

J

ames

van Artevelde, Myth or Reality?

When the statue of James van Artevelde was unveiled in the Friday Market in Ghent in 1863, the burgomaster pronounced the following: *'He thought of the Belgian nation and gave his life to realise his dream.'* Many peculiar things are said on such occasions but seldom as peculiar as this. The Belgian nation was created in 1830. James van Artevelde lived from about 1290 until 1345. Such foresight would have been superhuman! Having been forgotten for close on three hundred years he suddenly became, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a symbol of a growing feeling of independence for a group of citizens in the Southern Netherlands and a benevolent, wise and prosperous example for his home-town, Ghent. So what was he really like and what did he achieve? Neither question is easy to answer.

Fourteenth-century archive material is sparse. The authors of the medieval chronicles, such as Jean Froissart, tended to copy each other, to play the role of journalists rather than historians, and to have very definite axes to grind: after all, they earned their livings as courtiers. However, although the Flemings of the nineteenth century also mistook Van Artevelde's message and fabricated his biography, they were completely correct in underlining his importance, especially for the County of Flanders and the Duchy of Brabant. The Flanders which Van Artevelde knew was not what we mean by Flanders today, i.e. the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. It consisted of a county, ruled over by a count who for historical reasons owed allegiance to the King of France. Ghent, his home-town, lay on the border between the County of Flanders and the Duchy of Brabant, which, in its turn, was a fief of the German emperors. Occasions of divided loyalties, of scheming for allies, of playing one area off against another were far from lacking. When to internal complications in the Southern Netherlands were added those caused by the machinations of two tough and unscrupulous monarchs, Edward III of England and Philip VI of France, who both cast covetous glances at the rich and prosperous Low Countries, the situation was clearly an explosive one. James Van Artevelde lived at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War when England strove to extend the hold it had over France. The counts of Flanders owed personal fealty to the French kings under whose authority they ruled their possessions. By the fourteenth cen-



ture those monarchs were completely convinced of the great value to them of the rich, hard-working lands to the north, and were constantly involved, either by intrigue or battle, in trying to absorb them. England, on the other hand, embroiled in ambitious plans against its hereditary enemy, France, saw in the strategically situated Southern Netherlands a convenient springboard for attacks to the south. The Flemish count with whom Van Artevelde had to deal, Louis of Nevers, sided with his French feudal lord and called on the latter whenever things became too hot at home. Flanders was a pawn in the game of high politics. James van Artevelde's great achievement was to make his own countrymen aware of their power and to persuade the country to unite against outside interference instead of giving in to the temptation of immediate gains. He made them see that, together, the principalities of Flanders, Brabant, Hainault and Holland could weaken, if not sever, the feudal bond with France and look after their own interests in their own way. He also emphasised the great power of the Flemish towns, especially Ghent, Ypres and Bruges. He also made some mistakes, one of which was probably fatal.

James van Artevelde shot on to the historical stage in an unusual way. He was completely unknown. Only one relatively unimportant reference to him has been found in the archives before December 1337. Almost nothing is known of his early life, his first marriage, his business activities, his schooling, or, even more importantly, his motivation. His behaviour, however, shows that he was in the first place loyal to his town, Ghent, in the second to Flanders, and only as a very poor third to the Count of Flanders. At the end of December 1337, Ghent, the biggest town north of the Alps with the exception of Paris, was in the grip of an economic crisis. The city depended

F.-J. Boulanger,
*The Unveiling of the Statue
of James van Artevelde in
1863*. Bijloke Museum,
Ghent.

Frits van den Berghe,
*James van Artevelde
Addresses the People of
Ghent in the Bijloke Field
in 1337* (Drawing for
Paul Rogghé's book on
Van Artevelde, 1949²).

