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# Honour, community and hierarchy in the feasts of the archery and crossbow guilds of Bruges, 1445–81

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### A B S T R A C T

Archery and crossbow guilds first appeared in the fourteenth century in response to the needs of town defence and princely calls for troops. By the fifteenth century these guilds existed across northern Europe. Despite this they have not received the attention they deserve, and have even been dismissed as little more than militias. An analysis of the uniquely detailed account books of the two Bruges guilds, the archers of St Sebastian and the crossbowmen of St George, reveals much about their social activities, and especially their annual meals. Feasts were important to the guilds in three main ways. Firstly, they demonstrated the guild's status and wealth. Secondly, meals helped to strengthen the bonds of the community. The guild's community could include not just members resident in Bruges, but also shooters from other towns and even leading noblemen. Thirdly, and in contrast to this, communal meals were an occasion to exhibit the hierarchy present within these guilds. Hierarchy is shown through the range of foods purchased, and through the seating plans preserved in the St Sebastian's guild accounts.

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Fifteenth-century Bruges was the second largest city in the Low Countries and one of the most important marketplaces in western Europe.<sup>1</sup> Though its economy was in decline, in 1450 Bruges

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: RAB, Rijksarchief Brugge; SAB, Stadsarchief Brugge; BAS, Brugge, Archief van de Sint-Sebastiaansgilde.

maintained a population of over 36,000.<sup>2</sup> As befitting a city with such cultural and economic prominence, Bruges had a strong festive tradition, many elements of which have been studied.<sup>3</sup> The procession of the Holy Blood, in which a vial said to contain Christ's blood was carried around the city walls, was one of the most famous in the Low Countries.<sup>4</sup> Richer townsmen took part in the urban jousts of the White Bear,<sup>5</sup> while religious organisations catered to all levels of Bruges society.<sup>6</sup> Bruges was also the setting for noble celebrations: most famously, Charles the Bold's marriage to Margaret of York in 1468 presented a spectacle John Paston compared to the court of King Arthur.<sup>7</sup> The guilds of archers and crossbowmen, ostensibly founded for civic defence, were another important part of Bruges' vibrant civic culture, but have received far less attention from historians.<sup>8</sup>

The origins of the archery and crossbow guilds of Bruges are unclear, but may go back to the late thirteenth-century militia.<sup>9</sup> Over the fourteenth century the two communities, the archers of St Sebastian and the crossbowmen of St George, became important social groups. They received privileges, owned lands, and had their own chapels dedicated to their patron saints, all of which helped to make the guilds two of the most influential civic groups.

The archers of St Sebastian and the crossbowmen of St George both kept account books. The crossbowmen's accounts begin in 1445, with a gap from 1465 to 1470, and become fragmentary from 1481.<sup>10</sup> A separate membership list was kept from 1437.<sup>11</sup> The archers' accounts survive in four registers, covering 1454–6, 1460–5, 1465–72 and 1472–81. The last two of these, however, are incomplete.<sup>12</sup> The accounts of both guilds provide great insight into guild life, membership and devotional activities, as well as the guilds' annual meals, which are the focus of the present paper. Both guilds held two annual meals, one on their patronal saint's day, and another following their annual shooting competition, known as the *papegay*.

The feasts of the Bruges shooting guilds can be analysed to demonstrate how meals were simultaneously used to show status, create community and emphasise hierarchy. Firstly meals, especially

