
*Women's Guilds in Cologne in the Later Middle Ages**

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In the later medieval period women played a considerable part in the economic life of the city of Cologne.¹ They took part in commercial activities on their own account, in addition to acting as partners in their husbands' businesses — although it was frequently the case that merchants were instructed to employ their wives in their trading operations. For example, the Cologne magistrate Balthasar von Kerpen recorded in his will that he had entered on a second marriage 'for the sake of his children and also for the sake of his business'.² Women were generally welcomed as members and as workers in many of the city's guilds and industries, and in fact only three guilds imposed any limitations or restrictions on the employment of women and even these were only occasionally enforced.

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¹ Cf. MARGRET WENSKY, *Die Stellung der Frau in der stadtkölnischen Wirtschaft im Spätmittelalter*, Köln/Wien 1980 (= Quellen und Darstellungen zur hansischen Geschichte. N.F.).

² Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln (Abkürzung: Staköln), Testamente K 199, 1542 Juli 17.

Cologne was, however, the only German city in which special guilds for women were founded during the later medieval period and these were specifically for yarn-makers, for spinners of gold thread, for silk throwers and silk weavers. Only for Paris do we have evidence of a similar phenomenon elsewhere. The purpose of the following essay will be to describe the origins of the Cologne womens' guilds and their development down to the XVIth century.

I.

One of the best known of the city's export commodities was yarn, which went under such proprietary names as "*coelsch* yarn", '*fil de Cologne*', '*collen threden*'. This was a linen yarn that was normally dyed blue and whose quality was determined by the different treatments it received and the colour-fastness obtained.³ The yarn was spun by yarn-twisters and the finishing was entrusted to women who had been organised into a guild from as early as 1370-1397.⁴ On 14th April 1397 the Cologne city council confirmed the guild's charter for the "*garnmechersen*",⁵ and this laid down regulations for the length of apprenticeships, for admission to the mysteries of the craft, for the duration of working hours and the manner of preparing the yarn. Apprenticeship lasted for four years, and each apprentice had to be registered after eight days attendance in the yarn shop on the roll of apprentices and journeymen. On completion of the period of apprenticeship, the guild's committee had to inspect samples of the apprentice's work to verify 'whether or not her work was of good quality'. If the apprentice passed

³ Cf. BRUNO KUSKE, "Köln". Zur Geltung der Stadt, ihrer Waren und Maßstäbe in älterer Zeit (12.-18. Jh.), in: DERS, *Köln, der Rhein und das Reich*, Köln 1956, S. 138-176.

⁴ HEINRICH V. LOESCH, *Die Kölner Zunfturkunden*, 2 vols, Bonn 1907 (Abkürzung: Loesch); vol. II, p. 377.

⁵ LOESCH I, 22.

these quality controls then she was entitled to open her own workshop after payment of an acceptance fee of 2 guilders. Each woman was entitled to set up one daughter as an independent producer and to supply her with financial aid, but never with yarn. The daughter was then able to carry on her own business on her own account. Each independent woman was entitled to have three girls or servants to help her, and the daughter — *zo einre hant sitzet* (i.e. who was herself an independent craftswoman) was allowed two girls. When a yarn-master was unable to carry out all the work with the help of her own staff alone, she was entitled to have yarn prepared by someone else but not for a period in excess of fourteen days.

The regulations also made it possible for women born to non-yarn making families to enter the guild, and encouraged competition between members of the guild, although every effort was made to prohibit all forms of private manufacturing by members of the corporation. But just as in the other ordinary guilds, the yarn-makers guild acknowledged a 'widower's right' which enabled the widower of a member of the guild to practise the trade and to employ servants so long as he did not marry a woman who was not a member of the guild.

There were also various other regulations which need not be discussed in detail but which were designed to guarantee the quality of the yarn, and which for example included prohibitions on finishing yarn in the Cologne guilds that had been spun in Erfurt ⁶ or had been twisted and dyed in some other place outside the city.

