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**Early Medieval land structures and their possible impact on regional economic development within the Low Countries.
A comment on 'manors' in Bas van Bavel's *Manors and markets***

The impact of Early Medieval property structures and institutional arrangements on the later economic development is one of the most important issues raised in Bas van Bavel's recently published book. While acknowledging the fecundity of this perspective, this article highlights first of all the questionable regional framework used in the book, neglecting most of the French-speaking part of the Low Countries. Secondly, the use of the concept 'manor' by Van Bavel needs revision. Both the equation of manors with 'large landownership' and the evolution towards bi-partite estates are highly problematic. Through an examination of the importance of slavery in the Merovingian period, of the economic efficiency of the 'manors,' and of their disputed role in the emergence of markets, the role of the manor in the urban development of this part of Europe will be examined more closely, leading to a deepening and refining of Bas van Bavel's stimulating propositions.

In Bas van Bavel's latest book, the Early and High Middle Ages¹ enjoy an unusual importance, in comparison to most syntheses in economic and social history which barely consider the period before the eleventh century. Historians dealing with economic history often feel uncomfortable with the Early Middle Ages as statistical data are rare in this period. Furthermore, historiography is biased by national traditions. For example, while agrarian and trade history are very influential in British universities in most of the important works aiming to explain the late commercialisation of English society and urban development, they are only studied from the Norman Conquest onwards.² However, some historians pointed out the crucial importance of a transition phase to explain later developments, such as Derek Keene,³ in the English-speaking world, or Adriaan Verhulst in the Low Countries, whose continuous interest in the Early and High Middle Ages provided useful insights into the urban and agrarian development of Flanders from the Merovingian

1. We will use the author's periodisation, as defined in Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 9: 'the terms early, high and late middle ages will be used here to roughly designate the periods fifth to mid-ninth centuries, mid-ninth to twelfth centuries, and thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, respectively'.

2. See R.H. Britnell and B.M.S. Campbell (eds.), *A commercialising economy: England 1086 to c. 1300* (Manchester and New York 1995).

3. D. Keene, 'London in the Early Middle Ages', *London Journal* 20:2 (1995) 9-21.

period onwards.⁴ Breaking the traditional chronological boundaries, Bas van Bavel's book is thus innovative. So is one of its fundamental hypotheses: the contention that early medieval settlement and property patterns as well as institutional arrangements of exchange were of considerable influence on the later economic possibilities of the different regions included in the 'Low Countries'.⁵ The latter argument could at first glance seem tautological but arguably it is not, in view of the overall ignorance of the early centuries of the Middle Ages in syntheses. Van Bavel's institutionalist approach makes him much more insistent on the varied political and legal framings of economic and social activities than on geographical factors. The regional approach is the other linchpin of the book, resting upon Erik Thoen's social agro-system typology,⁶ and trying to explain the divergent developments of the different areas included in the Low Countries. Indeed, such a discrepancy could hardly be understood as the sole result of natural conditions. Acknowledging that the Early and High Middle Ages paved the way for further development is thus really essential, as its inclusion is one of the most original aspects of the work.

On the regional scope of the book

The author's attempt to escape from the classical and often teleological national approach, and thereby give a nuanced account of the regional diversity of the Low Countries, is noteworthy. Many scholars who deal with the Early Middle Ages also insist on the great variability witnessed in the social and economic practices encountered in northwestern Europe.⁷ Such an approach is thus more appropriate than any other in order to offer an explanation of the overall discrepancy between the different economic and social systems in the Low Countries.

However, the geographical framing in which this comparison is undertaken is questionable. First, there are a lot of omissions in the book: while considering the Low Countries as a coherent entity in the Middle Ages would indeed be a misconception, failing to deal with entire regions that are unquestionably part of these Low Countries is also problematic. The text itself as well as the maps of the Low Countries inserted in the book almost entirely neglect areas such as Hainaut, Brabant or Liège.⁸ This choice is acknowledged by

4. A. Verhulst, *The Carolingian economy* (Cambridge 2002).

5. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 9.

