxically, therefore, in a period when 'cheaper' defines the new textiles and material culture, the distinction between poor town dwellers and their richer neighbours increased.

Conclusions

The use of clothing by the poorer strata of late medieval urban society is often dealt with starting from either normative sources (for example sumptuary legislation) or from descriptions in both iconography and (moralist) literature. Poor people's clothing tends, therefore, to be described from the point of view of wealthier groups in society. It is usually described as bland, grey, practical, worn and used, dirty and not in any way related to fashion cycles, which became ever more important across the final centuries of the Middle Ages for both the elite and middle layers of society. The sets of clothing we know from distributions to the poor in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Flanders seem to confirm this picture. They suggest that poor people's clothing consisted of linen undergarments (which were often the only clothes to be provided by the parochial poor relief institutions) and one set of garments, that reached the poor either as a gift from local authorities (and in that case easily recognisable in the city's colours and bearing the city's coat of arms) or through the complex circuits of second-hand trade.

These assumptions of dress and textiles in the poorer strata are, however, only part of the reality. In the Bruges inventories of the late 1430s and early 1440s, a unique set of sources representing the material culture of not only middle-class households but also of poor townsmen, a very different picture emerges of poor people's relations with their material surroundings. Although the epithet «worn» (*usé*) appears slightly more often in poor man's and woman's dress than in that of more well to do citizens, it was in no way typical for poor people's wardrobe. Even richer people owned worn dress and dress in faded colours. The impression is one of great uniformity of fashion across all layers of urban society (and across gender). Certainly, a garment like the ubiquitous *houppelande* was very flexible as it allowed a wide variety of cuts and qualities (of the cloth used, of the lining, of furs, of dyes etc.). Yet the language of fashion remained almost universal across social strata, allowing dialogue and exchange between various social groups (and smoothening the all-important second-hand circuits). In fact, the importance of the second-hand market for dress may well have been one of the phenomena that may have partly caused the uniformity of dress typology (Stabel *forthcoming*). Because of the resale value, in the end dress always found its way to the market again and was likely to end up in the poorer people's wardrobe. But the fact that the uniformity not only touches the kind of clothing but also the fabrics and the colours used in dress, and this in a period of relatively rapid fashion change, points also to the fact that the success of second-hand markets does not suffice to explain everything. Black and red woollens are dominant across all urban social boundaries. They were, moreo-

ver, the same colours as the dukes themselves, noblemen, courtiers and ducal officers wore at the same moment.

Despite indications that poor people owned more garments in outdated colours, both the typology of dress as their fashionable colours were shared by both rich and poor. Expensive dyes, such as the enormously high-priced kermes based reds and deep blacks, undoubtedly belonged to the realm of the wealthy as did high quality imported furs as lining for the garments, but this did not prevent poor people from owning black and red gowns – the two colours that dominate Bruges fashion in this period – or from owning other fashionable types of clothing, such as the *huque,* the garment in which in the same period the extremely wealthy Lucchese merchant, Giovanni Arnolfini, was depicted by Jan Van Eyck. Moreover, there seems to be even an attempt to emulate the middle classes' preference for furred lining and sleeves. Even fashionable clothing accessories were very much in evidence in some of the poorer households.

The difference between rich and poor lies, therefore, not so much in the fashionable nature of clothing typology and colours, but rather in the quality of the fabric, the luxury of specific types of luxury furs, the depth of colour, the refined nature of the cut etc. Hence the ubiquitous blacks and reds are not necessarily the same in all layers of Bruges society. The wealthier households did not only own red clothing, but they also owned bright and deep 'blood' reds and blacks and the saturation of the dyes involved was probably very different. It is also in colour that, although not very outspoken, the most striking gender differences appear. Blacks and reds were worn both by both men and women, but not always in equal measure. It was mostly wealth and social status that decided whether expensive dyestuffs were used, not gender. And, of course, wealthy and middle-class households just owned more pieces of clothing than poor ones, allowing greater diversity and flexibility. But this did not prevent poorer people to own not only in average more than one gown, but also to own the right kind of gowns, the ones in fashion.

