

A Consumer Revolution under Strain.

Consumption, Wealth and Status in Eighteenth-Century Aalst (Southern Netherlands).



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Een consumptierevolutie onder druk.

Consumptie, rijkdom en status in achttiende-eeuws Aalst (Zuidelijke Nederlanden)

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PREFACE

Looking back over the past few years, the least that could be said is that the road traveled was a long and winding one. As such roads go, some days they pass through dark and unwelcoming woods, on others a bend in the road suddenly exposes the most scenic views imaginable. The lessons are in the journey, not in the destination, so goes the saying – and from that perspective the long and winding road is perhaps the best anyone could wish for. Along the way, a great many have served as invaluable guides and signposts, as travel companions, supportive bystanders and helpful passers-by. In due time, I hope to be able to repay them in more than the ink of these words. My deep gratitude goes first and foremost to Bruno Blondé for being an expert supervisor – patient as well as inspiring. What I learned from him greatly surpasses the contents and scope of this dissertation. My thanks also go out to my other supervisors, Gerlinde Verbist and Jan Dumolyn, who provided invaluable feedback, tips and suggestions from divergent but equally stimulating perspectives.

Crossing the river Scheldt is never an enterprise undertaken lightheartedly, but I was extremely fortunate to discover in Antwerp the most wonderful, interesting and friendly group of people that was – and still is – the Centre for Urban History. I can certainly think of no better way to spice up any Monday than with a hefty discussion in the Centre’s noon seminars. To many of them I owe a great deal of support, insight and laughs. In particular Jord Hanus, who has, throughout these past few years, unquestioningly helped and supported me, and who also read through the entire manuscript with his characteristic precision and eye for detail. Jeroen Puttevils and Reinoud Vermoesen as well, have read and commented upon chapters of this thesis, and were always available for invaluable advice and good company. Botho Verbist has proved of crucial archival assistance, for which I cannot possibly thank him enough. Many thanks also to the occasional fellow train travelers Peter, Tim, Henk, Maarten and Patrick; the former office buddies Jan, Tim, Ellen and Elke; and to Dries, Dries, Ilja and Nicolas.

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My friends, I suspect, will be better served by less absenteeism (and possibly more beer) on my behalf than by any words penned down in this preface. Nevertheless, a special word of thanks to An, Gwen, Helena, Ellen, Pieter, Jelle, Hanne, Bart and Wim for their continued friendship. My parents and sister, would like to thank, for always, and wholeheartedly, supporting me - no matter what.

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Ghent, April 30th, 2012

“Tout se meut, tout change à vue, tout se transforme et pourtant, rien ne change. Une telle société, lancée dans le progrès technologique, accomplit toutes les révolutions possibles, mais ce sont des révolutions sur elles-mêmes.”

(J. Baudrillard)

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

(F. Scott Fitzgerald)

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of June 13th 1792, shortly after the death of her husband Frans Soetens, Judoca van den Berghe allowed four visitors into her house on the corner of the *Peirdencouter* and the *Korte Zoutstraat* in Aalst. For the best part of the day the four men would be shown around the house, listing all the goods they encountered along the way. Judoca's late husband's brother Petrus was among them, as was Frans de Bie, a close (and wealthy) friend of the family. The other two men were Petrus Breckpot and Joannes Ghijssels, sworn appraisers of the town, charged with the task of drawing up after-death inventories in households all over Aalst.

As usual, the men started their tour around the house in the kitchen, and must have immediately noted the hearth, a large table with ten chairs, and a mirror on the wall. Two sets of nine drinking cups for the consumption of tea or coffee were also kept in the kitchen. One of the two adjacent downstairs rooms – presumably the dining room - included two tables and six chairs, while the smaller ‘antechamber’ (*voorcamer*) counted yet another table with seven chairs. It appears that Frans and Judoca had been quite well equipped to receive plenty of guests and accommodate them in a most agreeable fashion. The consumption of tea and coffee seems to have occupied a central place in these rituals of socialization. In those three rooms alone, the appraisers counted no less than ninety tea and coffee cups, seven tea- and five coffeepots. Moreover, the antechamber and dining room contained five sugar pots, sugar tongs and four small milk jugs. In the dining room the four men even noticed a small table for the specific purpose of serving tea. It seems as if each room was fully equipped with its own set of hot drinks apparel, perhaps matching the specific look and function of each chamber. Sizeable companies could not only be accommodated for in drinking, but also in eating. The antechamber counted no less than ninety-six stoneware eating plates, whereas in the dining room a set of twenty-five porcelain plates could be found. At least on some occasions food was consumed with a set of knives and forks kept in the kitchen, as had become the custom in the social circles to which Frans and Judoca presumably belonged.¹

Many of the items encountered by the appraisers Petrus and Johannes on that 13th of June might have appeared quite unexceptional to them but would have been highly unfamiliar to their fellow appraisers a century earlier. Cups, cans and pots for preparing and consuming hot drinks were extremely rare in seventeenth-century Aalst; chairs and tables in such quantities as found in Soetens' house could then only be imagined among the small upper crust of the town's elite – to which the couple did not belong. Porcelain, clocks and bird cages were unknown in Aalst at the time, and the vast majority of houses was not as neatly compartmentalized into functionally specific rooms as Soetens' was. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that Frans Soetens owed his professional success and his ability to acquire such a decent style of living precisely to the changing consumer preferences

¹ The preceding description is based on MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1909 (Frans Soetens, 1792).

which he embodied so well himself. As a tobacco processor, he sold tobacco ‘carrots’ and sniff to customers in Brussels, Ronse and Hainaut, as well as to local smokers.² It is not surprising then, that when the appraisers entered Soetens’ upstairs study three months after his death, they did not only encounter his books and the almost obligatory set of tea- or coffee cups, but also two snuff boxes. Little more than half a century earlier these would have been unidentifiable by any appraiser in town.

Perhaps not only the interior of Frans Soetens’ home would have looked like a strange and faraway country to the town’s appraisers a century earlier, but the whole neighbourhood might have as well. Whereas the house next door – the large tavern of “Sint Maarten” – had once faced the town walls and the gate leading towards the nearby parish of Nieuwerkerken, the town wall had long been demolished by the 1790s, and starting from the corner of the Korte Zoutstraat a large, rectangular square was quickly being developed in distinctly classicist style.³ Around the same time, large parts of the town’s political and cultural elites built their stately mansions in an increasingly uniform manner on and around the newly formed square.⁴ This aesthetically homogenized ‘Imperial Square’, with its broad and tree-lined walkway in the middle, no doubt constituted a type of social arena that was new to the town’s urban infrastructure. Similar developments have been described by Peter Borsay as part of an ‘Urban Renaissance’ in England, a concept which recast the eighteenth-century town as “*the engine of social emulation, and to some extent of the industrial revolution.*”⁵

The arena of social status competition imagined by Borsay was surely not limited to the area of the ‘Imperial Square’ alone. It reached out over the many streets that were gradually becoming cleaner, better lit and offered more agreeable walking to the provincial urban flâneur avant-la-lettre; over the numerous coffee shops that sprang up in Aalst during that time, and perhaps to the occasional meeting of the local freemason’s lodge ‘La Discrète Imperiale’ which was founded in 1764.⁶ But no doubt it also extended down to the rooms of Frans Soetens’ house that were so obviously geared towards the accommodation of guests and the sociability involved in the playing of music, dining in company and the almost ritualized drinking of tea and coffee.

It is unlikely that Petrus and Joannes, the appraisers who rummaged through the numerous belongings of Judoca and her late husband Frans Soetens, attached the same meaning to the list of goods they scribbled down on that day in early summer, as readers of that same list are rather likely to do more than two hundred years later. Perhaps they recognized the possession of porcelain plates as fashionable, the abundance of goods related to the ritual of consuming hot drinks as respectable, and the many chairs and tables as comfortable. Most likely they thought of the *buffet* and the standing clock in the dining room and the barometer in the antechamber as decidedly novel. The small organ

² Upon Soetens’ death his various business partners, at least five of whom resided in Brussels, owed him almost 3.000 fl. in arrears for his delivery of tobacco, sniff and ‘*keulsche aerde*’ (an ochre-like pigment).

³ C. D’Huyvetter, B. De Longie, and M. Eeman, *Inventaris van het cultuurbezit in België, Architectuur, Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen, Arrondissement Aalst.*, Bouwen door de eeuwen heen in Vlaanderen (Brussel: 1978).

⁴ Among them were the influential aldermen De Craecker, Pauwelaert, Wille and De Clercq, the tax collector Leunckens and Evit the notary, see MAA, OAA, n° 277-279, F. De Potter and J. Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst voorgaand van eene historische schets van 't voormalige Land van Aalst*, 4 vols. (Ghent: 1876); Hendrik Strijpens, *Aalsterse fundamente: de achttiende eeuw*, vol. 1 (Aalst: 2002).

⁵ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford: 1989).

⁶ Vincent Declercq, “Vrij-gemetseld in Aalst. De vrijmetselaarsloge La Discrète Impériale 1764-1786” (Ma Thesis, Ghent University, 2004).

and the drums in the dining room, along with the desk and books in one of the upstairs rooms might have struck them as cultured. Perhaps they might have found the eighteen flower pots in the garden and the four bird cages scattered around the rooms as a little odd, or at least unusual, while the complete lack of any silver, gold or expensive jewelry signaled the household's detachment from the traditional consumption patterns of the wealthy elites.

However, it is unlikely that they recognized the list of possessions they were compiling as they moved from room to room, as being distinctively 'bourgeois'. Even though they lived through an age of political revolutions, the thought did probably not occur to Petrus and Johannes that they were not climbing the stairs of an ordinary (yet sizeable) house in the Korte Zoutstraat in Aalst, but rather the barricades of a veritable revolution. Much less does it seem probable that they considered the modestly well-to-do but perhaps rather unimportant tobacco merchant Frans Soetens as a revolutionary and a harbinger of the glorious future, instead of a moderately successful parvenu. It is equally unreasonable to imagine Petrus and Johannes reflecting on the modernity and progress that were being shaped by the very objects which descriptions they penned down so meticulously. Yet it is with heavy words as these that the material world of households such as that of Frans Soetens and Judoca van den Berghe has been recast by historiography. The observations of the eighteenth-century appraisers have been re-appraised themselves, as it were, by their distant descendants in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Introducing the early modern 'consumer revolution'

The classic, and most influential, account of this eighteenth-century transformation in consumerism has certainly been McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.⁷ Graced with a sweeping introduction and a remarkable confidence of tone, the book laid out the contours of a far-reaching and profound 'consumer revolution' in eighteenth-century England:

"More men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions. Objects which for centuries had been the privileged possessions of the rich came, within the space of a few generations, to be within the reach of a larger part of society than ever before, and, for the first time, to be within the legitimate aspirations of almost all of it. Objects which were once acquired as the result of inheritance at best, came to be the legitimate pursuit of a whole new class of consumers."⁸

Not only did more people consume above the level of bare 'need', but those who did also started to consume more. In the process, need was replaced by fashion, as decencies became necessities and luxuries became mere decencies. Not the *will* to consume was new, to be sure, but the *ability* to do so. Crucial in this newfound ability were the greater aggregate wealth available and its more equal distribution over society. Moreover, the relatively closely stratified English society permitted an

⁷ N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialisation of eighteenth-century England* (London: 1982).

⁸ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society*, 1.

unusual degree of social mobility, which in turn stimulated the emergence of a dynamic social system driven by Veblenesque emulation and 'trickle down' effects.⁹ In Neil McKendrick's account, the expanding material world of eighteenth-century England resulted from greater financial wealth on the one hand, as well as from a gradual replacement of traditional, static social hierarchies, with a more equal and dynamic social order on the other.

In a sense, Neil McKendrick's consumer revolution offered a highly optimistic reinterpretation of the classic standard-of-living debate. It purported an elevated degree of material welfare and declining social inequality as the pendant of the British industrial revolution. Moreover, the consumer revolution thesis inscribed itself in a barely disguised Whiggish narrative of Eurocentric modernity.¹⁰ Referring explicitly to Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto*, McKendrick situated the eighteenth-century consumer revolution at the 'take-off' on a path with 'a society of high mass consumption' as the eventual destination of progress, modernity and history.¹¹ Such interpretation is inextricably indebted to the intellectual climate of the Cold War and the 'Golden Sixties', when the prototype of a democratic and consumerist American society was increasingly pitted against its Soviet antipode.¹² McKendrick's equation of a 'consumer revolution' with the blossoming of a more democratic and egalitarian social structure reflects the perception of an economy of mass consumption as a free and democratic society, and the act of consuming as the ultimate expression of free will.¹³

Such an a priori optimistic interpretation of the role of modern consumerism in history has of course received more than its fair share of criticism. For one thing, political philosophers have ardently discredited the democratic character of consumption as being largely tautological: it usually follows inevitably from Adam Smith's (abstract) economic definition of individuals, instead of referring to the actual inclusion (or exclusion) of all individuals as consumers within society.¹⁴ Furthermore, McKendrick's optimistic interpretation seems at odds with his heavy reliance on Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption and emulation. In a Veblenesque world all consumer dynamism is relegated to a small élite that sets the tone for the consumer desires (and thus the free

⁹ Most theories of emulation lead back to Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: 1899) and Georg Simmel, "Fashion," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (London: 1971 (orig. 1904)).

¹⁰ Frank Trentmann, "Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 3 (2004).

¹¹ W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A non-communist manifesto* (Cambridge: 1960); W. Rostow, "The Stages of Economic Growth," *The Economic History Review* 12, no. 1 (1959).

¹² J. Brewer, "The Error of Our Ways: Historians and the Birth of Consumer Society", in *Cultures of Consumption* (2004); Sheryl Kroen, "A Political History of the Consumer," *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 3 (2004).

¹³ In this respect, McKendrick's reasoning followed the general line of Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: 1973). For a more detailed treatment of this Cold War debate, see Ann Smart Martin, "Makers, Buyers, and Users. Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework," *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 2-3 (1993).

¹⁴ Kroen, "A Political History of the Consumer", 716; Andreas Wirsching, "From Work to Consumption. Transatlantic Visions of Individuality in Modern Mass Society," *Contemporary European History* 20, no. 1 (2011): 25. See also Daniel Miller's more ambivalent reflections in Daniel Miller, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History," in *Acknowledging Consumption. A Review of New Studies*, ed. D. Miller (London: 1995).

will) of the large majority in society, which merely emulates and blindly copies.¹⁵ Moreover, anthropologists have spent considerable effort on demonstrating the many continuities between traditional and modern patterns of consumption as well as the multiple ways in which objects convey meanings that cannot be easily captured in grand narratives. In showing the similarities between ancient sumptuary legislation and the modern laws of fashion, they have fundamentally called into question the interpretation of consumption as the wholly individualistic and rational expression of free will – let alone of the consumer society as the paramount of democracy and freedom.¹⁶

Nevertheless, these considerations do little to diminish the historiographical merit of McKendrick's work in drawing attention to the actual shifts in consumer behaviour that preceded the industrial revolution. Even though many of the crucial features of his 'consumer revolution' have been significantly revised since the appearance of *'Birth of a Consumer Society'*, it has exerted a strong and lasting influence on the association between early modern consumer change and economic growth on the one hand, and the development of a new, more dynamic social order on the other. It is with this dual association that the present study engages. It aims to do so by studying the three-way association of consumer change, economic decline and social inequality in the context of a town which eighteenth-century history is decidedly less prone to a 'triumphalist' reading of revolutions and births, but in which material cultures nevertheless transformed enough so that any seventeenth-century visitor might have barely recognized the world of Frans Soetens' as his own.

At least in part, the lasting influence of the early modern 'consumer revolution' thesis is due more to the work of those who followed in McKendrick's footsteps than to his own. For all its hyperbolic language, many of the claims made in *'Birth of a Consumer Society'* seem, in hindsight, fairly conventional. The consumer revolution it purported was little more than the necessary pendant to the commercialization and industrialization of eighteenth-century British society, which redirected certain types of (already extant) consumption towards the market. His own empirical work was concerned primarily with the commercial production and marketing by entrepreneurs like Josiah Wedgwood, and was more obviously connected to 'consumerism' as a consequence of budding industrialization and commercialization than to 'consumption' as an autonomous force in causing these processes.¹⁷ It was left to others to push the thesis one step further, by detaching the early modern changes in consumption and material culture from the early industrialization process, and positing consumerism as a more or less autonomous force in the social and economic history of Western Europe.

¹⁵ B. Fine and E. Leopold, "Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution," *Social History* 15 (1990) and more extensively with regards to McKendrick's reliance on Veblen: Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption. The Material and Cultural Revisited* (London: 2002).

¹⁶ M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (Harmondsworth: 1980); A. Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: 1986); M. Sahlins, *Stone age economics* (New York: 1972); Grant McCracken, *Culture & Consumption* (Bloomington: 1988).

¹⁷ By 'consumerism' I generally understand the more restrictive meaning of acquisitive purchase of goods on the marketplace, whereas 'consumption' relates to the broader use that people make of the world, both on and out of the market. While the latter might be understood as a universal human practice evident in all societies, the former usually refers to the specific act of commercial consumption within a commoditized market economy. See in general Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," in *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: 1986); S. Pennell, "Consumption and consumerism in early modern England," *Historical Journal* 42 (1999): 552; Paul Glennie, "Consumption, consumerism and urban form: Historical perspectives," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5-6 (1998): 928.

In search of evidence on changing consumer behaviour, a number of large-scale studies dug up ever growing numbers of probate inventories. While these studies largely confirmed the occurrence of profound changes in domestic material cultures and consumption patterns, they also served to sever it from the context in which McKendrick had originally placed the consumer revolution. Since English probate inventories largely disappeared from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, the focus shifted to the period 1650-1750 – that is, before the era of budding industrialization and expanding commercialization of the late eighteenth century.¹⁸ Case studies of cities and regions on the European continent and the American colonies similarly suggested important shifts in domestic consumption, and further detached early modern consumer change from the English industrialization process.¹⁹

In this sense, the historiography on early modern consumer change has become increasingly connected to the research agenda of the so-called “*Revolt of the Early Modernists*.”²⁰ Ever since Deane and Cole’s estimates of British economic growth during the industrial revolution were notoriously revised by Crafts and Harley in the 1980s, the ‘*gradualist*’ approach to the emergence of modern economic growth and the industrial revolution has gained in currency throughout the subsequent centuries.²¹ As the search for economic growth and rising living standards was redirected to the early modern period instead of the later, classical period of industrialization, the attention shifted from a pre-dominantly *supply*-side perspective on the economy, to a focus on early modern *demand*. In this, the gradualists found their natural allies in the students of changing patterns of consumer behaviour and material culture in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. To be sure, neither demand-side gradualism, nor the idea of important pre-industrial consumer change were altogether new undercurrents in economic history. Already in 1932 Elizabeth Gilboy had suggested that consumer demand might have spurred the industrial revolution, but it was only from the 1960s

¹⁸ L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (1988); M. Overton et al., eds., *Production and consumption in English households, 1600-1750* (London: 2004); P. Earle, *The making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (London: 1989); Ken Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness and social structure in early modern England" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009); C. Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer in England and America* (Oxford: 1990).

¹⁹ Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650-1720* (Princeton: 1982); Gloria L. Main and Jackson T. Main, "Economic Growth and the Standard of Living in Southern New England, 1640-1774," *The Journal of Economic History* 48, no. 1 (1988); Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh, "The Standard of Living in the Colonial Chesapeake," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1988); A. Pardailhe-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'Intime* (Paris: 1988); B. Garnot, *Un déclin: Chartres au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: 1991); D. Roche, *La culture des apparences. Une histoire du vêtement (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: 1990); Cissie Fairchilds, "The production and marketing of populuxe goods in eighteenth century Paris," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: 1993); Cissie Fairchilds, "Determinants of Consumption Patterns in Eighteenth-Century France," in *Material Culture. Consumption, Life-Style, Standard of Living, 1500-1900*, ed. Anton Schuurman and Lorena Walsh (Milan: 1993); Th. Wijzenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft. Bezit en bestaan van rijk en arm in een periode van achteruitgang (1700-1800)* (Hilversum: 1987).

²⁰ The title is borrowed from Jan Luiten Van Zanden, "The 'revolt of the early modernists' and the 'first modern economy': an assessment," *Economic History Review* 55, no. 4 (2002). A concise overview of this historiographical agenda in Jan De Vries, "Economic growth before and after the industrial revolution: a modest proposal," in *Early Modern Capitalism*, ed. Maarten Prak (London: 2001); E.A. Wrigley, "The quest for the industrial revolution," in *Poverty, Progress, and Population*, ed. E.A. Wrigley (Cambridge: 2004); J.L. Van Zanden, *The long road to the Industrial Revolution: the European economy in a global perspective, 1000-1800* (Leiden: 2009).

²¹ N.F.R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (New York: 1985). A critical appraisal of this revision in P Hudson and M. Berg, "Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution," *Economic History Review* 45 (1992).

that the argument seriously resurfaced.²² While Keynesianism became the unofficial orthodoxy in economic policy and Kenneth Galbraith wrote his bestselling *'The Affluent Society'*, it is perhaps not surprising that historians started looking for changes in demand at the roots of the industrial revolution.²³ The debate on the so-called *'Great Rebuilding of Rural England'* demonstrated that pre-industrial material cultures were not necessarily immobile, and Joan Thirsk saw confirmation for the potential importance of home demand for early modern economic growth in the gradual increase of consumer goods in English households from the end of the sixteenth century onwards.²⁴ When, beginning in the 1980s, historians of the industrial and consumer revolutions turned their back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the quest for the roots and causes of the industrial revolution could now begin to be reconciled with the alleged importance of home demand in the early modern economy.

This new perspective on the role of demand in Western economic history entailed an important reinterpretation of the nature of the pre-industrial consumer. Traditionally this pre-industrial consumer had often been seen as essentially autarkic, lacking both the ability and the desire to consume more than a certain target income for which he or she was willing to work.²⁵ He or she was now gradually replaced by his or her antipode, the *'active searching consumer'* who was sensitive to issues of fashion and novelty and able to make complicated decisions related to the household's allocation of resources in order to achieve a desired lifestyle. Already in 1975 Jan De Vries made a compelling case for re-imagining early modern peasants in peripheral Friesland as being perfectly capable of heightened demand and increased consumption of household goods.²⁶ During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he saw evidence of important investments in peasant housing, the gradual introduction of window curtains and mantelpiece cloths, a diversification of tables and chairs, the strong spread of new glass, tin and ceramic table- and kitchenware, as well as the introduction and diffusion of mirrors, clocks and books. Although individually these changes were far from revolutionary, together they reflected a gradual adoption of urban cultural practices that collectively transformed the consumption patterns of the Dutch rural population.²⁷ In the following years, De Vries would continue to make a strong case for the consumption potential of the rural peasantry, meanwhile

²² The article was reprinted in Elizabeth Gilboy, "Demand as a Factor in the Industrial Revolution," in *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution in England*, ed. R.M. Hartwell (London: 1967).

²³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: 1958).

