



TRABAJAR EN LA CIUDAD MEDIEVAL EUROPEA

JESÚS Á. SOLÓRZANO TELECHEA
ARNALDO SOUSA MELO
(EDITORES)

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JESÚS ÁNGEL SOLÓRZANO TELECHEA
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From the tavern to the meat hall. Women's economic activities in the fifteenth and sixteenth century butchers guild in Leuven

Nena Vandeweerd
University of Leuven

INTRODUCTION

“Butchers have been described as an organization of vigorous men, quite accustomed to blood and death, tenaciously in pursuit of social promotion, acting as a monolithic group in medieval societies and urban politics”¹.

The butchers guild has been the subject of several medievalists' studies covering multiple regions of Europe². These craftsmen are often depicted as rough, violent, but prosperous men. In many towns, their craft guild was one of the first corporations, and membership was often limited to traditional butchers

1. Costantini, V. “On a red line across Europe: butchers and rebellions in fourteenth-century Siena”, *Social History*, 41, 2016: 72-92, 73.

2. I want to thank Shennan Hutton for correcting my English and for her useful remarks. This article is a revised version of an article I published in *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*.

families³. The topic of women in this economically powerful corporation has received remarkably less attention in historiography. Shennan Hutton, in her study on women's economic activities in late medieval Ghent, argued that the butchers guild was one of the first corporations to prohibit women's access to the guild⁴. Yet, the case of Leuven, a town in the duchy of Brabant in the Low Countries, shows that women did have opportunities in this corporation.

In this article, I will investigate the position of women in the Leuven butchers guild in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in order to argue two points that address current historiographical debates. First, I will show how the exclusive structure of craft guilds affected women working in these occupations. Second, I will show that women's agency was not consistent throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but fluctuated over time. In other words, there was no steady decline beginning in the Late Middle Ages, as is often maintained by traditional and modern scholars⁵. To support these arguments, I use the ordinances of the town council of Leuven and the statutes of its butchers guild, dating from approximately 1350 to 1593. In-depth study of these sources demonstrates that women had more agency in the exclusive butchers guild of Leuven than scholars have posited for the same guild in other towns. While the contrast with the Flemish town of Ghent is particularly striking, studies of butchers guilds in many other European towns have paid limited attention to the participation of women⁶.

1. THE TOWN COUNCIL OF LEUVEN AND ITS ORDINANCES

Leuven was the capital of one of the four quarters of the duchy of Brabant, a region belonging to the Burgundian Empire, and after 1482 to the Habsburg Empire. Beginning as the ducal residence, Leuven then obtained privileges from

3. For more information about the general characteristics of the European butchers guilds, see the paragraph 'Butchers guilds throughout Europe'.

4. Hutton, S. *Women and economic activities in late medieval Ghent*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, 413.

5. Both historiographical issues will be explained more thoroughly in the following paragraphs.

6. See among others: Muñoz Fernández, A., Segura Graiño, C. *El trabajo de las mujeres en la edad media hispánica*. Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, Madrid, 1988; López Beltrán, M.T. "El trabajo de las mujeres en el mundo urbano medieval", *El trabajo de las mujeres en España*, 40, 2010: 39-57.

the duchy and became the location of the central court of appeal for Brabant⁷. The town was governed by a select group of aldermen and a slightly larger council, which composed the ordinances and guild statutes discussed in this article. As Raymond Van Uytven explains, these ordinances included legislation on matters affecting the entire daily life of the town, promulgated by the town council⁸. In the fifteenth century, the council consisted of twenty-one members, ten of whom belonged to the Leuven craft guilds. Corporations thus enjoyed an unusually high degree of political participation, won by them in the late fourteenth century⁹. The forty-two craft guilds of Leuven were divided into ten 'craft nations', each of which selected one new council member biannually. Since the butchers and the fishmongers formed one of these nations, the butchers had one permanent representative on the council¹⁰. Craft guilds used other methods as well to publicize their political inclinations. The council drew up several ordinances upon the explicit request of corporations, which were concerned about provisions that would affect their economic and social position¹¹. This evidence strongly suggests that the butchers guild would have influenced the council's provisions about women's work in that guild as well.

Leuven was located on the last navigable stretch of the Dijle River, which flowed through the whole town. The town was an important hub for trade with the German Rhineland and other areas. During the fifteenth century, there were approximately 17,000 inhabitants, making it a mid-sized town in the urbanized

7. Van Uytven, R. "Het gewicht van de goede steden", Van Uytven et. al. (Eds.) *Geschiedenis van Brabant. Van het bertogdom tot beden*. Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2004, 118-125, 118-119.

8. Van Uytven, R. "Beroering onder de Brabantse steden", Van Uytven et. al. (Eds.) *Geschiedenis van Brabant. Van het bertogdom tot beden*. Davidsfonds, Leuven, 2004, 171-179, 177.

9. Haemers, J. "Bloed en inkt. Een nieuwe blik op opstand en geweld te Leuven, 1360-1383", *Stadsgeschiedenis*, 7, 2012: 141-164.

10. The butchers guild was more prestigious than the fishmongers guild, as they appear higher on the list of craft guilds in Leuven, which was sorted by importance. Moreover, the fishmongers were less prosperous, as they had to tolerate more competition from individuals selling fish from their own lands, as an ordinance from 1453 shows. City Archives of Leuven (CAL), Old Archives (OA), 1523, 't Groot Gemeynboeck B (1523), 6 September 1433, fo. 53r-53v; CAL, OA, 4659, *Ordonnances relatives au Marché au poisson et aux poissonniers* (4659) 17 July 1453, fo. 1r – 9r.