6. See the contribution of Soens and Thoen in this volume.

7. C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford 2005).

8. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 16-17.

the author, who says that he favors a *pars pro toto* approach.⁹ Nevertheless, there are probably other and more pragmatic reasons that explain this option, as the book leans mostly on the Dutch or Flemish historiography. This is positive because it offers a broader audience to a literature that could otherwise be neglected due to linguistic barriers. Moreover, in the last thirty years, economic and social history has generally been much more dynamic in the Dutch-speaking part of the Low Countries than in the French-speaking part of Belgium, although with noticeable exceptions. However, on a theoretical basis, it is difficult to justify the identification of the Low Countries with Flanders, the Guelders river area, Holland and Drenthe, and much less with the Meuse, Ardennes, Condruz and Haspengouw regions. Nor is it certain that the regions where so many different institutions were exerting their diverging influence, e.g. the eastern part of present-day Belgium, which concentrated competing feudal powers, were exposed to the same determinants as those scrutinised in the book. They could offer an excellent ground for stimulating comparison.

It is indeed rather striking that the regions singled out by Van Bavel were rather large, and experienced either a sole central authority or a complete lack of such authority in the Early and High Middle Ages, while the political landscape became much more complex on the eastern side of the River Scheldt. In the latter regions, it was indeed fragmented between territorial lords with very diverging interests, like the Counts of Brabant, Hainaut, Namur or Luxembourg; the Dukes of Limburg; the Prince-Bishops of Liège, and many others. This fragmentation in itself is not a sufficient factor, as Van Bavel points out, to explain development or relative backwardness.¹⁰ However, so many potentially diverging sets of institutions offer an especially interesting field of study, with various ways of organising commerce, property or fiscality. Investigating the effects of the specific sets of rules on the less striking development of urban centres in eastern Belgium would strengthen Van Bavel's propositions. One of our hypotheses is that, in the Middle Meuse area, despite a higher geographic potential, the competition between 'central' authorities, or between local ones protected by them, could affect or even obstruct economic development, altering the circulation of people or goods and preventing the birth of factor markets. Access to variable and complementary resources (wood, crops and ore, stone or meat...) was in itself an issue, potentially favouring economic growth, as shown by Erik Thoen for the county of Flanders.¹¹ To the east, more localised political influence, and more competition between prin-

9. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 8-9.

10. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 385-386.

11. E. Thoen, 'Le démarrage économique de la Flandre au Moyen Age, Economie rurale et économie urbaine au moyen âge', in: A. Verhulst and Y. Morimoto (eds.), *Landwirtschaft und Stadtwirtschaft im Mittelalter* (Ghent and Kyushu 1994), 165-184.

cialities, could result in a less constant availability of primary resources and/or fierce struggles over the control of regional and interregional transports. This can be noticed in the twelfth century with the Duke of Brabant attempted to gain access to the Meuse area, and finally expanded much further towards the north, as Brabant was gaining economic and political power in a parallel way.¹² Another example can be found in the similar competition between the Count of Namur and the Prince-Bishop of Liège.

Flanders, with its diverse hinterland under one rule, its access to the sea, or Holland, admittedly with a slightly less rich hinterland, but relying on the coast and on an improved circulation of goods from the eleventh century onwards, were less exposed to the fierce rivalries due to the feudal fragmentation of powers in eastern Belgium. This eastern feudal fragmentation was the consequence of the more central and strategic position of Lower 'Lotharingia' in Carolingian and post-Carolingian times and to its internal richness, which proves somehow that Bas van Bavel is right to stress the importance of Early Medieval history for later developments. But there are other factors that could have been of influence, as we will see below. Despite historiographical difficulties, the inclusion of eastern and southern Belgium could have enriched the book substantially. Moreover, the way regions are framed and cut out in the book is not always satisfactory; the definition of what counts as a region is rather blurred: the Middle Meuse valley appears to be a region in itself, cut off from its surrounding countryside in Condroz and Haspengouw, with which it shared a political and economic destiny!¹³