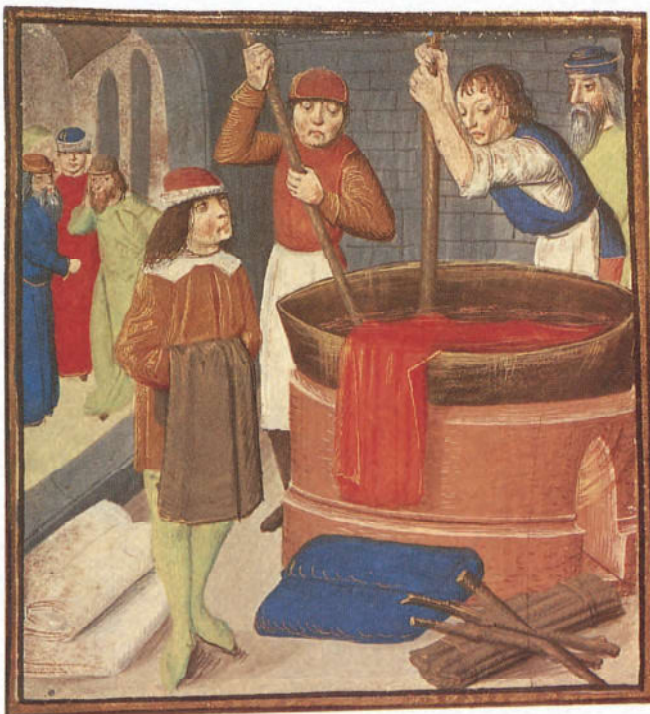


almost entirely on the manufacture of cloth. With a population of more than 60,000, of whom the greater part worked in this industry, Ghent was particularly susceptible to fluctuations in the supply of its raw material – wool. On this depended not only the weavers, fullers and dyers, but tradesmen of all sorts ranging from bakers to tanners. Wages were so low that few had savings to tide them over a rainy day. When there was no wool there was no work and no bread. This was the situation in the gloomy summer and winter of 1337. And wool came from England. It was obvious that he who controlled the wool supply controlled Flanders, and he who controlled Flanders had an important role to play in the row between Edward III and Philip VI. If Flanders was on the French side its riches could be used by its liege-lord and no nasty precedent could be drawn about throwing over loyalties, while if the county was on the English side an opening existed to attack France from the north and its prosperity would help the English war effort. Both kings had clearly recognised this and as retaliation for the so-called murder of some English merchants, Edward III had forbidden the export of the high quality English wool essential for Flemish cloth.

The choice to be made by Flanders seems clear. But this is to approach the problem from an essentially *modern* standpoint – an economic point of view. What mattered much more to most people in the fourteenth century were questions of personal loyalty and tradition, and Flanders had been a fief of France since the break-up of the Frankish empire. The Count of Flanders, Louis of Nevers, would certainly prefer to see his people starve to death rather than break his feudal oath to his lord, the King of France. James

van Artevelde did not agree. He addressed his fellow citizens to this effect in the Bijloke Field in Ghent and such was the power of his reasoning or his rhetoric that the town pulled itself together with surprising speed and success, so that by February 1338 the English wool supply had been resumed, the looms were rattling again and the dyers' vats polluting the air. We do not know what he said, but he must have proposed Flemish neutrality rather than active support for France against England. Six days after his speech the town appointed a committee of five captains, of whom Van Artevelde was the most important. Their appointment is recorded in Ghent's town accounts. From that moment on until his death in 1345 Van Artevelde dominated the Southern Netherlands. His policy was based on '*Flanders' economic dependence on England and feudal dependence on France*'.

Van Artevelde and his supporters did everything possible to loosen the ties which bound Louis of Nevers to the French king and which, therefore, constrained him to sacrifice their interests. Louis, however, never treated his subjects with understanding or even honesty. He seems to have had no interest in whether they starved or not. The gulf between rich and poor, aristocrat and ordinary citizen was so deep and unbridgeable at this time that this should not surprise us. Louis saw himself as a French prince ruling a rich but tiresome province where his subjects spoke a Low German dialect, which he did not understand, and threatened to ally themselves with the English enemy. So although the Flemings tried to persuade him to stay in the country and to understand their economic position, it became increasingly obvious that the count neither knew nor cared what happened to his possessions. Things came to a head when a popular Flemish official



Dyers at Work under the Supervision of a Draper, miniature from the *Livre des proprietes des choses*, Jean de Ries, Bruges, 1482. London, British Museum, Royal Ms. 15 E III, f. 269.