11. In my master's thesis I analysed ordinances and craft statutes to determine women's position in the corporations in Leuven. 33% of these ordinances were promulgated following a request from the craft guilds. For the other 64%, it is uncertain whether the town council composed them by its own initiative or by influence from the craft guilds.

Low Countries¹². Although its economic prosperity declined somewhat in the fifteenth century, there was still significant trade with the surrounding area. An ordinance from 1424, for example, forbade non-residents from selling fish before ten o'clock¹³. Leuven was still a centre for certain high-quality goods, like leather gloves¹⁴. Production in Leuven mainly took place in households. The household, as Martha Howell describes for a similar urban centre during the Late Middle Ages, “was small and was headed by a nuclear couple who had first married rather late and at about the same age”¹⁵. The couple formed a ‘family production unit’ in which men and women performed separate tasks, but were both responsible for the well-being of the household. Wives not only assisted their husbands, but also had to be able to perform certain tasks on their own, because they would take full responsibility for the household if their husbands died prematurely. Their participation, as Marianne Kowaleski and Judith Bennett state, made it necessary to incorporate them into the structures of the craft guilds. Their omnipresence was taken into account, rather than hindered¹⁶. The ordinances often use formulae beginning with ‘*that no [craftsman], nor his wife, children nor a servant may*’, showing that the family production unit was the most significant element of the Leuven economy¹⁷.

Preservation of the ordinances and guilds’ statutes make possible a normative study of women’s agency in the town’s craft guilds. In his analysis of town ordinances, Peter Stabel argues that the recurrence of certain regulations demonstrates that the practices described actually happened. Other scholars studying

12. Van Uytven, R. *Leuven, ‘de beste stad van Brabant’. 1: De geschiedenis van het stadsgewest Leuven tot omstreeks 1600*. Vrienden stedelijk museum, Leuven, 1980, 113-114; Stabel, P. “From the market to the shop. Retail and urban space in late medieval Bruges”, Blondé, B. et. al. (Eds.) *Buyers & sellers. Retail circuits and practices in medieval and early modern Europe*. Brepols, Turnhout, 2006: 79-108, 81-82.

13. *Item, dat nyemand, man noch wijf, wij bi sij denghenen die visch barync of botsoren te Lovene te coepe doen brengen of doen brengen [...] deraen staen op te vischmarct noch esswaer om te coepen voer der tijt dat tgoet op te vischmarct afgeset ende ontladen sal sijn*. CAL, 1528, *Ordonnances et autres actes* (1528), 13 August 1424, fo. 37v.

14. Van Uytven, R. *Het dagelijkse leven in een middeleeuwse stad. Leuven anno 1448*. Davidsfonds, Leuven, 1998, 32.

15. Howell, M. *Women, production, and patriarchy in late medieval cities*. University of Chicago Press, London, 1989, 87.

16. Kowaleski, M., Bennett, J.M. “Crafts, guilds and women in the Middle Ages. 50 years after Marian K. Dale”, *Signs*, 14, 1989: 474-501, 479.

17. The word *craftsman* has to be replaced by the craft that the ordinance is referring to. E.g.: “That no butcher, nor his wife [...]”. CAL, OA, 4648, *Ordonnances générales concernant tous les métiers* (4648), 31 January 1467, fo. 168r-172v.

women's labour opportunities in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period have used these normative documents as well¹⁸. The twelve ordinances I analysed for this article contain provisions involving female activities in the butchers guild. Ordinances have shortcomings; they lack quantitative data and specific information about women named in the provisions. They do not reflect actual practice. This inconvenience can be overcome by using sources that do reflect such practices, such as dispute settlements. Although most have been lost over time, the evidence from three dispute settlements involving women in the Leuven butchers guild offer important correctives to the normative ordinances.

2. A VIEW OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

In 1919, Alice Clark argued that the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth century led to a decline in labour opportunities for urban women, thus bringing an end to a "Golden Age" caused by the corporate character of the Late Middle Ages¹⁹. This decline thesis shaped the historiographical debates in pre-industrial gender studies from the 1980s onwards. Martha Howell and Merry Wiesner contested and adjusted Clark's original thesis. Both observed a change in women's agency after the the Late Middle Ages, as women's public opportunities in towns decreased, and they were restricted to lower-status occupations and work in households. The reason for this change, according to Howell and Wiesner, could be found in the corporative groups that Clark had praised. In their professionalization and specialisation of labour, craft guilds had pushed women to the margins of urban economies²⁰. Other historians, like Natalie Zemon Davis, also pointed to craft guilds to explain women's declining agency. The lack of social mobility for women within the vertical structure of the corporations automatically directed them to the lower-status tasks in the labour market²¹.

18. Kittell, E.E., Queller, K. "Whether man or woman": gender inclusivity in the town ordinances of medieval Douai, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30, 2000: 63-100; Schmidt, A. "Women and guilds: corporations and female labour market participation in early modern Holland", *Gender & History*, 21, 2009: 170-189.

19. Clark, A. *The working life of women in the seventeenth century*. Routledge. London, 1919.

20. Howell, Women, production, and patriarchy; Wiesner, M. "Guilds, male bonding and women's work in early modern Germany", *Gender & History*, 1, 1989: 125-137.

21. Zemon Davis, N. "Women in the crafts in sixteenth-century Lyon", Hanawalt, B.A. (Ed.) *Women and work in preindustrial Europe*. Indiana university press, Bloomington, 1986: 167-197.