On a broader basis, Bas van Bavel aims to bring comparative history to this particular field: he analyzes in-depth divergences between some areas of the Low Countries. But he barely compares the Low Countries with surrounding regions. As a consequence, this is, at best, internal comparison, with no external indicator. It would have been more meaningful to compare the 'Low Countries', or rather its different areas, with neighbouring but possibly diverging economies, such as the south of England, which was also affected by the Viking imprint just like Frisia. A comparison with the north of France, especially Picardy, could have explained why the latter area did not experience a comparable growth in the Early and High Middle Ages as some arable areas in the Low Countries did, despite its favourable soil conditions. Southwestern Germany and the Rhenan area also offer rich possibilities for comparison. A true integration of these areas would have made the interregional comparison stronger. The author, on the one hand, wants to emancipate himself from the 'national' frame or vague geographical expressions such as the Low Countries, preferring a more coherent frame for investigation, indeed the 'region' itself. But, on the other hand, he privileges only some regions within the tra-

12. R. Van Uytven (ed.), *Histoire du Brabant du duché à nos jours* (Zwolle 2004).

13. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 16-17 (map 1).

ditional boundaries of the 'Low Countries', despite the fact that he denies any relevance to these traditional boundaries, which is quite paradoxical.

The manor

As the title indicates, the manorial paradigm is a central issue in the book. Van Bavel argues that areas where manors were established at an early stage offered the landlords a predominance that would last for centuries, even though it would gradually shift from a non-economic one to an economic one, based on large leased-out properties. Van Bavel recognises manorial structures in some of the areas he scrutinises, mainly the Guelders region and Haspengouw, and in a different form in Frisia, while manorial organisation was scarce and rather fragile in inland Flanders or in the Campine area, thus leading to divergences in later developments. This assumption, really stimulating in itself, has to be thoroughly investigated.

We should first deal with the concept of 'manor' as used by Bas van Bavel. In itself, the word 'manor' is probably not ideal as it can only be used literally in the English area, after the Anglo-Norman conquest. The Anglo-Norman 'manor' is not identical to the Carolingian *grand domaine* or the German *Grundherrschaft*. As Wickham rightly argues, each linguistic term carries its own implicit meaning.¹⁴

To avoid misconceptions, the precise meaning of manor should thus be more carefully explained here, especially as, in Bas van Bavel's book, it seems to cover various types of large estates. It would not be fair to suggest that the author is not aware of the variability of the 'manorial' structures. Indeed, he acknowledges that the 'precise organisation of the manor showed wide regional differences, depending on the extent of large properties, the power of the lords and the former position of the serfs'.¹⁵ However, despite these nuances, Van Bavel uses the concept of manor so repeatedly in an undifferentiated way that a clarification is necessary. Van Bavel's manor is an extensive one, which could include every medium-sized or large property owned by lay aristocrats or churches and associating, even in a loose manner, peasant holdings dependent on an elite-controlled centre, such as a *curtis*. He identifies manorial characteristics first of all with 'non-economic coercion' in an uneven and non-contractual relationship; second, with control over the peasants' labour (while often almost absent in less 'classical' forms of manorial organisation where dues in kind or money were paid by peasants); and third, with the impossibility of movement of the dependent peasants, who were tied

14. C. Wickham, 'Problems of comparing rural societies in early medieval Western Europe', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 2 (1999) 221-246.

15. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 75.

to the land. Finally, according to the author's view, the role of former slaves now established on familial holdings provided by the masters is central in manorial organisation as they formed the huge mass of the dependent holdings. (Yet again, to be fair, Van Bavel recognises, although maybe too concisely, that some former free peasants could be included as well in the manorial frame.)¹⁶ Mostly, he sees the merging of the free and the former slaves in an intermediary social class of 'serfs', a word he already uses for Carolingian times, which is unusual.

