

Foreign Merchants and International Trade Networks in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries

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This article addresses the problem of networks in early-modern trade with particular attention to the Low Countries and Antwerp. It discusses the various ways scholars have conceptualized network forms in both spatial/geographical and human terms, and examines the changing focus of scholarship on networks in recent years. Moving beyond static network forms, this article deals with dynamic human networks and the part they played in early-modern commerce with special focus on the city of Antwerp and its foreign merchant communities. The article considers the roles of kin networks, friendship network, and merchant guilds as social networks that early-modern merchants employed in foreign trade.

1. Introduction

During much of the sixteenth century, the Low Countries were at the centre of European trade as Antwerp became one of the most important commercial cities on the continent. Thanks to the favourable orientation to trade rather than industry, merchants found an ideal atmosphere in which to conduct their business in Antwerp and in the nearby city of Bergen op Zoom. Merchants from England, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal and many other places came to these cities to buy and sell products from all over Europe and its colonial possessions.¹ Antwerp, which had reached the status of a continental emporium, became a node on an extensive commercial network extending all across Europe from London to Venice; from Danzig to Seville; from Breslau to Bordeaux.

¹ W. Brulcz, "The balance of trade of the Netherlands in the middle of the 16th century." *Acta Historiae Neerlandica* IV (1970), pp. 20-48.

That there existed a network of commercial cities with some cities serving as regional markets and other cities serving as local markets cannot be denied. We can, for instance, consider what has been described as a shift from Mediterranean-based trade, with Venice as the principal city, to Atlantic-based trade centred in Antwerp by the early sixteenth century. Venice and Antwerp remained connected by seaborne trade even as this shift was taking place, and a vast overland network of commercial cities served as distributive markets for both Mediterranean and northern commerce. As the sixteenth century wore on, crises (like the Dutch Revolt) made Antwerp less favourable as a trading centre, and dominance shifted briefly to the south again, focusing on Genoa. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam took the lead, as Dutch merchants and shippers succeeded in concentrating distribution in their principal city. Eventually, what Ormrod has called a "new pattern of economic development" took hold, based on an "integrated national economy", and London came into prominence as the most important city for Great Britain's worldwide commercial empire.²

The "rise" and "decline" of these commercial centres has been extensively studied, the cities compared with each other,³ and the role of cities and regions as nodes on a far-flung distribution network is becoming increasingly understood. But just what constituted a network is still often disputed. In a very general sense, a network can be defined as an interconnected system of either things or people. This is not a very satisfying definition because it can be applied to a variety of systems, both static and dynamic. For those interested in commercial history, the concept of a network can be used to describe interconnected commercial cities and transport routes, but it can also be thought of as an organisational form for commerce alongside market and hierarchical structures.⁴

² David Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770*, (Cambridge 2003), pp. 5-6.

³ Patrick O'Brien, (ed.), *Urban Achievement in Early-Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam, and London*, (Cambridge 2001).

⁴ Walter W. Powell, "Neither market nor hierarchy: network forms of organisation," *Research in Organisational Behavior* 12 (1990), pp. 295-336.

In hierarchical forms of commercial organisation, like the firm, information is thought of as flowing up and down the hierarchy, with decision-making being centralised. Hierarchy is often understood as being a form that stresses command and authority. Networks, on the other hand, are often associated with terms like *cooperation* and *consensus*.⁵ Information flows and communication lines are reciprocal and mutually beneficial in networks.⁶ While it seems that merchants may have preferred one organisational form to another, they nevertheless made use of both hierarchies and networks. This seems to have been true even for merchants operating within fairly strict hierarchies like merchant firms. Merchants exchanged commercial information in order to increase their chances of success in the marketplace by using all the organisation forms available to them.

If we consider the exchange of information to be at the heart of what constitutes commerce, then the more static 'spatial' networks must be examined within the context of much more dynamic human information-sharing networks. So the traditional idea of a network of cities connected by transportation routes used by the great merchant firms can provide a spatial illustration of commerce, but it fails to describe adequately how merchants established and maintained the connections that brought the spatial networks into being.