Recently, the decline thesis has returned to the forefront of this debate. Hutton argues in favour of that decline in the fifteenth century, because there were women in the middle ranks of the Ghent drapery, the premier industry of that city, in the fourteenth century, but they were increasingly limited to lower-status occupations in the next century²². Stabel maintains that the political power of craft guilds curtailed women's agency. Through this power, guild members increased their own economic prosperity at the expense of women's labour opportunities²³. However, Tine de Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden argue against the decline thesis and situate the restriction of women's opportunities in a later period than others do. In their view, the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century was a turning point in women's agency in the Low Countries. Because of the high mortality, single women gained opportunities in urban economies through the advantageous European Marriage Pattern (EMP). Because the situation only began to change in the early modern period, the fifteenth century even gave rise to opportunities for some women²⁴.

Others have contested the argument for decline as well. Bennett argues that women had already been working in unfavourable conditions since the thirteenth century; their work lives did not change fundamentally until the eighteenth century.²⁵ Several early modernists position themselves between these two perspectives. They maintain that female labour opportunities did not remain continuous throughout the Ancien Regime, but were liable to fluctuation²⁶. In contrast to this position, I argue that women's agency in the Leuven butchers guild did not diminish over time. However, female labour did become more visible, as a result of changes in the guild's hereditary practices.

22. Hutton, S. "The changing fortunes of the burgher and patrimonial construction", *Women and economic activities in late medieval Ghent*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011: 123-142.

23. Stabel, P. "Women at the market. Gender and retail in the towns of late medieval Flanders", Blockmans, W. et al. (Eds.) *Secretum Scriptorum. Liber alumnorum Walter Prevenier*. Garant, Leuven-Apeldoorn, 1999: 259-276; Stabel, P. "Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment", *Journal of Medieval History*, 30, 2004: 187-212, 195.

24. De Moor, T. and van Zanden, J.L. "Girl power. The European Marriage Pattern and labour markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period", *The Economic History Review*, 63, 2010: 1-33.

25. Bennett, J.M. "Medieval women, modern women: across the great divide", Aers, D. (Ed.) *Culture and history 1350-1600: essays on English communities, identities, and writing*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1992: 147-175; Bennet, J.M. "History that stands still: women's work in the European past", *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1988: 269-283.

26. Schmidt, A. *Overleven na de dood: weduwen in Leiden in de Gouden Eeuw*. Prometheus, Amsterdam, 2001; Schmidt "Women and guilds".

3. BUTCHERS GUILDS THROUGHOUT EUROPE

Historians often consider craft guilds in medieval and early modern societies to be exclusive groups that perpetuated their vertical structures. In the traditional view, the butchers guild was an outstanding example of the exclusive corporation. In some towns, the butchers were among the first groups to obtain legal statutes. They owed their success to the growing importance of meat in the daily diet. Butchers not only sold meat but also animal by-products, such as skins, grease and wool²⁷. Their significance to urban alimentation leads Valentina Costantini to conclude: “They could not easily be ignored by municipal authorities”²⁸. Precisely because of this leverage, the butchers guild numbered among the most exclusive and hereditary craft guilds in many European towns. In the late fourteenth century, the town councils of Rouen and Barcelona reserved tenure of stalls in the meat hall to heirs of butchers in the male line.²⁹ In Brussels and Ghent, a similar arrangement was in place; Ghent butchers won this privilege before the end of the thirteenth century³⁰. Entrance into this exclusive corporation was only possible by heritage or marriage to a butcher's daughter or widow, as some towns allowed butchers' widows to continue their husband's craft after his death³¹. Only in Antwerp could heirs from the female line inherit membership in butcher's trade if there was no male heir³².

Masculine exclusivity was clearly a particular feature of butchers guilds in Europe. In most towns, the butchers were among the first craft guilds to ban female members. As Howell demonstrates, the butchers guild in Cologne was one of

27. Deligne, C., Billen, C. and Kusman, D. “Les bouchers Bruxellois au bas moyen age. Profils d'entrepreneurs”, Jaumain, S. and Bertrams, K. (Eds.) *Patrons, gens d'affaires et banquiers. Hommages à Ginette Kurgan – van Hentenryk*. Le Livre Timperman, Brussels, 2004: 69-92; Costantini “On a red line across Europe”.

28. Costantini “On a red line across Europe”, 75.

29. Banegas López, R.A. “Competencia, mercado e intervencionismo en el comercio de carne en la Europa bajomedieval. Los ejemplos de Barcelona y Ruán”, *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 42, 2012: 479-499.

30. Libert, M. “The butcher's trade in Brussels during the French period (1797-1812). Between corporatist traditions and deregulation’, Blondé, B., Vanhaute, E. and Galand, M. (Eds.) *Labour and labour markets between town and countryside (Middle ages – 19th century)*. Brepols, Turnhout, 2001: 266-277, 267; Van Werveke, H. “De Gentse vleeshouwers onder het oud regime. Demografische studie over een gesloten en erfelijk ambachtsgild”, *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 3, 1949: 3-32.

31. Stabel, “Women at the market”, 262.

32. Poffé, E. *De Antwerpsche beenbouwers van de vroegste tijden tot beden*. Kennes, Antwerpen, 1894, 13.

the few guilds that fully excluded women from participation³³. Zemon Davis notes that only married women assisting their husbands had access to the craft in sixteenth-century Lyon³⁴. In Ghent, women were prohibited from accessing the craft and entering the meat hall as saleswomen. Not even married women were allowed to assist their husbands in selling from the stalls, a striking prohibition given the prevalence of the 'family production unit' in Ghent³⁵. Only in the northern French town of Amiens is there evidence of women butchers. Vincent Doom regularly cites the town ordinances, which frequently include the phrase: "*Et que nul bouchiers ni bouchiere*"³⁶, suggesting that when the council regulated this corporation, they took into account the existence of female butchers. However, the butchers guild in Amiens was neither exclusive nor hereditary. My study of the Leuven butchers guild suggests that the fact the butchers guild held exclusive and hereditary privileges in other towns made the corporation strictly male in those towns. The example of the early modern butchers in Leiden, a town in Holland, supports this hypothesis. According to Danielle Van den Heuvel, women in Leiden could produce and sell derivative meat products. In addition, butchers' spouses could assist their husbands with the sale of meat in the meat hall, and widows could inherit their husband's position in the craft.³⁷ However, in the seventeenth century in Leiden, the butchers guild was neither hereditary nor politically as powerful as the corporation in Leuven.