²⁴ W.G. Hoskins, "The Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570-1640," *Past and Present* 4 (1953); J. Thirsk, *Economic policy and projects: the development of a consumer society in early modern England* (Oxford: 1978). Hoskins' 'Great Rebuilding' was later followed by Margaret Spufford's seventeenth century 'Great Reclothing': M. Spufford, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England. Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London: 1984). See also D.E.C. Eversley, "The home demand and economic growth in England, 1750-1780," in *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution*, ed. E.L. Jones and G.E. Mingay (London: 1967) as one of the proponents of a demand side perspective. For a critical account of this literature and a more pessimistic interpretation: S. Horrell, "Home Demand and British Industrialization," *Journal of Economic History* 56 (1996); Fine and Leopold, "Consumerism".

²⁵ Jan De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge: 2008), 25; Shamma, *The pre-industrial consumer*, 1.

²⁶ Jan De Vries, "Peasant demand patterns and economic development: Friesland 1550-1750," in *European peasants and their markets: essays in agrarian economic history*, ed. W.N. Parker and E.L. Jones (Princeton: 1975).

²⁷ It should probably be remarked however, that most of the original evidence relating to an expanding material culture related to De Vries' upper category owning ten cows or more – a group to which (contrary to what the title suggests) the label 'peasants' fits rather uneasily.

expanding his argument to incorporate the changing household economy and developing proto-industrialization.²⁸ As the availability of consumer goods on the market increased, households changed their allocation of resources and labour increasingly towards the market. Rural households thus became progressively deeper involved in production for the market, as well as consumption from the market. Specialization deepened and the division of labour grew, ultimately producing productivity gains and declining relative prices. In other words, it was the gradual transformation of consumption desires – the search for comfort, pleasure, novelty and identity that defines the ‘active searching consumer’ – which triggered this process of growth. In De Vries’ view the early modern rural consumer had gone from autarkic scarcity to self-improving choice, and in the process of working harder and desiring more, he pulled himself up by his bootstraps.

Consumerism and optimism perpetuated

Between Neil McKendrick’s *‘Birth of a Consumer Society’* (1982) and Jan de Vries’ *‘Industrious Revolution’* (2008), the face of the early modern consumer revolution had changed profoundly. In McKendrick’s framework the changes in eighteenth-century consumer behaviour were primarily the *result* of rising living standards and economic modernization, while in De Vries’ perspective the new, seventeenth-century consumer mentalities presented themselves more as an autonomous *cause* of economic modernization than as its effect. The growing market consumption of a widening range of social groups is thought to have induced higher degrees of market involvement and labour intensification, which in their turn deepened proto-industrialization and stimulated productivity gains in agriculture and industry. Despite their divergent perspectives, both influential approaches to early modern consumer change carry deeply optimistic overtones with regards to the social and economic world in which they transpired.

In McKendrick’s view it were the unprecedented levels of wealth achieved in eighteenth-century England that allowed higher levels of market consumption, while De Vries saw in the spread of new consumer mentalities the beginnings of Smithian specialization and economic modernization - and eventual growth. In the social sphere, McKendrick imagined a *‘narrowing of social distances’* to have induced greater consumerism, whereas De Vries described the new patterns of luxury consumption themselves as instrumental in a unifying and collective *‘groping for modernity.’*²⁹ This general association of early modern transformations in consumerism with the gradualism of pre-industrial economic history and with the perceived transformation towards a less rigid social order inscribes the consumer revolution in a narrative of social and economic optimism that sits largely

²⁸ Jan De Vries, "Between purchasing power and the world of goods: understanding the household economy in early modern Europe," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: 1994); De Vries, *The industrious revolution*; Jan De Vries, "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution," *The Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 2 (1994).

²⁹ N. McKendrick, "The consumer revolution of eighteenth-century England," in *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England*, ed. N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J.H. Plumb (1982), 20; De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 54.

uneasily with most of the traditional, structuralist accounts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century economic history.

The contrast is particularly clear as soon as one leaves the exceptional trajectories of eighteenth-century England or the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic aside, and turns to those European regions where economic modernization and a narrowing of social distances appear far less evident.³⁰ There, one finds a historiography which abounds more generally in a pessimist take on early modern social and economic conditions. Part of this literature draws on a traditional, Marxist perspective on nineteenth-century industrialization in which the eventual breakthrough of industrial capitalism seems conceivable only as the result of a centuries-old process of proletarianization and impoverishment throughout Europe.³¹ Moreover, much of the historiography on early modern economic change has been pre-occupied with the development of rural proto-industries. The most influential accounts on the matter have described this proto-industrialization in terms of a Malthusian trap leading to poverty, over-population and proletarianization, rather than as the result of expanding consumerism.³²

The apparent conundrum has not been altogether ignored by Jan De Vries. After all, the theory of an '*industrious revolution*' seems specifically designed to deal with the issue of reconciling the pessimist's evidence of declining real wages with the optimist's reliance on changing consumer behaviour.³³ The growth in market-oriented labour input observed in proto-industrialization serves precisely this purpose, thereby redefining proto-industrial production from a forced survival strategy to a superior voluntary choice with the aim of increasing household consumption. The conundrum seems less easily reconciled in an urban context where increased market-oriented production and labour inputs seem far less obvious during this period.³⁴ It is therefore all the more remarkable that, despite presenting the most convincing case for the occurrence of an industrious revolution in the proto-industrial countryside, the new consumer desires which provided its main dynamism originated in the early modern city instead.³⁵ Some important exceptions aside, the urban world of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe was beset by widespread de-industrialization and decline rather than by the vibrant social and economic vigor one would expect.³⁶

It seems that, for many parts of Western Europe outside of the core regions of England and the Dutch Republic, the evidence on early modern consumer change can much less readily be applied to

³⁰ See also S. Ogilvie, "Consumption, Social Capital, and the "Industrious Revolution" in Early Modern Germany," *The Journal of Economic History* 70, no. 2 (2010).

³¹ Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in pre-industrial Europe* (Brighton: 1979).

³² H. Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen, 1650-1900* (Göttingen: 1996); P. Kriedte, H. Medick, and J. Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before industrialization: rural industry in the genesis of capitalism* (Cambridge: 1981); F. Mendels, "Proto-industrialization: the first phase of the industrialization process," *The Journal of Economic History* 32 (1972); F. Mendels, *Industrialization and population pressure in eighteenth-century Flanders* (New York: 1981). A comprehensive overview of the literature in S. Ogilvie and M. Cerman, "Proto-industrialization, economic development and social change in early modern Europe," in *European proto-industrialization*, ed. Sheilagh C. Ogilvie and Markus Cerman (Cambridge: 1996).

³³ De Vries, "Between purchasing power".

³⁴ Although the evidence for later eighteenth-century London points in this direction: Hans-Joachim Voth, "Time and Work in Eighteenth-Century London," *The Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 1 (1998).

³⁵ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 44-58.

³⁶ H. Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics and the process of urbanization and de-urbanization in the low countries from the late middle ages to the eighteenth century. A synthesis.," in *The rise and decline of urban industries in Italy and in the Low Countries (Late Middle Ages-Early Modern Times)*, ed. H. Van Der Wee (Leuven: 1988).

the optimistic interpretation of the 'revolt of the early modernists.' Moving beyond the mere conundrum, the question then becomes how the widespread transformations in European consumption behaviour should be understood within the context of the economic and social world in which they transpired. To this end, the current thesis examines the case of Aalst from the late seventeenth until the end of the eighteenth century. Aalst, which would become thoroughly dominated by a proletarianized labour force employed in factory production from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, was of no more than secondary importance throughout the early modern era. Itself beset by de-industrialization and urban decline, it served primarily as a central place and gateway for its surrounding countryside. This rural area, the '*Land of Aalst*', belonged to the core region of Flanders where the linen-producing proto-industry expanded rapidly throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries before dramatically collapsing around the beginning of the nineteenth century. Yet even before that time, the area was described in pessimistic terms by Franklin Mendels in his original formulation of the proto-industrialization theory.³⁷ Surrounded by this proto-industrial hinterland, deprived of its urban industries and slowly proletarianized in the decades to come, the town of Aalst bears little resemblance to either the positive socio-economic circumstances to which McKendrick ascribed the birth of consumer society, or the optimistic effects with which De Vries endowed similarly widespread consumer change.

Urban decline and material culture

Despite these circumstances, the general expansion and diffusion of a wide variety of consumer goods did not steer away from Aalst. Between the 1670s and the end of the eighteenth century there was a sixty percent increase in the number of household goods owned by the median household in town, and the introduction of new products such as tea, coffee, tobacco, porcelain and cottons profoundly changed the domestic interior as well as the way it was lived for many of the town's inhabitants. This raises important questions on the economic conditions in which this change came about, and the effects which it sorted. How did the early modern economy of a town like Aalst allow for such a profound transformation of the material lives of its inhabitants? Until the middle of the eighteenth century, urban life in the Southern Netherlands suffered from a lack of dynamism and the general absence of economic or demographic growth.³⁸ How is it then, that under these lackluster social and economic circumstances a new culture of consumerism was bolstered that could radically transform the consumer desires and household economies on the proto-industrial countryside?³⁹ And, when during the second half of the eighteenth century, a new round of urban growth began to affect many of

³⁷ Mendels, *Industrialization and population pressure*.

³⁸ P.M.M. Klep, "Urban Decline in Brabant: the Traditionalization of Investments and Labour (1374 - 1806)," in *The Rise and Decline of Urban Industries in Italy and in the Low Countries: Late Middle Ages - Early Modern Times*, ed. H. Van Der Wee (Leuven: 1988); Hugo Soly, "Social aspects of structural changes in the urban industries of eighteenth-century Brabant and Flanders," in *The rise and decline of urban industries in Italy and in the Low Countries (Late Middle Ages-Early Modern Times)*, ed. H. Van Der Wee (Leuven: 1988); A. Lottin and H. Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes des Pays-Bas méridionaux et de la principauté de Liège," in *Études sur les villes en Europe Occidentale (milieu du XVIIe siècle à la veille de la Révolution Française)*, ed. A. Lottin, et al. (Paris: 1983).

³⁹ The issue is left largely unexplored in De Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

the secondary towns throughout the area, how did this affect the material lives of the city dwellers?⁴⁰ If such a pattern of standstill and growth holds for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst, it would be interesting to learn whether the diffusion of new and growing quantities of consumer goods was confined to this latter period of McKendrick's birth of a consumer society, or if it transpired throughout urban decline and renaissance alike.

In this confrontation not only the character and development of the urban economy, studied in the light of profound changes in the material culture of the home, should be questioned, but also the character of the consumer revolution itself. What levels of increased financial wealth, as Neil McKendrick or Peter Borsay would have it, or which degree of Jan de Vries' industriousness, were required in order to finance the observed changes in consumption? Economic historians working in the tradition of the 'revolt of the early modernists' have generally emphasized the ways in which the newly emerging patterns of consumption represented tendencies of amelioration, progress and improvement which were enabled by the progressing development of the pre-industrial economy. Mark Overton *et al* have underlined the increase of the mundane objects related to domestic comfort, privacy and refinement rather than to fashion, display and emulation. This improvement of the material standard of living in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, they argue, was predominantly brought about by a greater availability, and subsequent affordability, of commodities that could enhance the comfort and convenience – and overall the utility – of early modern households.⁴¹ Likewise, Carole Shammas maintains that the bulk of transformations in consumer behaviour can be explained by declining relative prices and improving chains of retail and distribution, rather than by fundamentally shifting consumer desires.⁴² Most of these changes did not necessarily alter the budgetary priorities of households, let alone stimulate the rise of a brand new, modern type of consumer. Shammas' pre-industrial consumer largely remained the same utility maximizing individual of earlier eras, who simply adapted his or her consumption pattern in accordance to the shifts in affordability and availability produced by the pre-industrial economy.

However, it is not unlikely that the changing form of material culture itself carried an agency that allowed it to not merely reflect the development and progress (or decline) of the early modern economy, but to actively shape it as well. Carole Shammas allowed such a transformative role for the new exotic populuxe goods: tea, sugar, coffee and tobacco. Partly due to the inherently addictive effects of these drugs, she assumed a 'positive feedback' on those goods: once Europeans had come in touch with the joys of smoking tobacco or drinking tea, a self-stimulating cycle was set in motion, which would gradually familiarize the early modern consumer with market consumption and shopping, and eventually spill over into a more general consumerist behaviour.⁴³ Maxine Berg envisioned a more general positive feedback cycle for a wide variety of Eastern luxuries. By their very nature, the introduction of Indian calicoes, Chinese porcelain and Japanese lacquers "*undermined the uniformity and clear social hierarchies previously imposed by sumptuary legislation, and made*

⁴⁰ Bruno Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden. Ongelijkheden in de opbouw en de ontwikkeling van het Brabantse stedelijke netwerk (ca. 1750-ca.1790)* (Brussel: 1999); P. Hohenberg and L. Lees, *The making of Urban Europe* (Cambridge: 1985); Jan De Vries, *European urbanization, 1500-1800* (London: 1984).

⁴¹ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 118-20.

⁴² Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer*; C. Shammas, "Changes in English and Anglo-American consumption from 1550 to 1800," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: 1994).

⁴³ A critical stance against this hypothesis is taken in Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (London: 2002), 9.

individuality and variety an option to much broader parts of society."⁴⁴ In luring the broad middle classes to the market and stimulating the production of cheaper import-substitutes, the impact of these Eastern luxuries upon the economic development of Western Europe proved to be immense.

By studying the development of the urban economy of Aalst in conjunction with the changing domestic material cultures which took shape in it, the reflexive nature of both will be considered. To what extent did these changing material cultures reflect the amelioration of comfort, convenience and material living standards produced by a developing economy? And are there indications that transformations in the material culture available not merely reflected changes in affordability and availability, but themselves reshaped the utility function of their consumers, and thus the face of the urban economy? In other words, what were the economic conditions in which the changing consumption patterns in early modern Aalst came about, and what effects did they sort in the economic sphere? Posing these questions in a reflexive way, helps to illuminate what the changing patterns of consumption can learn about the character of the early modern urban economy in the Southern Netherlands, as well as to (re-)consider the close connection between the consumer revolution and the historiography on the revolt of the early modernists.

Consumer change and the social

Much of the historiography on the emergence of new types of consumerism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries suggests, indicates or assumes that this reflected equally important changes in the social configuration of the early modern world. Neil McKendrick, it has been noted, believed that the drive to consumerism originated in a more closely stratified society which induced consumers to strive for social ascent through emulating their superiors.⁴⁵ However, most historians working on early modern consumer change have dismissed emulation as a significant driving force in bringing about the new patterns of consumerism. Scholars like Colin Campbell and Jean-Christophe Agnew have argued from theoretical grounds that motivations of emulation should not too readily be inferred from the mere trickle-down of commodities or from the marketing techniques of entrepreneurs like Josiah Wedgewood.⁴⁶ Many more have rejected hypotheses of emulation on empirical grounds, arguing that utility, comfort and convenience proved more important to early modern consumers than display or imitation.⁴⁷ Others have maintained that the leading 'taste groups' in early modern society did not map

⁴⁴ Maxine Berg, "New commodities, luxuries and their consumers in eighteenth-century England," in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester: 1999), 67; M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: 2007).

⁴⁵ McKendrick, "The consumer revolution", 20

⁴⁶ Jean-Christophe Agnew, "Coming up for air: consumer culture in historical perspective," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: 1993); C. Campbell, "Understanding traditional and modern patterns of consumption in eighteenth-century England: a character-action approach," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: 1993); C. Campbell, "The meaning of objects and the meaning of actions. A critical note on the sociology of consumption," *Journal of Material Culture* 1, no. 1 (1986); C. Campbell, "The desire for the new. Its nature and social location as presented in theories of fashion and modern consumerism," in *Consumption. Critical concepts in the social sciences*, ed. D. Miller (London: 2001).

⁴⁷ For instance Overton et al., *Production and consumption*; Anne McCants, "Poor Consumers as Global Consumers: the Diffusion of Tea and Coffee Drinking in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History Review*

altogether closely on the socio-economic and judicial stratifications of class.⁴⁸ Cissie Fairchilds similarly noted that in eighteenth-century France “social class did not, as it may have in earlier periods, dictate what people bought; instead, they spent what they could afford on goods that expressed their social aspirations.”⁴⁹ In a historiographical essay written over a decade ago, Sara Pennell remarked how, in the work of then recent historians, emulation had “arguably slipped from the lofty position once accorded it, but there is a hesitancy about what might stand in its stead. This is rooted in a deeper discomfort about how consumption (with its implications for modern, demotic/democratic practice) and issues of power intersect, if it is not through hierarchic strategies that benefit some but not others.”⁵⁰

Nevertheless, this apparent sidestepping of the relation between consumption and power, and the lack of grand new theories to replace the old, has generally gone hand in hand with a widespread, although often implicit, acceptance of the active, modern and middle class consumer as the liberal agent in the birth of the early modern consumer society. By and large, the historiography on the early modern consumer revolution that has emerged in McKendrick’s wake has almost consistently strengthened the historical agency of the individual consumer as the sole creator of meaning and value within the economic and semiotic world he or she inhabited. Colin Campbell, for instance, has sought to locate the origins of modern consumerism in a novel pre-occupation with the sensual fantasies attached to commodities.⁵¹ He described modern consumerism as ‘autonomous imaginary hedonism.’ It was imaginary in the sense that most pleasure was derived from the fantasies attached to the consumer goods or services, rather than from the materiality of those goods themselves. Hence, “the visible practice of consumption is thus no more than a small part of a complex pattern of hedonistic behaviour, the majority of which occurs in the imagination of the consumer.”⁵² According to Campbell, the birth of this modern hedonistic consumer resulted from a broader process that took place during the early modern period. Day-dreaming and imaginary consumption required

61, no. 1 (2008): 194, and closer to home, a study on the material culture of the rural area of Nevele in Flanders concluded that it was a new “desire for comfort” that spurred proto-industrial peasants to work harder, rather than either hardship or emulation (C. Schelstraete, H. Kintaert, and D. De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid. Arbeid, bezit en woonomstandigheden in het Land van Nevele tijdens de 17e en de 18e eeuw* (Nevele: 1986), 203-04). A recent exception is Hester Dibbits, “Pronken as practice. Material Culture in The Netherlands, 1650-1800,” in *Luxury in the Low Countries. Miscellaneous Reflections on Netherlandish Material Culture, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Rengenier C. Rittersma (Brussels: 2010), who emphasized the practices of display in early modern Dutch households.

⁴⁸ Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*, 194-97; Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, “A Matter of Taste. Lifestyle in Holland in the seventeenth and 18th Centuries,” in *Material Culture. Consumption, Life-Style, Standard of Living, 1500-1900*, ed. Anton Schuurman and Lorena Walsh (Milan: 1994); Brian Cowan, *The social life of coffee. The emergence of the British coffeehouse* (London: 2005); C. Campbell, *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism* (Oxford: 1987); De Vries, *The industrious revolution*; B. Lemire, “Consumerism in pre-industrial and early industrial England: the trade in second-hand clothes,” *Journal of British Studies* 27 (1988); Berg, “New commodities”; Johan Poukens and Nele Provoost, “Respectability, Middle-Class Material Culture, and Economic Crisis: The Case of Lier in Brabant, 1690-1770,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42, no. 2 (2011).

⁴⁹ Fairchilds, “Determinants”, 60.

⁵⁰ Pennell, “Consumption and consumerism”, 553.

⁵¹ Campbell, *The romantic ethic*. As the title suggests, Campbell’s work draws considerably on the work of Max Weber, but also on that of Weber’s contemporary and close friend Werner Sombart: Werner Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (München: 1922) (see more extensively on the latter: Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer culture. History, theory and politics* (London: 2007)).

⁵² Campbell, *The romantic ethic*, 89.

individualism, a conviction that something coherent and internal as the 'self' is the locus of emotions and can be subjected to a minimal degree of control. Such individualism, and the concomitant modern consumer, supposedly arose among the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie, embedded in a cultural framework of romanticism.⁵³ Rather than being driven by emulation, the early modern consumer revolution "was in fact carried through by means of a specifically bourgeois consumer ethic; a set of values and beliefs which were distinct to this section of English society".⁵⁴ Although it originated in the mental framework specific to this particular social category, Campbell attributed the new consumer behaviour explicitly to the agency of the individual and his or her ability to imagine.

Campbell is far from the only scholar linking the rise of the 'bourgeoisie' to the birth of the liberated, modern consumer as an agent in history. Woodruff Smith, for instance, has traced the emergence of a new culture of respectability from the late eighteenth century onwards, which would come to define a central part of what we understand by (bourgeois) modernity.⁵⁵ Smith's new repertoire of respectability can easily be aligned with the cultural construction of a distinct middle class (and urban) identity as described by Peter Borsay, Simon Gunn, Peter Earle and Lothar Gall.⁵⁶ In this view, the cultural formation of the middle class, with specific attitudes towards consumption and materiality, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, preceded the formation of any referent conforming to the middle class as a social unit in the socio-economic sphere. Both Campbell's romantic ethic and Woodruff Smith's culture of respectability offer a demand-side perspective to Weber's protestant ethic as the birthplace of modernity and capitalism.⁵⁷ Although the new cultural identity of the middle classes was fuelled by a drive for incessant status competition among social peers, it did not arise from an attempt to copy traditional patterns of genteel or aristocratic conspicuous consumption. In the perspective of Smith, Campbell, Borsay or De Vries, the distinct material expression of identity by the emerging middle class both reflected and strengthened the newly found malleability of the early modern social hierarchy.

The creative and innovative early modern consumer that has thus gained prominence in historiography may very well be a more complex and nuanced affair than either McKendrick's emulative agent, or neo-classical theory's utility maximizing individual, yet it is not entirely unproblematic either.⁵⁸ In re-conceptualizing the consumer as the independent and individual carrier of agency, recent historiography has tended not just to ignore the relation between consumption and power, but to turn it largely irrelevant in the process. How then, can this early modern consumer be re-

⁵³ A more nuanced analysis of the inherent ambiguities in the relationship between romanticism and consumerism can be found in Stana Nenadic, "Romanticism and the urge to consume in the first half of the nineteenth century," in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester: 1999).

⁵⁴ Campbell, *The romantic ethic*, 35.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Consumption*, 243-46.

⁵⁶ Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*; Simon Gunn, "Class, identity and the urban: the middle class in England, c. 1790-1950," *Urban History* 31, no. 1 (2004); Earle, *The making*; Lothar Gall, *Bürgertum in Deutschland* (Berlin: 1989).

⁵⁷ Their theories have been loosely supported by the inventory studies of Earle, *The making*; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*; Gwendolynn Heley, *The Material Culture of the Tradesmen of Newcastle upon Tyne 1545 - 1642: The Durham Probate Record evidence* (London: 2009); Poukens and Provoost, "Respectability", but not for instance by H.R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England 1600-1750* (Oxford: 2007).

⁵⁸ On this active and creative consumer: M. Bianchi, ed. *The Active Consumer. Novelty and Surprise in Consumer Choice* (London: 1998); M. Bianchi, "Consuming Novelty: Strategies for Producing Novelty in Consumption," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 1 (1998).

aligned with the social structures with which he or she engaged and within which he or she acted? Considering the histories of proletarianization, pauperization and social polarization which span the urban world of the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands, how is it that a broad new middle class could simultaneously find its self-expression in newly emerging cultures of consumption? Did the diffusion of new consumer goods and expanding material cultures follow patterns that were largely independent from the socio-economic inequalities of the time, or did they rather reflect the “*narrowing of social distances*” which McKendrick had in mind? In other words: how was the new consumer culture which manifested itself in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst shaped by the inequalities of urban society at large?⁵⁹ The reverse question merits hardly less attention: how is it that the changing material world of households in Aalst affected the social boundaries between them?⁶⁰ Did the introduction of a wide variety of new consumer goods expand the opportunities for social distinction, or did it rather loosen the rigid and static social orders of early modern society?