Between 1373 and 1498 there were continual quarrels between the women yarn-masters and the twisters who reeled the yarn on to wheels, mainly over terms of payment. In 1373 the yarn-spinning shops that had previously been privately run passed into the control of the city, and were thereafter leased out for

⁶ LOBSCH II, 377; 380; 381.

periods of ten years.⁷ One result was that the yarn-twisters' wages rose by some 50%, and these immediately gave rise to vocal protests from the yarn-merchants, who were often the husbands or the agents of the women yarn-finishers. They demanded the right to run the reeling shops themselves, but this the council refused to accept. The reeling wheels were technologically-advanced mechanical units, and by the end of the XVth century they were driven by horse-power and functioned without interruption by day and night.⁸ But in 1498, following the complaints of the yarn merchants and finishers, this system was ended and prices for different types and variations of twisting and reeling were fixed.⁹

There were a number of women who leased reeling mills in the early XVth century, although our evidence does not make it clear whether the same persons were also yarn-makers, although this seems probable.¹⁰ The lack of sources also means that it is not possible to describe the size and growth of the guilds in relation to the numbers of workers and apprentices, or even to depict the economic and social conditions of the women involved in the yarn trade. However, the important place held by Cologne yarn as a commodity in the XVth century at least would suggest that there must have been a considerable number of women engaged in the production of the yarn either as independent yarn-makers or as apprentices.

Cologne yarns were often exported to England,¹¹ and were

⁷ LOESCH II, 676 B; cf. FRANZ IRSIGLER, *Die wirtschaftliche Stellung der Stadt Köln im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden 1979 (= VSWG. Beiheft 65.), 34 f.

⁸ Cf. WALTER ENDREI/WOLFGANG V. STROMER, "Textiltechnische und hydraulische Erfindungen und ihre Innovatoren in Mitteleuropa im 14./15. Jahrhundert," in: *Technikgeschichte* 41, 1974, 89-117, 93.

⁹ LOESCH II, 389.

¹⁰ RICHARD KNIPPING, *Die Kölner Stadtrechnungen des Mittelalters*, vol. I, Bonn 1897, S. 73.

¹¹ E. g. *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. IX, Leipzig 1903, 537; LOESCH II 381; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. VII, 1, Weimar 1939, 547, 690; vol. X, Leipzig 1907, 710;

marketed by way of Antwerp, the Netherlands and Flanders,¹² being frequently mentioned in lists of customs duties as well as in retail orders.¹³ But the yarnmakers of Cologne hardly ever engaged directly in the trade in their products, unlike the women silk makers, and seem to have left the commercial transactions to their husbands. When in 1373¹⁴ they complained to the town council about the yarn-twisters they themselves referred to this family division of labour: "we merchants and citizens, whose business it is to sell linen yarns abroad, and our wives, whose labour it is to make these yarns within our town". The woman yarnmaker Mettelin who tried in 1489 to bring a suit against an Osnabruck merchant¹⁵ seems to have been an exception to this rule.

II.

The gold thread spinners were members of a guild which also included numbers of gold-beaters. The task of the gold-beaters was to work the gold and silver into fine threads by beating and stretching, and it was with the resulting metal threads of gold, silver, silvered copper and beater's skin with metal coating that the spinners set to work to set them around a core thread, or group of threads, made from silk, linen or cotton. Alternatively, the metal foil could be spun on its own without a supporting fabric thread.

In Cologne, gold-spinning had been women's work from the start. In the mid XIVth century it was still a trade that could be freely exercised, although there was at the same time a guild

BRUNO KUSKE, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kölner Handels und Verkehrs im Mittelalter*, vol. II, Bonn 1917, 603-605.

¹² E. g. RENÉ DOEHAERD, *Etudes Anversoises. Documents sur le commerce internationale à Anvers*, vol. II, Paris 1962, 57; 447; 747; Staköln Briefbuch 42, fol. 355 r; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch VII*, 1 (see note 11), 477, S. 244, note 3.

¹³ Cf. KUSKE (see note 3), 149.

¹⁴ See note 4.

¹⁵ KUSKE, *Quellen II* (see note 11), 1133.

which was partly dependent on that of the goldsmiths.¹⁶ Documents from the XIVth century reveal that the industry was very fully developed and that golden thread was amongst Cologne's most prized products. When in 1373 instructions were given to Venice and other cities concerning the recognition of authentic gold thread from Cologne, mention was made not only of the city's goldbeaters (*aurimalliatoren*) but also of the gold-thread spinners (*filatrices*).¹⁷

On the 14th April 1397¹⁸ the "goldslegeren" and "goltspenrissen" (goldbeaters and goldspinners) obtained a guild charter of their own, and thereafter membership of the guild became compulsory for those engaged in the trade. The charter contained the usual regulations concerning apprenticeships, admission into the guild, the employment of supernumerary workers, as well as minute instructions regarding different processes and techniques involving these costly raw materials. The apprenticeship lasted for four years, and the consent of the entire guild was required when a new apprenticeship commenced. Additional workers had to be employed for at least a year; a gold-spinner whose husband worked as a gold-beater was allowed to employ 'three girls to help spin the gold threads', whereas a single spinner might employ four girl assistants — a rule clearly designed to safeguard equality of opportunity amongst guild members. The spinners and beaters elected two women and two male officers every year, each group in turn electing one man and one woman. The "*vrauwenmeistersen*" took responsibility for the commercial side of the operations while the male officers had to: '... look to the organization of the work and put on it the stamps and seal of the city'. They were responsible for the general supervision of the craft and for the important task of quality control.