While these views are far from absurd, some are rather sketchy and need to be nuanced. First of all, the context in which 'manorialism' was rooted should be framed better. In the book, the period between Late Antiquity and Carolingian times is considered a low in terms of people, power and agrarian structures. This overall view is correct, but the depiction of Merovingian times should be adapted in the light of some important new studies. For instance, the population figures cited for the mid-seventh century Meuse valley, Guelders, etc. are now considered wishful thinking.¹⁷ Bas van Bavel rightly discards the paradigm of continuity of the ancient Roman estates and the potential links between ancient slaves and medieval 'plantation workers'. But he does not rely on important publications on the social and economic structures of the Merovingian period that are highly relevant for any serious scrutiny of the question of whether the 'path toward the manorial structures was paved' or not. Here the problem of the vanishing of slavery in Merovingian times is a central and complex issue, especially if Van Bavel wants to show how institutional arrangements conditioned later development.

The evidence of Merovingian slaves working on the master's estates is scarce if not nonexistent.¹⁸ On the small and even on the larger aristocratic estates, plantation slavery is questionable, and the renting of smaller holdings to free tenants may have been the rule,¹⁹ while the large landowners had no demesne (*indominicatum*) at all. This does not mean that there were no dues: the concept of 'loose' or 'extensive' lordship or *abatement*, described by Roz Faith²⁰ and M. Innes, among others, could be very useful here.²¹ In the core

16. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 76-77.

17. Compare Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 36 table 2.2 to J.-P. Devroey, *Économie rurale et société dans l'Europe franque (VIIe-IXe siècles)*, 1, *Fondements matériels, échanges et lien social* (Paris 2003).

18. H.-W. Goetz, 'Serfdom and the beginnings of a seigneurial system in the Carolingian period and a survey of evidence', *Early Medieval Europe* 2 (1993) 29-51.

19. M.-J. Tits-Dieuaide, 'Grands domaines, grandes et petites exploitations en Gaule mérovingienne', in: A. Verhulst (ed.), *Le grand domaine aux époques mérovingienne et carolingienne* (Ghent 1985) 23-50; Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages*.

20. R. Faith, *The English peasantry and the growth of lordship* (London 1997).

21. M. Innes, *State and society in the early Middle Ages: The middle Rhine society* (Cambridge 2000).

of the Merovingian realm as well as in Scandinavia or on the other side of the Channel, domination was not always exerted in an intensive manner on a geographically coherent area. Rather, the acknowledgement of a lord's dominance could be expressed by the gift of tributes or objects which cannot be properly qualified as 'taxes,' and that expressed a personal or collective 'subjection' or at least adhesion to a superior ruling.²² In this way, loose lordship could form a conceptual starting point to characterise the economic system that preceded the progressive intensification of social and economic control that started from Merovingian times onwards in some fertile areas, and that was embodied in the *système classique* from the sixth or seventh centuries onwards. It is thus questionable – while not excluding that the establishment of the manorial system originated from the 'end of slavery' because it is perfectly possible that elites withdrew a part of their revenues from the renting and/or extracting of dues in a less intensive way.

This does not mean that slavery was not widespread, but its importance in Merovingian agriculture remains widely open. It is now acknowledged that the shift toward the classical bi-partite manorial system started from Merovingian times onwards. Hence the bi-partite system is no longer acknowledged as purely 'Carolingian' nor was it the sole effect of a royal policy. The Merovingian and Carolingian church in general, and rich abbeys and cathedral churches in particular, played an important role in it, probably more through its implementation on their estates or through the use of their intellectual abilities in literacy and accounting than through predication.²³ The core of the movement was situated in the Parisian area. This is far from accidental, due to the importance of this region in the seventh century, before the rise of Austrasia and especially the Pippinids' Middle Meuse Valley. It also offers a possible explanation for the distribution of the purely bi-partite classical estates, which are limited to some *villae* of Saint-Germain-des-Prés close to Paris. In the latter region, the organisation of the bi-partite estate started earlier, and Merovingian power was fully exerted.