Outline of the dissertation

Like most empirical studies of early modern consumer change, the present thesis aims to shed light on these questions by making use of post-mortem inventories. For this study, a collection of 535 inventories detailing the wealth and material possessions of households in Aalst has been gathered, spread over four sample periods from the 1670s until the 1790s. The first chapter of this thesis examines the potential pitfalls and caveats characteristic of this type of sources. Since the focus of this study lies on the social dynamics of early modern consumer change, particular attention is directed towards the problematic social bias of the inventories. By confronting them with census data, parish registers and tax records, it is argued that these sources can nevertheless be exploited to explore the patterns of social diffusion and inequality throughout the period under scrutiny. The second and third chapters sketch the contours of economic development, living standards and social structures in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst, and how these were subject to change over time. These are then confronted with the evidence on the extent and nature of consumer change in the fourth chapter. The final chapter questions the social conditions and effects which caused, and were caused by, the widespread consumer change experienced in early modern Aalst.

By studying early modern consumer change in overt relation to the historic social and economic context in which it transpired, it is my hope that the socio-economic conditions for the profound transformation in the material culture of the home which took place during the early modern period, as well as its consequences, can be illuminated.

⁵⁹ See also Lisa Tiersten, "Redefining Consumer Culture: Recent Literature on Consumption and the Bourgeoisie in Western Europe," *Radical History Review* 57 (1993).

⁶⁰ Soly, "Social aspects"; H. Soly, "Materiële cultuur te Gent in de 18e eeuw: een terreinverkenning," *Oostvlaamse Zanten* 63, no. 1 (1988).

I. POST-MORTEM INVENTORIES

IN AALST

Any scholar interested in issues of wealth, material living standards and consumer goods in the early modern period is likely to turn to the evidence presented by post-mortem (or probate) inventories sooner or later. In their most basic form these inventories record the movable possessions found at the house of a recently deceased individual, although it may take many different forms. Without a doubt, such after-death inventories provide a unique insight into the material culture of early modern households, but their use is not always entirely unproblematic. In fact, almost all scholars involved with these sources have described the potential pitfalls and biases at length. Nevertheless, due to the large local, regional, national and temporal differences in the nature and origin of the inventories used, no standard method in dealing with these issues was ever adopted. This spatial and temporal diversity has also made the forging of comparative and aggregated conclusions based on disparate case-studies a methodologically hazardous task. The probate inventories of seventeenth-century Cornwall were drawn up for different reasons and were probably left behind by a different subgroup of the population than those a century later, or in Antwerp, Paris or the American colonies.

All local inventorying practices have in common that they emerged from the desire to prevent disputes concerning the payment of debts and the distribution of possessions left behind upon death.⁶¹ Adequately documenting assets, debts and entitlements assured the reimbursement of creditors, while facilitating the actual or later partition of property between the spouse and heirs.⁶² Since the judicial and customary contexts surrounding debt payment and hereditary transfers were locally and temporally entrenched, the specific concerns in inventory taking varied accordingly. Hence the large variety in what and whom was inventoried. Official authority over hereditary matters differed from place to place (and time to time) as well. In England probate records were usually drawn up by ecclesiastical courts, although some larger cities also gained the right to probate in particular instances.⁶³ In Flanders, by contrast, the inventory taking process was taken up by the alderman benches of towns, rural jurisdictions, or was in some cases attributed to a special Orphan Chamber, and sometimes left to the duties of public notaries.⁶⁴

⁶¹ A general outline of the English situation in Jeff Cox and Nancy Cox, "Probate 1500-1800: a System in Transition," in *When Death Do Us Part: Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England*, ed. Tom Arkell, Nesta Evans, and Nigel Goose (Oxford: 2000).

⁶² See for instance Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 13-14.

⁶³ Cox and Cox, "Probate 1500-1800", 15-19. See the inventories discussed in Earle, *The making*, 394-95.

⁶⁴ H. Van Koolbergen, "Ontwikkelingen in het boedelinventarissenonderzoek," *Volkskundig bulletin* 13 (1987); A.J. Schuurman, "Probate inventories: research issues, problems and results," in *Probate inventories. A new source for the historical study of wealth, material culture and agricultural development*, ed. Ad Van Der Woude and A.J. Schuurman (Wageningen: 1980); A.J. Schuurman, "Probate inventory research: opportunities and drawbacks," in *Inventaires après-décès et ventes de meubles. Apports à une histoire de la vie économique et*

The nature of the probate process in a specific place and time determined *who* left inventories (their representativeness) and *what* was recorded in them (their completeness and detail). As the study at hand is not primordially a comparative one, the question of most interest here is the extent to which the evolutions in material culture and wealth holdings traced by the post-mortem inventories reflect actual changes in the social and economic fabric of the time. If, on the contrary, they were the result of changes in the inventory taking process itself, a dual challenge would present itself. Not only should new ways of dealing with a changing source bias over time be developed, but also the possibility that the probate taking process itself altered as a result of changing attitudes to property relations and changes in the social structure would have to be considered.

1. What was included in the Aalst inventories?

According to local customary law after-death inventories in Aalst had to include *all* possessions belonging to a household: real estate, financial assets and movables, but also the liabilities and outstanding debts were to be included.⁶⁵ Early modern inventories in the Low Countries differ in this respect from the English and North American cases in the sense that the latter did not record real estate and debts owed by the deceased.⁶⁶ Unfortunately occupations were only rarely (11%) and ages never recorded in Aalst.

Inventories in the Low Countries and the Anglo-Saxon world both relate to the possessions of a household instead of an individual. The majority of possessions of a married couple was either brought in the 'community of property' (*ghemeenschap*) at the time of marriage, or added to the communion by acquisition afterwards (*conquesten*), and was thus to be included in the post-mortem inventory regardless of which partner had died. The only major exceptions were those goods (usually fiefs or other real estate) that were brought into marriage outside of the community of property, usually by marriage contract. Such goods were only included in the inventory of the deceased him or herself, not in the inventory of the partner. Since marriage contracts seem to have been rather rare in Aalst, the chances that our data would have been heavily distorted because of this reason, is slim. In the area of moveable goods, there is the comparable issue of heirlooms.⁶⁷ An heirloom could be practically any object intended to be kept out of the succession arrangements and be transmitted directly to a specific heir. As a result, it was not supposed to show up in a post-mortem inventory. The local customary law of Aalst does not make specific mention of heirlooms, which gives us no reason to believe that it would have been particularly more common than elsewhere.

In general terms, it can be safely argued that large omissions from the inventories are unlikely, especially since there were no inheritance taxes or other particular incentives for evasion in force. Smaller inaccuracies on the other hand seem to have been rather common. Since many inventories

goutidienne (XIVe-XIX siècle), ed. M. Baulant, A.J. Schuurman, and P. Servais (Louvain-la-Neuve: 1988); Th. Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, "Boedelinventarissen," *Broncommentaren* 2 (1995).

⁶⁵ "... behoyrlycken state van alle de goeden, zoo leenen als erfve, renten, meublen, actien van voordeele, ende alle andere, metgaders vande commeren ende lasten vanden sterffhuysse." T. De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume des pays et comté de Flandre. Quartier de Gand. Tome III. Coutumes des deux villes et pays d'Alost (Alost & Grammont)* (Brussel: 1878), 100.

⁶⁶ Cox and Cox, "Probate 1500-1800", 31.

⁶⁷ Cox and Cox, "Probate 1500-1800", 22.

were only drawn up several months after death, the exact listing and valuation of all property was often prone to minor errors. A certain time lapse of a couple of weeks was nevertheless desirable, since it often took considerable time to obtain an overview of all outstanding debt and the degree to which they could be recuperated. When doctor Frans Vanden Neste died in 1711, his widow remained unsure for weeks how many debts from his numerous patients could be collected.⁶⁸

Yet, the longer the lapse of time between death and inventory registration, the less an inventory can probably be taken to adequately reflect the wealth of a household at the time of death. Eight inventories have been excluded from the original sample because they were registered at least two years after the time of death. But even inventories that were drawn up within the first few weeks often give rise to numerous problems. 11% of the inventories in our sample did not include any cash because it was used to cover the funerary or administrative expenses or to cover small outstanding debts.⁶⁹ Although this practice is unlikely to have heavily distorted the aggregate wealth figures for these households, they have to be analyzed with care when addressing specific research questions.

Moreover, the appraisers and clerks did not always note every single possession with the same care. Miscalculations were common enough and so probably were wrongly cited figures.⁷⁰ Objects of little value were sometimes excluded or lumped together in a rest category (usually described as *'prondelinghe'* in the sources). Clothes and shoes were often considered to be very personal and were thus sometimes left out of the inventory. Customary law in Aalst specifically provided for certain goods to be left out of the succession, such as the clothes that would follow the deceased's body, any mourning clothes, a man's weapons and a woman's veils or hats, belts, purse, knives and wedding ring.⁷¹ It is not uncommon to find references to particular items of clothing which were given directly to the children without having been appraised.⁷²

It also occurred that specific objects were listed but not appraised. This was the case with almost all land holdings in the inventories, which were listed with their total amount of acreage (expressed in square *roeden*) rather than a monetary value.⁷³ Houses within the city walls were usually valued in pecuniary terms, except when they remained in the 'community of property' between the widow(er) and his or her children.⁷⁴ In other cases still, it was the valuation itself that posed problems. Whenever specialized goods of any sort had to be valued, an expert in the same field was to be sought after to act as an appraiser. Carpenters and masons were usually asked to appraise dwellings, whereas smiths or bakers were asked to assess the professional stock of their deceased fellow trade members.

⁶⁸ The orphan's chamber ordered his widow to carefully take note of all incoming payments during the next few weeks as an addition to the sums in the inventory. SAA, OAA, nr. 1826: "*Item vint desen sterfhuyse goet diversche vaccatien aen diversche personen soo in dese stadt als buyten op de prochien over visiten bij den overledenen gedaen, dan alsoo de selve niet ten geheele en sullen betaelt worden, soo en wordt daervan alhier geene somme uytgetrocken, dan sal joffrauwe d'hauderigge daervan hauden pertinente notitie van den ontfanck.*"

⁶⁹ This percentage does seem to be consistent over the four periods examined: 11% ca. 1670; 10% ca. 1710; 11% ca. 1750 and 12% ca. 1790.

⁷⁰ For instance only 88% of all inventories in our sample had the difference between assets and liabilities calculated correctly, to give just one example of possible errors. The degree to which errors was made, remained constant throughout the entire period studied.

⁷¹ De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 116.

⁷² MAA, OAA, nr. 869.

⁷³ The value of land holdings in the Aalst inventories has nevertheless been estimated using average land prices, see appendix A.

⁷⁴ This was the case in 11% of all inventories in our sample.

Less common objects sometimes posed considerable difficulty to the appraisers. The inventory of the above mentioned Frans Vanden Neste is again a good case in point. His possessions included a long list of books (mostly on medicine) that had to remain without valuation because “*no-one in this city knows their value*”. It was later annotated in the margin that the books should best be sold during public auction in Antwerp or elsewhere.⁷⁵ Supposedly Aalst was too small a community to include many residents knowledgeable on the value of an intellectual’s library.

Notwithstanding the various issues mentioned above, post-mortem inventories seem to present a fairly reliable source to gain information on the assets, debts and material culture of households in the past. Because they were designed as a means of protecting the hereditary rights of all parties involved in a succession, and since all interested parties were represented throughout the drawing up of the inventory, large-scale fraud is not to be expected. The intervention of the spouse, custodians from both sides of the family, independent appraisers and witnesses, all combined to create a system of checks and balances which more or less guarantees the relative accuracy of the inventory. Occasionally things could still go wrong of course. As the exception that proves the rule, there is the case of Frans Vanden Berghe, the wealthy widower of Marie Brouckaert who died in July 1706.⁷⁶ While editing the inventory of the household after she died, Vanden Berghe noticed that many of his wife’s clothes, her wedding ring and financial securities were missing from the house. There were three main suspects: Judocus De Moor, Frans Lecquet and Daniel Boone, the husbands of his wife’s daughters from her first marriage. The three men and their wives were forced to declare under oath “*whether they know anything about the missing goods, whether or not they had them in their possession, [...] and whether they are aware of any other goods, effects, money, papers or documents that are missing from the house of the deceased.*” They were also questioned about the goods they had been given by their late mother – such as clothes, money, textiles, beds, shop goods, furniture, shoes, socks, bakery apparel or buckles – so that these could be taken into proper account during the later partition of goods between them and the children born during their mother’s second marriage.⁷⁷

Certainly there must have been others like Marie Brouckaert’s daughters who tried to keep certain assets out of the inventory in order to obtain a more advantageous share in the partition of goods. Yet there is plenty of reason to believe that the close involvement of all interested parties, such as Frans vanden Berghe, created a system of checks and balances which ensured that the large

⁷⁵ SAA, OAA, nr. 1826: “*Item de boeken ten sterfhuyse bevonden soo vande medicijnen als andere, sijn bij inventaris alhier overgeleyt ende ghebleven ongepresen mits alhier in dese stadt niemant de weerde daervan en weet.*” Annotated in the margin: “*... omme de boeken in texte ten besten proffijte van het sterfhuis te vercoopen in eene auctie t’sij tot Antwerpen ofte in eenige andere steden daer d’hauderigge ende voogden het geraetsaem sullen vinden.*”

⁷⁶ SAA, OAA, nr. 1822.

⁷⁷ SAA, OAA, nr. 1822: “*Soo versouckt de hauder dat den voorn. vooght Coppejans, srs. De Moor, Lecquet ende Boone met hunnen respectie huysvrauwen hun onder solmnelen eede sullen hebben te expiergieren oft sij van alle het gone voorseijt niet en weten, het selve ten deele ofte ten gheheele onder hun en hebben, en hebben verstecken doen ofte laeten verstecken directelijk ofte indirectelijk voor pretense compensatie ofte anderssints ende voorder oock oft sij niet en weten van eenighe andere meubels, effecten, gelt, pampieren, documenten ende lefferagien anders als den gone ten selven sterfhuyse tot nu toe en sijn bevinden.[...] ... aen den selven de moor ende sijne huysvrauwe onder eedt te bevraeghen wat sij van hunne overledene moeder in haer leven hebben ghecregen ende gheprofficeert tsij in gelde, cleederen, lijnwaet, beddens, winckelwaeren, verandwordinghe huysraet, meubelen, schoenen, caussens, in het backersambacht filnere keten, ghespen als anderssins directelijk ofte indirectelijk.*”

majority of post-mortem inventories sketch a reliable overview of any household's assets and liabilities.

2. Why and when were they recorded?

In early modern Aalst, as elsewhere in the Low Countries, the most common reason for drawing up a post-mortem inventory of a household was the succession by minors (or other judicially 'incapable' individuals) as heirs.⁷⁸ As soon as an orphan or half-orphan was involved, having a post-mortem inventory ratified by the town's aldermen became compulsory.⁷⁹ Within twenty-four days counting from the time of death the surviving spouse had to notify the town's Orphan Chamber. If no surviving parent remained in the household, the closest relatives were to take over this responsibility. The Orphan Chamber consisted of four retired aldermen, assisted by a clerk and a servant. They were responsible for the proper registration of the name of the deceased, the time of death and the names and ages of the orphans. The Chamber would then appoint two custodians – one from the maternal and one from the paternal side of the family and receive their oaths. Afterwards the remaining spouse (or in his or her absence one of the closest relatives) would be ordered to prepare a full inventory of the household's possessions within the following six weeks. After a public oath had been sworn on this inventory, the content of the document was officially copied and registered in the Chamber's registers. The inventory would henceforth bear testimony to the later inheritance of the orphans, whose goods were to be administered by a custodian as long as they remained under-aged or unmarried.

To the extent that these official rules were observed, the inventories preserved at the Orphans Chamber can be expected to offer reliable overviews of a household's belongings. Checks and balances from both families, the supervision over the process by the town aldermen and the close involvement of those closest to the deceased all increased the likelihood of a fairly accurate documentation. Customary law moreover assured that compliance was compulsory for every household in which a deceased left orphans. Theoretically at least, within a maximum of 80 days after death, a post-mortem inventory should be registered for every household in this situation.⁸⁰ By failing to comply one risked a total fine of 36 fl. and eventually physical arrest. However, the law could differ substantially from practice. As has been mentioned earlier, the average time lapse between death and registration of a post-mortem inventory during the periods 1740-1744 and 1780-1784 was no less than seven months (210 days).⁸¹ Apparently not everyone deemed the official registration of an inventory to be of primordial importance. Especially in those cases where a spouse remained in the household, the need to register an inventory at the death of one parent was probably not particularly pressing. The day to day affairs related to all household property remained in the hands of the spouse for as long as

⁷⁸ Children were considered minor until the age of 25, unless they married before that time.

⁷⁹ De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 98-102.

⁸⁰ The name of the deceased and the names and ages of the children had to be handed over to the Chamber within the first 24 days, followed by a 42 day period for drawing up the inventory. There was an extra 14 day allowance if this first deadline was missed. De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 100-04.

⁸¹ G. Libbrecht, "Materiële cultuur in het 18de-eeuwse Aalst. Een verkenning op het terrein van slaapcultuur, eet- en drinkcultuur, keukengerei, meubilair, decoratie, hygiëne, verwarming en verlichting" (MA thesis, VUB, 1997), 4.

he or she lived so that it mattered little whether or not the children were (half) orphans. This changed as soon as the widow(er) remarried, since dividing the property pertaining to the first marriage would then become essential for the proper division of the inheritance between the children from the first marriage on the one hand and any newborns or children from the new husband or wife on the other. As a result, some inventories were only registered at a much later date, when the need became more pressing.⁸²

In some households no inventory was drawn up even though they were legally obliged to do so. A 1753 decree issued by the town aldermen noted that there was at the time “*much neglect in the proper registration of each deceased person leaving orphans*”.⁸³ The spouse or close relatives of a deceased were henceforth officially summoned to do so by court order. Why some households did and others did not comply with the rules concerning probate is not always clear. It makes sense that households with negative net wealth were considered exempt from the obligation to present an inventory. It also stands to reason that solvent households with only limited means would try to circumvent the inventory taking process in order to evade the costs involved. Even though having an inventory recorded whenever orphans were involved was obligatory, there is plenty of reason to believe that these inventories were biased towards the wealthier strata of society.

Of all inventories from early modern Aalst used in this study, 68% were drawn up in order to protect the rights of succession of (half-)orphans. Contrary to the situation in England and its colonies, both men (57%) and women (43%) left behind inventories regardless of their marital status, since on the Continent both spouses held property equally and jointly.⁸⁴ Even though guaranteeing the proper succession of orphans was the main cause that led to the registration of an inventory, other reasons were possible as well.⁸⁵ For instance when other heirs of minor age were involved, such as grandchildren, nieces or nephews, the drawing up of an inventory was also obligatory. On occasion inventories were also recorded when potential heirs were in doubt over the net worth of an estate before accepting the succession, or when no heirs were to be found at all. Furthermore, it is quite likely that a number of inventories were simply drawn up for no other reason than to prevent disputes between the remaining spouse and heir(s) or amongst the heirs themselves. The proportion of inventories taken for other reasons than the involvement of children of minor age rose distinctly at the end of our period (table I.1). This decline might help to explain why the Orphan Chamber of Aalst was abolished on April 29th 1788, after which the responsibility of administering the post-mortem inventories was attributed to the sitting aldermen by way of a rotating system.⁸⁶

⁸² A.J. Schuurman, *Materiële cultuur en levensstijl. Een onderzoek naar de taal der dingen op het Nederlandse platteland in de 19de eeuw: de Zaanstreek, Oost-Groningen, Oost-Brabant* (Urecht: 1989).

⁸³ “*Ende alsoo ter verscheyde plaetse groote negligentien gebeuren in het annoteren ter register den dag van het overlyden van elcken persoon weesen agterlaetende.*” De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 742-43.

⁸⁴ Cox and Cox, “Probate 1500-1800”, 22. This explains why only 9% of inventories in the American colonies were left by women: Alice Hanson Jones, *American Colonial Wealth. Documents and Methods* (New York: 1977), 6.

⁸⁵ See the description of the inventory taking process in general terms, without any specific mention of the presence of orphans: De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 120. A full overview of possible reasons for the creation of post-mortem inventories in Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, “Boedelinventarissen”, 32-39.

⁸⁶ De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 781.

Table I.1. Percentage of sampled inventories related to under-aged children.

	% leaving orphans	% not leaving orphans	N
1669-1681	71%	29%	164
1705-1715	75%	25%	150
1745-1750	66%	34%	160
1790-1795	60%	40%	159
Total	68%	32%	614

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

Despite what the institutional and legal context would suggest, the inventories that have been preserved in the town archives of Aalst constitute a mixed bunch. The majority was clearly recorded for the benefit of orphans, but this was definitely not always the case. This implies that the survival of an inventory following death was determined by a variety of influences. What effect this had upon the representativeness of any random sample of after-death inventories will have to be inferred from the characteristics of the inventory sample itself.

3. The survival rate of inventories in Aalst

Post-mortem inventories have been preserved in Aalst from the late sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century.⁸⁷ During the four sample periods (1669-1681, 1705-1715, 1745-1750 and 1790-1795) selected for the present study this amounts to a total of 1.127 inventories spread over a total of 35 years – which makes for an average of 32 inventories per year. Contrary to the situation in most parts of England, there was no clear decline in the number of inventories in the Netherlands during the eighteenth century. Comparisons of the number of inventories drawn up per year to the number of deceased according to parochial burial registers do seem to point at a decreased ratio of inventories to burials in many places throughout the Southern Netherlands however – especially in the second half of the eighteenth century (table I.2).

Table I.2. A comparison of the ratio of inventories to burials between Aalst (left panel) and rural communities in Flanders.

	# of burials / year	# of inventories / year	Ratio of inventories to burials	Erembodegem & Moorsel	Nevele	Zaffelare	Ardoonie
Ca. 1670	71	23	32%		10%		10%
Ca. 1710	85	21	25%		10%	12%	11%
Ca. 1750	142	36	25%	23%	18%	16%	18%
Ca. 1790	271	48	18%	14%	12%	8%	9%

⁸⁷ Erik Houtman, *Inventaris van het oud archief van de stad Aalst* (Brussels: 1974), 115-17.

Sources:

- Burials Aalst: MAA, OAA, nrs. 109-113.
 Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.
 Erembodegem & Moorsel: Vermoesen, "Markttoegang", 62.
 Nevele: Schelstraete, et al., "Het Einde Van De Onveranderlijkheid", 18.
 Zaffelare: Zeischka, "Strukturen En Leefpatronen", 11-12.
 Ardooie: Verfaillie, "Krediet".

At least in the case of Aalst this drop in the ratio of inventories to burials at the end of the eighteenth century was not the result of a declining coverage rate of the inventories. Rather it was the result of a rapidly rising proportion of children among the parochially recorded deaths – which may or may not itself have been caused by higher infant mortality.⁸⁸ The ratio of inventories to *adult* burials was in fact strikingly stable from the second half of the seventeenth until the end of the eighteenth century (table I.3). These figures are highly reassuring, since they demonstrate that there were no significant shifts in the demographic coverage of the inventories. That in itself makes it unlikely that large changes in the social composition of the inventoried population would have taken place, such as presumably occurred in eighteenth-century England.