2. Models for the Study of Networks

How historians have used the concept of network in their work has, not surprisingly, changed over time, with earlier works focusing on spatial networks and more recent works beginning to examine human networks. Economic historians, for example, have proposed a variety of models to explain how trade networks functioned. The earliest works focused on spatial networks, casting them as fairly static. The most well known studies are the key theories of both Christaller and Lösch,

⁵ Grahame F. Thompson, *Between Hierarchies and Markets: The Logic and Limits of Networks Forms of Organisation*, (Oxford 2003), p. 14.

⁶ Powell, "Neither market nor hierarchy," p. 296.

which were published early in the twentieth century. These scholars tried to explain how cities were distributed and interconnected in space, but they were much less successful in explaining how networks formed.⁷ Christaller, for instance, examined production and the way products and services were distributed geographically. While his model was elegant and has offered historians a way to examine some factors of economic organisation, it falls short on many counts, not the least of which were his unrealistic assumptions. His theory has little bearing on the historical reality of any period, given Lipietz's observation that goods are usually produced in 'districts' rather than in evenly-spaced production centres within a given geographical area.⁸

Because Christaller's central place model was oriented to production rather than to long-distance trade, it is not particularly helpful on its own if we want to understand the course of commercial relationships. Blockmans has suggested, for instance, that theories of the centrality of places or of networks of cities can be appreciated on several levels: to examine certain factors, to put these factors in relation to others, and to test a general theory by applying it to a specific case.⁹ However, we must bear in mind that centrality and rank size alone fail to illustrate the dynamic nature of urban networks.¹⁰

The work of James Vance, who viewed long-distance trade as part of an open system, has been more valuable than the central-place theory for the study of commercial networks. Vance put forward the notion of 'agents of trade,'¹¹ an idea that Paul Hohenberg and Lynn Lees

⁷ Walter Christaller, *Central Places in Southern Germany*. Translated by Carlisle W. Baskin, (Englewood Cliffs 1966); August Lösch, *The Economics of Location*. Translated by William H. Woglom, (New Haven 1954).

⁸ Alain Lipietz, "The local and the global: regional individuality or interregionalism?" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 18 (1993), pp. 9-10.

⁹ Wim Blockmans, "Des systèmes urbains: pourquoi?" in *Le réseau urbain en Belgique dans une perspective historique (1350-1850)*, (Brussels 1992).

¹⁰ Étienne François, "The German urban network between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: cultural and demographic indicators," in Ad v. d. Woude, Akira Hayami, Jan de Vries, eds. *Urbanization in History: A Process of Dynamic Interactions*, (Oxford 1990), pp. 84-100.

¹¹ James E. Vance, *The Merchant's World: the Geography of Wholesaling*, (Englewood Cliffs 1970), p. 5.

used to good effect in their well-known model of network systems.¹² According to Vance's model, the ability to produce surplus "father[s] the desire to expand trade beyond the local area." In an open system of the type Vance envisioned, efficient information exchange must be present to match sellers of surplus with buyers. The mechanism for information exchange is the 'agent of trade' illustrated by Vance as a city positioned to take advantage of long-distance trade. The agent of trade informs external consumers about "abundance and its location" on the one hand, and informs producers about the "location of external scarcity" on the other hand. In many respects, Vance's commercial city, acting as an agent of trade, forms a type of gateway city connecting a regional trade to the larger commercial network. Though Vance's work was intriguing, he was still describing what was essentially a spatial network because his agent of trade was a place rather than an individual or group of individuals. Nevertheless, Vance recognised the importance of information exchange in maintaining enduring commercial networks.

The research carried out by Walter Prevenier, Jean-Pierre Sosson and Marc Boone on Flemish urban networks during the broad period of the thirteenth to the nineteenth century presents an attempt to consider networks as a multiplicity of connections.¹³ These scholars suggested that urban networks in Flanders were based on a number of factors: economic, financial/fiscal and political/administrative relations. They concluded that geographical attributes, political dynamism and material infrastructure, population density, a favourable life expectancy, marriage rates, and migratory patterns favourable to economic changes were what contributed to the success of the Flemish urban network.¹⁴ This was an important study precisely because it rejected the older idea that research to isolate independent variables was most fruitful. Instead, their work pointed out that examining many interdependent variables would give us a

¹² Paul M. Hohenberg and Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1950*, (Cambridge (MA) 1985), pp. 59-69.