In Austrasia, Flanders or in the Guelders area, the large property was not often 'classically' organised. Already in 1985 Devroey emphasised the variability of 'manorial' forms in the eastern part of Belgium, where the classical bi-partite model was rarely encountered, despite the presence of rich abbeys, often founded in Merovingian times, such as Lobbes, Stavelot and Malmedy, Saint-Trond, Prüm or Saint-Hubert.²⁴ Where available, documents often show

22. S. Sato, 'L'agrarium, la charge paysanne avant le régime domanial, VII^e-VIII^e s.', *Journal of Medieval Studies* 24 (1998) 103-125.

23. As suggested by Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 80-81.

24. J.-P. Devroey, 'La diversité des formes domaniales en Belgique romane', in: *Mélanges Jean-Jacques Hoebanx* (Bruxelles 1985) 29-45 and idem, *Puissants et misérables. Système social et monde paysan dans l'Europe des Francs (VI^e-IX^e siècles)* (Brussels 2006).

heavy rents in kind or money paid by dependent holdings, or direct management through monastic farms. The following centuries (especially the tenth and eleventh) confirm this trend: Eastern and southern Haspengouw (the area of Liège) saw the foundation of a lot of rich churches (including important secular chapters) which owned a considerable part of the countryside and implemented there a bi-partite system that was far from being classical but mainly based on the payment of dues.²⁵

While a lot of work still has to be done on eastern Belgium, these conclusions do have some consequences for Bas van Bavel's theory, not least with regard to the institutional arrangements associated with manorial structures. While, as pointed earlier, the impact of slavery remains open, the weight of other burdens of exploitation raises the question of a possibly broader integration of 'free' peasant holdings in manorial structures, peasants who can find a few advantages in being associated with a larger structure (escaping from military service, among others), or even partly or entirely free craftsmen or peasants, whose association with the manorial framework could not be very tight. Let us add that the contractual nature of this association is far more open than suggested in Van Bavel's book, who emphasises coercion in manorial relations, which is still being discussed by researchers.²⁶

Secondly, in order to explain the use of coercion in manorial structures, Van Bavel points to the lack of available workforce and the need for its requisition. If so, the fact that *corvée* was not widespread in the Low Countries raises some unsolved questions. Was it the effect of the impossibility for large landowners to impose coercion on a relatively free peasantry and hence the result of a balance of power less favourable to the landowners? Or was it a conscious choice due to a later installation of the system and in favour of a model based on dues, which had to be less intensely monitored than boon work? Or conversely, were the specific characteristics of the manorial system in this region due to a better availability of labour than assumed by Van Bavel? Indeed, the 'outsiders' able to perform some work were much more frequent than suggested in *Manors and markets*, not only in the Low Countries, but also elsewhere. Van Bavel rightly mentioned the *haistaldi*, isolated workers who may have been employed as wage-workers; but a lot of similar characters appear in polyptychs. Some form of flexibility in land availability even

25. A. Wilkin, *La gestion des avoirs de la cathédrale Saint-Lambert de Liège des origines à 1300. Contribution à l'histoire économique et institutionnelle du pays mosan* (Brussels 2008).

26. L. Kuchenbuch, 'Porcus donativus: Language use and gifting in seigneurial records between the eighth and the twelfth centuries', in: G. Algazi, V. Gröbner and B. Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the gift: premodern figurations of exchange* (Göttingen 2003) 193-246; M. Bourin, 'Facere servitium et donare censum. Le vocabulaire du prélèvement seigneurial dans la France du Midi : l'exemple du Languedoc méditerranéen', in: M. Bourin and P. Martinez Sopena (eds.), *Pour une anthropologie du prélèvement seigneurial dans les campagnes médiévales (XIe-XIVe siècles). Réalités et représentations paysannes* (Paris 2004) 2, 87ff

existed in a few cases, offered by the *mansi absi*, which were holdings that were not occupied permanently by a tenant family but rented on a temporal basis according to the needs of the other existing holdings. Finally, credit did exist in the Early Middle Ages: rich churches were lending money, much earlier than the eleventh century.²⁷ While depicting ‘factor markets’ for the Early Medieval times would indeed be absurd, the ‘manorial’ system was thus capable of adaptation.