Table I.3. Burials and inventories in Aalst.⁸⁹

	# of burials / year	# of adult burials / year	# of inventories / year	Ratio of inventories to adult burials / year
1669 – 1681	71	53	23	42%
1705 – 1715	85	57	22	39%
1745 – 1750	142	93	36	39%
1790 – 1795	271	123	48	39%

Sources:

- Burials: MAA, OAA, nrs. 109-113.
 Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

During the whole period under consideration inventories have been preserved for approximately 23% of all deceased, or 40% of deceased adults. Table I.2 already revealed that these ratios for Aalst compare favourably to a number of rural case-studies in the Southern Netherlands. Even in the larger cities such as Ghent or Antwerp only 14% and 10-11% respectively of all deceased adults left inventories in the eighteenth century.⁹⁰ The odds of having a more complete and representative sample of post-mortem inventories thus seems to be considerably higher in a medium-sized provincial town

⁸⁸ Since Isabelle Devos, *Allemaal beestjes. Mortaliteit en morbiditeit in Vlaanderen, 18de-20ste eeuw* (Gent: 2006), 42 found declining levels of child mortality in eighteenth-century Flanders it seems likely that the sudden surge was related to changing administrative practices.

⁸⁹ In order to make both figures fully comparable, the inventory numbers include the residents of the nearby villages of Schaarbeke and Mijlbeke, which belonged to the same parish as Aalst. The inventories of residents from nearby Nieuwerkerken (14%) and those of the '*buitenpoorters*' (individuals who had acquired citizenship of Aalst – usually for fiscal or judicial reasons – without actually residing there) were excluded.

⁹⁰ The figure for Ghent relates to 1738, while those of Antwerp relate to the periods 1735-1740 (10%) and 1786-1793 (11%). Lucien Vanaverbeke, *Peiling naar de bezitsstructuur van de Gentse bevolking omstreeks 1738* (Brussels: 1969), 33; Bart Willems, *Leven op de pof. Krediet bij de Antwerpse middenstand in de achttiende eeuw*, Studies Stadsgeschiedenis (Amsterdam: 2009), 41-42.

such as Aalst than in either the large urban centres or the rural villages of the time – although the greater tendency to have inventories drawn up by notaries instead of the orphan chamber in the larger cities might account for some of this discrepancy.

From an international point of view as well, the inventory coverage of Aalst seems to be particularly favourable. Case-studies from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sweden and Finland estimate that between 22% and 25% of all deceased were probated – which is essentially the same as in Aalst.⁹¹ Comparisons with the situation in England and its colonies are somewhat more complicated since the legal situation concerning probate inventories differed considerably. Married women did not – on principle – leave probate inventories there since their possessions belonged to their husbands (under *coverture*). It is not surprising then that only 10% of deceased left inventories between 1676 and 1775 in two west Midland parishes.⁹² Yet even when married women are removed from the equation, 45% of deceased men and widows left inventories in Aalst, while this was typically only 10% to 30% in England.⁹³ In the Anglo-Saxon colonial offshoots, the situation seems to have been somewhat more favourable. Approximately 34% of (white) adult deaths were probated in colonial America, 35% in Jamaica, approximately 30% in nineteenth-century South Australia and between 23% and 36% in nineteenth-century Canada.⁹⁴

4. The demographic representativeness of the inventories in Aalst

Even though the number of deceased households that left an inventory was comparatively high in Aalst, this does not necessarily imply that the town's population was uniformly represented among inventoried households. In order to determine the social representativeness of the inventory sample one needs to know who belonged to this 40% and how they differed from the rest of the Aalst population. We will consider this step by step for more than 500 urban inventories that have been selected for the four sample periods that will constitute the backbone of this study. All inventories pertaining to the rural or semi-rural outskirts of the town's population (Schaarbeke, Mijlbeke and Nieuwerkerken) were excluded in order to focus on those households that resided within the town walls.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Erkki Markkanen, "The Use of Probate Inventories as Indicators of Personal Wealth during the Period of Industrialization: the Financial Resources of the Finnish Rural Population 1850-1911," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* XXVI (1978); Jan Kuuse, "The probate inventory as a source for economic and social history," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* XXII (1974).

⁹² Cited in P.H. Lindert, "An Algorithm for Probate Sampling," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11, no. 4 (1981).

⁹³ Peter Lindert even cites as low a figure as 3% of dying household heads for London-Middlesex. Cox and Cox, "Probate 1500-1800", 26; Lindert, "An Algorithm", 654.

⁹⁴ Livio Di Matteo, "Wealth and Inequality on Ontario's Northwestern Frontier: Evidence from Probate," *Histoire sociale / Social History* XXXVIII, no. 75 (2006): 88; T.G. Burnard, "'Prodigious riches': the wealth of Jamaica before the American Revolution," *Economic History Review* 54, no. 3 (2001): 514; Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, 516; Martin Shanahan, "Personal Wealth in South Australia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 1 (2001): 60.

⁹⁵ During the four sample periods considered approximately 36% of inventories preserved came from householders living in one of these (semi-)rural settlements.

Since the majority of inventories were directly related to the inheritance of orphans, one would expect any sample in such a context to be considerably biased towards the married part of the population. A comparison between the after-death inventories, the burial registers and a general population census carried out during the French occupation in 1796 confirms this intuition (table I.4).⁹⁶ Compared to both the living and the dying citizens of Aalst the married were overrepresented among those who left inventories, while singles were decidedly underrepresented. Widows and widowers on the other hand were overrepresented compared to the living, but underrepresented vis-à-vis the dying population.

Table I.4. Marital status at the end of the eighteenth century: census, burials and inventories

	Census (1796)	Burials (1790-1792)	Inventories (1790-1795)
Single	34 %	30 %	13 %
Married	57 %	47 %	72 %
Widowed	9 %	23 %	15 %
N	6.152	356	159

X² is significant at the 99% level on this cross-tabulation, indicating a statistically significant association between the source type and the proportions of marital status in the population (Cramer's V = 0,090).

Sources:

Burials: MAA, OAA, nrs. 113.

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1906-1915.

Census: MAA, MAA, *Bevolking*, nrs. 1-5.

It is clear that the post-mortem inventories preserved primarily inform us about the households that formed the archetypal nuclear family. Although it is important to keep this bias in mind, it also means that for this particular group of households, the inventory sample is quite representative. In fact, fully 61% of all married individuals in Aalst that died at the end of the eighteenth century left a probate inventory.⁹⁷ It is quite likely that this proportion was even higher in earlier periods since the proportion of married deceased in the inventory sample steadily declined over time (table I.5). The increasing proportion of singles in the overall urban demographics of the region is a common feature for this period, and the changing demographic character of our sample probably reflects this.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Children have been excluded from the burial registers here, as well as all individuals under the age of 20 in the population census (there was only one married couple below this age in the whole town). J. De Belder et al., "Arbeid en tewerkstelling in Oost-Vlaanderen op het einde van het ancien régime: een socio-professionele en demografische analyse. Werkdocumenten 5", 1210

⁹⁷ On the other hand only 18% of dying singles and 25% of widow(er)s were represented.

⁹⁸ L. Jaspers and C. Stevens, *Arbeid en tewerkstelling in Oost-Vlaanderen op het einde van het Ancien Regime. Een socio-professionele en demografische analyse*, *Kultureel jaarboek voor de provincie Oost-Vlaanderen* 23 (Ghent: 1985); J. De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie in het Land van Aalst 1570-1800*, vol. 18, *Historische uitgaven*, reeks in-8° (Brussels: 1968); Claude Bruneel et al., eds., *Le dénombrement général de la population des Pays-Bas autrichiens en 1784* (Bruxelles: 1996).

Table I.5. Demographics of the Aalst inventory sample over time.

	1669-1681	1705-1715	1745-1750	1790-1795	Total
Single	2 %	3 %	4 %	9 %	5 %
Widowed	7 %	8 %	12 %	15 %	11 %
Married	89 %	85 %	74 %	72 %	80 %
<i>First marriage</i>	76 %	68 %	62 %	61 %	67 %
<i>Second marriage</i>	13 %	17 %	12 %	11 %	13 %
Religious	1 %	2 %	9 %	3 %	3 %
N	164	150	141	159	614

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

The institutional context in which the after-death inventories came about not only suggests an overrepresentation of married couples, but also of the age group in which these couples were most likely to have children of minor age. Unfortunately, neither age nor date of birth of the deceased was recorded in the inventories so that this bias and its evolution over time are not easily checked. The ages of any minor children in the households however were almost always documented, allowing for a rough proxy of the age of the deceased to be calculated. Considering that most couples only married at about 25 years of age and had their first child within one or two years after marriage, the age of the eldest child plus 26 years can be taken as a rough approximation of the age of the deceased.⁹⁹ This proxy can be calculated for over half of the inventories in our sample. Judging from the resulting age distribution, the inventory sample is biased towards the 35-44 demographic, but only modestly so (table I.6). This confirms the finding for Milton (Kent, England) that the age distribution of inventories was probably more representative than is generally assumed.¹⁰⁰ At least as far as the inventoried households with children are concerned, it is not likely that the age bias will have a very significant influence on the results produced.

Table I.6. Age distribution of individuals in inventory sample and heads of household in the population census.

Age	Census (1796)	Inventories (all)	Inventories 1669-1681	Inventories 1705-1715	Inventories 1745-1750	Inventories 1790-1795
≤ 24	5 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
25 – 34	18 %	31 %	37 %	27 %	29 %	33 %
35 – 44	24 %	39 %	32 %	49 %	41 %	31 %
45 – 54	20 %	19 %	25 %	17 %	25 %	13 %
55 +	34 %	11 %	7 %	7 %	5 %	22 %
N	1174	341	108	89	76	68

X² measures between the census ages and inventoried ages are significant at the 99% level (Cramer's V = 0,256 for all inventories, and Cramer's V = 0,105 for the inventories from 1790-1795).

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

Census: MAA, MAA, *Bevolking*, nrs. 1-5.

⁹⁹ De Belder et al., "Arbeid en tewerkstelling"; Jaspers and Stevens, *Arbeid en tewerkstelling*.

¹⁰⁰ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 27-28.

The demographic biases hitherto explored mainly resulted from the specific institutional and legal context in which the inventories were generally produced. Married couples were overrepresented, while the elderly as well as the unmarried were less likely to leave an inventory after death. These results are predictable and, moreover, comparable to the situation elsewhere: generally the same demographic biases are exhibited by probate inventories from Antwerp to Delft and from Cornwall to Philadelphia.¹⁰¹ Although important enough on their own account, these biases are unlikely to have seriously distorted the empirical evidence on social and economic change presented by early modern probate inventories across Europe and North-America. From this perspective, the fact that not every demographic group was legally obliged to have an inventory drawn up upon death is less of a problem than the fact that not everyone who *was* also *did*. Many scholars have pointed out that the number of inventories recorded per capita varied significantly across time and space, even though the institutional context remained the same. In England, for example, probate inventories reached a peak in the second half of the seventeenth century, yet all but disappeared after 1720.¹⁰² In the Northern Netherlands as well, the peak period of inventories was in the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.¹⁰³

5. The social representativeness of the inventory sample

The question then becomes why some deceased left inventories while others did not, and how this changed over time. The most common explanation for why households failed to have an inventory drawn up is a lack of assets. Simply put: if there was nothing to be inherited, disputes over the inheritance were unlikely to arise and thus the need for an inventory of all belongings would have been less pressing.¹⁰⁴ All the more so since there were costs involved in the production of the inventory as well: a guilder per hour for the audition of the inventory as well as another guilder for the clerk and 10 styvers for the servant of the Orphan Chamber.¹⁰⁵ For these reasons it is usually assumed – and occasionally proven – that post-mortem inventories almost exclusively document the assets of the social middling groups broadly defined.¹⁰⁶ This can hardly count as a general rule, however, since our sample of inventories demonstrates that 7% of households leaving inventories possessed negative wealth.¹⁰⁷ Clara Bouchain, a poor widow who had lived off her spinning labour left a gross wealth of no more than 28 fl, which corresponded to no more than a couple of weeks work for even an unskilled

¹⁰¹ The only major exception here is the fact that married women did not leave inventories in England and the American colonies. See in general J.S. Moore, "Probate inventories: problems and prospects," in *Probate records and the local community*, ed. P. Riden (Gloucester: 1985); M. Spufford, "The limitations of the probate inventory," in *English rural society, 1500-1800. Essays in honour of Joan Thirsk*, ed. J. Chartres and D. Hey (Cambridge: 1990).

¹⁰² Lindert, "An Algorithm", 654; T. Arkell, "Interpreting probate inventories," in *When Death Do Us Part: Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England*, ed. T. Arkell, N. Evans, and N. Goose (Oxford: 2000), 72-73.

¹⁰³ Wijssenbeek-Olthuis, "Boedelinventarissen", 6.

¹⁰⁴ If, however, there was a great number of liabilities involved an inventory was often made to facilitate the selling of goods and the proper settlement of debts.

¹⁰⁵ De Limburg-Stirum, *Coutume*, 741.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance Earle, *The making*; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*; Willems, *Leven op de pof*; J.M. Montias, "Quantitative Methods in the Analysis of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Inventories," in *Economics of the Arts*, ed. Victor Ginzburgh and Pierre-Michel Menger (Amsterdam: 1996).

¹⁰⁷ When only considering personal wealth (excluding real estate), this figure rises up to 10% of all inventories.

labourer.¹⁰⁸ Meager household wealth does not seem to have been the only determinant in having an inventory drawn up or not.

If we are to use post-mortem inventories in order to obtain information on the social distribution of living standards and consumption patterns, it is of prime importance that we are fully in the know of the precise social bias that these inventories exhibit. In fact, understanding how the inventoried population compares to the total population in terms of social position, and how this was subject to change over time, is of no less than pivotal significance to the proper employment of any sample of post-mortem inventories. These issues lie at the very heart of many methodological debates surrounding living standards and consumer change in the early modern period. In a seminal article outlining the principles of an industrious revolution in the 'long eighteenth century', Jan De Vries noted the apparent contradiction between stable or declining real wages on the one hand and a rising diversity and dissemination of consumer goods in ordinary households on the other.¹⁰⁹ He solved this conundrum by introducing an 'industrious revolution' which raised total household income and consumption even though real wages did not increase.¹¹⁰

Empirical evidence of consumer change and of a shifting material culture is almost invariably based on probate documents. Without a doubt, post-mortem inventories and accounts provide a unique insight into the material culture of early modern households; yet this almost exclusive reliance on one source type also constitutes a weak spot for the theory of the consumer revolution. The pitfalls and uncertainties involved when working with these sources are numerous. Alexandra Shepard and Judith Spicksley for instance have recently argued that while probate inventory evidence in England has shown a rising level of conspicuous consumption by wealthier decedents, the inventories have failed to capture the increasing social polarisation and inequality that took place at the same time.¹¹¹ In a recent working paper Gregory Clark drove this point to its extreme in arguing that the perceived consumer revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in fact entirely a statistical artefact.¹¹² He argued that – at least in the English case – the proportion of probated men declined during this period and the social bias shifted upwards. The perceived increase in consumption in probate inventories was thus created not by rising incomes or shifting consumption patterns, but simply by changes in probate practice that focused increasingly on the higher social strata alone.

Although this argument has not been made explicitly for the evidence on inventories from the Low Countries, it does push methodological issues prominently to the fore. The bias exhibited by the available inventories has thus re-emerged not just as a matter of methodological interest alone, but as a pivotal discussion point in the historical debate.

¹⁰⁸ She was not the only one of humble possessions to have an inventory made upon death. There are 18 inventories (3%) in our sample with a gross personal wealth of less than 100 fl., mainly concentrated in the last sample period (1790-1795).

¹⁰⁹ De Vries, "Between purchasing power".

¹¹⁰ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

¹¹¹ Alexandra Shepard and Judith Spicksley, "Worth, age, and social status in early modern England," *The Economic History Review* 64, no. 2 (2010).

¹¹² G. Clark, "The Consumer Revolution: Turning Point in Human History, or Statistical Artifact?" (2010). This argument is of course closely linked to the framework outlined in G. Clark, *A farewell to alms. A brief economic history of the world* (Princeton: 2007).

Unfortunately, developing an operational solution for this issue is not quite as straightforward as it is important.¹¹³ In most cases it may suffice to define a number of absolute social categories based on groupings provided by the inventories themselves. Jan de Vries for instance has traced shifting patterns of material culture within social groups defined by the number of cows each household owned.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Bruno Blondé has examined changing consumption patterns of tableware among social categories derived from the number of rooms they inhabited¹¹⁵, and much research into English and Dutch consumption patterns has been based on occupational stratifications.¹¹⁶ Most local studies of material culture in the early modern Southern Netherlands have used fixed wealth groups as a means of stratifying inventory samples.¹¹⁷

While such methodologies are appropriate for micro-level studies or to record cultural changes under social *ceteris paribus* conditions, they obviously fail to capture shifting patterns on a macro scale. Since the size and position of these social categories – however defined – are themselves subject to change as well, it is impossible to infer from them any conclusions about changing levels of material possessions for society at large.¹¹⁸ Since precisely such conclusions are aimed for in the present study, it is necessary to gauge more extensively the social position of the inventoried population in relation to the total population of Aalst in our four sample periods.

External sources such as tax registers can theoretically be used in order to position each inventoried household within the wider urban stratification.¹¹⁹ In an ideal situation, such tax registers should be able to adequately reflect household income or wealth holdings and cover the entire population of the area under scrutiny. Unfortunately such extensive wealth taxes are rare for medieval and early modern Europe, and sadly Aalst is no exception.¹²⁰ Housing taxes, which are widely

¹¹³ Detailed methodological remarks on these issues in Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*; Lindert, "An Algorithm"; Moore, "Probate inventories".

¹¹⁴ De Vries, "Peasant demand".

¹¹⁵ Bruno Blondé, "Tableware and changing consumer patterns: dynamics of material culture in Antwerp, seventeenth - 18th centuries," in *Majolica and glas from Italy to Antwerp and beyond: the transfer of technology in the 16th - early seventeenth century*, ed. J. Veeckman (Antwerp: 2002).

¹¹⁶ For England: Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*; Overton et al., *Production and consumption*; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness". For the Northern Netherlands for instance Harm Nijboer, "De fatsoenering van het bestaan. Consumptie in Leeuwarden tijdens de Gouden Eeuw" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Groningen, 2007); Schuurman, *Materiële cultuur en levensstijl*.

¹¹⁷ Soly, "Materiële cultuur"; Siger Zeischka, "Strukturen en leefpatronen aan het einde van het Ancien Régime. Zaffelare in de achttiende eeuw : een sociaal-economische analyse op basis van staten van goed" (Ma Thesis, UGent, 2001).

¹¹⁸ Whereas De Vries, for instance, points towards the changing consumption patterns of Frisian farmers with 10 or more cows, their share in the total population simultaneously declined during the same period. It is hard to say then, whether this change reflects actual shifts in aggregate demand or merely the altered composition of a shrinking category. De Vries, "Peasant demand".

¹¹⁹ Such a methodology has been used tentatively in Paula Hohti, "Material Culture, Shopkeepers and Artisans in Sixteenth-Century Siena" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 2006), using wealth taxes, and in Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft* using burial taxes, to name just two.

¹²⁰ A prime example of early modern wealth taxes is the Florentine catasto: David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families* (New Haven: 1985). Somewhat similar fiscal sources are occasionally found at later dates in for instance Italy (Guido Alfani, "Wealth Inequalities and Population Dynamics in Early Modern Northern Italy," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XI, no. 4 (2010)), Germany (Christopher Friedrichs, *Urban Society in an Age of War: Nördlingen, 1580-1720* (Princeton: 1979)), Catalonia (Jeff Fynn-Paul, "The Catalan City of Manresa in the 14th and 15th Centuries: A Social, Political, and Economic History" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2005)) or the Netherlands (Jaco Zuijderduijn, *Medieval capital markets. Markets for renten, state formation and private investment in Holland 1300-1550*) (2009); L.

available for many cities in the early modern Netherlands, might provide a viable alternative however. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many towns in the Southern Netherlands, including Aalst, began levying taxes on the rental value of dwellings as a regular source of revenue.¹²¹ In theory the records produced for these taxes include all extant houses within the city walls – which means that they included the vast majority of households, except for boarders or sub renters (but more on these later). Moreover, it has often been suggested by economists and economic historians that the rental value of a house can be taken as a proxy for long-term income or even household wealth.¹²² At least in theory then, housing tax registers offer the opportunity to position the inventoried population within the wider social stratification of Aalst.

After years of experimenting with different types of housing taxes, in 1672 the aldermen of Aalst decided that a new and extensive cadastral survey was to be conducted within the city walls. The result was a detailed list of all houses, together with their measurements, number of storeys and rooms, a valuation of each dwelling's worth and the name of the head of household occupying it.¹²³ This extensive survey would henceforth serve as the basis for the collection of the housing taxes (usually twice a year), until the end of the eighteenth century.¹²⁴ Before this source series can be successfully employed in order to position the inventoried population within the town's social hierarchy, two issues need to be explored further still. First of all, we need to examine to what extent the taxed housing values actually reflect total household wealth. And secondly, it is important to explore whether the whole population of Aalst was indeed recorded in these tax registers, and if this was consistent over time or not.

When comparing total household wealth of a sample of 60 inventories that have been traced down in the cadastral survey of 1672 to their respective housing taxes, the results are reassuring with regards to the first issue. When regressing each household's contribution in the tax on their respective household wealth using a power (or double log) transformation, a determination coefficient of $R^2 = 0,642$ is obtained.¹²⁵ This means that low tax levels are generally associated with low household wealth, whereas higher tax levels tend to be associated with higher wealth levels (figure I.1). The nature of the power regression – which provides the best fit from a range of possible regression forms – furthermore implies that in our sample household wealth increases proportionally more with rising housing taxes, which is perfectly in accord with the expected relation between wealth and the expenditure on any kind of basic consumption good such as housing.

Soltow and Jan Luiten Van Zanden, *Income and wealth inequality in the Netherlands, 16th-20th century* (Amsterdam: 1998).

¹²¹ H. Coppens, "Fiscale bronnen voor de economische en sociale geschiedenis van het platteland," *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 55 (1972); Juul Hannes, "Het primitieve kadaster (voor 1840) als bron voor de studie van de plattelandseconomie," in *Economische geschiedenis van België. Behandeling van de bronnen en problematiek*, ed. H. Coppejans-Desmedt (Brussel: 1972).

¹²² For the use of housing taxes as proxies for permanent income, see for instance J.G. Williamson, *Did British capitalism breed inequality?* (Boston: 1985); P.T. Hoffman et al., "Real Inequality in Europe since 1500," *The Journal of Economic History* 62 (2002).

¹²³ MAA, OAA, nr. 264.

¹²⁴ MAA, OAA, nrs. 265-279.