¹³ Walter Prevenier, Jean-Pierre Sosson and Marc Boone. "Le réseau urbain en Flandre (XIII^e - XIX^e siècle): composantes et dynamique," in *Le Réseau Urbain en Belgique dans une Perspective Historique (1350-1850)*, pp. 158-200, (Brussels 1992).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

better picture of how networks functioned. The importance of action on the part of the individual is implied, but not made explicit in this study.

James Murray has also criticised the geographical, hierarchical nature of most network models by pointing out that scholars have “lost sight” of the “merchants themselves.”¹⁵ Like Vance, Murray was concerned with efficient communication between buyers and sellers, and he understood that this communication takes place largely in commercial towns, but he feared that static and hierarchical models could not illustrate complex human behaviour by themselves. Robert Brenner, coming from a very different theoretical starting point, highlighted the diversity of merchant actions when he wrote that “the reaction to commercial opportunity (or cost), if indeed there is one, will tend to vary with the social, political, and economic character of the mercantile group.”¹⁶ What Brenner was saying is that not all merchants will react the same way to each opportunity because they have different experiences, interests, capabilities and connections.

Scholars have not ignored individual merchants. Most of the studies of merchant guilds, for example, tend to present the institution as a type of social network and they have involved lengthy treatments of the place of individual merchants and the goods in which they traded.¹⁷ Some studies have quite successfully examined how guilds might be viewed as networks established to regulate exchange in the absence of “institutionalised enforcement mechanisms.”¹⁸ Indeed, the data presented

¹⁵ James Murray, “Of nodes and networks: Bruges and the infrastructure of trade in fourteenth-century Europe,” in Peter Stabel, Bruno Blondé and Anke Greve (eds.), *International Trade in the Low Countries (14th – 16th Centuries)*. (Leuven 2000), p. 3.

¹⁶ Robert Brenner, “The social basis of English commercial expansion, 1550-1650,” *Journal of Economic History*, 22 (1972), p. 362.

¹⁷ Oskar de Smedt, *De Engelse natie te Antwerpen in de 16e eeuw. (1496-1582)*, (Antwerp 1950); Hans Pohl, “Die Portugiesen in Antwerpen: (1567-1648): zur Geschichte c. Minderheit”, Beihelte nr. 63 *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Wiesbaden 1977); J. A. Goris, *Études sur les colonies marchandes méridionales à Anvers de 1488 à 1567*, (Louvain 1925).

¹⁸ Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, “Interdependence and the collective pursuit of profits: Portuguese commercial networks in the early-modern Atlantic,” in D. R. Curto and A. Molho (eds.) *Commercial Networks in the Early-Modern World*. EUI working papers HEC no. 2002/2 (European University Institute, 2002), p. 92.

in these studies provide us with starting points for understanding commercial networks on a grand scale.

More recently, historians have begun to examine human networks more explicitly as they have sought to broaden their understanding of how networks of all kinds functioned in the past. Leos Müller, for example, has studied the social network Swedish merchants created during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as they sought to reduce the risks involved in commerce.¹⁹ Selzer and Ewert have investigated the network structure of Hanseatic commercial relationships, showing how they differed from the hierarchical structures of South German and Italian enterprises.²⁰ Even more recently, Daviken Studniki-Gizbert has studied the Portuguese 'nation' as a merchant network in the Atlantic world, highlighting the interdependence and integrated structure of this network.²¹ And Steve Murdoch has shown how various kinds of networks – and kin networks above all – were employed by Scottish emigrant communities in early-modern Northern Europe to enhance commercial and political endeavours.²²

3. From Spatial Networks to Human Networks in the Early-Modern Economy

In his *Regula Transporti*,²³ written in the early sixteenth century, Willem van de Lare identified a series of networks based on the availability of products. Van de Lare's identification of commercial

¹⁹ Leos Müller, "The role of the merchant network: a case history of two Swedish trading houses, 1650-1800" In C. Lesger and L. Noordegraaf, eds. *Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurship in Early-Modern Times: Merchants and Industrialists within the Orbit of the Dutch Staple Market*, (The Hague 1995).