¹⁶ Cf. WENSKY (see note 1), Chapter IV, 1.

¹⁷ LOESCH II 427.

¹⁸ LOESCH I, 29.

By the beginning of the XVth century, and possibly earlier, there is evidence that gold-spinning was also being carried on privately, partly in response to the rising price of the precious metals. The records of the trial of Johann Eichoultz in Cologne in 1519 reveal that he had several gold-spinners working for him¹⁹ due to the very high price of gold. He was made to pay a fine of 2000 guilders as well as serving a prison sentence for having falsely put stamps on gold and silver. He tried to blame the gold-spinner Lisabeth van Zoens for this and she was also imprisoned, although in court she was able to establish her innocence.

In the early XVth century the gold-beaters also exploited the relative dependence of their female colleagues given that the work was organized to their advantage. In 1514 the women protested to the council²⁰ that: '... their livelihood and their craft had unjustly been taken from them by the goldbeaters, in violation of the guild statutes'. According to what was claimed, the gold-beaters falsely registered their wives as apprentices so that after four years they might be admitted to the guild which conferred also the right to employ additional apprentices and workers. In fact it became clear that in practice the gold-beaters were freely practising both trades, which made for unfair competition and took work away from the women gold-spinners who were left, as a result, 'without food and provisions'. On 3rd June the council reached a decision in favour of the women and gave orders that the statutes of the guild charter should be fully respected, yet as early as July 22nd²¹ it again proved necessary to issue instructions prohibiting any gold-beater from having gold-spinning work carried out in his own house unless his wife was a fully admitted member of the spinner's guild. But this still meant that the wife who was a registered spinner could carry on an unregulated private industry.

¹⁹ STAKÖLN VERFASSUNG und VERWALTUNG G. 51, 1519, fol. 255-257.

²⁰ STAKÖLN Ratsmemoriale 4, fol. 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 102v-103v.

Once again the sources do not provide us with any information on the numbers of women engaged in the guild, or on their social and economic situation, or on the wages paid to the dependent spinners. However, the quarrel with the gold-beaters does reveal that it was frequently the case that the trade was practised jointly by a married couple, which would have brought obvious advantages. There were also cases in which the husband was a member of the goldsmiths' guild, and in view of the close relationship between the two corporations there were various possibilities for transfer — in 1438, for example, the Cologne city council permitted transfer from one to other²² while prohibiting the exercise of both trades at once.

Gold and silver threads worked in Cologne had succeeded in breaking into the markets of northern Italy as early as the second half of the XIVth century despite the presence of local products of very high quality. That they were able to sustain this competition over a considerable period bears witness to the high standards of the Cologne industry. In 1376, for example, Lucca prohibited the use of silk and other accessories in the city other than those produced there,²³ with the exception only of the gold and silver threads of Cologne which were expressly stipulated in the manufacture of certain high quality brocades.²⁴ In the mid-XVth century we find a German merchant in Rome importing 'oro di Colognia' (gold thread from Cologne²⁵). By the end of the century 'koltzgolt', or Cologne golden thread, was still reaching the brocade factories of Venice and Genoa and was still being finished by the women of the German city.²⁶

²² LOESCH II, 447.

²³ LOESCH, II, 427.

²⁴ ENDREI/STROMER (see note 8), 107.

²⁵ Arnold Esch, Importe in das Rom der Frührenaissance. Ihr Volumen nach den römischen Zollregistern der Jahre 1452-62, in: *Studi in memoria di Federigo Melis*, vol. III, Naples 1978, 382-452, 430.

²⁶ KUSKE, Quellen II (see note 11), 1055; ALOYS SCHULTE, *Geschichte der Grossen*

In Cologne itself these same threads were also widely used in the embroidering of coats of arms and heraldic devices, in braid trimmings and in silk-weaving.

III.