¹²⁵ The formula for the power regression is $Y = 0,039 * X^{1,544}$; where Y is household wealth in guilders and X is the tax level. As this is a power transformation, the B coefficient (1,544) can be interpreted as the reverse wealth elasticity of housing. A true calculation of housing elasticity would take wealth as the independent variable, and housing as the dependent.

Figure I.1. Power regression of taxed housing value on household wealth

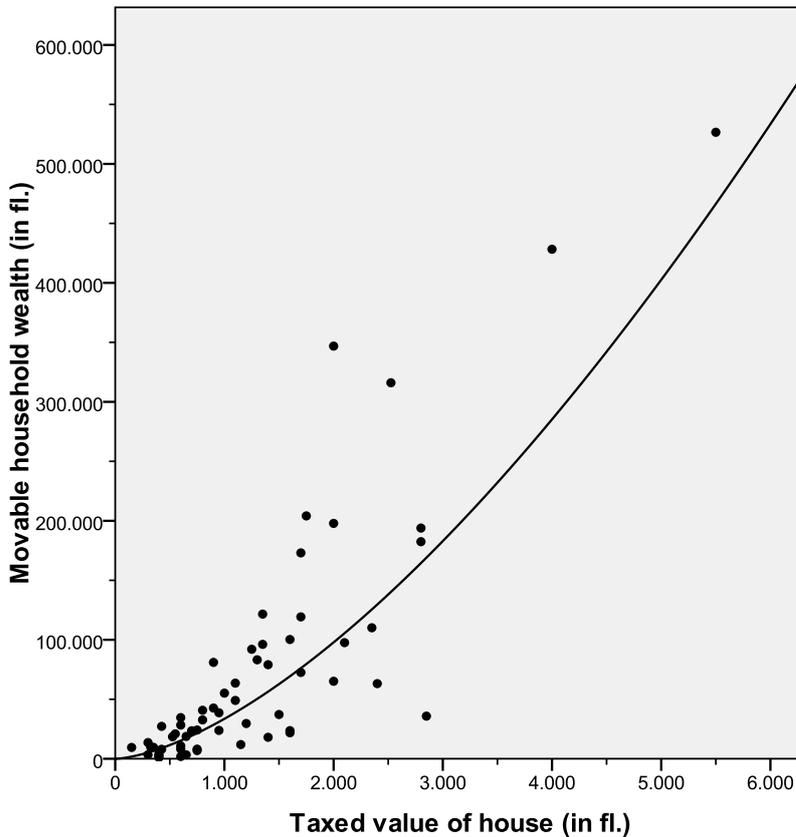


Table I.7. Power regression of taxed housing value on household wealth

	R ²	B	N
1670	,642	1,544	61
1710	,655	1,297	76
1750	,540	1,537	51
1790	,525	1,543	70

Sources:

- Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.
- House taxes: MAA, OAA, nrs. 264, 269, 270, 273, 277, 278, 279.

The strong association between tax value and household wealth slowly declined towards the end of the eighteenth century (table I.7). In part, this probably resulted from the imprecise and incomplete updates applied to the original cadastral survey over the years. Only when houses were split, merged, (re)built or demolished were new tax values recorded in the tax rolls. When comparing the value of the houses taxed in 1672 to their respective values in 1790 – a hundred and twenty years later – 32% had remained unchanged.¹²⁶ The majority of housing values (63%) had been adjusted by a margin of less than 5%, and only 5% had been adjusted by more than that. Between 1672 and 1790 approximately 200 new houses had been added to the tax records as well – some emerging from the new building activities in the second half of the eighteenth century, but many also resulting from the division of

¹²⁶ 603 houses could be linked in both tax registers, which makes up 78% of all houses in the 1672 survey.

extant houses. Even though the housing valuations in Aalst were not exactly static between 1672 and 1790, it seems inevitable that a growing degree of inaccuracy crept in throughout the years. Only after the French occupation at the end of the eighteenth century a completely new cadastral survey was carried out in 1810.¹²⁷ Our regression analysis nevertheless shows that the association between taxed housing values and household wealth was still very large by the end of the eighteenth century. The series of housing taxes preserved in the municipal archives of Aalst thus seem to live up to our expectations of providing an external stratification criterium to position the inventoried households within the social fabric of the town.

The second issue – the extent to which all households were included in the tax registers – poses more problems. Complete counts of all households in Aalst are hard to find before the nineteenth century. This is further complicated by the fact that most population figures available for the early modern period include the rural outskirts of the town. These consisted mainly of the villages of Schaarbeke and Mijlbeke, which belonged to the same parish as Aalst and were gradually transformed into suburbs of Aalst proper. By the end of the eighteenth century, approximately 39% of the total population of Aalst lived in these suburbs.¹²⁸

A detailed comparison between the housing tax and the number of households *intra muros* is possible only for the 1790's (table I.8). In total, 86% of all houses listed in the extensive population census of 1796 were also recorded in the tax registers.¹²⁹ The remaining 14% might have been too small (or perhaps too new) to be mentioned in the tax lists. It is quite likely that many houses which had been subdivided as a result of mounting demographic pressure since mid-century were listed separately in the census but as a single unit in the tax rolls.

Table I.8. A comparison between the number of households in the housing taxes of 1792-1795 and in the 1796 census.

Town quarter	Houses in tax	% of houses in census	% of families in census
'Pontstraatwijk'	205	77 %	62 %
'Zoutstraatwijk'	222	92 %	77 %
'Nieuwstraatwijk'	233	88 %	76 %
'Kattestraatwijk'	129	88 %	76 %
All	789	86 %	72 %

Sources:

House taxes: MAA, OAA, nrs. 277, 278, 279.

Census: MAA, MAA, *Bevolking*, nrs. 1-5.

¹²⁷ From that point onwards cadastral documents were completely revised every few decades: in 1810, 1834, 1860 and 1890. See Juul Hannes and Eric Vanhaute, "Economische verandering en inkomensongelijkheid. De inkomensverdeling in de Oost-Vlaamse steden in de negentiende eeuw," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 4, no. 2 (2007).

¹²⁸ Both Strijpens, *De achttiende eeuw*, 1 and De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 18 provide a different estimate, according to which 59% of the total population would have lived *extra muros* (4.000 *intra muros*, 4.000 in Schaarbeke and 1.809 in Mijlbeke). These figures seem to be based on the 1796 census, from which one of the 5 *intra muros* quarters is missing. More consistent estimates in H. Van Isterdael, "Belasting en belastingdruk: het Land van Aalst (17de-18de eeuw)" (Free University of Brussels, 1983) and De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*.

¹²⁹ Based on only four of the five *intra muros* quarters, since the census for the fifth quarter has only been partially preserved.

An additional disadvantage of the housing taxes is that they give no insight into the households occupying them. If a household is defined strict sensu as the group of people living together in one house, this is of course not an issue. But if one considers boarders, widows or couples who rented a room in another family's house as separate household units, the issue becomes more pressing. If we count the number of *families* in the 1796 census, instead of the number of *households* stricto sensu, the coverage rate of the housing taxes drops to only 72%. At least in the 1790's then, the coverage of the housing taxes did not fully extend to the whole population of Aalst – about 15% of households and 28% of families were apparently omitted from the records. If these taxes are to be used as a way of socially positioning the inventoried households, this partial coverage matters a great deal. This is especially the case because these sub-renting or boarding individuals and households were not so much missing from the tax register as being unnoticeable submerged in it: they share parts of the houses of large numbers of middling households whose corresponding housing taxes are thus over-estimations. Not only are a number of (presumably poorer) boarding and sub-renting households absent from the tax lists, but their very presence also overestimates the housing value of many middling households who rented out part of their homes. It seems likely that it is especially this latter phenomenon that might account for the declining ability of the tax records to predict the wealth of corresponding households.

Since the strong pressure of demographic growth on the housing market was especially a phenomenon of the second half of the eighteenth century, it is no surprise that this issue of declining correspondence and coverage grew over time. But how accurate were the tax rolls to start with? Given the fact that a more reliable way of distributing the tax burden was precisely one of the main goals of conducting the 1672 cadastral survey, it seems odd that a substantial share of houses would have been ignored at the time. As an approximate way of checking the ratio of taxed households to the total population of Aalst, we have compared the average number of adult burials per year in 1672-1686 and in 1785-1796 to the number of taxed households in these periods.¹³⁰ Under the assumption that mortality rates remained more or less stable between both periods, burial figures should be able to give us an impression of the changes in general population levels. If the ratio of taxed households to buried adults was the same in 1670 as in 1790, the partial coverage of the tax registers would supposedly be similar in both periods as well. If the ratio was higher in 1670 however, this would confirm our expectation that the tax coverage had declined over time.

A complicating factor in this comparison however is the inclusion of the population of Schaarbeke and Mijlbeke in the burial registers, but not in the housing taxes. Especially since in all likelihood these extra muros communities expanded more rapidly during the eighteenth century than the rest of the town. We do know, however, that in 1797 the intra muros part of the town made up 61% of the total population and that the communities of Schaarbeek and Mijlbeke already had a sizeable population in the sixteenth century.¹³¹ The proportion of inventoried households that stemmed from either intra or extra muros provides us with a particularly conservative estimate of the ratio between both town parts: 85% in 1670, as opposed to 58% in 1790. We have used these ratios in order to estimate the yearly number of adult burials in each period. In order to make the ratios more easily

¹³⁰ Parish burial registers in MAA, OAA, nrs. 109-113.

¹³¹ De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 18.

interpretable, the burial figures have been reconverted to estimates of the number of households using the 1796 census data: we know that there were 1.391 households *intra muros* and that this corresponded to an estimated 75 adult burials a year *intra muros*. The same conversion rate has then been applied to the 1670 period (table I.9).

Table I.9. A comparison of the coverage of households by the housing taxes, 1670's & 1790's.

	# of adult burials / year	# of adult burials <i>intra muros</i> / year	Estimated number of families	Taxed households	% of taxed families in estimated total
1672-1686	53	45	835	806	97 %
1785-1796	123	75	1.391	1.005	72 %

Sources:

Burials: MAA, OAA, nrs. 109-113.

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

House taxes: MAA, OAA, nrs. 264, 269, 270, 273, 277, 278, 279.

Census: MAA, MAA, *Bevolking*, nrs. 1-5.

As noted earlier, in the 1790's only 72% of all families listed in the population census was separately recorded in the tax registers of the time. According to the conservative estimate used above, based on the assumption that mortality figures more or less reflect population trends, the situation in 1672 was very different. At that time, almost all families seem to have been recorded in the housing tax (97%). Loosening any of the strict assumptions in the above calculations, for instance for instance by looking at the representation of households *stricto sensu* (instead of families) in the tax records, the proportion for 1672 rises well above 100%. This suggests that either our estimated population of the suburbs is too small for the 1670's or that the mortality rates changed over time. Whatever the value of the precise estimate for the 1670's, the ratio of taxed households to adult burials clearly indicates that the coverage of the tax records was much greater – if perhaps not entirely complete – in the earlier period than at the end of the eighteenth century.

It stands to reason then that the housing taxes in Aalst provide a suitable means of socially positioning the inventoried households within the wider social hierarchy of the town for the first three sample periods. Only when strong population growth during the second half of the eighteenth century caused increasing pressure on the housing market, did the housing taxes become less complete and less accurate in covering and representing the wealth of households in Aalst.

In order to compare the social position of the inventoried to the total population, each inventoried household was traced back to the housing taxes of a nearby year – usually within five years time. Matches could be based on various identifiers such as the name of the deceased (or his or her spouse), the street, occupation, house owner, or the names of the neighbours, or a combination of these. Not all inventoried households could be identified in the tax records, as a result of which 26% (or 139 inventories) remained without a link to their respective tax positions. Of the 396 inventories (74%) that could be identified, not all of them were matched with the same degree of certainty. Homonyms were quite common and the use of first and second names was not always as consistent as 21st-century historians would sometimes wish for. Therefore, we have introduced a separate category

of ‘certain’ links. These are the cases for which there are at least two matching identifiers – for instance the names of the deceased and both neighbors, or the deceased’s surname, the street and his occupation. Almost half of all inventories were linked in this way (table I.10).

Table I.10. Identification of inventories households in housing taxes, 1670-1795.

	Total N	Links		‘Certain’ links	
		N	%	N	%
1670	133	98	74 %	61	46 %
1710	135	112	83 %	76	56 %
1750	126	94	75 %	51	41 %
1790	141	92	65 %	70	50 %
Total	535	396	74 %	258	48 %

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

House taxes: MAA, OAA, nrs. 264, 269, 270, 273, 277, 278, 279.

The tax links allow us to position each and every linked inventory to their respective social position within the wider urban tax distribution of the time. Unfortunately, the nominal identification of individuals in early modern sources is seldom a socially neutral process. Time and again it turns out that households towards the bottom of the social spectrum are much less easily identified. Rarely did they have their occupations mentioned, nor did they usually own the houses they occupied. Being much more mobile than the better-off households also makes them substantially less tractable. In other words, the identification of households in both the inventory sample and the housing taxes tends to be biased towards the rich. The scope of this problem becomes evident when considering the differences in standard scores (Z-scores) of total household wealth between those inventories that were identified in the taxes and those that were not (table I.11). Standard scores indicate how many standard deviations an observation lies above or below the mean.¹³²

Table I.11. Linked versus unlinked inventories: a comparison of mean Z-scores & one-way ANOVA.

	Mean Z-score of wealth		ANOVA sig.	N
	Not linked	Linked		
1670	- 0,0202	0,0245	,805	133
1710	- 0,0547	0,0412	,593	135
1750	- 0,1226	0,1659	,119	126
1790	-0,3967	0,4084	,000	141

Sources:

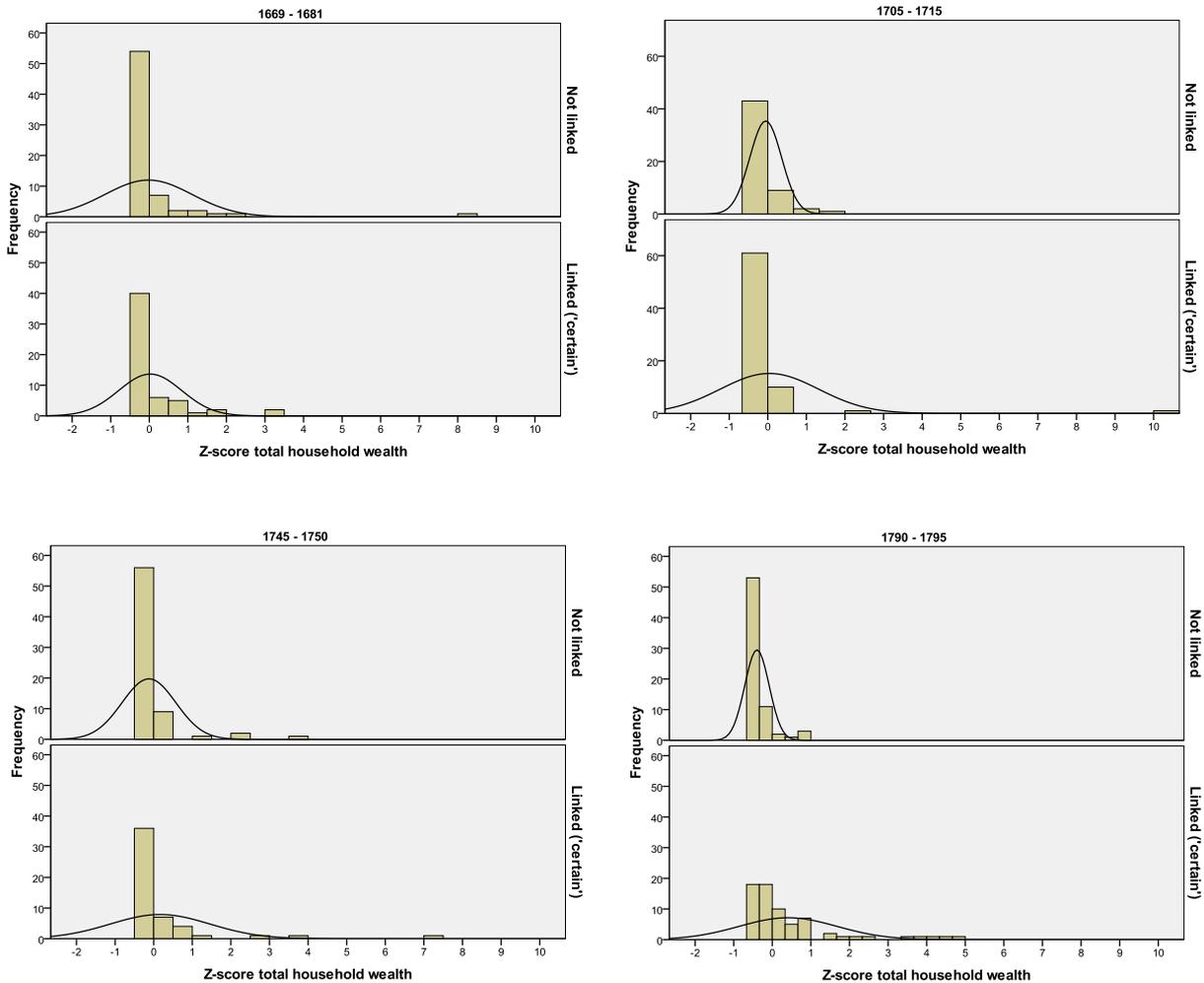
Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

In every sample period the average wealth of the linked inventories lies above the mean (i.e. is greater than zero), whereas the wealth of the unidentified inventories is consistently below the mean. Although the differences are at first marginally small (i.e. linked inventories are only 2 % of a standard deviation richer than all inventories) and statistically insignificant, they increase noticeable

¹³² This implies that a Z-score of 0 is equal to the mean, whereas a Z-score of 1 is equal to the standard deviation.

over time. By the 1790's the difference between both groups had become large enough to turn up as significant (at the 99% level) in a one-way Analysis of Variation (ANOVA). A comparison of the frequency distributions between the linked and the unlinked inventories similarly shows only barely noticeable differences, except again for the 1790 sample (figure I.2). It seems sensible to relate this gradual increase to the declining coverage rate and accuracy of the housing taxes between 1670 and 1790. If the taxes did indeed cover a smaller proportion of the total number of households, it makes sense that a larger share of the less well to do deceased could not be traced in the housing taxes – for instance because they rented a room in someone else's house.

Figure I.2. Frequency distributions of linked and unlinked inventories



Apart from the 1790 sample, the social bias of the linked inventories compared to the rest of the inventoried households was small. Keeping this (minor) bias in mind, we can finally turn to the social positioning of the inventoried population within the total population of Aalst. Table 3.12 presents the standard scores of the inventoried households within the wider housing tax distribution of each period. Only the households of which the links were established with certainty were used here. Since the standard scores of the inventoried households were positive on average, it is clear that their aggregate tax values were higher than the mean of the housing tax distribution. These differences were quite

small however, and never statistically significant. In 1672 the inventoried population had an average housing value that was only 3% of a standard deviation above the mean for the whole town. The maximum discrepancy was attained in 1710, when the house value of inventoried households was 25% of a standard deviation above the tax mean.

Table I.12. Situating the inventoried households in the tax distribution: a comparison of standard scores.

Z-scores of tax value	Not deceased / Not inventoried	Inventoried	ANOVA Sig.	N
1672	- 0,0023	0,0306	0,813	805
1710	- 0,0071	0,2509	0,223	837
1750	- 0,0111	0,2031	0,166	846
1790	- 0,0088	0,1248	0,298	992

Sources:

House taxes: MAA, OAA, nrs. 264, 269, 270, 273, 277, 278, 279.

These are small differences, especially if one confronts them with the numerous cautionary tales of the large social bias of early modern after-death inventories. If these inventories truly captured the middle classes and the well-to-do alone, one would expect much larger discrepancies between the inventoried households and the rest of the urban tax distribution. The rather limited social bias of the after-death inventories becomes even more striking when taking into account the previously mentioned bias produced by the linking process itself (table I.11). Since this latter bias is at least partially responsible for the former, both effects cancel each other to a certain degree. In a very crude way the difference between both biases, as expressed in mean Z-scores, offers an indication of the total bias and its direction (table I.13).

Table I.13. The total social bias of the after-death inventories expressed in standard scores.

	Z-scores of tax	Z-scores of wealth	Difference
1670	0,0306	0,0245	0,0061
1710	0,2509	0,0412	0,2097
1750	0,2031	0,1659	0,0372
1790	0,1248	0,4084	- 0,2836

Sources:

See tables I.11 and I.12.

By all means, these are modest figures. The social bias in 1670 and 1750 seems to be almost negligible, and even in 1710 the aggregate social bias is no larger than 21% of a single standard deviation. The final sample period is once again the odd one out, since the total bias for those years turns out to be negative. The households that left after-death inventories in this period seem to have been poorer, on average, than the mean taxable household. This makes sense, of course, given the larger prevalence of sub-renting and boarding households in this period: these substantially overestimate the ‘predicted wealth’ based on the housing taxes of many middle-range households (who rented out part of their homes), whereas they left many poorer boarders and sub-renters out of the picture. At least during this sample period then, the sample of inventories more adequately

captures changes in wealth levels than do the tax rolls. The fact that the ratio of inventories to deceased remained the same throughout the eighteenth century makes it less credible that the increase in poor inventories could be explained by changing administrative practice alone. As pressures on the housing market mounted by the end of the eighteenth century and more and more families shared housing facilities, the housing taxes cease to provide a reliable means of socially positioning the inventoried households of the time.

For the other three sample periods on the other hand, it has become increasingly clear that linking the inventoried households to the tax distribution offers a reliable way of socially positioning each inventory in the sample. This method will be used throughout this thesis whenever the social position of a household is discussed. The quintiles of the tax distribution will thereby be used as points of reference. Table I.14 summarizes the distribution of inventoried household over the five quintiles of the housing tax hierarchy in each period.

Table I.14. The distribution of inventoried households over tax quintiles.

	1670		1710		1750		1790		Total	
	All	Certain								
Q1	6 %	8 %	4 %	3 %	6 %	2 %	11 %	3 %	7 %	4 %
Q2	19 %	20 %	11 %	8 %	23 %	18 %	17 %	17 %	18 %	15 %
Q3	20 %	17 %	27 %	30 %	23 %	30 %	24 %	23 %	24 %	25 %
Q4	30 %	33 %	32 %	33 %	18 %	18 %	27 %	31 %	27 %	30 %
Q5	25 %	22 %	27 %	26 %	30 %	32 %	21 %	26 %	26 %	26 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

House taxes: MAA, OAA, nrs. 264, 269, 270, 273, 277, 278, 279.

The social bias of the after-death inventories is again evident from this table. Each quintile represents 20% of the households in the housing tax, ranked from poor (Q1) to rich (Q5). The inventory samples show a consistently upwards social bias, most obviously in the low numbers of inventories that could be traced to the lowest 20% of the taxed households (Q1). The next quintile seems to be somewhat underrepresented as well, but the remaining 60% of households are more or less equally represented. Contrary to the situation in rural England where courts at a supra-regional level often probated the estates of the wealthiest, the rich do not seem to be absent from the Aalst inventory samples.¹³³ Expressed in this way, the social bias of the inventories again urges us to be cautious but not to despair. While it is true that 80% of all (certainly linked) inventories pertained to 60% of the population, the inventory series definitely do not speak of the middling groups alone. Moreover, contrary to the situation in England, there is no evidence of an increasing ‘exclusiveness’ of after-death inventories in the Southern Netherlands at all.