²⁰ Stephan Selzer and Ulf Christian Ewert, "Verhandeln und Verkaufen, Vernetzen und Vertrauen über die Netzwerkstruktur des hansischen Handels" *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 199 (2001), pp. 135-163.

²¹ Daviken Studniki-Gizbert, "La «nation» portugaise. Réseaux marchands dans l'espace atlantique à l'époque moderne", *Annales HSS* 3 (2003), pp. 627-648.

²² Steve Murdoch, *Network North: Scottish Kin, Commercial and Covert Associations in Northern Europe, 1603-1746*, (Leiden 2006).

²³ Willem van de Lare, *Regula Transporti*, Plantin-Moretus Museum Archive, Arch 318.

networks was not explicit and it is possible that he was not even conscious of it, but today we can read in his little unpublished merchant manual an understanding of some of the spatial networks of his day. The hub of van de Lare's network was Antwerp with Nuremberg, Frankfurt, Lisbon, Lyons, Paris and Venice completing his commercial world. Certainly some cities are notably absent from this list, which was written to instruct merchants on the exchange of important products, while van de Lare includes some secondary centres that we might find unusual (the Atlantic island of Madeira and the nearby city of Limberg, for example). But these cities were the principal commercial centres for merchants interested in the products van de Lare highlighted in his manual: pepper and other spices, sugar, copper and other metals, and a limited variety of textiles – although the absence of an English city is particularly striking, given the importance of English cloth for Antwerp's trade.

Van de Lare's manual is just one example of how merchants understood their commercial worlds by focusing on products. Another important, and better-known merchant manual presents a fairly similar picture. Lorenz Meder's merchant manual, published in Nuremberg in 1558, was intended for novice merchants who were just learning about the world of commerce. The most important commercial cities Meder listed included Venice, Lisbon, Antwerp, Nuremberg, Augsburg, Lyon and a variety of Italian cities: Bolzano, L'Aquila in the Abruzzi, Idria, Como, Bologna, Florence and Genoa.²⁴ The inclusion of so many Italian cities may be attributed to Meder's more southern orientation, as a merchant of Nuremberg, in contrast to van de Lare's more northern perspective centred on Antwerp.

We would expect the great commercial cities of sixteenth-century Europe to head any description of places for commerce tempered only by the particular interests of individual merchants and merchant firms in products that originated in more remote regions. The authors of both these merchant manuals chose to concentrate on certain cities

²⁴ Hermann Kellenbenz (ed.), *Das Meder'sche Handelsbuch und die Welser'schen Nachträge*, (Wiesbaden 1974).

because of the products the cities offered to merchants. This has been almost a routine way for modern scholars to focus on commercial networks. The importance of the connection between Antwerp and Lisbon because of the pepper trade, or the significance of Antwerp for the English cloth trade are just a couple of examples that scholars have highlighted as they have sought to understand early-modern trade. But these examples also illustrate that no single constellation of cities could satisfactorily define the network of cities that were important for all merchants because much depended on the products merchants chose to buy and sell. Of course, products were what attracted merchants to any particular town. For the sixteenth-century merchant, knowledge about the places where products could be obtained was very important. And the search for knowledge about places and products may have been the foundation for the creation of merchants' networks.

