

# Social Groups and Urban Territories from the Middle Ages until the 16th century

**An International Conference organised within the perspective of the federal inter-university research network (IUAP-PAI) on Urban Society in the Low Countries, from the Late Middle Ages until the 16th century**

## **CALL for PAPERS**

Venue : Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels

Date : December 2-4, 2004

Languages : French, English

Deadline for submissions : 300-word abstracts should be submitted by April 30th, 2004.

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Board and travel expenses will be covered for guest speakers.

## **Presentation**

During the Middle Ages the notion of "social group" covers a variety of conceptions, ranging from whole sectors of the population enjoying a similar material status to family clans or vocational associations, as well as to the military or the religious communities, or even individual congregations.

Research in recent years has highlighted the difficulty of drawing clear dividing lines between different group memberships, which not infrequently overlap and interact with collective behaviour patterns. It also points to a lack of homogeneity between the different groups acting on the urban scene.

Historical research has been able to put to proper use concepts borrowed from other disciplines in the humanities, such as the notion of social network, thus to gain a better grasp of a complex reality. At the conference, the organizers will encourage recourse to, and implementation of, a manifold, open-ended definition of the social group.

By the same token, the notion of urban territory can also be understood at different levels and from different perspectives. There is of course the definition of urban territory as a finite space, possibly encapsulated within city walls, and subdivided into smaller enclosed units such as parishes or quarters. But there is also the territory in its wider sense, which stretches beyond the city walls, but which belongs to the area over which social groups in the city and without seek to wield control with a view to ensuring their survival, wealth or power. This hinterland constitutes a choice field for observation of the impact of urban social policies on area management and on the environment in general.

At a higher level, territory may be understood as the respective areas of influence of cities within a principality or state, which intermingle and are reorganized through the processes of conflict and regulation. These processes often focus around issues such as roads, bridges, canals, rivers, forests and fields; and thus the people using these become important actors in interurban politics.

The conference to be organized at the Université Libre de Bruxelles within the framework of the inter-university research network (IUAP-PAI) on Urban Society in the Low Countries, from the Late Middle Ages until the 16th century and the research programme The Fate of Capitals and Normalization Processes will seek to explore the issues from both a sociological and a territorial perspective. Contributions allowing a comparison between the Low Countries and other geographical areas will be welcome.

The conference will focus on the following issues :

- The diachronic evolution of the organization of urban territory;
- The modalities of occupation of the area by different social groups;
- The physical manifestations of the links between the city and the outside areas, and the consequences on space of urban development and interests.

## **Development of the central issues :**

### **a. Territorial organization from a diachronic perspective**

The process of emergence of medieval cities is increasingly associated to the process whereby earlier nuclear units progressively tend to merge. What have been the factors leading to this increased homogeneity ? How permanent have they been over the centuries ?

Present-day historiography maintains the idea of a progressive reduction of private power giving way to the notion of public space. To what extent does this reflect an idealised vision of reality ? The case examples of Tournai, Brussels and Liège would rather point to the perennity of private and communal spaces in the cities of the Netherlands. This in turn raises the question of the parishes : how do the social spaces constituted by these superimpose themselves on the lineage-conditioned or communal spaces ?

Does the legal status of the inhabitants, whether members of the ruling clans and lineages, of the bourgeoisie or of the commoners, in any way determine or condition the spatial structure of the city ? In other terms, are there specific modes of occupation of the urban space ? Does one observe socially and legally homogeneous spaces ? What about the social mixity of the medieval towns ? Is anything known about the forces that affect the social evolution and the morphology of quarters ?

The relationship between social and spatial aspects is a fluctuating one, as the fate of family alliances may entail the appearance of territorial strongholds within the city or, on the other hand, shatter into small parts large units built over the years.

The appearance of long- or short-term "pariah" quarters whose growth or decline follows economic or moral circumstances illustrates another aspect of the constant mutation of urban space.

The increasing participation of representatives of given quarters in the political process, as witnessed in numerous cities, has been interpreted as the implementation of a stricter control structure across the whole of the territory. But on the other hand, quarters have also been instrumental in the creation and structuring of militias, which raises the question whether they, in turn, did not exert control over the Magistrature.

### **b. Occupation of the urban territory**

The structure of the urban space will be conditioned by physical elements such as hydrography and relief. Workers' quarters will develop by the riverside, while traders will settle in those areas where the river is equipped for the reception of goods. Centres of commercial and manufacturing activities appear at an early stage, and will affect the artificial shaping of waterways : the multiplication of river arms and skilful sharing of hydraulic resources are clear markers of urban development. The river banks and quaysides are coveted by groups with opposing interests. What are the results of this friction on the structure of the city ?

Why do certain towns offer clear patterns of functional organization, and others less so ? Can one identify recurrent patterns in spatial structuring, notably in the case of various crafts ? Is the opposition between uptown and downtown areas only the reflection of a social structure conditioned by the proximity to waterways ? Where and when do we witness an impact of a more symbolic structuring ? Which strategies do government and interest groups develop in order to wield control over the urban space ?

Ritualized movements (processions, parades and ommegegans) are expressions of control over a territory. Which role do they play in the structuring of space and in the hierarchical organization of urban areas ?

### **c. Beyond the city limits**

The city is inconceivable without external relationships. The most obvious aspect of the city's control over the outer space is the ownership of countryside real estate by citizens. But the scope of influence does not stop there. Urban groups confront each other, as well as non-urban groups, over the surrounding rural areas. The management of rural territories and access to their resources are crucially dependent on the urban policies of control and claims to monopoly.

The conquest of these outer spaces concerns not only the local authorities: the crown has its part to play in the process as well. The extension of urban influence is also effected via procedures like the granting of fiscal privileges, the allotment of jurisdictions, prerogatives in the management and exploitation of roads and waterways, or the building of relays in the guise of convents.

The development of ever wider zones of influence eventually gave rise to territorial competition between cities. The history both of the hinterlands and of city life is marked and conditioned by successive conflicts and negotiations; and as a result whole stretches of land have been shaped by these inter-city conflicts.