In Leuven, the butchers guild was a fairly powerful corporation, as it was in other towns³⁸. An ordinance from 1433 shows that the butchers had their own

33. Howell, M. "Women, the family economy, and the structures of market production in cities of Northern Europe during the Late Middle Ages", Hanawalt, B.A. (Ed.) *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986: 198 – 221

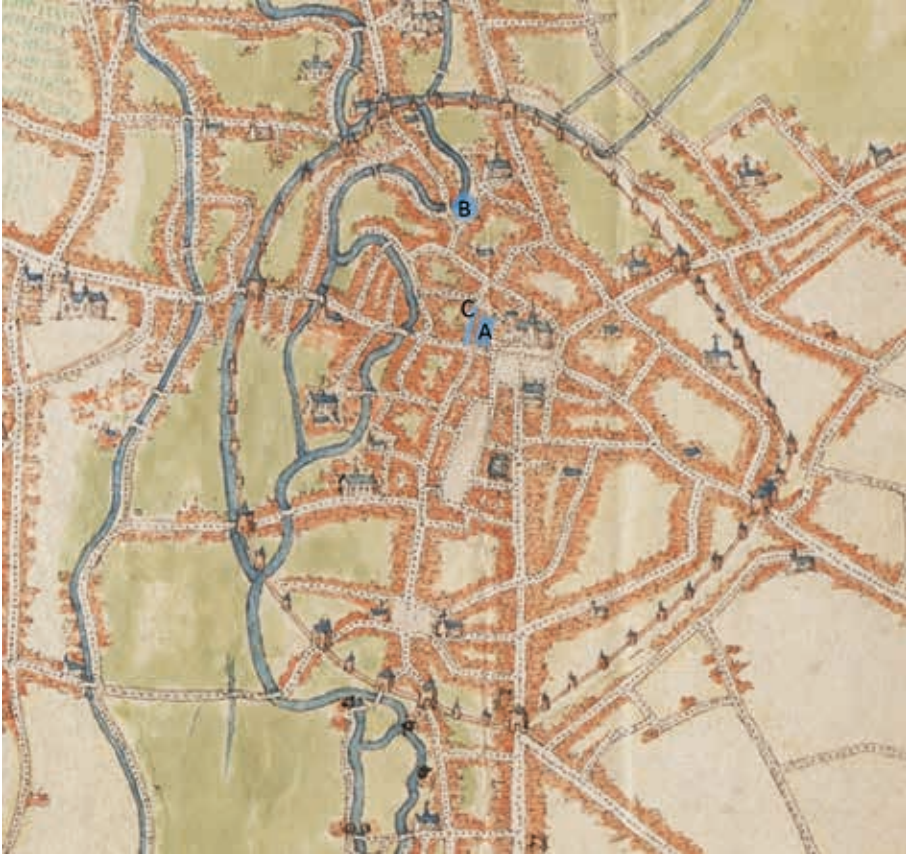
34. Zemon Davis, "Women in the crafts", 168-169.

35. Hutton, S., "Women, men, and markets: the gendering of market space in late medieval Ghent", Classen, A. (Ed.) *Urban space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age*. De Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 2009: 409-431; Stabel "Women at the market", 268-269.

36. Doom, V. "Une communauté de métier au bas moyen âge: l'exemple des bouchers amiénois", Guignet P. (Ed.) *Le peuple des villes dans l'Europe du nord-ouest: fin du moyen âge – 1945*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Université Charles de Gaulle. Centre de recherche sur l'Histoire de l'Europe du Nord-Ouest, Lille, 2002-2003: 117-146.

37. Van den Heuvel, D. "Partners in marriage and business? Guilds and the family economy in urban food markets in the Dutch Republic", *Continuity and Change*, 23, 2008: 217-236, 222-223.

38. Meulemans, A. "Leuvense ambachten: de beenhouwers", *Eigen school en de Brabander*, 41, 1958: 412-428; Idem "Leuvense ambachten, de beenhouwers", *Eigen schoon en de Brabander*, 42, 1959: 92-107, 212-230 and 294-303; Van Uytven, *Leuven*, 137.



Map of Leuven indicating places where meat was sold. In: Jacob van Deventer, *Atlas des villes des Pays-Bas*, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Bruxelles, 1550-1565.

statutes, and ranked third in importance as a craft, along with the fishmongers³⁹. Throughout the entire late medieval and early modern periods, butchers in Leuven tried to secure a stature making their guild hereditary. Alfons Meulemans argues that the craft was never officially hereditary, despite the butchers' claims to the contrary⁴⁰. Van Uytven contends that the craft could only be inherited in male line. However, as I will demonstrate, the town council made exceptions for female descendants under certain circumstances.

39. CAL, OA, 1523, 25 February 1433, 54r-54v.

40. Meulemans "Leuvense ambachten", 418-428.

The main trade location of the butchers in Leuven was the meat hall, located in the town centre. The hall officially belonged to the duke of Brabant, who leased the stalls to Leuven butchers. The butchers generally received stalls by inheritance, which helped preserve the exclusivity of the craft⁴¹. However, the few privileged craftsmen who possessed a stall were not the only people selling meat. The *Pensstraat* (literally, 'Tripe Street'), next to the hall, was the site for selling meat products, such as roasted meat, blood sausages and salted meat.⁴² The butchers were also permitted to sell certain types of fish at the Leuven fish market, because the consumption of meat was prohibited on certain days and periods as required by ecclesiastical tradition.⁴³

4. 'THAT NO WOMAN MAY SELL TRIPE': FEMALE ENTRANCE IN THE BUTCHER'S GUILD

"To prevent the infringements that occur daily inside and outside the Meat Hall, where butchers and tripe women throw bones and stones at each other, [and] slander each other's goods [...]"⁴⁴.