<sup>2</sup> P. Stabel, 'Composition et recomposition du réseaux urbaine de Pays-Bas au moyen âge', in: *Villes de Flandre et d'Italie*, ed. A.E. Crouzet-Paran and E. Lecuppre-Desjardin (Studies in European Urban History 12, Turnhout 2008), 29–58. See also W. Blockmans and others, *Studiën betreffende de sociaal structuren te Brugge Kortrijk en Gent in de 14e en 15e eeuw* (Heule, 1971–73); J.-A. Van Houtte, *Geschiedenis van Brugge* (Brugge, 1982), 25–83; J. Dumolyn, 'Population et structures professionnelles à Bruges aux XIVe et XV siècles', *Revue du Nord*, 81 (1999), 43–64; P. Stabel, 'From market to shop, retail and urban space in late medieval Bruges', in: *Buyers and sellers. Retail circuits and practices in medieval and early modern Europe*, ed. B. Blonde and others (Studies in European Urban History 9, Turnhout, 2006), 79–101; W. Blockmans, 'Brugge als Europeen handelscentrum', in: *Brugge en Europa* ed. E. Aert, W. Blockmans and others (Brugge, 1992), 41–55; J. Murray, 'Of nodes and networks: Bruges and the infrastructure of trade in fourteenth-century Europe', in: *International trade in the Low Countries (14th–16th Centuries). Merchants, organisation, infrastructure*, ed. P. Stabel, B. Blonde and A. Greve (Leuven, 2000), 1–14; R. van Uytven, 'Stages of economic decline: late medieval Bruges', in: *Peasants and townsmen in medieval Europe*, ed. J.-M. Duvois and E. Thoen (Gent, 1995), 259–69.

<sup>3</sup> A. Brown, *Civic ceremony and religion in Bruges c.1300–1520* (Cambridge, forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr Brown for access to the unpublished text.

<sup>4</sup> A. Brown, 'Civic ritual: Bruges and the count of Flanders in the later middle ages', *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997), 277–99; T.A. Boogart, 'Our Saviour's blood: procession and community in late medieval Bruges', in: *Moving subjects. Processional performance in the middle ages and the renaissance*, ed. K. Ashley and W. Husken (Amsterdam, 2001), 69–116.

<sup>5</sup> A. Brown, 'Urban jousts in the later middle ages: the White Bear of Bruges', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 78 (2000), 315–30; A. van den Abeele, *Ridderlijk gezelschap van de witte beer* (Brugge, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> A. De Schodt, 'Conférie de Notre-Dame de l'Arbre Sec', *Annales de la Société d'Émulation de la ville de Bruges*, 28 (1876–7), 141–87; A. Brown, 'Bruges and the Burgundian "theatre-state": Charles the Bold and Our Lady of the Snow', *History*, 84 (1999), 573–89.

<sup>7</sup> John Paston III to Margaret Paston, 8 July 1468, in *Paston letters and papers of the fifteenth century* ed. N. Davis, R. Beadle and C. Richmond, 3 vols (Oxford, 1971–2005), vol. 1, 538–40, no. 330.

<sup>8</sup> Though both have been written about: H. Godar, *Histoire de la gilde des archers de Saint Sébastien de la ville de Bruges* (Bruges, 1947); M. Lemahieu, *De koninklijke hoofdgilde Sint-Sebastiaan Brugge, 1379–2005* (Brugge, 2005); L. A. Vanhoutryre, *De Brugse kruisboogilde van Sint-Joris* (Handzame, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> For an overview, see E. van Autenboer, *De kaarten van de schuttersgilden van het Hertogdom Brabant (1300–1800)*, 2 vols (Tilburg, 1993–4); L.-A. Delaunay, *Étude sur les anciennes compagnies d'archers, d'arbalétriers et d'arquebusiers* (Paris, 1879); W. Iven and others, *Schuttersgilden in Noord-Brabant ('s-Hertogenbosch, 1983)*; J.A. Jolles, *De schuttersgilden en schutterijen van Zeeland. Overzicht van hetgeen nog bestaat* (Middelburg, 1934).

<sup>10</sup> SAB, 385, Sint Joris, register met ledenlijst, 1321–1531.

<sup>11</sup> SAB, 385, Sint Joris, rekeningen, 1445–80.

<sup>12</sup> BAS, volume 3, rekeningboeken, 1455–72, and volume 4, rekeningboeken, 1468–1513.

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