Conversely, the so-called ‘decline’ of the manorial system has to be reassessed, not only in Van Bavel’s book, but in many syntheses which still rest on classical views. If boon work or *corvée* was not widespread in the Low Countries, the frequent use of rents in kind or money throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries does not necessarily reflect the ‘decay’ of a previous system. It might equally be an indicator of a previous and different way of organising large properties.²⁸ We also should bear in mind that the shift from a ‘manorial’ to a ‘rent’ system, where existing, was not straightforward and linear.²⁹ The history of manorial management is far more complicated and has evolved in a zigzag fashion, with direct management or a looser kind of administration directly linked to the religious and economical politics of ecclesiastical communities according to circumstances. Van Bavel mentions it for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; but it also has to be underlined for earlier periods. Finally, the specific goals of the ecclesiastical communities have to be integrated in the analysis, as they were searching for equilibrium, not always for profit maximisation. From this point of view, *corvée* and the *mansus* system may have prevented potential instability in the availability of labour, as fixed charges enhanced predictability and long-term planning rather than being a solution for the lack of available wage workers.

Fourthly, what is at stake in *Manors and markets* is the impact of the ‘manorial’ organisation on the later growth – or the absence of growth – of the regions scrutinised in the book. Despite their importance, the remarks expressed above do not really affect most of Bas van Bavel’s conclusions with regard to the later development of the areas taken into consideration. In

27. F. Bougard, ‘Le crédit aux VIII^e-X^e siècles. Pratique et documentation’, in: J.-P. Devroey, L. Feller and R. Le Jan (eds.), *La richesse des élites au Haut Moyen Age* (Turnhout 2010).

28. Wilkin, *Gestion des avoirs*, passim.

29. G. Brunel, ‘La France des corvées. Vocabulaire et pistes de recherches’, in: Bourin and Marintez Sopena, *Pour une anthropologie*, 1, 271-290 dismissing older statements by F.-L. Ganshof, ‘Une étape de la décomposition de l’organisation domaniale classique à l’abbaye de Saint-Trond’, *Fédération archéologique et historique de Belgique* 29:5 (1932) 22-40 and G. Despy, ‘L’exploitation des curtes en Brabant du IX^e siècle aux environs de 1300’, in: W. Jansen and D. Lohrmann (eds.), *Villa–curtis–grangia. Landwirtschaft zwischen Loire und Rhein von der Römerzeit zum Hochmittelalter. Économie rurale entre Loire et Rhin de l’époque gallo-romaine au XI^e-XIII^e siècle*. 16. *Deutsch-französisches Historikerkolloquium des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Paris. Xanten*, 28.9 – 1.10-1980 (Munich 1983), 185-204.

those regions where large ecclesiastical or lay property existed, it seems that in most cases landowners were able to maintain their position for centuries. Whether they did so despite the ‘decay’ of the manorial system based on *corvée*, or through adoption of a manorial structure already resting mostly on dues, remains open. But almost everywhere, if we set apart inland Flanders, a lot of rich landowners succeeded in maintaining their position. This was also the case in eastern Belgium, in Haspengouw, where churches remained rich proprietors until the end of the *Ancien Régime*, leasing out most of their properties. However, we would like to pinpoint a singularity in this region: in the eighteenth century, slightly more than one-third of the countryside in Haspengouw was in the hands of peasant families, one-third in the hands of the church, 20 percent in the hands of nobility and around 10 percent in the hands of burghers³⁰ with huge discrepancies between different villages, and often a bigger persistence of small peasant property in places where the cathedral church of Liège or other secular chapters were also landowners.

In addition to the possible fragmentation of the peasant property caused by demographic pressure, as suggested by Van Bavel, the continuous persistence of peasant property may be due to an earlier appropriation of soil by peasantry who held firm rights to it, even before the arrival of ecclesiastical communities in the tenth century, which adopted a loose type of manorial organisation in this region. In Haspengouw, this appropriation of land by peasant landowners might have prevented the birth of ‘agrarian capitalism’, but this has to be confirmed by complementary research, which is urgently needed to establish the link between the Early and High Middle Ages on the one hand and the later periods on the other. This should also be undertaken for the Condroz region, which displayed quite a different profile in the Early Modern period, with half of the countryside in the hands of nobility, who employed poor wage-workers to cultivate their lands.³¹ For this region as well, characteristics of rural society established in the Early and High Middle Ages might have played a determining role in further developments.