The butchers guild in Leuven allowed women to practice certain tasks in the meat trade, according to a copy of an ordinance from 1593, which is probably based on a lost guild statute from 1513⁴⁵. The above quote from a list of possible offenses in the ordinance shows that butchers were not afraid to use violence on market days. More importantly, it addressed female traders equally as potential offenders. The formulation *tripe women* (a literal translation of the Middle Dutch *pensvrouwen*) refers to a custom dating back to an ordinance from 1458, in which the town council prohibited women from selling blood sausage⁴⁶. According to Van den Heuvel, the sellers of this type of processed meat were

41. Van Uytven *Leuven*, 137.

42. *Ibidem*.

43. CAL, OA, 4659, 17 July 1453, fo. 1r – 9r; Van Uytven, *Leuven*, 137.

44. *Om te versien opte onmanierlijckbeyt die dagelijcx gevalt in den vleeschuyse oft oeck daerbuyten. Van den vleeschouweren oft pensvrouwen die nae malcanderen ende andere goede luyden worpen met beenen, steenen ende anders malcanders goet mesprijsen [...]*.

CAL, OA, 1527, *Ordonnances et règlements de la ville de Louvain* (1527), 1593.

45. The same statute which is referred to in a source dating from 1566, which will be analyzed later in this article. CAL, OA,

46. CAL, OA, 1524, 't *Groot Gemeynboeck B* (1524), 12 December 1458, fo. 202r-202v.

generally women, mainly wives of butchers who provided extra income for the family⁴⁷.

The prohibition against selling blood sausages did not stem from a sexist mentality. The ordinance of 1458 continues: "Item, that all women are allowed to sell tripe, providing that they pay one Holland guilder, that they are born into the craft guild, that they are not married to a butcher, and that they were the eldest child"⁴⁸. Women born to the craft were allowed to sell blood sausages, making them independent members of the corporation to some extent. Hence, the restriction of women in general was probably initiated by the craftsmen's wish to protect the guild's exclusive rights. It ensured guild members that women unrelated to a craft member could not find access to the trade. Gendering of the craft guild reflected the desire for a formal hereditary regulation. Although women were certainly restricted in the butchers guild, the ordinance shows that they were integrated into the craft's social structure. However, the agency these women had differed according to their marital status.

As the family production unit was the most important element of the medieval urban economy, the guild access of married women has been the subject of several studies⁴⁹. Historians disagree about the extent of their participation in guild life, but all agree that married women did assist their husbands. Hutton concludes that female entrepreneurs were often married women, profiting from their husbands' status⁵⁰. Katherine Reyerson, on the other hand, notes that married women's responsibilities in the household prevented independent entrepreneurship⁵¹. The Leuven ordinances show that women did help the family production unit, but they could do this with a certain degree of independence. First, town ordinances and guild statutes regularly contain the formula, "that no

47. Van den Heuvel "Partners in marriage and business?", 222-223.

48. *Item, sal elke vrouwe person eer zij pensen vercopen sal moegen moeten ghevenen den ambachte eenen halven gulden soe verre zij uutten ambachte vorseyde gewonnen ende geboren zijn ender dairmede gestaen en waert soe dair bueren man gheen vleeschouwer en waere bij also nochtan dat alsulker vrouwen persoene doudste kind waere ende anders niet [...].*

CAL, OA, 1524, 12 December 1458, fo. 202r-202v.

49. Beattie, C. and Stevens, M.F. (Eds.) *Married Women and the Law in Premodern Northwest Europe*. Boydell, Woodbridge, 2013; Kowaleski and Bennett "Crafts, guilds and women".

50. Hutton *Women and economic activities*, 103-105.

51. Reyerson, K. "Women and business in Medieval MontPELLIER", Hanawalt, B.A. (Ed.) *Women and work in preindustrial Europe*. Indiana university press, Bloomington, 1986: 198-221, 213.

butcher, his wife, children or messenger”, indicating that the council recognized female participation in the household economy.⁵² For example, the couple was not allowed to sell unsold meat from the meat hall in taverns after the hall closed.⁵³ It seems that wives assisted in meat production as well as sale. An ordinance from 1467 states: “that no butcher, his wife, messenger or other relatives may produce or sell sausages elsewhere than in the meat hall”⁵⁴. It is notable that the only task women were allowed to perform independently, i.e. selling blood sausages, was aligned with the help they offered once they were married. A second point is that married women were allowed to assist their husbands with some independence. An ordinance from 1513 states:

“That no woman may sell or ask someone else to sell meat in the meat hall, nor may they stand behind the stall or call [potential buyers] [...]. But if her husband is absent from the market, then they may appoint a free journeyman from the butchers guild and stand in front of the stall as they supervise the sale [...]”⁵⁵.

Married women were allowed to take responsibility for sales if their husbands were ill or out of town. Although this was not full independence, the ordinance suggests that the council considered that women were capable, and further, that married women were an indispensable part of the family production unit. Women in the Low Countries did not lose their personal property after marriage. Hutton sees these rights as the basis of women’s agency in late-medieval Flanders. As women possessed private property and were allowed to manage it, they gained the means to be active in urban market⁵⁶. Although the ordinance

52. *Item dat gheen vleeschouwers, sijn wiiff, noch boden [...]*.