In some cases it might be interesting to ‘correct’ for the social bias of the inventories in order to arrive at aggregate results for the totality of households in Aalst. In order to do so, each inventory can be weighed according to its respective quintile. Inventories belonging to the tax quintiles at the bottom of the distribution, which are relatively underrepresented, shall then be weighed more heavily than those

¹³³ Cox and Cox, "Probate 1500-1800".

from the middle or the top, which are relatively overrepresented. These weights will be attributed in such a way that each tax quintile becomes equally represented in the inventory sample. By applying these weights to the linked inventories in the sample, the social bias of the source can be cancelled out in order to arrive at results which hold for the totality of households in Aalst. Because of the specific doubts that have been cast over the reliability of the housing taxes in the last sample period, the application of this methodology to the 1790's inventories might be a cause of concern. Therefore, whenever diachronic evolutions are the focal point of analysis, the un-adjusted inventory samples will be employed (since they have been shown to more accurately capture change over time).

6. The inventory sample

The archives of the Orphan Chamber of Aalst do not only contain probate inventories. Included between the inventories are debt liquidations, probate accounts, partitions, marriage contracts and various other documents related to the process of probate or the administration of orphan's estates. The actual inventories moreover do not pertain to the city of Aalst itself, but to everyone subject to the jurisdiction of the aldermen of the town. This included the previously mentioned villages (or suburbs) of *Schaarbeke* and *Mijlbeke*, but also *Nieuwerkerken*, which constituted a separate parish but was subject to the jurisdiction of the aldermen of Aalst. Occasionally inventories of 'buitenpoorters' (individuals who had acquired citizenship of Aalst, usually for fiscal or judicial reasons, without actually residing there) are also found in the Chamber's archives.

During the 35 sample years studied in this dissertation, a total of 1.176 after-death inventories were presented to the Chamber (or the aldermen in later years). Only 64% (748) of these pertained to households residing *intra muros*, as opposed to 35% in *Schaarbeke*, *Mijlbeke* and *Nieuwerkerken*. In the present study only the *intra muros* inventories have been used. Of those 748 inventories, a further 28% has been excluded from the database because they were not considered fully reliable or did not provide sufficient information to reconstruct total wealth holdings for that particular household. The majority of these inventories lacked information on either the value of the home or of any real estate owned, which were often mentioned only *pro memorie*, without being appraised.

The remaining 535 complete inventories will be used for the analyses throughout the present study. For the detailed exploration of the material culture in Aalst, only the inventories with a detailed item-by-item listing of all possessions have been used. These represent 47% of all complete inventories (249).

II. THE ECONOMY OF AALST: GROWTH & COMMERCIALIZATION

The study of consumption and material culture in the past tends to suffer from scholarly polarization. Interest in stylized models of economic, social and cultural behaviour has diverted attention disproportionately towards case-studies that are supposedly exemplar within an (often implicit) juxtaposition. Although this often subconscious and collective research strategy has greatly expanded the boundaries of our knowledge, there also lurks a danger of excessively relying on the extraordinary and the exemplary to arrive at abstract but ultimately a-historical reconstructions of the past. The history of early modern consumption has led us to explore on the one hand the cosmopolitan world of the trading, entrepreneurial middle classes of London, Paris and Antwerp – the cultural and social pioneers of the early modern era.¹³⁴ On the other hand, and by means of contrast, historians have delved into the experiences of the rural fringes of Western European society: the peasants of remote Friesland and barren Cornwall, or the humble settlers of Colonial America's backcountry.¹³⁵

Such a historiographic juxtaposition would do particular injustice to the economic and social history of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century southern Low Countries. Neither the experience of the near self-sufficient farmer, nor that of the cosmopolitan international merchant was at all common there – if it even existed. The focus of this study will instead be diverted to an urban community of no more than regional importance.¹³⁶ Its citizens neither dabbled in international commerce, nor did they labour daily in their fields. Theirs was a social, economic and cultural experience shared by many in the region, since at least half of all urban citizens in the area of current-day Belgium lived in medium-sized secondary towns rather than in the internationally oriented metropolises of the day.¹³⁷ Moreover, what it lacks in exceptionality, an exploration of social and consumptive change in such a secondary

¹³⁴ For instance Earle, *The making*; Roche, *La culture des apparences*; D. Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris. Essai sur la Culture Populaire au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: 1981); C. De Staelen, "Spulletjes en hun betekenis in een commerciële metropool. Antwerpenaren en hun materiële cultuur in de zestiende eeuw" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2007).

¹³⁵ Among others Overton et al., *Production and consumption*; De Vries, "Peasant demand"; A.S. Martin, *Buying into the world of goods: early consumers in backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: 2008).

¹³⁶ Secondary towns were also studied in Garnot, *Un déclin*; Wijssenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*; H. Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit. Materiële cultuur in Doesburg en Maassluis, 1650-1800* (Nijmegen: 2001); Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

¹³⁷ Calculation based on Paul Bairoch, Jean Batou, and Pierre Chèvre, *La population des villes Européennes. Banque de données et analyse sommaire des résultats* (Genève: 1988), 11-12. Of all urban inhabitants in 1800, 51% lived in settlements with less than 15.000 inhabitants. For the area covered by the current province of East-Flanders, the share of the total population living in cities of over 15.000 inhabitants was 9%, as opposed to 20% in secondary towns, and 71% on the countryside (calculations based on Jaspers and Stevens, *Arbeid en tewerkstelling*, 41 and De Belder et al., "Arbeid en tewerkstelling".

urban centre, makes up for in the practical feasibility of studying an entire urban community through time. This community is the town of Aalst.

To the contemporary observer Aalst had little of interest on offer, compared to the larger cities of Ghent and Brussels, or (somewhat further away) Bruges, Antwerp and Malines. When, on occasion, the town was featured in the travel itinerary of traveling foreigners, it was rarely bestowed with more than a cursory – if not unsympathetic – glance in passing. In 1772 the English protestant writer Cayley Cornelius travelling across the Continent wrote: "*On Saturday noon, September nineteenth, behold me once more in the Diligence [...], setting forward for Ghent, about thirty English miles north-west of Brussels. The road I found very pleasant, paved all the way, and the country agreeable, much the same as before described. We passed thro' Alost about 15 miles in our road, and at night arrived at Ghent.*"¹³⁸ Three decades earlier the anonymous, English, author of '*Flanders delineated*' (1745) thought Aalst "*a pretty town*" and "*a place of some trade*" with a "*noble parish-church*", but "*neither large nor well fortified.*" Its rural hinterland, however, he described as "*one of the most fruitful in Flanders.*"¹³⁹ The most remarkable features about Aalst, apart from its apparent pleasantness, seemed to be the remarkable quality of the road that led to it, and the fertility of its surrounding countryside.

Later economic and social historians have largely concurred with these eighteenth-century travellers, as the intensification of agriculture, the expansion of rural proto-industry, and development of an efficient road network have generally captured much interest in the economic and social history of eighteenth-century Flanders. The region of Aalst has been studied intensively with regards to property relations and living standards in its proto-industrial, rural hinterland.¹⁴⁰ As the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressed, land holdings in the area became increasingly fragmented while the population expanded and linen production boomed. Secondary towns such as Aalst – but also Ninove, Geraardsbergen, Ronse, Oudenaarde and Dendermonde – seem to have played second fiddle, providing central markets to the dynamic population on the countryside. It is no surprise then that neither economic historians nor contemporary commentators have dwelled long on its eighteenth-century fate.

However, this lack of obvious dynamism should not be confused with unimportance.¹⁴¹ Jan De Vries' '*industrious revolution*' hypothesis, for instance, principally rests on the idea that new, and specifically *urban* forms of consumerism were introduced in rural households where they spurred a drive for market production and consumption.¹⁴² As the Flemish countryside became both increasingly proto-industrial and susceptible to consumer change, the regional market towns through which both its products were exported and its consumer goods imported, produced and distributed, were no doubt of

¹³⁸ Cornelius Cayley, *A tour through Holland, Flanders and Germany* (Dublin: 1772), 67.

¹³⁹ Anonymous, *Flanders delineated: or, a view of the Austrian and French Netherlands* (London: 1745).

¹⁴⁰ Mendels, "Proto-industrialization"; Christiaan Vandenbroeke, "Proto-industry in Flanders: a critical review," in *European proto-industrialization*, ed. Sheilagh C. Ogilvie and Markus Cerman (Cambridge: 1996); Van Isterdael, "Belasting en belastingdruk"; Reinoud Vermoesen, "Markttoegang en 'commerciële' netwerken van rurale huishoudens" (University of Antwerp, 2008).

¹⁴¹ See also C. Lis and H. Soly, "Different paths of development: Capitalism in the Northern and Southern Netherlands during the late Middle Ages and early modern period," *Review* 20, no. 2 (1997).

¹⁴² De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 44-50; De Vries, "Between purchasing power".

significant importance.¹⁴³ Notwithstanding the general ‘urban decline’ of the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, towns like Aalst thus exerted continued influence upon their hinterland in both economic and cultural terms. Moreover, it were the urban communities, including secondary towns like Aalst, which would witness, from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, the emergence of new forms of capital and labour concentration in industrial production. It would take until at least the middle of the nineteenth century before large-scale mechanization and factory production would come to effectively dominate social and economic life in Aalst, but by then profound socio-economic change had figured prominently in the experience of its inhabitants for at least a century.

1. A short population history of Aalst

The town of Aalst, situated in the South-Eastern part of Flanders, had been an urban centre of regional importance since the middle ages, and largely remained that way until today. At the end of the sixteenth century, during the religious and political turmoil of the Dutch Revolt, Aalst counted a little over 6.000 inhabitants within its walls.¹⁴⁴ Although this made Aalst the most populous town in the extensive rural area of the same name (*het Land van Aalst*), it was decidedly small compared to the nearby cities of Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp. Detailed census data from before the end of the eighteenth century have not been preserved for Aalst so that the town’s demographic evolution can only be sketched in rather crude terms. A first reliable point of reference is provided by the odd population count carried out in 1709 to guarantee adequate grain provisioning in a year of dearth.¹⁴⁵ Some figures for the number of communicants in the parish of Aalst have furthermore been preserved for most of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. These figures can be used, with the help of an extensive body of demographic scholarship on the relation between the number of communicants and population size, to estimate the town’s demographic evolution throughout this period.¹⁴⁶ From the end of the eighteenth century onwards there is a sudden abundance of population counts for Aalst which document the extraordinarily rapid demographic growth of those years.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ See also the crucial role played, according to De Vries, by secondary towns in the urban network – especially after 1750: De Vries, *European urbanization*.

¹⁴⁴ De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 18.

¹⁴⁵ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 263. On the exceptionally cold winter of 1709 and the ensuing crop failure in Aalst, see Maaïke Putman, ""Terwijl ik dit schrijf, voor het vier zittende, vriest den inkt in de penne". De strenge winter van 1709 op Europees vlak met een case-study over het Land van Aalst" (KUL, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ The communicant figures are in De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 18 I have decided not to use De Brouwer’s population estimates. Instead I have made new population estimates based on the communicant numbers he provides. The conversion rates used have been based on C. Vandenbroeke, "Prospektus van het historisch-demografisch onderzoek in Vlaanderen," *Handelingen van het genootschap voor Geschiedenis gesticht onder de benaming "Société d'Emulation" te Brugge* (1976); Jaspers and Stevens, *Arbeid en tewerkstelling*, but have been raised (multiplied by 1,089) in order to account for the relatively higher percentage of communicants in urban areas (see Erik Pletinck, "De demografische evolutie van Oost-Vlaanderen (1561-1840). Een bronnenoverzicht" (Ghent University, 1985)).

¹⁴⁷ The population figure of the 1796 census used by Strijpens, *De achttiende eeuw*, 1 and based on the publication the census data in De Belder et al., "Arbeid en tewerkstelling" is incorrect. The total population count of 11.592 reported there is contradicted by the much lower figures for 1791, 1797 and 1800 (all within the 9.809 - 10.0927). Since the actual 1796 census in the municipal archives (MAA, Modern Archive, *Bevolking*,

Most population figures of Aalst not only include the inner city, the area within the town walls, but also the two *praterijen* Schaarbeke and Mijlbeke: two small villages just outside the city's perimeter that would become integral parts of the town's expansion in the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁸ Since both villages belonged to the same parish as Aalst and fell under the jurisdiction of the town's aldermen, it is hard to estimate their share in the total population figures reported above. Only in the 1709 population count and in the late eighteenth century census data can the city proper (*intra muros*) be isolated from its rural outskirts. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the inner city counted 5.328 heads, or 73% of the total population.¹⁴⁹ During the period of urban decline in the first half of the eighteenth century this proportion declined rapidly, as a result of which in 1784 the inner city comprised no more than 5.070 inhabitants or 55% of the total. A recovery of the *intra muros* population was evident at the end of the century, since its head count quickly climbed to 6.051 (58%) by 1797.¹⁵⁰ The records of the yearly levied housing taxes of Aalst provide an additional indication of the *intra muros* population share, since only houses within the city proper were taxed. The number of dwellings subject to the levy increased between 1672 and 1705, remained stable during the first half of the eighteenth century, and renewed its growth between 1742 and 1790.¹⁵¹ By applying the respective growth rates of the housing taxes for each period to the known population figures, demographic change in the city proper can be estimated for the missing years as well (figure II.1).

nrs. 1-7) has only been partially preserved, it is unlikely that this is the source which was used by De Belder et al. Presumably their data pertains to the 1815 census (MAA, Modern Archive, *Bevolking*, nrs. 8-14, but previously erroneously labeled as 1-7 in the archives).

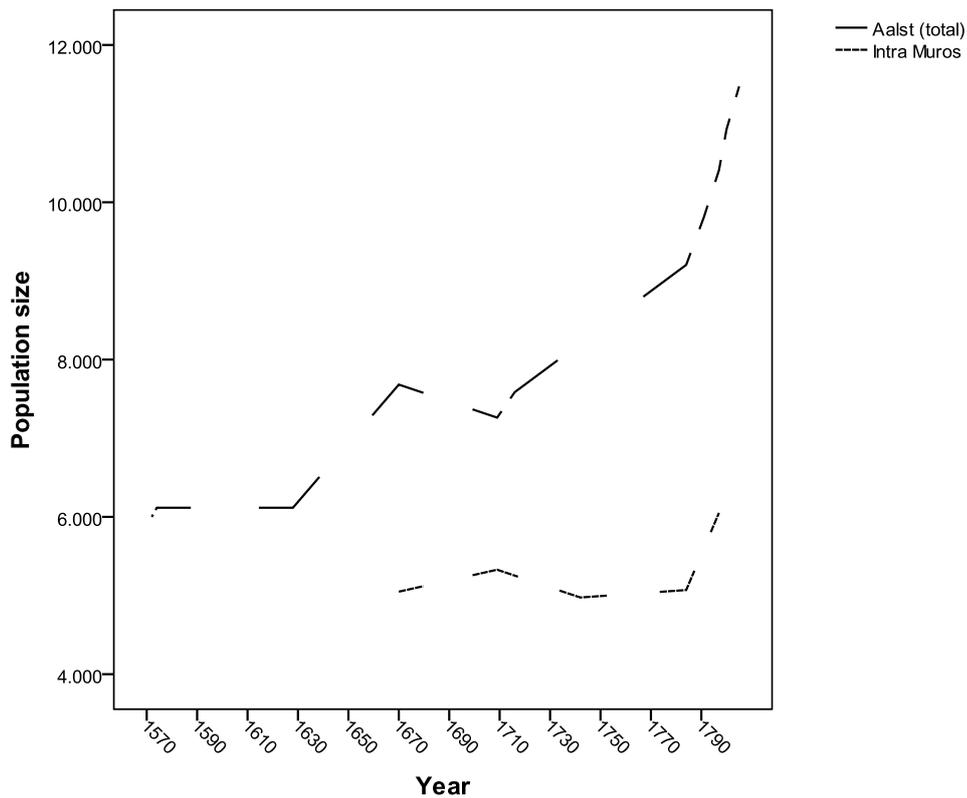
¹⁴⁸ Schaarbeke is situated to the North-West, less than 2 km. from the Nieuwstraatpoort, whereas Mijlbeek lies on the other side of the Dender, less than 2 km. to the East of Aalst.

¹⁴⁹ MAA, *LvA*, n° 263 mentions 5.328 people *intra muros* and 2.857 for the three *praterijen*, including Nieuwerkerken which has been left out of the other figures listed here. To arrive at a comparable total population figure (of the *intra muros* city, Schaarbeke and Mijlbeke), the population number of Nieuwerkerken, which De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 18 puts 923 for 1710, has been deducted from it.

¹⁵⁰ De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 18 reports the unlikely share of 41% *intra muros* for 1791, but there seem to be more than a 1.000 inhabitants missing from the city centre compared to the censuses of 1784, 1796 and 1797. See MAA, Modern Archief, *Bevolking*, nrs. 1-5; RAG, *Scheldedepartement*, nr. 1673.

¹⁵¹ MAA, *OA*, nrs. 264, 269-270, 273, 277-279.

Figure II.1. The population of Aalst, 16th-18th centuries.



Sources:

- 1572-1716: De Brouwer, "Demografische Evolutie".
1784: Van Isterdael, "Belasting En Belastingdruk".
1791: RAG, *Kasselrij Aalst*, nr. 394; De Brouwer, "Demografische Evolutie".
1797: RAG, Schelvedepartement nr. 1673; De Hauwere, "Vergelijking Tussen Twee Vlaamse Steden".
1800: Faipoult, "Mémoire Statistique".
1805: Jaspers and Stevens, "Arbeid En Tewerkstelling".

It is clear from figure II.1 that the total population of Aalst considerably grew over the course of the early modern period. Especially during the final decades of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries the expansion seems to have been particularly rapid. This growth spurt corresponds well with the general pattern of increased urbanization and general population expansion in the whole region from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards.¹⁵² The preceding urban decline that hit the Southern Netherlands – and most of Western Europe in general – during the 1650-1750 period, seems reflected in the demographic standstill of Aalst during this period.¹⁵³ Considering only

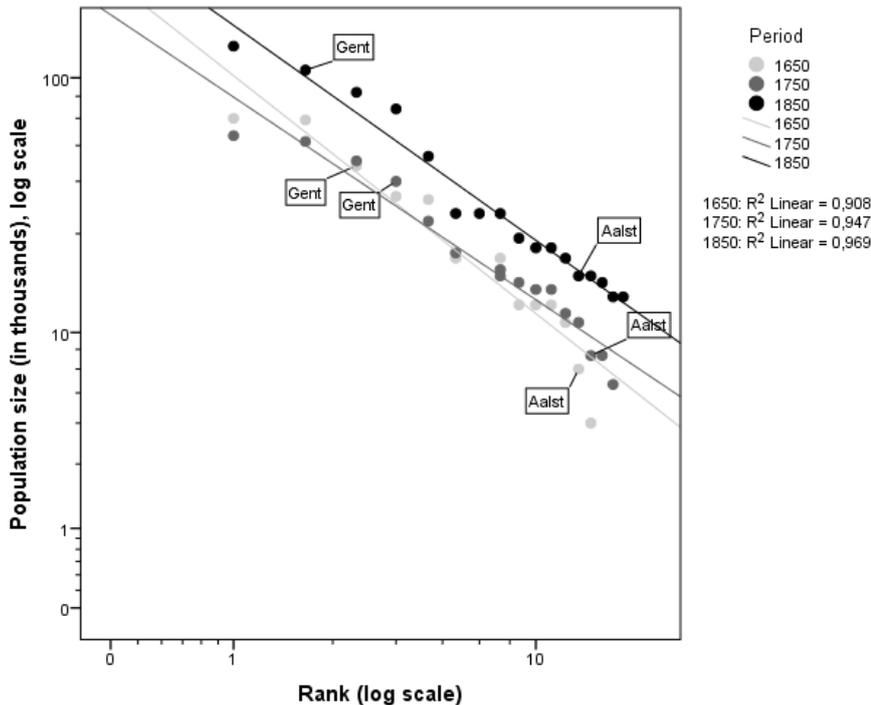
¹⁵² See for instance P.M.M. Klep, *Bevolking en arbeid in transformatie. Een onderzoek naar de ontwikkelingen in Brabant, 1700-1900* (Nijmegen: 1981); Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden* for Brabant.

¹⁵³ Peter Stabel, "De-urbanisation and Urban Decline in Flanders from 1500 to 1800: The Disintegration of an Urban system?," in *European urbanisation, social structure and problems between the eighteenth and twentieth century*, ed. Desmond McCabe (Leicester: 1995) sees the demographic evolution of Aalst as exemplar for small towns in inland Flanders in general: these suffered much less from urban decline than did the large cities such as Ghent. On the general patterns of this urban decline in the Southern Netherlands: Klep, "Urban decline"; Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics".

the intra muros part of the city does not change much to this picture.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps secondary towns like Aalst were not quite as susceptible to de-urbanization as general urbanization trends would suggest. This is corroborated by a brief survey of changes in the rank size distribution of the main cities in the area covered by current-day Belgium (figure II.2).¹⁵⁵

Figure 2.2. Rank size distribution of cities in current-day Belgium (1650-1850).

Figure II.2. Rank size distribution of cities in current-day Belgium (1650-1850).



Sources:

De Vries, "European Urbanization"; Bairoch, et al., "La Population Des Villes".

While there was little or no overall growth in the urban network of the Southern Netherlands between 1650 and 1750, the rank size distributions suggest a modest internal restructuring. While the largest cities – such as Ghent – had lost ground by 1750, the smaller towns – including Aalst – had slightly improved their position. Although the general hierarchy was largely maintained, it is clear that the secondary towns suffered less than the larger ones. The population flow which followed from midcentury seems to have lifted all boats, regardless of their size.¹⁵⁶ The divergent demographic path of the secondary towns during the 1650-1750 period points at a different economic functionality which made them straddle the divergent dynamics of both town and countryside. A comparison between population growth in Ghent, Aalst and the extensive rural area in between bears this out.

¹⁵⁴ Vermoesen, "Markttoegang" suggested that the population intra muros could have followed a different (declining) path from that of the rural *praterijen* during this period.

¹⁵⁵ Only cities with a population size of at least 10.000 by 1800 have been included. For more information on the geographical concept of rank size distributions see De Vries, *European urbanization*.

¹⁵⁶ In fact, as far as the urban network is concerned, economic growth during the first phase of the industrial revolution seems to have had a less polarising effect than that of the commercial capitalist growth in the 16th century: Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics".

Table II.1. Demographic evolution in Ghent, Aalst and het Land van Aalst.