The silk industry held a special place amongst the various crafts and trades of later medieval Cologne. In no other German city did it flourish so fully or over such a long period. Again, this crucially important export craft was carried out and organised almost exclusively by women. The extent to which this was unusual for its time and to which it appeared remarkable in the eyes of Cologne's trading partners is clearly revealed in a document originating from Cologne in the year 1498 which set out to explain to the city of Antwerp: "... that in our city the craft of silkmaking is carried on mainly by women and very rarely by men, with the result that the women are much more knowledgeable about the trade than are the men".²⁷

The silk industry was centred around silk weaving, together with the ancillary trades of spinning and dyeing. For a fairly long time the women silk-makers carried on their trade without any guild organization. It was only in 1437 that they obtained 'statutes and regulations such as those governing other crafts'.²⁸ The first set of statutes was followed by two more before 1506,²⁹ while a fifth draft charter, which was never fully enacted, has also survived.³⁰ No other Cologne guild was ever subject to so

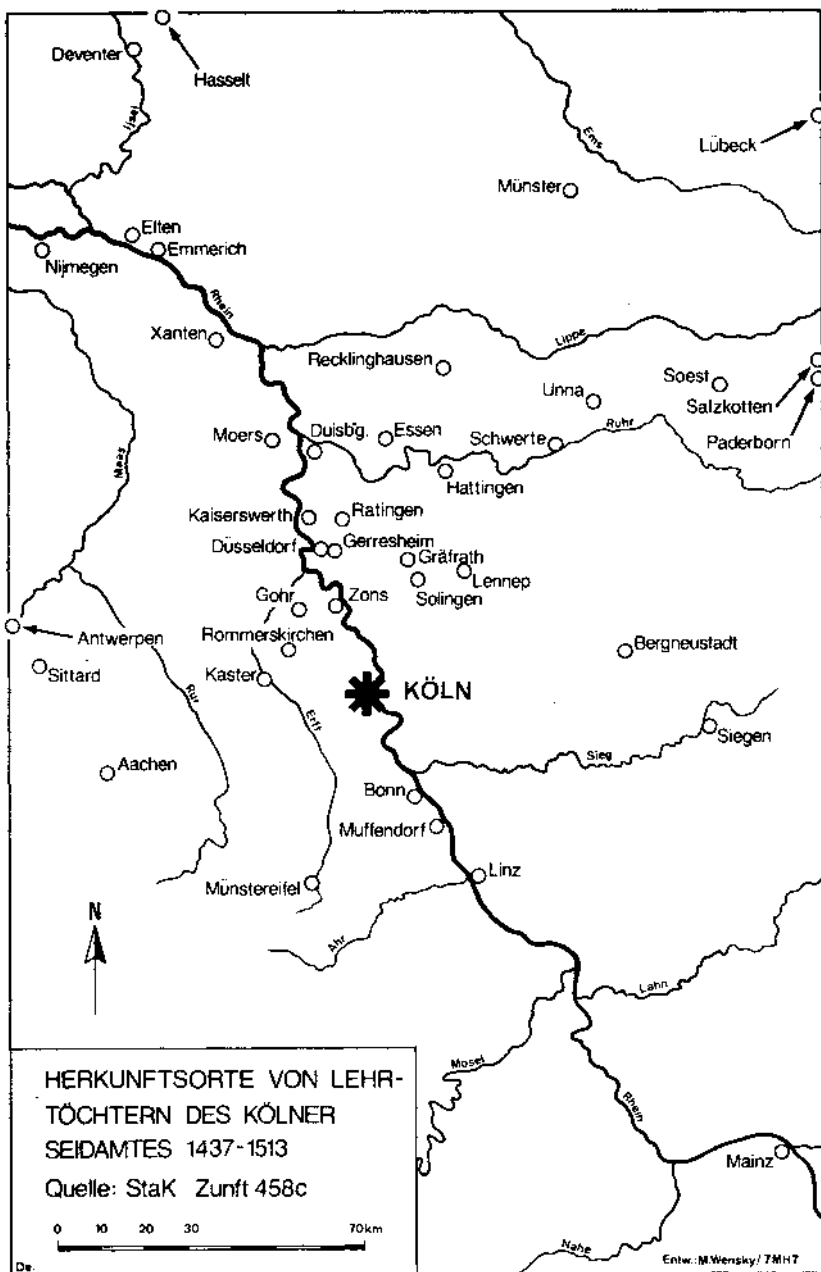
Ravensburger Handelsgesellschaft, 3 vols, Stuttgart 1923, Reprint Wiesbaden 1964, vol. I, 282; vol. II, 201-203; vol. III, 203.

²⁷ LOESCH II, 655 and note.