CAL, OA, 4648, 31 January 1467, fo. 168r-172v.

53. CAL, OA, 4648, 31 January 1467, fo. 168r-172v.

54. *Item dat gheen vleeschouwers, sijn wiiff, noch boden, noch anderen van zyn weghen vleeschworste maken noch vercoopen en selen moeghen dan int vleeschuyse [...]*.

CAL, OA, 4648, 31 January 1467, fo. 168r-172v.

55. *Item, dat gheen vrouwe person vercoopen noch coop maecken oft iemanden anders van eens anders banck roepen noch in de banck staen en zullen moegen [...]. Maer in absentie van buere mans als die buyten ter merct zyn zelen in moegen stellen eenen vryen geselle int ambach wesende om buer vleesch te vercoopen ende alsdan sullen de vrouwe personen moegen voor de banck staen ende toesichte nemen [...]*.

CAL, OA, 4748, CAL, OA, 4748, *Actes portant défense aux veuves de bouchers d'abattre du bétail ou de vendre de la viande dans la Halla aux viandes*, 1566.

56. Hutton *Women and economic activities*, 123-124.

about the sale of blood sausages stipulated that the independent rights of women born into the guild terminated upon their marriages, a conflict between the butchers and a married (butcher) couple, Hendrik Michiels and Katelijne, shows that this independence did not fade completely. On 17 August 1461, the parties appeared before the town council after the butchers complained that Katelijne had continued to sell blood sausages after her marriage, in contradiction with town customs. Hendrik spoke in her defence, claiming:

“[...] that he was a butcher's son and that his wife, as a butcher's wife, could sell tripe as she had done before. He hopes that the earlier mentioned craftsmen would not allege any longer that he was already born when his father entered the craft [and thus that he was not born in the butchers guild] [...]”⁵⁷.

The town council judged that Katelijne could continue to sell blood sausages, until the butchers could prove that Hendrik was not born a butcher's son. As another conflict from 1477 between the butchers and the couple's son proves, Katelijne actually continued selling until she died⁵⁸. Although the norms required women to stop selling blood sausages when they married a butcher, this decision shows that women did not always comply with the norms. Moreover, the independence Katelijne had as an unmarried woman persisted after her marriage. However, the type of meat women were allowed to sell, i.e. processed meat, was only of secondary quality, and the more expensive types were exclusively sold by male butchers. Finally, a woman's position in the Leuven butchers guild also provided a man opportunity to enter the exclusive craft or be promoted within it. Through marriage, men could enter and receive the official title of butcher. The 1458 ordinance declared that a man could enter in the craft guild for only half the membership fee if his spouse had been a guild member for less than three years⁵⁹. In this way, the council (and thus the corporation) favoured male membership over female membership, even for newcomers, as women theoretically had to leave the guild after marriage. Although the town

57. [...] dat hij eens vleeschouwers zone waer ende dat zijn buisvrouwe alsoe eens vleeschouwers wijf wel pensen vercopenen mochte alsoe zij lange gedaen badden. Hopend dat de voirscreven gesworene oic nemmermeer gelboenen en zouden dat hij geboren waer geweest eer zijn vader in dambacht quam [...].

CAL, OA, 1528, 17 Augustus 1461, fo. 123v.

58. CAL, OA, 4648, 4 February 1477, fo. 174r-174v.

59. CAL, OA, 1524, 12 December 1458, fo. 202r-202v.

allowed women broad agency in the meat trade, the corporation was still heavily gendered.

In addition to married women, single women were allowed access to the craft under certain conditions. According to the 1458 ordinance, they had to be born into the guild, pay one Holland guilder and be the oldest child of the family⁶⁰. Most historians traditionally conclude that single women were the most vulnerable women, as they could not rely on a relationship with a man. Most single women thus belonged to the lowest classes in society and worked in occupations with low status, mainly as wage workers.⁶¹ However, women born into the Leuven butchers guild could enter that craft guild and thus secure their social status. Katelijne, the wife of Hendrik Michiels from the dispute recorded above, may have been a single woman enjoying this status before her marriage. This can only be a hypothesis as there is no further information about the status of single women in the Leuven butchers guild.

Widows also held rights in the Leuven butchers guild. Historians have usually pointed out that women with this marital status were the most prosperous and fortunate, because in the late-medieval Low Countries they held certain rights that gave them more options. Leuven recognized their right of devolution, which allowed widows to inherit real estate. In Low Countries craft guilds, they enjoyed the ‘widow’s right’, which allowed a widow to inherit her husband’s position in a craft guild after he died⁶². The butchers guild in Leuven recognized this right. Throughout the fifteenth century, widows could succeed to the title of butcher held by their husbands and practice the craft independently.⁶³ In the mid-sixteenth century, butchers began to contest the position of widows, citing their concern over the increasing number of widows selling meat in the Leuven meat hall⁶⁴. Because widows were the only women who were truly independent craft members, limitations placed on them offer opportunities to study changes in the gendering of the butchers guild, as I will do in the following paragraph.

60. CAL, OA, 1524, 12 December 1458, fo. 202r-202v.

61. Howell *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*, 86 – 93; Reyerson “Women and business in Medieval Montpellier”, 121-122.

62. Godding, P. *Le droit privé dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux du 12e au 18e siècle*, 78 – 79; *Ibidem*, 266 – 277; Stabel “Women at the market”, 262.