Lucas Rem's famous *Tagebuch*²⁵ gives us a glimpse into how the connections between the spatial network of late medieval and early-modern commercial cities were of significance for merchants in creating their human networks. Lucas Rem was associated with Augsburg's Welser firm through his maternal relatives (his mother was Magdalena Welser, daughter of Lucas Welser). In 1494 he was sent at a young age to learn the tools of commerce in Venice, an important city for the Welser firm. Here young Lucas benefited from the kith and kin network that the Welser firm had established in Venice; some of the firm's agents were also his relatives.²⁶ Between 1502 and 1509, Rem seems to have been based in the Welser's Lisbon office. While there, he travelled to Saragossa, and to the Atlantic islands of Madeira and the Canaries. While in Antwerp in 1509, he worked for the firm in Bergen op Zoom, Middelburg, Bruges and Vlissingen. In 1511, he left Antwerp to visit the important markets of the area, including Middelburg, Bergen, Bruges, Brussels, Mechelen and Leuven. In all these places, Lucas Rem became associated with agents of the Welser firm and made contacts with

²⁵ B. Greiff (ed.), *Tagebuch des Lucas Rem aus den Jahren 1494-1541*, (Augsburg 1861).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

many merchants while working for the Welsers. Rem was participating in the hierarchy of the firm and learning about the spatial commercial networks of his time. He was also establishing and consolidating a human network because of the contacts he was making (based both on his family relationships and on his business contacts) that would eventually serve him once he struck out on his own.

Operating in many different cities could present merchants with problems. While merchants could count on some familiar institutions in most commercial cities, trade was not necessarily conducted uniformly across Europe. Whereas Europe's great merchant firms – like Welsers – could afford to establish branch offices in every city in which they wanted to conduct business, less wealthy merchants had to rely on the relationships they formed in order to follow local customs and reduce risk. But even large merchant firms could not avoid relying on local institutions and individuals. It is the human networks that merchants created that provide the richest insights into how commerce worked in early-modern Europe, and specifically in Antwerp.

4. The Human Networks of Early-Modern Merchants

Although the large merchant firms of early-modern Europe were hierarchical in structure, individuals associated with them participated in human networks. While there may, indeed, be a distinct dichotomy between hierarchy and network as organisation forms, sixteenth-century merchants made little of the distinction. For example, the Augsburg firm of Haug, Langenauer and Link had branch offices in Nuremberg, Cologne, Ulm, Venice and, of course, Antwerp.²⁷ Through its agents at these branch offices the firm obtained the information it needed to conduct its business. But through network connections the firm's range extended to other parts of Europe as well. The commercial network of Anton Haug's son-in-law, the Ulm cloth merchant Joris Schorer, and his brother Lenart connected their home town of Ulm with Augsburg,

²⁷ Donald J. Harreld, *High Germans in the Low Countries*, p. 73.

Antwerp and London, and intersected with the Haug-Langenauer-Link network. The Haug-Langenauer-Link firm's principals came into direct contact with the Schorers' in Ulm, Antwerp and Augsburg, but not at the extreme ends of their respective networks (Venice in one case, and London in the other), but the two firms benefited from their connections with each other. The Anton Haug and his son-in-law connection presents a network based on kin-association. Kin-based networks offered merchants a way of reducing risk by working with trusted relatives. By mapping merchants' human networks, we can get an idea of how kin-association fitted into the overall structure of trade that was often based on the firm's hierarchy.

On February 4, 1546 Anton Haug's factor, Ulrich Hainhofer, together with the Antwerp cloth measurer (*mensurator*) Anton Waryn, declared that the cloths Hainhofer had purchased for Haug from the English merchant William Stemp through Leonard Schorer, the brother of Haug's son-in-law, were shorter than they were supposed to be.²⁸ From this case, we can see that Haug's network in Antwerp included extended kin connections that brought the firm into contact with an English cloth merchant, although in this case the deal was perhaps less satisfying than Haug might have hoped.

Merchants capitalised on kin-network connections established at home in order to advance their affairs abroad. The varied business of the Bimmel family of Augsburg created for them a network connecting Nuremberg, Ulm, Antwerp, Cologne, Venice and Schwaz in Tirol. But the network connections of the Bimmel firm intersected with those of the Haug firm at home in Augsburg,²⁹ and made it possible for the Bimmels to extend the firm's reach to England in order to participate in the lucrative trade in English cloth. In July 1543, Ulrich Hainhofer, the Antwerp factor of Anton Haug's firm (mentioned above), represented the Bimmel firm in the purchase of 200 pieces of fine English cloth from

²⁸ Stadsarchief Antwerpen (SAA), *Notariaat 2073*, fo. 10.