²⁸ LOESCH I, 62: the first charter appears as a copy in the third dated 1469.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: the second statute also appears as a copy appended to the third charter - Loesch I, 63 - fourth charter dates 22 August 1470; Loesch III, 657 - Transfixbrief dated 24th October 1470. HANS KOCH, *Geschichte des Seidengewerbes in Köln vom 13 bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* Leipzig 1908, pp. 94-99 - Transfixbrief dated 14th January 1506.

³⁰ LOESCH I, 64.



many revisions of its statutes, and this is in itself an indication of the special place held by the silk industry.

The statutes reveal that the industry was organised along the following lines: the mastersilk-maker, also known as the '*heuft-vrauwe*', practised her trade in her own house, where she was entitled to train as many as four apprentices in addition to her own daughters. She was also allowed to employ as many extra helpers as the business required. All new apprentices had their names registered in the guild's register of apprentices opened in 1437,³¹ and which reveals that the length of the apprenticeship was for three years until 1469, and four years thereafter.

The master silk-makers elected two male and two female guild officers each year, and they met once a fortnight. Only the husbands of the silkmakers could be elected, but a man and wife were debarred from holding office simultaneously. The apprentice roll also reveals that the silk-makers did not only take on girls from Cologne as apprentices, but from elsewhere as well. The majority (see accompanying map) came from the Rhineland and Westphalia, within a radius of 150 km, but others came from Antwerp, Deventer, Nymegen and Lubeck. It was only after 1506 that silk-makers who wished to set up an independent shop had to produce proof of their nationality.

Between 1437 and 1504 there were 116 silk-makers with independent shops who employed a total of 765 apprentices. Not all of these 116 master silk-makers carried on their trade in the same way. Twenty of these women only operated for a short period, employing a single apprentice apiece. The success of the other 96 can be gauged from the numbers of apprentices they were able to take on at different times — that is to say the numbers employed at any given time, taking into account the four-year period of the apprenticeship. On this basis the silk-makers can be grouped into five classes based on the volume of production, as in the following table:

³¹ STAKÖLN *Zunft* 458 c, discussed in: WENSKY (see note 1), *Tabelle* 4.

SILK-MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN COLOGNE 1437-1504

Category	Frequency with which new apprentices are taken on	Number employed in business	No. of enterprises
I	Less than 1 year	4 apprentices	18
II	1-2 years	4-2 apprentices	50
III	2-4 years	2-1 apprentices	18
IV	4-6 years	Trade conducted	4
V	6-10 $\frac{1}{2}$ years	irregularly	6
		Total	96

From the table it can be seen that the majority of the 96 silk-makers (that is categories I & II together) employed at least 2 and at most four apprentices. In category I there were in fact many silk-masters with a large number of apprentices, but there is proof that they were actively engaged in the trade only for periods of about five years. The most successful silk-makers, those who were actively engaged in trade for the longest periods, are to be found however in the second category. But the productivity of the successful silkmakers was not the result of the number of apprentices employed alone. If we take the example of some of these silk-makers who were engaged in trade for different lengths of time, we can tell from the variations in their activity over this time what other factors and circumstances may have been involved.

Fygeⁿ Lutzenkirchen became a master silk-maker in 1474 and by 1497 had employed 25 apprentices.³² Her husband, Peter Lutzenkirchen was an astute merchant in the city who traded with the Hanseatic ports, acted as agent for several Upper German trading houses and was also a city councillor in Cologne on various occasions.³³ These trading activities and contacts helped to bring his wife's silk-manufacture into a wide economic context, and the respect that they commanded is evident from the fact

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Zur Handelstätigkeit der Lutzenkirchen zahlreiche Belege" in: KUSKE, Quellen II (see note 11), III, Bonn 1923 and IV, Bonn 1934. — Cf. IRISGLER (see note 7), p. 360.

that they served alternately on the executive committee of the guild for 18 years. Peter frequently visited trade fairs outside Cologne, particularly those of Frankfurt and Antwerp and as well as buying supplies of raw silk at such places he almost certainly also sold his wife's silk goods there as well. But Fygen herself, in addition to her own trade, also participated actively in these commercial operations, and Peter's death in around 1498 coincides almost exactly with her own withdrawal from silk-making. Thereafter she seems to have carried on the commercial activities inherited from her husband, and presumably continued to represent the Ravensburg trading house in Cologne.³⁴ She appears to have handed over the silk shop to her daughter Lysbeth, herself a master silk-maker since 1496³⁵ and the wife of Mertyns II Ime Hove - son of one of the richest silk manufacturers in Cologne at the end of the XVth century. Their combined manufacturing and trading activities brought great wealth to the Lutzenkirchen family and by 1511 Fygen was listed as one of the richest citizens in the city.³⁶

The activities of three other silk-makers belonging to the first category can also be described, each being active for about 8 to 10 years. Their family backgrounds were not dissimilar to those of the Lutzenkirchen, albeit in more modest proportions.