These striking findings must be a warning against too easy assumptions on social distinction and the deliberate strategies of showing social status that have been made for the Low Countries by scholars like Wim Blockmans, Raymond Van Uytven and many others (Blockmans and Janse 1999). All of these scholars have used the prescriptive sources that instruct us about the elite groups and the way they wanted the social divide to be noticed. The fact that sumptuary legislation on dress (although almost absent in the southern Low Countries until the late fifteenth century) and above all story and manner books written by religious or secular moralists constantly warn for transgression of these desired symbolic social boundaries, is often ignored and tells us more about the omnipresence of these transgressions.

The dress owned by Bruges townsmen, rich and poor alike, tells a different story, a story about fashion and the way it trickles down from court society into urban society, not only to the socially ambitious middle classes, but also to the non-guild organised workers, to single women (often in domestic service), to poor parochial clergymen etc. It tells the story of another kind of social ambition, a desire of poor people to fit in and their willingness to spend what must have been a large proportion of their very modest means on apparel and dress as a means of identification and social identity, a desire therefore, to express their sense of belonging in the

changing urban society of the late Middle Ages, in the constant tension between emulation and distinction.

It seems to have been a price that the poor were willing –or felt they were socially obliged – to pay. While the late medieval period facilitated to a certain extent this eagerness to conform because of the average higher standards of living, and the period is characterized by a remarkable clothing consensus across social boundaries, this proved also to be a very vulnerable equilibrium. The urban societies of the Low Countries may have stimulated lower strata in society to invest heavily in dress – it was after all important to adhere to a common urban culture and identity –, once the conditions changed, the clothing consensus also seems to have disappeared. Despite overall 'cheaper' fashionable textiles, towards the end of the fifteenth century, the social divides of clothing widened, dress became less adaptable and less durable, secondary markets probably less attractive to uphold status and fashionability, and poorer people could no longer follow the necessary investments. It is striking that this broken clothing consensus seems to have predated the inflationary trend of the sixteenth century.

Hence it was not only the representatives of the middle classes in late medieval Bruges society who had to pay the price for social aspiration and emulation – although their heavy investments in dress (and fur) seems to confirm Georg Simmel's prediction–, but poorer groups in urban society as well were also tightly held between the hammer of emulation and the anvil of distinction. Their family budgets must have clearly felt this *Catch 22* situation. In the end, the speeding fashion cycles in post Black Death Europe were, therefore, not only triggered by elite demand, chased by ambitious and wealthier middle classes; it was the whole of urban society that seems to have been part of the process. Whether this urge for the urban poor in Bruges towards the consumption of clothing can be explained by the general rising purchasing power in the post Black Death period or a willingness to sacrifice leisure preference (Blondé, Geens and Stabel, *forthcoming)*, whether it is linked to the specificity of Bruges as a commercial gateway and a hub for the textile trade, or whether it reveals a structural phenomenon in pre-modern urban society, whereby the poor cannot but participate in the consumer frenzy of particular periods, are questions that will have to be addressed in the near future.

One thing is, however, beyond any doubt, in late medieval Bruges, and probably also in the other cities of the Low Countries, the poorer strata of urban society were clearly participants in changing fashion and must have boosted demand to no small extent. In late medieval Bruges the second-hand cloth and second-hand fur dealers were numerous crafts and were even getting more important across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In their statutes there is little mention of shabby clothes they were selling (State archives Bruges, Craft guilds, 1, f. 252r-266v). On the contrary, the low-end markets for worn clothes were often in the hands of non-guild organized sellers, mostly women (Fontaine 2008). The Bruges *oudkleerkopers* and *oudgrauwerkers* (sellers of old clothes and furs) were above all manufacturing crafts, whose activities consisted mainly in transforming used clothes and furs into fashionable items. They were as much part of world of artisans transformed the city of Bruges from a textile manufacturing centre into a hub for luxury and fashion

trades in the late Middle Ages (Stabel *forthcoming*). And among their customers were not only the wealthy and middle-class citizens, but they also catered for the poor.

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