63. CAL, OA, 4748, 1566

64. CAL, OA, 4748, 1566

5. 'AS THE OLD CUSTOMS ESTABLISHED': CHANGES OVER TIME

One of the oldest sources concerning craft guilds in the City Archives of Leuven is a scroll listing regulations for some of the town's alimentary trades⁶⁵. One section focuses on the rules of the meat hall and the butchers guild, which makes it the earliest source naming the corporation in Leuven. The regulations focus on practical organization of the meat trade itself rather than the organization of the craft, which shows its weak political position in the period before 1360-1383, when craft guilds in Leuven obtained political participation in the town government. The formulae emphasize the male character of the meat trade in the fourteenth century. There are no formulae including female members or wives assisting their husbands, nor any mention of female labour in the meat trade. This provision shows that the town council did not recognize women practicing the trade: "Item, that no butcher, nor any other man [...] But that he will take meat like this to the street behind the meat hall"⁶⁶. The street mentioned in the ordinance is the pensstraat (translated as Tripe Street), where women, certainly in later periods, sold meat products. Yet this provision about similar products did not mention women. Although the scroll does not contain as much information about the corporation as the later guild statutes do, in comparison with the sixteenth-century documents, the silence is striking.

The first ordinance mentioning women in the butchers guild was the 1458 ordinance concerning women selling blood sausages discussed above⁶⁷. One explanation for the inclusion of information about women in the butchers guild might be the general increase in written (surviving) ordinances for all of Leuven. However, not only did the earlier provisions fail to mention female labourers, but the first ordinance mentioning them is one curtailing their agency. Moreover, earlier ordinances concerning the butchers guild were later, in the sixteenth

65. Louis De Man published the scroll in 1956 in the journal *Taal en Tongval*. Although the source is not dated, he determined that it was probably written around 1350, making it one of the earliest preserved craft statutes in Leuven. De Man, L. "Een Brabantse 'ambachtsrol' uit de 14de eeuw", *Taal en Tongval*, 8, 1956: 15-34. CAL, OA, 4647, *Statuts des marchands de gibier, bouchers, poissonniers, boulangers, vigneron et brasseurs*.

66. *Item, dat negheen vleeschouwere noch ander man [...] mar met alselken vleessche sal elckermale staen in de strate achter t'vleeschhuus [...]*.

De Man "Een Brabantse 'ambachtsrol'", 24.

67. CAL, OA, 1524, 12 December 1458, fo. 202r-202v.

century, rewritten to include women.⁶⁸ An ordinance from 1420, for example, states: “[...] that no one in the meat hall will throw knives, sticks, bones or meat at another”⁶⁹. The ordinance is similar to the earlier mentioned: “where butchers and tripe women throw bones and stones at each other, slander each other’s goods”⁷⁰, lacking only the address to butchers and tripe women. By the mid-fifteenth century, the town council clearly held women working in the meat trade into account, as the councilors recognized women as a social entity when they wrote ordinances.

Something clearly changed, but can we label this a decline in women’s labour status just because their contribution became more visible in normative sources? Married women probably did not experience a change in their agency. The increasing visibility of women might have been the result of an expanding administration, rather than constriction of their agency. This contradicts Zemon Davis, who claims that the separation of the workshop and private space reduced women’s agency as they were confined to the household⁷¹. The 1467 ordinance on the production and sale of sausages in the meat hall shows that married women remained involved in their husband’s trade and assisted them in tasks that took place out of the household⁷². The ordinance addressing women born in the guild who were allowed to enter the craft as *tripe women* was repeated three times in the following century, in 1461, 1554 and 1593. Although there is no record of how many single women entered the craft, the norms did not change for them during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries either.

However, the ordinances concerning widows’ work in the craft do demonstrate a change in the gendering of the Leuven butchers guild. As married women they had probably learned the craft from their husbands, as a part of the family production unit, which enabled them to take over after their husbands’

68. Same ordinance: that no butcher nor someone related to him, without mentioning his wife, like later ordinances

69. *Item dat nyemant van hen int vleeschuys na den anderen en sal werpen met messen met stocken, met steenen, met beenderen, met onnutten vleessche [...]*.

CAL, OA, 1523, 9 September 1420, fo. 67v – 68v.

70. CAL, OA, 1527, 1593.

71. Zemon Davis, “Women in the crafts”, 173.

72. CAL, OA, 4648, 31 January 1467, fo. 168r-172v.

death⁷³. An ordinance and the conflicts arising from it indicate that widows were allowed into the meat hall as independent craft members in the Late Middle Ages. Unlike other women, they could sell meat from behind the stall, without the mandatory assistance of a journeyman⁷⁴. However, the council decided in 1566 to change this old rule, henceforth denying widows access to the craft.

“[...] that no butcher's wife or butcher's widow after her husband's death may butcher or sell meat in the meat hall in Leuven, as the lord's ordinance, given to the craft guild, states that no woman may sell or have someone else sell meat, nor may they call clients from other stalls, or stand behind the stall”⁷⁵.

The members of the council who drew up this ordinance clearly knew they were changing an old practice, as they repeated the original rule several times. The text reads that the butchers feared that too many widows would eventually enter the craft, leaving no place for younger, less established male members. Moreover, the craft members feared that the widows would not let their own sons enter once they reached the proper age of eighteen⁷⁶. Nevertheless, later sources show that the decision of 1566 did not become the new norm. In 1566 and 1567, two widows received approval to continue their deceased husbands' trade, as they had to provide for their families and both had sons who were almost old enough to learn the craft themselves⁷⁷. These widows probably were not the only ones to use a similar explanation to continue practicing the craft. Further, in 1570 the town council revised their ordinance and stated that widows could enter the craft, but only to sell blood sausages, salted meat and

73. [...] that all widows as long as they are widows may enjoy all the rights that their diseased husband had [...].
[...] *dat alle weduwen zoo lange zij in bueren weduwelijck staet blijven mogen genyeten alle gerechticheyd als zij met bueren overleden mans gebadt hebben* [...].