Greitgen van Berchem came from a merchant family, many of whom had served as officers of the silk-makers' guild.³⁷ Her husband Jakob was a silk importer, among other things, and also served on the executive committee of the guild. Tryngen Loubach was the daughter of parents who were respectively silk maker and merchant, and she herself ran her own silk-shop in partnership with her husband Konrad.³⁸ Greitgen van der Sar

³⁴ SCHULTE (see note 26), vol. I, p. 124, 425.

³⁵ Cf. note 31.

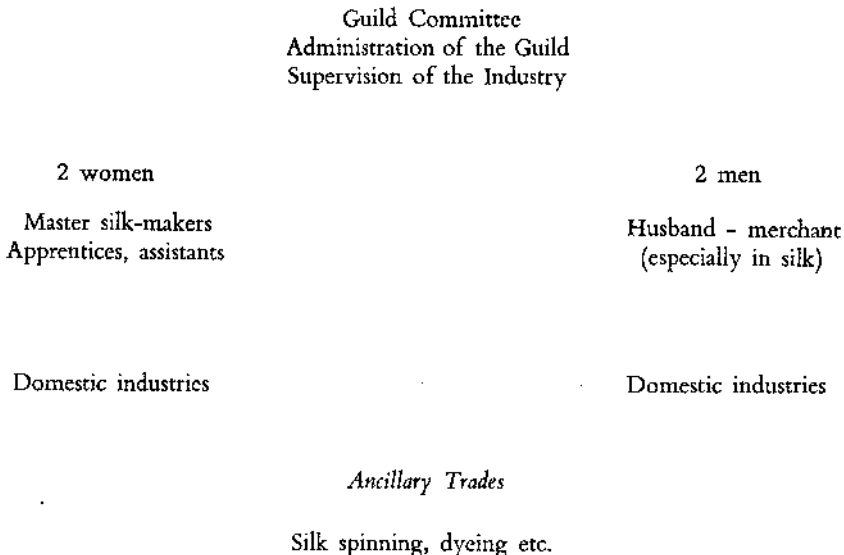
³⁶ STAKÖLN Rechnungen 119.

³⁷ Cf. note 31. Greitgen was a member of the council of the silk guild 1469-76.

³⁸ Cf. note 31. Tryngen was a member of the council of the silk guild 1493ca-1513 and his mother had been a silk-maker.

was the founder of a silk-weaving clan which continued to manufacture and trade in silk with great vitality down to 1572 at least.³⁹ After her relatively premature death, her husband Hermann van der Sar married a silk-maker who was no less active than her predecessor.⁴⁰ Hermann himself was a city councillor in Cologne, and also was a qualified clothier.

If we examine the social position of these silk-makers that we have taken as an example, it becomes clear that the manufacturing and commercial prosperity of their businesses resulted from the happy combination of industry and trade, with the woman taking the role of producer and guild member, the husband acting as merchant and taking responsibility for acquiring raw materials and disposing of the finished products. The structure of the Cologne silk industry can therefore be represented as follows:



³⁹ Cf. note 31. Greitgen worked as a silk-maker between 1476 and 1478 with 9 apprentices. At least seven of her descendants were active in Cologne silk industry in the XVIth century (Statkoin Zunft, 456).

⁴⁰ Cf. note 31. Lysbeth van Brucgen trained 19 apprentices in 20 years.

This family division of labour also occurred amongst the yarn-makers and gold-spinners, and was by no means peculiar to the womens' guilds alone - it can also be found in many of the Cologne metal-working trades, although here working in the reverse direction.⁴¹

Although her husband's commercial activities were of considerable importance in the extraordinary success of Cologne's most important silk-maker in this period - Tryngen Ime Hove also known as 'zer Roder Duyr'⁴² (lit: 'At the Red Door') - there can be no doubt that the main cause lay in her exceptional personality, and her most successful years as a silk-maker began only after the death of her husband. Her life and career merit a fuller description.