involved in negotiations about the wool supply was thrown into prison by Louis on the French king's orders and murdered in March 1338 in Rupelmonde castle. Edward III also tried to persuade Louis to give up his allegiance but he too failed. It became obvious that nothing would make the Count of Flanders stop supporting his county's ill-wishers. Louis fled to Paris. This led to the greatest success of Van Artevelde's period in power. Convinced that England and wool was better than France and starvation, the Flemings and their allies headed by him proclaimed Edward III of England as King of France on 26 January 1340 in the Friday market in Ghent. This apparently peculiar step meant that their allegiance was still to the King of France, but now in the person of Edward rather than Philip VI. Solid arguments backed his claim. For once there is an eye-witness account from an ambassador describing the glittering scene. The English court, including Edward and his queen Philippa, lodged in St Bavo's Abbey. The urban officials, led perhaps by Van Artevelde, paid homage to Edward who promised to observe their privileges and protect them from their enemies. This step meant a new turn in Van Artevelde's policy. He had tried to persuade Count Louis to consider Flemish interests and not sacrifice the county to France. This had failed. He therefore led his followers into an alliance with England. By this move he gained important economic advantages for Flanders and Brabant, including the fixing of the English wool staple in Bruges for fifteen years. This was the peak of his power. There must have been vigorous celebrations in the house on the Kalenderberg in Ghent where he lived with his second wife Kathleen de Coster and their children.

This was the period when Van Artevelde was on familiar terms with the King of England, a situation unheard of in medieval society. English records contain references to him as '*dilectus et fidelis*' ('faithful and well-beloved') although he never bore any official title and described himself, in the three autograph letters in the Public Record Office in London only as '*citizen of Ghent*'. While Queen Philippa was lodged in Ghent she gave birth to a son known subsequently as John of Gaunt (Ghent); she also became godmother to one of Van Artevelde's sons. That an ordinary citizen, whose role in public affairs had been recorded only on one unimportant local occasion, should be on such familiar terms with a king and his wife was entirely exceptional. It certainly caused jealousies. The violence of the times is shown by the fact that Van Artevelde himself struck dead a courtier who mocked him. The picture of James van Artevelde as a sort of elder statesman, wisely negotiating international agreements and quietly leading his town and country towards a golden horizon, is completely misleading. He had emerged at a moment of crisis and had clearly proposed a solution which had brought back English wool. He had also tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Louis of Nevers, Count of Flanders, to consider the best interests of his people instead of behaving like a French prince whose only occupation was extracting funds for military adventures under his liege lord's command. Louis was later killed fighting for France against England at the battle of Crécy. But Van Artevelde had found no permanent solution to the problem of Flemish sovereignty, and he was obliged to hold together a number of allies who did not always see eye to eye. One of the surprising facts in the short story of his comet-like appearance on the historical stage is the intensity of his activities. The town accounts and the few other sources for this period show him to have been

constantly on the go. Travel in the mid-fourteenth century was no joke, and it is clear that Van Artevelde and the other captains spent hours, weeks and months in the saddle. One of the essential points in his policy was to keep his supporters together. This involved constant meetings with his colleagues in the rest of Flanders, particularly in Ypres and Bruges, but also with officials from Brabant, Hainault and Holland. The efforts made at this time pointed towards a much later unity of the Low Countries. A treaty promising mutual help, aimed at promoting peace between the peoples of these territories who, it was stated, were already related historically and geographically and had economic interests in common, was agreed in 1339 between Flanders and Brabant, which were joined later by Hainault.

Van Artevelde himself and his colleagues from Ghent conferred tirelessly with their opposite numbers in Bruges and Ypres. The latter, like Ghent, – although smaller – was a textile producing town. Bruges was the commercial centre *par excellence*, the home of many foreign merchants as well as the provider of invaluable services to the trading community. One of the weak points in the three towns' policy was their often violent preoccupation with keeping the cloth trade in their own hands. The dominant guilds in all three towns saw the activities of smaller agglomerations such as Oudenaarde, Kortrijk and Poperinghe as a threat. They were determined to eliminate this,



The treaty promising military and economic cooperation between Flanders and Brabant (Municipal Archive, Ghent).