²⁹ Gerhard Seibold, *Die Manlich: Geschichte einer Augsburger Kaufmannsfamilie*, (Sigmaringen 1995), pp. 27-8.

William Gifford, factor for the London merchant Rafael Warren. Gifford arranged the sale by involving three other English cloth merchants who could together fill the 200-piece order.³⁰

Kin networks are closely associated with 'kith' networks but, rather than revolving around family relationships, kith networks were founded on friendships and acquaintances. Kith networks were sometimes just as strong as kin networks.³¹ In October 1542, Francisco de Pierro, a merchant from Venice, and Jan de la Faille, a merchant from Antwerp, declared that they had known well and for a long time a certain Mathys Verge, a Venetian merchant new to the city.³² Mathys Verge drew on his kith network when establishing himself in Antwerp, a place where he was not well known. The status of the individuals making the declaration was very high. Jan de la Faille was probably the foremost Antwerp merchant involved in overland trade with Italy during the middle years of the sixteenth century. This declaration by de la Faille and de Pierro gave Verge considerable standing in the Antwerp foreign merchant community; he is found later in the records when he joined Francisco de Pierro in vouching for yet another merchant from Venice who was new to Antwerp.³³

Similarly, towards the end of October 1542, three German merchants, all residents of Antwerp, made an official declaration before the city aldermen, testifying that they had known Wolf Pruner, a merchant from Bavaria, for a long time.³⁴ They further testified that Pruner was a factor and agent of the Welser firm from Nuremberg (a branch of the well-known Welser family from Augsburg). Pruner used his contacts in the city, nodes on his human network, to be introduced to Antwerp's merchant community and his presence in the accounts of many commercial transactions stands as testimony to the effectiveness of his kith network in establishing his reputation as an upstanding merchant.

³⁰ SAA, *Notariaat 2071*, fo. 109 ff.

³¹ Murdoch, *Network North*, pp. 349-350.

³² SAA, *Certificatieboek 5*, 21 Oct 1542, f^o 38.

³³ SAA, *Certificatieboek 5*, 24 Nov 1542, f^o 48.

³⁴ SAA, *Certificatieboek 5*, 25 October 1542, f^o 49.

In addition to kith and kin networks, guilds also provided merchants with a human network that facilitated the accumulation of social capital,³⁵ particularly for merchants without well-established networks in a particular commercial city. Guilds provided merchants with “closed” social networks within which they could exchange information and enforce contracts and social norms. Social networks (one type of human network) were not always beneficial for the population at large: on the contrary, they were instituted for the benefit of those who held membership within the association. As social networks, guilds made it easy for merchants to generate social capital, but for their own benefit rather than for society as a whole.³⁶

Sixteenth-century Antwerp was a city of merchants, most of whom were not native to the city, and, given their large numbers, few could have been known to each other. Association with a merchant guild gave the merchant standing in the city and access to information and privileges necessary in the course of trade. While a variety of guilds existed in sixteenth-century Antwerp, most of them were craft guilds. A merchants guild, or ‘nation’, was made up of merchants from a particular city or region engaged in long-distance trade in another city or region. Antwerp had many foreign merchants’ guilds, including several representing merchants from the principal Italian cities, Portugal, the Hanseatic League, and England. While merchants benefited from their membership in the guild, all foreign merchants in Antwerp participated at some level in the social networks the guilds established. The privileges the guilds obtained and the institutions that they worked for often ultimately applied to all foreign merchants.

Most of the privileges merchant guilds were able to obtain in Antwerp were adapted from those the guilds had negotiated in Bruges in the fourteenth century. The merchants of the Hanseatic League were one of the earliest of the foreign merchant groups to establish

³⁵ James S. Coleman, “Social capital in the creation of human capital,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (1988) Supplement, pp. 95-120.