	Ghent		Aalst		Land van Aalst	
	Population	Annual growth	Population	Annual growth	Population	Annual growth
c. 1600	31.000		6.100		42.500	
c. 1700	50.000	+0,48%	7.600	+0,22%	86.000	+0,71%
c. 1750	38.000	-0,55%	8.000	+0,10%	130.000	+0,83%
c. 1800	55.000	+0,74%	11.000	+0,63%	171.000	+0,55%
1600-1800		+0,29%		+0,30%		+0,69%

Sources:

De Brouwer, "Demografische Evolutie", Faipoult, "Mémoire Statistique", De Vries, "European Urbanization"

The demographic paths of Ghent and *het Land van Aalst* largely followed the traditional pattern of urban recovery, decline and growth which characterised the Southern Netherlands in the early modern period (table II.1).¹⁵⁷ Recovery was ubiquitous during most of the seventeenth century, although it was more extensive on the countryside than in the cities. The de-urbanization that set in during the first half of the eighteenth century hit Ghent particularly hard, which shrank at a yearly rate of 0,55% (table II.1), whereas population growth in the proto-industrial *Land van Aalst* rose to a new high. The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed an impressive revival in Ghent, but declining growth rates on the countryside. Throughout, Aalst occupied a middling position, proving to be remarkably resilient when confronted with general urban decline, and experiencing an urban renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century – although somewhat less vigorously so than Ghent.¹⁵⁸ The urban economy of a regional centre such as Aalst was of course closely intertwined with the development of its rural surroundings. As the proto-industrial linen production on the countryside grew ever more important, the rural demand for urban goods and services probably worked to counteract the general decline in export-oriented urban industrial activities.¹⁵⁹ In 1646 Aalst had gained staple rights for all linen produced in the region, so that it also functioned as a trading hub between its rural surroundings and the larger export centres such as Ghent and Antwerp.¹⁶⁰ The economic functions provided by middle-sized market towns made them a decidedly dynamic force within the urban hierarchy during the ‘age of the countryside’.

¹⁵⁷ Compare with the model proposed in Hohenberg and Lees, *The making of Urban Europe*.

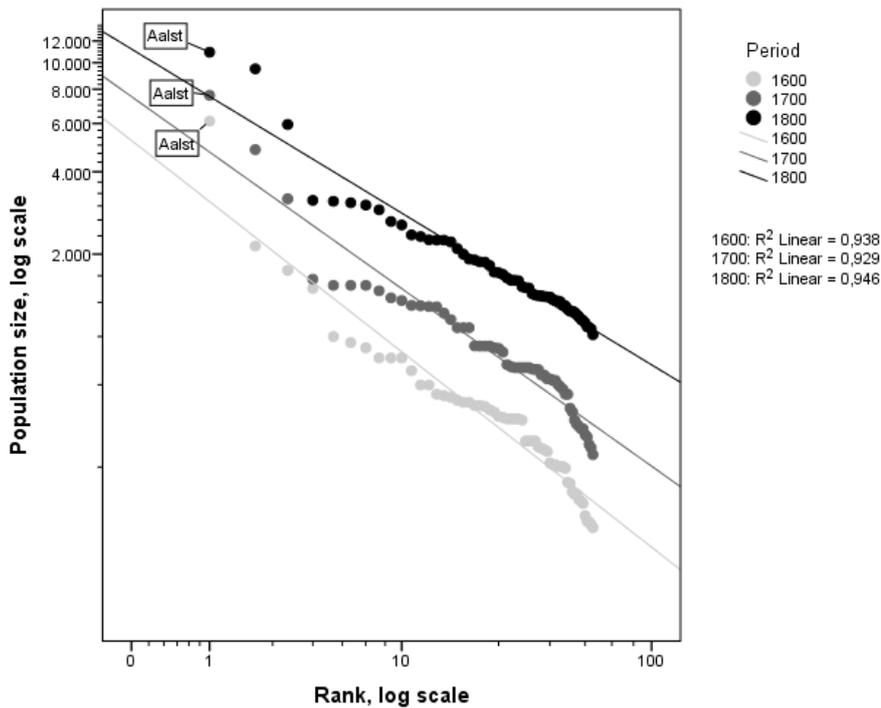
¹⁵⁸ In this latter respect the experience of Aalst seems to differ from that of the secondary towns in Brabant, see: Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*.

¹⁵⁹ See Vermoesen, "Markttoegang"; B. Blondé, "Domestic demand and urbanization in the 18th century: Some demographic and functional evidence from Brabantine small towns," in *Growth and stagnation in the urban network of the Low Countries (14th-18th centuries)*, ed. H. Van Der Wee (Leuven: 1990); C. Vandenbroeke, "Levensstandaard en tewerkstelling in Vlaanderen (17e-18e eeuw)," *Handelingen der maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde te Gent* 31 (1977). See also infra.

¹⁶⁰ H. Van Der Wee and P. D'haeseleer, "Ville et campagne dans l'industrie linière à Alost et dans ses environs (fin du moyen âge-temps modernes)," in *Peasants and townsmen in medieval Europe. Studia in honorem Adriaan Verhulst*, ed. J.M. Duvosquel and E. Thoen (Gent: 1995), 753-55.

At the same time, the position of Aalst within the regional economy of *het Land van Aalst* changed little. The region was dominated by four middle-sized towns (Aalst, Ronse, Geraardsbergen and to a lesser extent Ninove) of which Aalst was consistently the largest. According to the rank size distribution in figure II.3 - which plots all communities in het Land van Aalst that counted at least 1.000 inhabitants by 1800 - the general shape of the hierarchy remained largely unchanged. The rank size distributions suggest that population growth between 1600 and 1800 was quasi universal, without affecting the pre-existing gap between town and countryside, but perhaps it hides from view the complex mechanisms of demographic, economic and social interrelations between town and countryside during this period.

Figure II.3. Rank size distribution of communities in het Land van Aalst.



Sources:

De Brouwer, "Demografische Evolutie"; Faipoult, "Mémoire Statistique".

Middle-sized marked towns such as Aalst (but also Geraardsbergen or Ronse) continued to play an important role in the regional economy even when de-urbanization struck the urban network of the Southern Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Closely connected to the boom of the proto-industrial linen production on the countryside on the one hand, and yet entertaining important trading relations with the large commercial centres of the day on the other, the economy of Aalst seems to have straddled two worlds. The calculation of urban centrality in the province of East-Flanders around 1796, carried out by Peter Stabel, demonstrates that Aalst continued to play an important role in the provisioning of urban goods and services to the surrounding countryside – notwithstanding the preceding centuries of urban de-industrialization and rural proto-

industrialization.¹⁶¹ The economies of town and countryside were closely interwoven and continued to be so until well into the nineteenth century. The demographic growth of Aalst during the second half of the eighteenth century can firmly be categorized as an 'urbanization from below'.¹⁶²

2. Economic structure and change

The urban fate of Aalst was closely connected to that of its surrounding countryside. When, around 1750, the town's mayor sketched the contours of Aalst's economic activity, he described the town both as both a gateway and a central place; as being served by, and serving its rural hinterland. The description of the town's economy was penned down in the midst of a heated debate over the extension of transport facilities in and around Aalst – a cause, of course, for which stressing the central and gateway function of the town might prove particularly opportune.¹⁶³ At issue was the further development of the network of roads and rivers that traversed the region and connected it to the outside world. Following the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, the Habsburg government was seeking to further promote economic development in the Austrian Netherlands. One of the tactics deployed was the rapid extension of paved roads and waterways, especially in the densely populated and urbanized provinces of Flanders and Brabant.¹⁶⁴ Plans had emerged for the development of a new commercial route from the southern region of Hainault all the way to the Scheldt – which in its turn provided access to Antwerp, Holland and Zeeland, and ultimately the Atlantic. With the construction of a new paved road up to Aalst and a canal from there to Baasrode, on the river Scheldt, Aalst would gain a crucial position within the trade flows of the area.

Since the neighbouring cities of Ninove, Geraardsbergen and Dendermonde (all within a 25 km. perimeter of the town) and the principle notables (bailiffs, noblemen and representatives of the clergy) from the rural district of '*het Land van Aalst*' took issue with these plans, a prolonged judicial clash followed. Town aldermen, judicial councillors, noblemen, abbots and anyone with political stakes to defend took to the rhetorical battlefields of the time. Armed with petitions, lengthy letters and elaborate tracts destined for Brussels, each party tried to tempt and persuade the political authorities.

Among the many resulting documents preserved in the municipal archives of Aalst sits an extraordinarily long and interesting, but undated tract on the advantages of the Aalst-Baasrode

¹⁶¹ Stabel, "De-urbanisation".

¹⁶² See De Vries, *European urbanization*; Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*.

¹⁶³ Sketched in Jeroen Meert, "Het kanaal Aalst-Baasrode en de verkeerswegenproblematiek in het Land van Aalst in de 18de eeuw," *Het Land van Aalst* 55, no. 1 (2003). A collection of letters, petitions, plans and other documents related to this episode in MAA, LvA, nrs. 3683 and 3684.

¹⁶⁴ See B. Blondé, "At the cradle of the transport revolution? Paved roads, traffic flows and economic development in eighteenth-century Brabant," *The Journal of Transport History* 31, no. 1 (2010); L. Genicot, *Histoire des routes Belges depuis 1704* (Brussels: 1948); G. Dejongh and Y. Segers, "Een kleine natie in mutatie. De economische ontwikkeling van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden / België in de eeuw 1750-1850," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 114, no. 2 (2001). By the nineteenth century the network of roads and waterways in Belgium was notoriously more developed than in England: C. Vandenbroeke, "The Regional Economy of Flanders and Industrial Modernization in the Eighteenth Century: A Discussion," *Journal of European Economic History* XVI, no. 1 (1987): 161-62.

canal.¹⁶⁵ The document, written in almost Socratic style, contains 48 statements critical of the new canal between Aalst and Baasrode, each followed by a lengthy reply in support of the project. Although the author remains anonymous, it is clear that he had strong ties to the political elites of the town, and was most likely Jean Vilain XIII, who was mayor of Aalst from 1743 until 1751, and who would later become one of the most influential figures in the eighteenth-century Austrian Netherlands.¹⁶⁶ Both the style of writing and the economic policies defended in the document closely resemble that of his later works.¹⁶⁷ The 48 statements against which the author reacts are most likely taken from the arguments put forward by Pierre Pycke, who would continue to oppose the whole project until its eventual failure.¹⁶⁸ For a text written in a small, provincial town around the middle of the eighteenth century and concerned with a topic of no more than pragmatic importance on a regional level, its theoretical breadth and demonstrable acquaintance with economic theory is extraordinary. By the 1740's Vilain XIII had finished both his university education as a jurist and his *grand tour* through Europe where he picked up an interest in economics, finance and political economy.

In the tract on the Aalst canal he exudes a remarkable confidence in his knowledge of the basic economic principles of the time, remarking at one point that "*the obscurity and confusion evident from the [opponent's] observations necessitate a succinct exposition of the true principles of trade and their mutual and necessary concatenation, by means of which a system can be presented which should be followed and sustained by state policy in its integrity.*"¹⁶⁹ Taking up his own challenge, he then presents the reader with a 3.000-word overview of economic theory, reaching far beyond the scope of the infrastructural issues at hand.¹⁷⁰

Although prone to such theoretical commentaries, Vilain begins his argument for the Aalst-Baasrode canal on a more pragmatic level. In order to demonstrate the need for an improved transport

¹⁶⁵ The document was briefly studied in Meert, "Het kanaal Aalst-Baasrode". It can be found in MAA, LVA, n° 3683.

¹⁶⁶ P. Lenders, *Vilain XIII* (Leuven: 1995). Vilain XIII would acquire more notoriety as mayor of Ghent and president of the Estates of Flanders. He is usually seen as a typical exponent of Enlightenment politics in the 18th-century Netherlands.

¹⁶⁷ There are for instance the strong mercantilist views expressed in the document, noting at several occasions the unfairness of local (mostly urban) trade privileges and internal tolls and excises, as opposed to the need for external trade barriers preventing import (most explicitly in article 19 of the document; MAA, LVA, n° 3683) – economic policies which he would repeat in his books from the 1750's and 1760's (Lenders, *Vilain XIII*). There are clear parallels as well between the stress in the Aalst document placed on the promotion of industriousness among the peasants and poorer citizens, and Vilain's later writings in favour of workhouses and strict measures against mendicancy: compare for instance the remarks in articles 17 and 19 of the anonymous document with the introduction in J. Vilain XIII, *Qui noluerit operari non manducet. L'homme est condamné par Dieu à manger son pain à la sueur de son visage* (Gent: 1771), which subtitle appropriately refers to Genesis 3:19: "L'homme est condamné par Dieu à manger son pain à la sueur de son visage" ("Man is condemned by God to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow").

¹⁶⁸ P. Lenders, "Aalst onder het Bestuur van J.J.P. Vilain XIII (1743-1751). De Invloed en de Betekenis van een Man der Verlichting. Een Tijdsbeeld," *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 48 (1965).

¹⁶⁹ MAA, LVA, n° 3683, art. 19: "*L'obscurité et la confusion adroitement repandues dans les observations rendent indispensable une exposition succincte des vrais principes du commerce et de leur enchainement mutuel et necessaire, au moyen de laquelle on tachera de presenter un susystème suivi soutenu dans toutes ses parties par rapport a un état politique.*"

¹⁷⁰ Although Vilain XIII's economic policies can generally be regarded as mercantilist, his library contained not only works of such typical mercantilists as Josiah Child, but also from its renowned opponents such as John Locke, David Hume and Jean-François Melon. The list of over 700 books sold upon his death in 1779 is published in: *Catalogue de livres (de monsieur Vilain XIII), don't la vente se fera publiquement dans la Cour de St Georges à Gand le 24 et le 25 février 1779... sous la direction de Pierre de Goesin, libraire*, Gent, s.d, and is preserved at the library of the University of Ghent.

system in and around Aalst, he sets out to “*deliver a detailed description of both the internal and external trade of Aalst and its surroundings.*”¹⁷¹ To his mind, there is no doubt that the most important commercial activity in Aalst was the marketing of rurally produced textiles. In second place came the trade in hops, which were exported mostly to neighbouring provinces such as Brabant, but also to Holland and the German territories. Of tertiary importance to the economy in Aalst was the commerce in grains, which was gathered on its markets and in its storehouses. It is clear that mayor Jean Vilain considered Aalst not primarily as an industrial production centre but as a commercial hub for the produce of its rural surroundings. The principal trades in textiles, hops and grains all stemmed from the countryside and depended on Aalst almost solely for mercantile purposes. Only in fourth place does Vilain XIII mention the existence of three urban tobacco manufactures and two salt refineries, although he points out that their revenues were steadily declining. In last place come the smaller trades and artisans such as wholesale wine merchants, all kinds of shops and brewers. At least in Vilain’s rhetorical construct eighteenth-century Aalst had little urban industries to boost and was entirely reliant on its role as a commercial hub and central place for its surrounding countryside. Although this position was no doubt inspired by the purpose of Vilain’s intervention – to make the case for a better infrastructural accessibility of the town – it fits the evidence from the rank-size distribution presented earlier particularly well. This image of Aalst will be subjected to closer inspection in the following paragraphs, taking Vilain’s principal trade in textiles as a starting point.

2.1. The fabric of the urban economy: textiles in Aalst

Aalst has a long history as a trading and production centre of textiles. Although it was not able to fully compete with the industrial centres of the heavy drapery such as Ghent and Ypres, the later middle ages brought a considerable bloom of the urban cloth production in Aalst.¹⁷² As elsewhere in Flanders, urban drapery production in Aalst quickly declined during the sixteenth century and was partly replaced by the production of linen and tapestries.¹⁷³ Already during the late middle ages the countryside to the west of Aalst had been included in the production processes of both woollen and linen fabrics. Whereas peasant involvement at first focused mainly on the preparatory stages of production, the increasing demand for cheap and coarse linen stimulated the continuous expansion of rural involvement in linen production.¹⁷⁴ The essentially feudal property relations prevalent in Inland Flanders, in which household production was aimed at survival through commercial production, guaranteed the existence of a large, cheap and accessible labour market on the countryside.¹⁷⁵ Even

¹⁷¹ MAA, LVA, n° 3683, art. 3. For the overview of commerce in Aalst: *ibid.*, art. 4-8.

¹⁷² Peter Stabel, “Dmeeste, oirboirlixste ende proffitelixste let ende neringhe”: een kwantitatieve benadering van de lakenproductie in het laatmiddeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Vlaanderen,” *Handelingen van de Maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde van Gent* 51 (1997); Van Der Wee and D’haeseleer, “Ville et campagne”.

¹⁷³ J. Dambruyne, “De hiërarchie van de Vlaamse textielcentra (1500-1750): continuïteit of discontinuïteit?,” in *Qui Valet Ingenio. Liber amicorum aangeboden aan Dr. Johan Decavele ter gelegenheid van zijn 25-jarig ambtsjubileum als stadsarchivaris van Gent*, ed. J. De Zutter, L. Charles, and A. Capiteyn (Gent: 1996).

¹⁷⁴ Van Der Wee and D’haeseleer, “Ville et campagne”.

¹⁷⁵ Erik Thoen, “A ‘commercial survival economy’ in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (Middle Ages-nineteenth century),” in *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (middle ages-nineteenth century) in light of the Brenner debate*, ed. Peter Hoppenbrouwers and Jan Luiten Van Zanden (Turnhout: 2001).

though the many re-assessments that have followed Mendels' proto-industrialization theory have pointed out that urban de-industrialization did not necessarily follow rural proto-industrialization, and was not likely to be caused by it, urban linen production in Aalst dwindled from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards.¹⁷⁶

In 1738 there were only 31 linen weavers left in Aalst, and most of them had no subordinate labourers in service.¹⁷⁷ Neighbouring parishes on the countryside such as Erembodegem (41) and Erpe (95) easily surpassed this number, despite their much smaller population sizes.¹⁷⁸ By 1784 the craft guild of the linen weavers had been disbanded altogether, so that no trace of remaining weavers can be found.¹⁷⁹ The first occupational census from the end of the eighteenth century mentions only four weavers and three tapestry makers.¹⁸⁰ Evidence from after-death inventories confirms the decline of weaving activities in Aalst during the latter half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries (table II.2). This limited involvement in the weaving of linen textiles did not, however, prohibit a much larger and growing occupation with the preparatory stages of the production process. Over 20% of households in Aalst possessed either unprocessed flax or tools for the breaking, scotching or heckling of flax. In one way or another at least, these households were involved in the distribution and production chain of flax before it was spun. Spinning itself underwent a remarkable expansion, rising from a mere 6% of households possessing spinning wheels around 1672 to 38% in the 1790's. Like lacework, spinning was a pre-dominantly feminine and relatively low-productivity activity.¹⁸¹

Table II.2. Ownership of items related to textile production in after-death inventories from Aalst.

	c. 1670	c. 1710	c. 1750	c. 1790	Diff. (%)	Cramer's V.
Weaving	11 %	4 %	2 %	2 %	- 9	0,183 ***
Flax pr.	24 %	21 %	17 %	24 %	=	0,000
Spinning	6 %	10 %	22 %	38 %	+ 32	0,386 ***
Finishing	2 %	6 %	3 %	5 %	+ 3	0,082
Lacework	6 %	17 %	5 %	9 %	+ 3	0,057

Notes:

The differences and Cramer's V measure of association have been calculated on the first and the last period.

*** denotes significance at the 1% level, ** at the 5% level and * at the 10% level.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

¹⁷⁶ On these issues: Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics"; S.R. Epstein, "Introduction. Town and country in Europe, 1300-1800.," in *Town and country in Europe, 1300-1800*, ed. S.R. Epstein (Cambridge: 2001).

¹⁷⁷ MAA, *LvA*, n° 1683: reply to the questionnaire concerning the number of corporations active in each parish. The 31 linen weavers in Aalst employed 6 journeymen, 4 apprentices and 4 servants, thus comprising a total workforce of 45 persons.

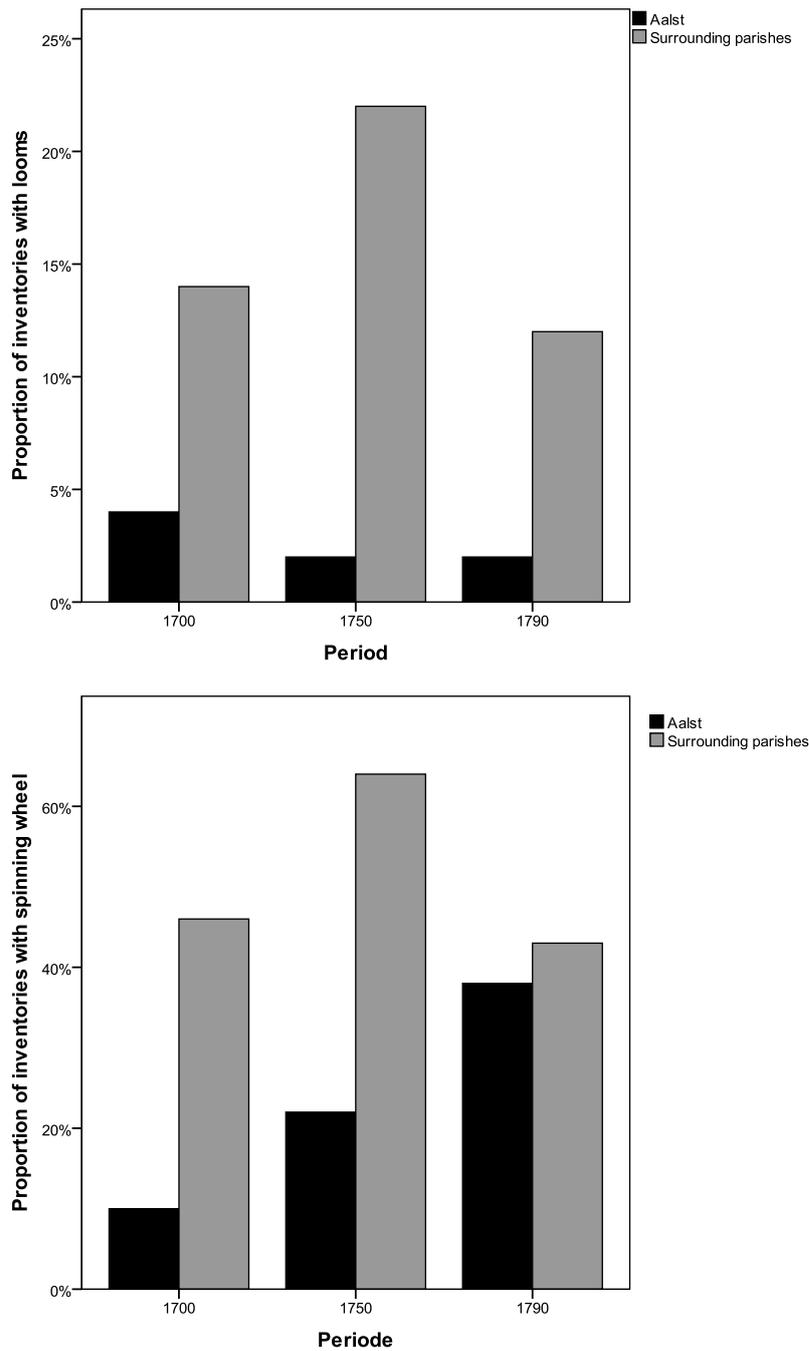
¹⁷⁸ Danny Lamarq, "Een kwantitatieve benadering van de arbeidsparticipatie in de vlassector. Het Land van Aalst (1738-1820)," *Handelingen der maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde te Gent* 36 (1982).

¹⁷⁹ ARA, *Oostenrijkse Privé Raad*, n° 405 B; H. Vangassen, "Het ambacht der Blauwververs en Garentwijnders te Aalst in de XVIIIde eeuw," *Het Land van Aalst* 8 (1956).

¹⁸⁰ MAA, *Modern Archief Aalst*, Bevolking, n° 1-5.