A merchant's daughter, Tryngen had qualified as a silk-weaver by about 1450. In 1462 she became an officer of the guild, together with her husband Mertyn Ime Hove who came from Süchteln on the Lower Rhine, but he had served as assistant to various merchants in Cologne for over ten years and in 1453 had been admitted as a citizen of the city.⁴³ In the 39 years down to 1501, Tryngen trained 39 apprentices and she was always the employer of the largest number of apprentices in the city. Some idea of the output of Tryngen's shop can be gained from calculating the amount of raw silk consumed, and the customs registers between 1491 and 1495 suggest that she purchased one-fifth, or about 20,000 pounds, of the raw silk that entered the city in these years.⁴⁴ On average, therefore, her shop must have been processing about 5,000 pounds of raw silk per annum. Obviously, it would only have been possible to manage such enor-

⁴¹ E.g. with the Cologne "henschenmechern", cf. IRISGLER (*wic Anni.* 7), 160.

⁴² Cf. note 31.

⁴³ KUSKE, *Quellen II* (see note 11), 124; *Kölner Neuburger 1356-1798*, ed. Hugo Stehkämper and Gerd Müller, vol. I, Köln 1975, p. 89.

⁴⁴ TRAUOGOTT GEERING, "Kölns Colonialwaarenhandel vor 400 Jahren," in: *Mitteilungen aus dem Stadtarchiv von Köln*, 11, 1887, p. 41-65.

mous quantities by putting out at least part of the work, and the councillor Gerhard von Wesen may well have had her in mind when he recorded around 1490⁴⁵ that certain silk-makers in the city were so rich that they could afford to spend between two and three thousand guilders a year on raw silk alone.

Tryngen also participated in her husband's business which was probably trading with England — in exchange for silks and silk manufactures from Cologne he imported cloths and wool from England, and these were the staple commodities in the trade between the two regions. As we have already mentioned, Tryngen's son — Mertyn II Ime Hove — married Lysbeth Lutzenkirchen, and it was they who continued the business of their parents and parents-in-law into the next generation.

But in addition to these family concerns there were also other forms of enterprise that could prove equally successful. In the first place there was the case of businesses run by the woman silk-master alone — as envisaged in the original guild statutes — in which the husband seems to have played little if any part on the commercial side. *Mettel an dem Hühnermarkt*,⁴⁶ wife of Peter van Hielden, and one of the leading women of the guild in the final quarter of the XVth century provides a good example of such a case. The Cologne registers show that she purchased at least 1,000 pounds of raw silk between 1491 and 1495,⁴⁷ which she processed with the help of about four girl apprentices. She probably also put some of the work out, since she was also actively engaged in trading in the finished silk manufactures.

Styngen Kremers, who became a master silk-maker in about 1439,⁴⁸ provides a similar example. The wife of Johann vame Hirtze, several times mayor of Cologne but with no connection at all with silk-making, Styngen, was able to work without inter-

⁴⁵ LOESCH II, 661.

⁴⁶ Cf. note 31.

⁴⁷ Cf. note 44.

⁴⁸ Cf. note 31.

ruption and with great success as a silk-maker despite being the wife of the mayor, since we know that she was employing 19 apprentice girls before 1465. The same example also demonstrates that the trade enjoyed high social standing.

There are fewer examples of cooperative ventures, even though this was another successful form of enterprise since when two silk-makers joined together they could employ double the number of apprentices. The sisters Fygen and Sewis van Berchem operated in this fashion with great success. Admitted respectively to the guild in 1455 and 1462,⁴⁹ Fygen was employing 15 apprentices at the time of her death on 15th May 1502, and Sewis employed 19 in about 1489. There is also evidence that Fygen also put work out. Both women served on various occasions on the guild committee, and Sewis is one of the few independent silk-masters who can positively be identified as being unmarried. The sisters also acted as merchants on different occasions; they appeared on the list of those paying tax on imported silks, and in the 1470s also imported wines.⁵⁰ Their wills reveal that they died very wealthy,⁵¹ and they possessed considerable property both in Cologne and elsewhere.⁵²

There were other cases in which the woman supervised the workshop while the husband was the driving force in the business. This was generally the case when a merchant took a silk-maker as wife and when she died the husband took over the business until he made a second marriage with another silk-maker. It was then often the case that the second wife only acquired membership of the guild at his instigation. This was what happened in the case of Hermann van der Sar, mentioned above, but it

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* They were related to the Greitgen van Berchem mentioned above.

⁵⁰ E. g. 1452-59, 1460-69, 1470-80 (StaKöln Rechnungen 36, 38, 19, KUSKE, Quellen III, 41 ff. and 74 ff.).

⁵¹ STAKÖLN Rechnungen 51.