The Siege of Tournai by Edward III and James van Artevelde in 1340, miniature from a manuscript by Jean Froissart. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, French Ms. 2643, f 74v°.

whatever the cost. And the cost was high. All the great towns, but especially Ghent, possessed private armies, or militias, whose task in these significant years in Flemish history was to fight in the anti-French wars, but also to keep the countryside and small towns in order. The 'white hoods' of Ghent, so-called because of a sort of white woollen hood worn under their helmets, spent a great deal of time under Van Artevelde's command 'pacifying' – an ominous word – such places. These fierce bands also attacked pockets of support for Count Louis, for example in the castles of Wondelgem, Evergem and Biervliet. A series of documents in the archives of Bruges and Ghent gives a rare picture of what being 'pacified' by Ghent actually meant. It involved the taking of a large number of hostages, a very substantial fine, and the demolition of one of the town gates of Oudenaarde.

This policy, short-sighted in the extreme, was an attempt to make the clock stand still and to keep the smaller towns and villages under control. The destruction of looms and other punishments led in the end to the development, in these lesser centres, of types of cloth which fell outside guild regulations and were, in fact, a pointer towards the future. Although far-sighted in politics, Van Artevelde had no similarly advanced economic ideas. His main positive contribution in this field was to bring about an alliance, if only

temporary, between the various textile guilds who had been at each others' throats for decades, and which fell back into chaos soon after his death. The very powerful weavers always tried to dominate the more lowly fullers by depressing the latter's wages, and frequent and bloody encounters took place between the armed supporters of each. Van Artevelde succeeded in persuading them to unite in their opposition to France, although this compromise lasted for only a short time before their enmity emerged again in a battle in Ghent's Friday Market on Black Monday (2 May 1345).

Skirmishes which foreshadowed the weightier battles of the Hundred Years' War began in 1340, on the boundaries of Flanders. In June the English won the sea-battle of Sluis and the English king came to Ghent to celebrate the victory – a glorious moment for Van Artevelde. Edward then tried to capture Saint-Omer and Tournai with the help of his Flemish allies, and failed. By September a truce had been signed between Edward III and Philip VI and Flemish participation in the Hundred Years' War was at an end. The theatre of conflict moved south and Edward lost interest in his allies to the north.

This change was in some ways fatal to Van Artevelde. While he had something to offer the English king – troops, money – he had a reason for dominating Flanders, for keeping Ghent in command, for bullying and organising his countrymen. He could rely on help, even friendship, from Edward. Once the theatre of war had shifted, however, and the English king had found other loans, other allies, other friends, Van Artevelde could no longer hold everything together. The old hostilities re-emerged. One of his earlier allies in Ghent, John van Steenbeke, led a revolt against him in 1342 which was put down; its precise causes are not known but it may easily have been the result of the frequent and brutal 'pacifying' of the country-side. Whatever the reason, cracks were clearly appearing in Flemish unity. Although we do not know the details, Van Artevelde's control was beginning to loosen before 1345. There was no longer any external threat. More importantly, no real solution had been found to the sovereignty question answered to some extent by the proclamation of Edward III as King of France in 1340. He had a legitimate claim to the French throne, but through the female line, as his mother had been a daughter of King Philip the Fair. Philip VI was also only an indirect heir of Philip the Fair, through the latter's brother Charles of Valois. The French preferred a Frenchman as king! Here lay the roots of the Hundred Years' War between France and England. Only when Edward had been declared King of *France* did the Flemish vassals feel free to change their allegiance to him. Many were unconvinced. Even the towns were never really comfortable with the solution. To many of them it was just a way of getting back the wool supply.