³⁶ Sheilagh Ogilvie, “Social Capital, Social Networks and History,” University of Cambridge Economics working papers (2000), p. 26.

themselves in Antwerp. Their privileges in Antwerp were adapted from those that were first conferred by John, Duke of Brabant, on 28th October 1315 in Bruges. Subsequent dukes reconfirmed these privileges with only minor changes in 1409, and in 1468, when the group was given a house in Antwerp called *Den Cluys*.³⁷ In addition to an exemption from the beer and wine assize (something virtually all the foreign merchant nations in Antwerp enjoyed), the Hanse privileges stated all fees and toll rates its merchants would be charged on various goods, whether travelling by land or by sea. The lower rates the Hanse merchants obtained from the city gave them a significant advantage over other merchants.³⁸ Hanse "nation" privileges also stated clear property rights for its members. In the privilege of 1545, for example, Hanse merchants were declared to be under the protection of the Emperor, and their goods were exempt from arrest even in cases of debt or misdeed. The privileges also indicated that the city would not get involved in reprisals against Hanse "nation" merchants, even in the event of war with a Hanse city.³⁹ Invoking imperial protection was certainly an enforcement mechanism intended to ensure the city complied with the property rights provisions listed in the privileges. Privileges like these were particularly necessary for merchants who did not operate within the hierarchical firms. Viewed as networks, guilds sought to level the field for associated merchants.

Membership in a guild often eliminated the need for merchants to secure housing and warehouse space in the city. This allowed merchants without the resources and infrastructure of large firms to operate in the city. Enclaves established by the English "nation" and, to a lesser extent, by the Hanseatic League "nation" provided their merchants with a variety of amenities.⁴⁰ Once the Hanseatic League built a new

³⁷ SAA, PK 1063, *Oosterlingen I*, various.

³⁸ SAA, Privilegiekamer 1062, *Oosterlingen*, Tractaten, *Register gecoppieerd einde XVIde eeuw uit zeeckeren boeck in rooden leere gebonden berustende onder den secretaris van den hanse in 't Oostersbuys*, (1315-1573), f^o 25v-40 (1567).

³⁹ SAA, PK 1063, *Oosterlingen I*, 10 February 1545.

⁴⁰ Donald J. Harreld, "Trading places: the public and private spaces of merchants in sixteenth-century Antwerp", *Journal of Urban History*, 29, (2003), p. 650.

building in Antwerp's "new city" in 1568, the "nation" had the capacity to house as many as three hundred merchants and to store their goods in warehouses. For their part, the English merchants had a large complex, complete with a warehouse and their own *pand* (market) for English cloth.

Like the Hanseatic League and, indeed, all the other principal foreign merchant guilds in Antwerp, the Portuguese privileges were based on those that they had received in Bruges. The Portuguese "nation" privileges, first confirmed in Bruges by John "the Fearless", permitted a number of benefits but, most importantly, the right to appoint a consul or judge and to establish statutes and ordinances for its members. Portuguese merchants were to come under the legal jurisdiction of the Portuguese consulate, which was charged with dispensing justice to its members.⁴¹ Other privileges guaranteed that Portuguese merchants would be allowed to move themselves and their goods freely without fear of arrest, and property rights were clearly defined – even salvage rights in the event a Portuguese ship be wrecked at sea. These privileges applied to the many Portuguese merchants trading in Antwerp. The actual number of Portuguese permanent residents in the city was fairly low.⁴² Nevertheless, all Portuguese merchants used the network structure of the guild.

Genoa provides another example of a merchant guild active in sixteenth-century Antwerp. The privileges Philip "the Handsome" conferred upon Genoa in 1501 were virtually identical to those the Genoese had received from his grandfather, Charles "the Bold," in 1468, when they were active in Bruges, their *office* in the medieval Low Countries.⁴³ The Genoese "nation's" privileges concerned property rights; merchandise that the Genoese brought into the city on their own ships could not be confiscated. Philip further decreed that the goods the Genoese brought into the Low Countries on Dutch ships would be

⁴¹ SAA, PK 1070. *Natie van Portugaal I*. Privileges confirmed in 1438.