⁵² According to Sewis' will, dated 1483 (StaKöln Testamente B 298) and that of Fygen dated 1502 (KUSKE, Quellen III, 211, Testament 14).

is also true of the important merchants Syvert Bysser and Hermann Vurberg.

All of these enterprises can be seen as variants on the basic family enterprise, but there is also evidence that by the beginning of the XVIth century there were also master silk-makers who relied entirely on the putting-out system which meant that they had no involvement with apprentices and other trained staff but operated entirely as commercial intermediaries. On occasions the husband of a silk-master who was not practising her trade but was still a guild member would act in this way - one example being the tailor Johann Fromann who employed a number of silk spinners in about 1500.⁵³

To conclude, then, we can say that the silk-makers came predominantly from the commercial middle and upper middle classes of Cologne. Nearly 30% of the registered master silk-makers came from families which held seats on the city council. The social background of the apprentices was similar to that of their employers, although on occasions it was possible for the children of small tradesmen and artisans to be taken on — but it was only the better placed women who were able to set up their own independent workshops.

The close connections between production and trade which can be found throughout the guild structure provided the basis for the remarkable up-swing in the Cologne silk industry in the second half of the XVth century.⁵⁴ Imports of raw silk had increased rapidly since the middle of the century, but between 1491 and 1495 alone some 100,000 pounds of raw silk was purchased in the city and processed in the shops of the master silk-makers. Some of our examples have shown how rich individual families could grow in this industry.

But in parallel with this remarkable expansion of the silk

⁵³ LOESCH II, 664 A.

⁵⁴ Cf. IRISGLER (see note 7), 31.

industry, social abuses also increased as a result of the adoption of capitalist practices. Worst affected were the silk spinners and throwers who supplied the silk-makers purely on a putting-out basis, but by the end of the century the workers in the silkshops, many of whom were themselves qualified craftsmen, also began to feel the consequences. The spinners had suffered considerable difficulties throughout the century. Firstly, they were exposed to competition from the spinning works in the convents and monasteries — and although this was prohibited on various occasions it never completely stopped.⁵⁵ Secondly, there were always differences with the silk-makers, specially over wage rates for spinning. In 1456 the spinners acquired their own guild statutes, and these were subsequently reconfirmed on two occasions,⁵⁶ but this did little to solve the problems, and it proved necessary to remind the silk-makers time and time again that the spinners should be paid in cash and not in kind on a truck basis. In 1480, in the 5th version of the spinners' charter an attempt was made to list the prices for different qualities of work, but this never took effect since the revision was never enacted.

The evils of the trucking system were often denounced from the pulpit, as the Cologne city councillor Gerhard von Wesel noted in 1490 in his report on the poor conditions prevalent amongst workers in the silk industry.⁵⁷ He claimed that the system worked as follows: the silk-makers paid the spinners not in cash but either in silk or in English cloth, but in quantities worth less than the cash wage. But they had no alternative since they were totally dependent on the silk-makers who paid the wages: “...the poor creatures spin and weave in order to fend off hunger and thirst, and they must take made-up silks from the silkmasters at 19 marks which they can only resell at 14½ or 15

⁵⁵ LOESCH II, 651 and 654.

⁵⁶ The guild charter of 22nd December 1456 has only survived in the form of a copy included in the second charter of 20th June 1469.

⁵⁷ Cf. note 45.

at most, so they must lose about 6 marks and feel happy for every penny above that they may obtain". This kind of payment which caused the 'poor creatures to come to ruin' was in the view of Gerhard von Wesel nothing other than 'usury and double usury'.

These were not the only problems affecting the silk-guild, and Gerhard went on to complain that the guild regulations were broken at virtually every turn. He claimed that some four to six silkmasters had a monopoly within the guild, that they alone were treated with respect and acknowledged to be the 'chief silk-makers' which meant that other women silkmakers who were every bit as skilled in their craft had no work and were forced to turn to out-working. What this amounted to was probably not an authentic commercial putting out system, but rather a form of cottage industry carried on within the guild itself whereby some of the richer women masters who were able financially to buy up large stocks of raw silk then put this out to be worked by the poorer members of their own guild. Anyway, the situation of the guild continued to decline sadly and seems to have reached a very desolate state by 1504 since in 1506 new regulations were introduced in an attempt to remedy this. However the guild was not to be reorganized until 1513.⁵⁸ But even though the guild was suffering decline, it still remains true that at the end of the XVth century the making of silk was one of the most important — if not *the* most important — export industry in Cologne in this period.

⁵⁸ STAKÖLN Zunft 456.