CAL, OA, 4748, 1566

74. CAL, OA, 4748, 1566.

75. [...] *egeen vrouwen oft weduwen van vleeschouwers nae dafflijvicheyt van baren mans eenich vleesch te moegen slaen vercoopen oft Leuven int vleeschuys gelijk tzelve oeck uuyter ordinantie van mijnen elder beere den ambachte gegeven ende verleent wil es te collagens ende te verstaen uuyt dien egeen vrouwe persooene vercoopen noch coop maeken oft yemanden anders van eens anders banck roepen noch inde banck staen en moegen*. CAL, OA, 4748, 1566.

76. CAL, OA, 4748, 1566; Meulemans “Leuvense ambachten”, 296-297.

77. CAL, OA, 4748, 1566.

roasted meat “as tripe women were used to doing without a man present”⁷⁸. Meulemans states that a few decades later, in 1655, widows already had regained the right to exercise full craft membership.⁷⁹ Although the patriarchal butchers guild pointed its arrows at women when their economic power was threatened, women’s agency did not decline linearly over time, nor did the changes anchor in urban society.

Finally, it is important to explain these fluctuations and compare them with previous studies about women’s changing agency. Contrary to the decline thesis, I believe the growing visibility of female labour activities in the butchers guild and the corresponding restrictions did not stem from a general decline in women’s opportunities, but from an exceptionalality of the butchers guild. Ordinances involving the Leuven butchers guild regularly contain references to the corporation’s desire to become hereditary. In 1439 the butchers complained to the council that it was too easy to enter the craft which had once been reserved for family members. The council responded with raising the membership fee from five to ten Holland guilders.⁸⁰ It is striking that several other craft guilds obtained the same increase around this date.⁸¹ The political power of corporations made the council pay attention to their requests. Nevertheless, in 1484, the butchers complained again and the craft almost became hereditary again at this point. In 1649, as Meulemans states, Philip IV of Spain wrote in a charter that the butchers guild had always been hereditary in practice, but that this custom had never been made official.⁸² My hypothesis is that the increasing visibility of women in the butchers guild in the normative sources was the result of poorly defined borders. Their agency might not have changed much during this entire period. Moreover, some women might even have found a way into the meat trade when this would not have been possible in the fourteenth century, when the craft was more exclusive. Katelijne, Hendrik Michiels’ wife, might not have found her loophole in the earlier period. Unfortunately, there are insufficient sources to confirm this in the Leuven archives, and further research is needed.

78. [...] *die pensvrouwen gewoon sijn te doens sonder mannen* [...].

CAL, OA, 4652, *Ordonnances des métiers des faiseurs de poches, mégissiers, couvreurs, charpentiers, épiciers, bouchers, poissonniers, bateliers, colporteuses* (4652), 31 May 1570, fo. 204r-205v.

79. Meulemans “Leuvense ambachten”, 296-297.

80. CAL, OA, 1524, 3 June 1439, fo. 201v.

81. CAL, OA, 1523, 10 January 1424, fo. 61r.

82. Meulemans “Leuvense ambachten”, 421.

CONCLUSION

Women in Leuven had many chances to participate in the meat trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even within the formal institution of the butchers guild. Women probably held on to similar responsibilities in the craft even when their marital status changed. As daughters of butchers, and later, as single women, they learned to prepare derivative meat products, such as blood sausages. Once married, women officially had to leave the trade, but as the conflict between the butchers and Kateline shows, this did not always happen in actual practice. Married women thus continued to profit from the skills they had learned earlier. They also assisted their husbands with other tasks of the trade, as they were considered responsible for the whole process if their husbands were ill or absent from the market. As widows, they were allowed to continue to practice their craft officially within the corporation. Therefore, although the butchers guilds generally hindered women in the trade, some women continued to play prominent roles in many areas of the craft. This article does not deny male dominance over the occupation. Overall, the corporation was gendered: women generally sold the cheaper (derivative) meat types and could only participate under strict conditions. Compared to other butchers guilds, such as the one in Ghent, women even held considerable agency in the Leuven craft. One possible explanation is the different characters of craft guilds in different towns. In towns such as Ghent, where women were not allowed to enter, the butchers guild had a long hereditary tradition, while in Amiens, Leiden, and Leuven, the butchers guilds did not have a strong hereditary tradition, and women could perform specific tasks in the meat trade. However, the Leuven butchers claimed to be a hereditary corporation and women were still allowed access, perhaps because other craft guilds in Leuven also sold meat products. In the open Monday market, anyone could sell meat products. The tanners guild also sold sausages and other derivative meat products⁸³. The butchers guild thus might have allowed women related to butchers to practice the trade in order to decrease competition, or to stop those women from entering the tanners guild.

Finally, this evidence shows that craft guilds were influential in restricting women's labour opportunities. In the second half of the sixteenth century, butchers tried to exclude women from their craft, fearing the growing number of wi-

83. Meulemans "Leuvense ambachten", 413.

dows in their corporation. However, in Leuven there was no real decline in their agency, as many authors have argued for other places. Though more detailed research into the different craft guilds' characteristics and women's agency in these organizations is necessary to draw broader conclusions, in the Leuven butchers guild, it appears that women's agency fluctuated rather than declined. What is more, women's access to the exclusive butchers guild may actually have increased in the fifteenth century, as the corporation's hereditary tradition was challenged. The West in the late medieval period was patriarchal and certainly no 'Golden Age' for women, as Alice Clark claimed almost a century ago, but neither was it a time of decreasing access to occupations. My study suggests that women in the Leuven butchers guild knew how to adapt normative structures to their own benefit, in a juridical framework that left them more agency than generally accepted.

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