Fifthly, the question of the efficiency of early medieval agriculture, its influence on urban growth and its orientation toward the market deserves a more central role in the book and sometimes needs revision. Specifically, the latter remark applies to the ideas on agricultural techniques: as recently proved, the swivel plow did exist in Merovingian times,³² as well as the long-handed scythe, but later on they were simplified, and no further evidence of them has

30. I. Delatte, *Les classes rurales dans la principauté de Liège au XVIII^e s.* (Liège 1945).

31. Delatte, *Classes rurales*.

32. J. Henning, “Heiße Eisen” der frühen Rechtsgeschichte: Pflugschare als Grabbeigaben in der Merowinger- und Karolingerzeit, in: H. Brink-Kloke and H. Deutmann (eds.), *Die Herrschaften von Asseln: Ein frühmittelalterliches Gräberfeld am Dortmunder Hellweg* (Munich 2007) 109–114.

yet been found before 900. More questionable and more important is the interaction between the existence of urban centers and manorial production. First, it seems a little surprising that the book should almost totally ignore the fierce debates surrounding the efficiency of large estates in the Early Middle Ages, with the notable exception of Georges Duby's famous synthesis.³³ Duby's pessimistic views have been amplified by Robert Fossier and stimulated the editing of a lot of articles by Verhulst, Morimoto, Devroey, Hägermann or Pierre Toubert, and a special issue of the *Flaran* series that, maybe too optimistically, revealed the dynamics of the so-called manorial structures that somehow paved the way towards economic growth and urban rebirth in Western Europe. Ideally, this should be reflected in the synthesis, just like the opposite view expressed in the provocative article of Joachim Henning on the rebirth of post-Roman urban centres after the end of the manorial system – a phenomenon that, according to Henning, exerted a parasitical influence and had negative effects on urban and rural standards of life.³⁴

With regard to the role of manorial lords in urban development, Van Bavel's argument wavers: on the one hand, he suggests that manor and urban markets were not compatible – the second being an alternative to the first one.³⁵ On the other hand, he acknowledges the geographical proximity between manors and *emporia* and the further evolution of monastic central places towards urban centres. The characteristics of the shift from a non-urban Carolingian society where rural estates were dominant towards an urbanised society around 1000, and the possible role of the countryside on urbanisation are rather blurred, although Van Bavel recognises the importance of agrarian surpluses to sustain urban growth.³⁶ If we follow Henning's audacious model – but here, again, these are hypotheses to be carefully looked at in the future – the decline of centralisation of agrarian surpluses and craft products in the manorial frame from 900 onwards enabled the new emergence of urban centres as areas of craft production and places of exchange. This explanation, briefly summarised here, would be interesting, especially as two of the most urbanised areas of the Low Countries, inland Flanders and the Middle Meuse valley, experienced a weak or vanishing 'manorialism', as suggested by Erik Thoen, and a kind of late and loose manorial structure that did not have the capacity to centralise craft products, respectively. If so, according to Henning, the manorial weakness allowed for further urban rede-

33. Discussed in Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 131.

34. J. Henning, 'Early European towns. The development of the economy in the Frankish realm between dynamism and deceleration AD 500-1100', in: Joachim Henning (ed.), *Post-Roman towns, trade and settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, vol. 1: *The heirs of the Roman West* (Berlin and New York 2007) 3-40.

35. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 81.

36. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 117.

ployment, in combination with other factors. In both cases, the protective and administrative stimulus behind urban growth was offered by wealthy (also with regard to estates), strong, and long-lasting territorial lords (the Count of Flanders and the Bishop of Liège) redirecting part of their agrarian surpluses to urban centres, while other factors already discussed above or in the book could explain the divergence in further economic 'efficiency' of both areas.