⁴² SAA, PK 1070. *Natie van Portugaal I*, 26 Nov 1526.

⁴³ SAA, PK 1075. *Handel en Scheepvaart*. *Natie van Genua*. "Le Troisième Privilège de Pan 1501."

subject to the same rules as those brought into the city on Genoese ships. If, in the event of war or other calamity, the Genoese left and began operating out of another city within the ruler's jurisdiction, they would continue to enjoy the same rights and privileges. Should they return to the city, they were to be guaranteed the same protections as before.

While the Genoese privileges were designed to reduce transaction costs by ensuring clear property rights concerning the goods that merchants shipped in and out of Antwerp by sea, by the sixteenth century few Genoese merchants were transporting their goods on ships. Virtually all merchandise sent to and from Italy by these merchants travelled overland.⁴⁴ This suggests that, by the middle of the sixteenth century, the privileges granted to the Genoese no longer had much to do with the actual way they conducted their trade. This is an important point, because the Genoese continued to be a vibrant group in Antwerp, despite their superfluous privileges. The Genoese "nation" had become a social network for Genoese merchants in Antwerp, rather than an institution committed to negotiating privileges.

South Germans were possibly the largest group of foreign merchants in the city,⁴⁵ and, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the South German merchant community as a body never sought privileges from the ruler. Antwerp's South German merchants were successful without the kinds of commercial privileges that the foreign merchant "nations" usually obtained. This is not surprising if we consider, for example, the Genoese privileges, which had little to do with actual business practices by the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, the South Germans presented themselves to the city as a unified group and formed a distinct community within the city. They were routinely referred to in official documents as the *Hoochduytse natie* (High German Nation). The High German nation existed, as a legal fiction to be sure, to provide southern

⁴⁴ Wilfred Brulez, "L'exportation des Pays-Bas vers l'Italie par voie de terre au milieu du XVI^e siècle", *Annales, E.S.C.* 14 (1959), p. 461.

⁴⁵ René Doehaerd, *Études Anversoises: Documents sur le commerce international à Anvers*, (Paris 1962).

German merchants with a network from which they could make contacts and exchange information. It also allowed German merchants to receive recognition in the marketplace and participate in the city's social events.

5. Conclusion

As large numbers of merchants increasingly began to operate in a particular city, it became a node on a network. Many scholars have demonstrated this. Individually, merchants were also nodes in human networks connecting themselves to other merchants through kith and kin networks, guilds, and through their associations with local businessmen. Once we begin examining the affairs of individual merchants, we begin to see how complex the web of commercial networks was in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. By exploring the ways scholars have conceptualised commercial networks for the sixteenth century and by looking at the types of network individuals employed, we can begin to understand better how merchants extended their commercial affairs beyond their local area and how merchants constructed their human networks.

Scholars have identified a web of networks connecting commercial cities in Europe. Merchants created these commercial networks when they engaged in trade between cities. But merchants participated in multiple networks. Some of these networks were based on commercial contacts, such as those between merchants, factors and craftsmen. Other networks, and perhaps those most important initially for extending trade into new areas, were often kin-based. Merchants were also part of families, members of church congregations, neighbourhoods and a variety of other associations that provided contacts, but were not always immediately connected with commerce.

The merchant guild was one of the structures that gave merchants a way to link together their operations in different cities, but it was not the only network merchants had for gathering commercial information, making connections and reducing risk. The members of Antwerp's foreign merchant guilds, for example, interacted with each other in the

marketplace, aware of the various privileges and interests each held. Early-modern merchant guilds together formed a network of merchants with common commercial interests and gave them opportunities for the exchange of information. Like other human networks, they were, to borrow a phrase from Ronald Coase, "a complex interrelated structure."⁴⁶

Both hierarchies and human networks were important organisational forms for merchants in early-modern Europe. But merchants were not restricted to only one form of organisation. The merchants and agents of even the largest firms made use of networks as they sought commercial information, privileges and status in the marketplace.

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