To Van Artevelde it may have meant much more. There is no contemporary evidence about his thoughts on the matter but his behaviour in the last months of his life seems to point to his desire to see Edward's son, the Prince of Wales, as the ruler of Flanders: in other words instead of Count Louis of Nevers. The latter, sheltering under the French king's protective wing, continued to hammer on the treasonable nature of the Flemish position. Troubles had arisen near Bruges in 1342; Van Steenbeke had revolted soon afterwards and such was Van Artevelde's fury that his followers had to shut him up in the house of Gerard the Devil in Ghent to cool down. One crisis

was dealt with, with the help of armed militias from Bruges and Ypres which camped outside Ghent's gates, but two years later came a much more serious outburst. Weavers and fullers were at each others' throats under their leaders Gerard Denys and John de Bake and when the day's slaughter came to an end power over Ghent passed to Denys.

At the last moment salvation appeared to be at hand. King Edward III arrived in the harbour of Sluis on 5 July 1345. Artevelde's spirits must have risen with hope. The King wanted to re-cement old friendships and make sure that his Flemish friends would not forsake him in the campaigns which were to come. Artevelde, full of hope, rode to Sluis on 7 July, 'to welcome' the King 'and to thank him for coming' according to the accounts. Edward seems then to have put forward some plan which threw the towns into complete confusion. Messengers and delegations rushed to Sluis. Count Louis was consulted and refused the requests of his subjects. But what was it all about? The chronicles maintain that Edward had proposed his son as Count of Flanders if Louis refused to do homage to him as King of France. If this is true it was probably supported by Van Artevelde himself, but we shall never know; Froissart's later detailed description of the scene is far from reliable! Van Artevelde was met by a hostile crowd on his return and murdered as he tried to leave his house on the Paddenhoek in Ghent by a weaver called, according to Froissart, Denys. The English alliance continued until 1349 when the new count, Louis of Male, arrived in his county.

Flanders had played a not unimportant role in the skirmishes between England and France at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War. Edward III had found funds and support in an area vital in all quarrels between these two countries. That the English king did indeed have a special relationship with Van Artevelde is also beyond question. Orders, of which the originals have disappeared, from the King to various officers of the crown refer to him frequently as friend and colleague. One, copied onto the Close Rolls of March 1339, refers to him as one 'to whom the King is especially bound for his good services and for his assistance given to the King's affairs in parts beyond the sea'. However his greatest achievement was the determination and clear-headedness which allowed him to get back the wool to Flanders. He clearly saw essential points. Some of his ideas, such as the unification of the separate parts of the Low Countries, turn up later under the Burgundians. Quarrels about a common currency, which was one of the points of the Treaty of 1339, are still going on! Van Artevelde had saved Flanders from starvation in 1337 and pointed it towards a future of co-operation with the other principalities in the Low Countries. Although a man of Ghent through and through his vision was not confined to his home-town. He also clearly understood the value of the English alliance and the shakiness of the French king's acceptance of Flemish neutrality. He was brave enough to take the radical step of declaring Edward III King of France. The fuss made about this by the chroniclers shows what a momentous step it was. By force of character and clarity of ideas, backed up by the Ghent militia, he imposed unity at a moment when it was essential, although his severity and cruelty to the surrounding small towns and country-side caused a fatal backlash. But he did not foresee the Belgian nation!

PATRICIA CARSON

FURTHER READING

- CARSON, P., *James van Artevelde, the Man from Ghent*. Ghent, 1980.
- DE PAUW, N., *La conspiration d'Audenarde sous Jacques van Artevelde, 1342*. Ghent, 1878.
- DE PAUW, N., *Cartulaire historique et généalogique des Artevelde*. Brussels, 1920 (Comm. roy. d'hist.).
- LUCAS, H.S., *The Low Countries and the Hundred Years' War, 1326-1347*. Ann Arbor, 1929.
- LUCAS, H.S., 'The sources and literature on Jacob Van Artevelde', *Speculum*, VIII, Cambridge (MA), 1933, pp. 125-149.
- POWER, E., *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History*. Oxford, 1941.
- WERVEKE, H. VAN, *De Gentsche stadsfinanciën*. Brussels, 1934 (Acad. roy. Belg., Mémoires 2nd series, XXXIV).
- WERVEKE, H. VAN, *Jacques van Artevelde*. Brussels, 1942 (Collection 'Notre Passé').
- WERVEKE, H. VAN, *Gent. Schets van een sociale geschiedenis*. Ghent, 1947.