Whether these views are partially confirmed or not, this debate on the integration of the production and distribution spheres, from 500 until the eleventh or twelfth centuries, remains highly problematic and broadly unsolved due to the lack of documentary evidence. Archaeology might offer a solution: scholars such as Chris Wickham suggest archeological data such as the distribution of different types of ceramics should be used as indicators of trends in economical circulation, connecting the productive and distributive spheres.³⁷ Whatever overall scheme will result from these further investigations, it is almost certain that the countryside played a decisive role in the birth, growth, and persistence of urban elites. While the pure manorial system may have contributed to the downfall of urban life, the rich landed elites understood very early the opportunities offered by an urban context where they could sell or distribute surplus production. They associated themselves with urban power, and sometimes confiscated the latter, as shown for medieval Brussels where a true *inurbamento* happened.³⁸ Sometimes they also created and stimulated new urban development. Moreover, self-provisioning, which is often considered typical of a 'manorial society', also exists in an urbanised society. The close association between self-provisioning and power was not confined to the Early Middle Ages, but lasted much longer, as late as the end of the *Ancien Régime*, even in an urban context. The principle stating that *le roi doit vivre du sien* – that is, living from his revenues – is still present in an urbanised world, where *Selbstbesorgung* is an ideal for counts and prince-bishops. Only the emergence of truly interconnected markets put an end to this situation. And even nowadays, different economic logics can coexist and interfere.

Conclusions

In the present field of research, one still feels the need for a cross-analysis of the economic structures of the densely exploited and populated areas where large property was initially present, but where pure 'manorial' structures were

37. C. Wickham, 'Rethinking the structures of the Early Medieval Economy', in: J.R. Davies and M. McCormick (eds.), *The long morning of medieval Europe: New directions in early medieval studies*, (Hampshire-Burlington 2008) 18-31.

38. P. Charruadas, *Bruxelles et sa région. Entre croissance économique et action seigneuriale (haut moyen âge-XIIIE s.)* (Brussels, in preparation).

not dominant, such as Guelders, inland Flanders and eastern Haspengouw. The latter region is crucial in this comparative enterprise: it showed a high density of holdings inserted in larger structures and a complex intermingling of feudal powers, but its economic dynamism was slowing down. The take-off of urban development in Haspengouw was spectacular, but the region did not follow the Flemish boom, and it probably did not achieve anything like agrarian capitalism or pronounced specialisation.³⁹ As a possible explanation for this, Van Bavel singles out demographic pressure and the lack of agricultural innovation. Other elements might be added: first of all the intermingling of concurrent feudal powers controlling roads, fluvial networks and commerce (which is the classic explanation); secondly, the early fragmentation of rural property and peasant land appropriation in the most fertile areas; and finally, the conservative management of wealthy landowners in general, and churches in particular.

As a general conclusion, one might ask whether the above-mentioned criticisms and queries imply a denial of the importance of the book or the strength of its hypotheses. This is definitely not the case, as *Manors and markets* is audacious, clear and systematic. Van Bavel's synthesis is a fascinating enterprise providing useful insights. It clearly evolves in the right direction. Nevertheless, some corrections are needed, especially with regard to 'manorial' structures. Let us add that a lot of the scrutinised regions do not encounter the large property discussed in this contribution but were characterised by strong geographical and institutional particularities (sandy or peaty areas). Van Bavel's description is in this case often plainly valid and explicative. Finally, one of the book's fundamental assumptions – the influence of Early Medieval occupation on later developments – has already proved stimulating for the 'manorial' zones and has to be systematised and applied to regions that do not enjoy an in-depth study in this book. By raising new questions or provoking reactions or objections, Van Bavel's book proves innovative and groundbreaking, and will certainly stimulate further research. In itself, this is already praiseworthy.

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39. Among others, it avoided the spectacular specialisation in the production of woad that was localised closer to Brabant: A. Joris, 'La guède en Hesbaye au moyen âge (XIII^e-XV^e siècles)', *Le Moyen Age* (1963) 773-789.