¹⁸¹ See De Vries, *The industrious revolution* and E. van Nederveen-Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen. Vrouwen en loonarbeid in de Nederlandse textielnijverheid, 1581-1810* (Amsterdam: 2007).

Figure II.4. The proportion of inventories containing weaving looms and spinning wheels in Aalst compared to its surrounding rural parishes.



Note:

The rural parishes included are Erembodegem, Gijsegem, Herdersem and Hofstade.

Sources:

Aalst: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

Rural parishes: calculated from appendices in Vermoesen, "Markttoegang".

As with weaving, however, urban involvement in spinning occurred at a much smaller scale than in the immediate countryside (figure 2.3). Even by the end of the eighteenth century the proportion of households involved in spinning in nearby rural parishes easily surpassed that of Aalst, and was in fact

considered by many contemporaries to be quasi universal for all women.¹⁸² Nevertheless, the rapidly rising number of spinning households tentatively suggests that a proto-industrializing process affect not just the eighteenth-century countryside, but increasingly also the urban economy. Especially during the latter half of the century, as the number of rural immigrants in the town expanded, this seems to have been the case.

Nevertheless, the most important contribution of the Aalst economy to the textile trade lay in its market function. As has been noted earlier, on December 10th 1646 Aalst established an official weekly linen market, thereby coercing local weavers to sell their produce there and nowhere else.¹⁸³ The revenue from the urban excises on the (compulsory) measurement of textiles on the linen market permits an assessment of its success during the subsequent centuries (figure 2.4).¹⁸⁴ A dual tariff was applied, imposing a levy of one styver per piece of cloth for linen textiles shorter than 30 *el* (22 m.) and two styvers for all longer pieces.¹⁸⁵ Since there seems to have been a tendency towards selling shorter pieces of cloth, this dual tariff probably inflates the exponential rise evident from figure 2.4 somewhat.¹⁸⁶ Regardless of their length however, the rise in pieces of cloth sold was nothing short of spectacular: from approximately 1.425 pieces in 1655, to 7.125 in 1705, 25.600 in 1745 and eventually 39.000 in 1785.¹⁸⁷ By this time, the total length of linen cloth annually sold at the Aalst market roughly came close to no less than 1.420 linear kilometres.¹⁸⁸ Since the municipal authorities repeatedly expressed their concerns over supposedly widespread evasion of the linen excise tax, the actual figures of linen sold were probably higher still.¹⁸⁹ Only from the 1830's onwards would the widespread crisis of the proto-industrial linen production make itself felt on the Aalst market. For 1843 the annual number of pieces sold can be estimated at 18.500, with a total length of about 1.000 linear kilometres.¹⁹⁰ By then the zenith of the Aalst linen market had clearly passed.

¹⁸² Vermoesen, "Markttoegang"; Lamarcq, "De arbeidsparticipatie in de vlassektor".

¹⁸³ Van Der Wee and D'haeseleer, "Ville et campagne".

¹⁸⁴ Data from MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417, 425, 434, 443, 453, 463, 472, 482, 492, 502, 511, 521, 531, 541. And Vangassen, "Het ambacht".

¹⁸⁵ Vangassen, "Het ambacht" and MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 472.

¹⁸⁶ C. Vandenbroeke, "Sociale en conjuncturele facetten van de linnennijverheid in Vlaanderen (late 14e-midden 19e eeuw)," *Handelingen der maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde te Gent XXXIII* (1979) puts the linen sold on the Aalst market in 1711 at 8.000 pieces and in 1785 at 41.000. If these figures are correct, the proportion of textiles taxed at one styver (shorter than 30 *el*) would have risen from 44% in 1711 to 58% in 1785.

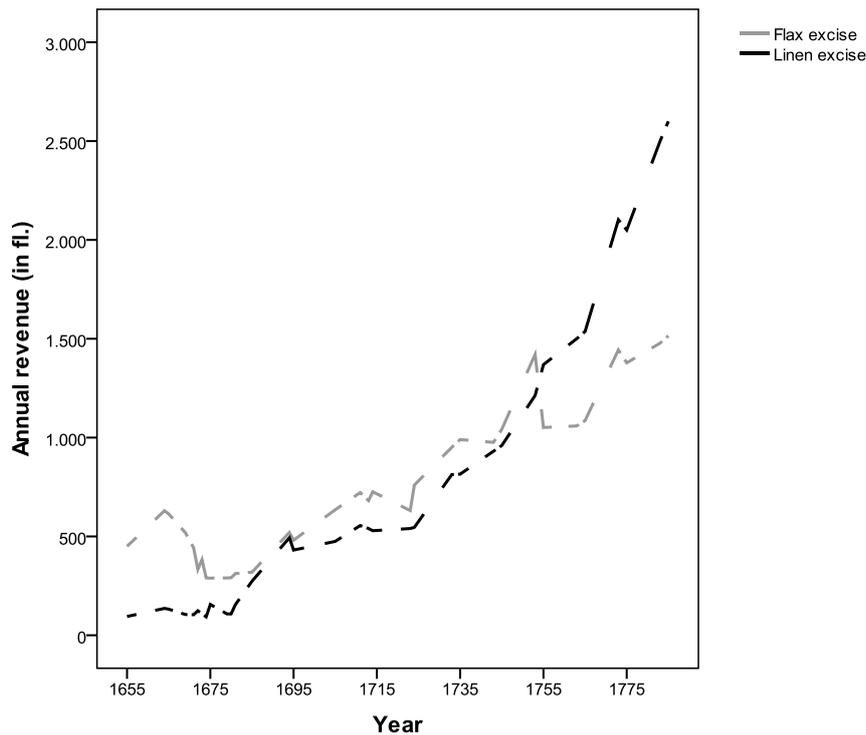
¹⁸⁷ Estimates are calculated under the assumption of equal shares of 'long' and 'short' pieces of linen cloth.

¹⁸⁸ G.C. Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique du département de l'Escaut (ingeleid door P. Deprez)* (Ghent: 1960 (orig. 1802)) estimated the average cloth size in 1802 at 75 *el* per piece. Using a lower bound for the number of pieces sold in 1785 (using the tariff for large cloth only), this converts to a minimum of 1.950.000 *el* or 1.419,6 km. Faipoult estimated a total production of 9.581 km for the Scheldt Department in 1802. It seems safe to say that the Aalst market covered at least 15-20% of that market by the end of the 18th century.

¹⁸⁹ See for instance MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (23 December 1760; 29 October 1765; 24 July 1788).

¹⁹⁰ This estimate based on the revenue cited in Rapport sur les Octrois Communaux de Belgique, Présenté à la Chambre des Représentants, le 28 janvier 1845, par le Ministre de l'Intérieur, t. III, p. 145. I have assumed an average cloth length of 55 m, corresponding to the figure proposed by Faipoult in 1802 (75 *el*).

Figure II.5. Revenue from the linen and flax excises in Aalst.



Sources:

MAA, Oud Archief Aalst, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417, 425, 434, 443, 453, 463, 472, 482, 492, 502, 511, 521, 531, 541.

Additional data points from Vangassen 1956.

During the expansion of the Aalst linen market in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, the market for flax and yarn at first followed suit, but stabilized during the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1785 a maximum of 157.748 kg of flax was sold at the Aalst market, which would suffice to produce approximately 396.919 el of linen cloth – or 20% of the actual amount sold on the market in that year.¹⁹¹ Apparently there was considerable urban involvement in the almost exclusively rural process of flax cultivation and yarn production. This explains why throughout the entire period under consideration some 20 % of after-death inventories from Aalst contained references to either flax or yarn (table 2.2). In fact, the total amount of flax sold at the Aalst market in 1765 accounted for more than 10% of the total flax production in het *Land van Aalst*.¹⁹² Despite its decidedly rural character, the proto-industrial production of linen textiles in Inland Flanders seems to have relied at least partly on the urban market for its organization of labour and the distribution of raw and intermediate materials.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Conversion of the flax needed per el of linen has been based on the figures provided by de Patin (1764), cited in Lamarq, "De arbeidsparticipatie in de vlassector".

¹⁹² MAA, Oud Archief Aalst, Stadsrekeningen, n° 521 and Lamarq, "De arbeidsparticipatie in de vlassector". However, its significance should not be overestimated, since most flax used in the linen production in the area was not locally produced but imported (for instance from 'het Land van Waes').

¹⁹³ For a more in-depth study of the local economy of het Land van Aalst, see: Vermoesen, "Markttoegang"; R. Vermoesen, "Gescheiden door de wallen? Commerciële circuits in de stad en op het platteland (de regio Aalst,

The finishing and eventual distribution of rurally produced linen belonged even more firmly to the urban realm.¹⁹⁴ Bleaching and dying of finished textiles were fairly capital-intensive processes that benefited from the market concentration provided by an urban setting. In 1738 there were 32 master dyers active in Aalst, each of whom employed an average of more than three journeymen, apprentices or labourers.¹⁹⁵ The total labour force occupied in the dying sector was comprised of 136 persons, which was three times larger than the number of linen weavers itself. Such linen dyers usually controlled the final stage of production before the textiles left the area of Aalst. Textile dyer Reynier De Smet, for instance, bought linen yarn on the Aalst market after it had been spun, dyed it blue with the help of one of his servants and had it transported by cart to Brussels where it was sold.¹⁹⁶ Albertus Luyckx, operating in the 1790's, bought yarn on the local market in Aalst as well, coloured it with dyes purchased from a merchant in Antwerp, and sold the dyed yarn to a merchant from Brussels.¹⁹⁷

Apart from dying, finished linen or yarn was also bleached on the grasslands along the banks of the Dender.¹⁹⁸ From the last quarter of the seventeenth until the end of the eighteenth century three bleaching fields were consistently mentioned in the tax lists of Aalst.¹⁹⁹ Bleachers in the town seem to have mainly worked on commission, getting paid per bleaching order by merchants or dyers, rather than actively partaking in the textile trade itself.²⁰⁰ The fact that some textile merchants resorted to bleachers in Ghent instead of relying on the local ones, perhaps demonstrates the less developed nature of this particular stage of the finishing industry in Aalst.²⁰¹ Since Ghent had a well-established reputation in this area, it seems likely that the better-quality pieces of linen were transported there for bleaching.

Although dying and bleaching were two typically urban components in the proto-industrial linen production, the most important function of towns like Aalst was performed by their weekly markets. In most of Inland Flanders the textiles were brought to these urban markets by the producers themselves.²⁰² A municipal ordinance from 1788 describes all sellers on the Aalst linen market as

1650-1800)," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 3, no. 2 (2008). On the functioning of the *local economy* in general: P.T. Hoffman, *Growth in a traditional society: the French countryside, 1450-1815* (Princeton: 1996).

¹⁹⁴ In general terms see Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics"; Lis and Soly, "Different paths of development".

¹⁹⁵ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 1683. There were 32 master 'blauwververs', 11 journeymen, 9 apprentices and 84 servants or labourers.

¹⁹⁶ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1863 (Reynier De Smet).

¹⁹⁷ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1909 (Isabella Van Cauwenberge). A similar pattern emerges from the inventory of Frans Van Hecke (1745), who owed 5 fl. to Guilielmus Meert, ferryman, for transporting yarn to Brussels. MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1863 (Frans Van Hecke).

¹⁹⁸ This involved a rather extensive and slow bleaching process, described somewhat disapprovingly by Faipout (1802) as being outdated. According to him, the Flemish textile producers were convinced that the traditional bleaching method produced the best result and would not incur a loss of reputation abroad – especially in Cadiz. The private interest of the bleachers and the many people who earned a living by regularly sprinkling the cloth on the bleaching fields, provided further incentive for sticking to the old ways.

¹⁹⁹ All three of them were situated across the river, one on the Molendries, and two outside the Pontstraatpoort to the South-East. MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 264-279.

²⁰⁰ This was the case for the two bleachers that were included in our inventory sample, to whom various payments 'for bleaching' (*over het blecken*) were still due upon their death. MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1796 (Jan Linkebeke) and MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1863 (Marie Petronella Schoup).

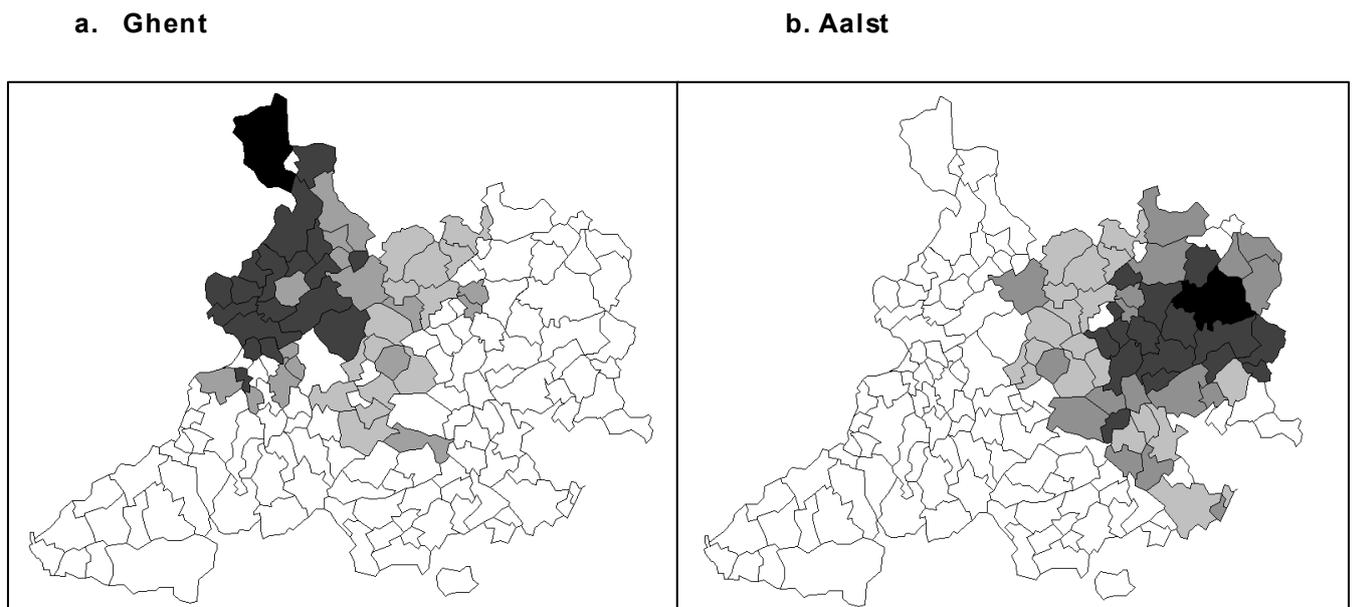
²⁰¹ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1796 (Magdalena Van Grootenbrule): Daniel Smet owed 37 fl. to Lucas Ganseman of Ghent for the bleaching of yarn. For the importance of bleaching in early modern Ghent, see: J. Dambruyne, *Mensen en Centen. Het 16de eeuwse Gent in demografisch en economisch perspectief* (Gent: 2001).

²⁰² In his essay on the Aalst-Baasrode canal written around the middle of the 18th century, Jean Vilain XIII repeatedly mentions the importance of efficient infrastructure in local central places (such as Aalst) so that peasants would lose less time when travelling to the markets for selling linen or buying fertilizing ashes (MAA,

coming from the countryside, and being either individual weavers or *cutsers* (rural merchants who purchased finished linen from rural weavers and sold it on the urban market).²⁰³ At least as far as linen production is concerned, all available evidence points towards the prevalence of a *Kauf-system* in which the peasant-producers retained ownership of the means of production.²⁰⁴ Despite its hefty involvement in commercial production, the Flemish countryside was not directly penetrated by mercantile capital in the textile industry.²⁰⁵

In his analysis of the economic activities on the countryside of the '*Land van Aalst*' in 1764, *commissaire* de Patin compiled a list of the markets where rural households sold their produce.²⁰⁶ One of the items on his questionnaire concerned the nearby markets where linen cloth and yarn was sold. Based on de Patin's figures, it is possible to map the reach of the urban linen markets on the eighteenth century countryside of the '*Land van Aalst*'. Of the 130 rural parishes listed 46 (35%) recorded Aalst as one of their main linen markets. The rural production base for the Aalst linen market dominated the Eastern part of het Land van Aalst (map 2.1). Geraardsbergen was provisioned from a similar territory in the South, Oudenaarde in the East, and Ghent in the North.

Map II.1. Area of het Land van Aalst provisioning the markets of (a) Ghent, (b) Aalst, and (c) Geraardsbergen.



Land van Aalst, n° 3683). Faipoult writes in 1802 that merchants bought their linen textiles destined for export on the weekly urban markets (Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 166; Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*).

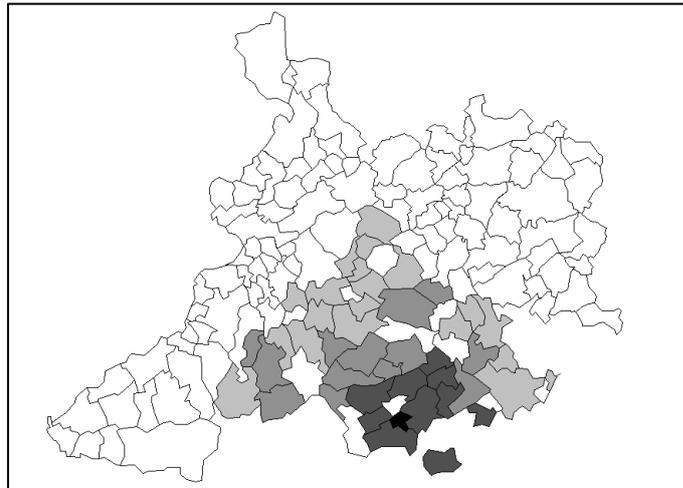
²⁰³ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (July 24, 1788). Both the 1764 survey of the linen industry by de Patin (ARA, *Junta*, Besturen en Beden, n° 604) and the municipal ordinances (MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 17-18) confirm the prevalence of *cutsers* in *het Land van Aalst*, although they seem to have been more common in the rural area provisioning the market of Ghent.

²⁰⁴ Van Der Wee and D'haeseleer, "Ville et campagne"; Vermoesen, "Gescheiden door de wallen?"; Vermoesen, "Markttoegang".

²⁰⁵ Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'".

²⁰⁶ ARA, *Junta*, Besturen en Beden, n° 604. I am much indebted to Wouter Ronsijn (UGent) for pointing this list out to me. See also Peter D'haeseleer, "Proto-industrialisering van de vlasnijverheid in dertien gemeenten ten westen van Aalst (18de - eerste helft 19e eeuw). Een bijdrage" (MA Thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1990) for an analysis of this issue from a rural perspective.

c. Geraardsbergen



Sources:

ARA, *Junta, Besturen en Beden*, n° 604.

Although the outreach of the linen market in Aalst was on par with those of Geraardsbergen and Oudenaarde, it was considerably larger than those of for instance Ninove, Ronse or Zottegem. A brief comparison between the markets listed by de Patin for linen and those for grains learns that the former was more concentrated and specialised than the latter. Whereas households in many rural parishes sold their agricultural produce on nearby grain markets such as Wetteren and Kwatrecht, these same households carried their textiles further afield, to Aalst, Geraardsbergen, Ghent and Oudenaarde. These latter towns clearly fulfilled a specialised function in the linen trade. Unlike the textile markets of the smaller towns, they were able to attract linen producers from far outside their usual hinterland.

Table II.3. Percentage of parishes in *het Land van Aalst* attending a selection of urban grain and linen markets, 1764.

	Grain	Linen
Ninove	4 %	5 %
Zottegem	12 %	12 %
Aalst	18 %	35 %
Wetteren	19 %	0 %
Geraardsbergen	21 %	33 %
Gent	28 %	38 %

Sources:

ARA, *Junta, Besturen en Beden*, n° 604.

Census data enumerating the number of weavers present in *het Land van Aalst* document a sustained growth throughout the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century (table II.4).²⁰⁷ Growth was particularly strong at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, and disproportionately so in the Eastern and Northern parts of the region – those areas which provisioned the linen markets of Aalst and Ghent respectively. This almost incessant expansion of proto-industrial

²⁰⁷ Lamarcq, "De arbeidsparticipatie in de vlassector".

linen production in the countryside goes some way at least in explaining the rapidly rising revenues from the linen excise in Aalst noted earlier. Since the excise revenues rose more rapidly than the number of weavers in the countryside, one could conjecture that either the labour input in weaving increased, or that the market of Aalst expanded its provisioning radius during this period.

Table II.4. Chained indices of the number of weavers in the rural communities of het *Land van Aalst*, aggregated per administrative department.

	Dep. Aalst	Dep.Geraardsb.	Dep.Oordegem (near Ghent)	Dep. Ronse	All
1738	100	100	100	100	100
1764	107	163	117	126	132
1820	189	142	192	163	180

Sources:

Lamarcq, "De Arbeidsparticipatie in De Vlassektor"

According to Vilain XIII, the weekly market of Aalst had linens of all prices and all qualities on offer around the middle of the eighteenth century.²⁰⁸ Some would cost as little as 24 styvers per el, whereas the more expensive ones exceeded a 120 styvers. Most of these 'luxury' linens were consumed in the southern Low Countries itself and to a lesser degree in Holland and France. The cheaper textiles were destined mostly for export to Spain. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Spain and its South-American colonies still accounted for the lion's share of linen exports from Flanders, although the German territories, Portugal, Italy and North-America were now mentioned as lucrative markets as well.²⁰⁹ This globalization of the linen trade astounded Guillaume-Charles Faipoult – then prefect of the Scheldt Department (more or less covering the current-day province of East-Flanders) – who argued rather hyperbolically that "*the apathetic owner [of Flemish linen] on the Peruvian coast or the Mexican plains is unlikely to have any idea of the strenuous labour carried out on the banks of the rivers Lys and Scheldt, which provides him more valuably in his material needs than the mines which surround him.*"²¹⁰ The cargo ships returning from Spain brought raw materials such as Spanish wool, Argentinian leather, or pigments such as indigo or carmine (cochenille) in return. Consumer goods such as Spanish wines and fruits, sugar from Havana or *quinquina* from South-America also found their way back to the Southern Netherlands.²¹¹

Despite the international allure of the linen trade which made its way from the Aalst market, most local merchants did not reach quite as far. Linen merchants probably sold their textiles mostly to merchants or middlemen in Ghent, Antwerp or Brussels. The only detailed inventory of a linen merchant included in the present study does not shed much light on the matter.²¹² Upon his death in 1746, Peeter Vander Snickt was one the 2% richest men in Aalst. Among the numerous debts owed to

²⁰⁸ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3683, art. 4.

²⁰⁹ Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 167-68; Robert S. Duplessis, *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 1997), 235.

²¹⁰ Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 123-24: "*L'indolent propriétaire des côtes péruviennes ou des plaines du Mexique ne se fait probablement guère d'idée de l'activité laborieuse qui honore les rives de la Lys et de l'Escaut, et qui prépare pour ses besoins des objets usuellement plus précieux que les produits des mines dont il est entouré.*"

²¹¹ Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 166-67.

²¹² MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1862 (Peeter Vander Snickt).

him were 116 outstanding sums from people to whom he had delivered textiles. The total value of those textiles of which the payment was still overdue amounted to 21.656 fl – roughly the equivalent of 22 houses in Aalst at the time.²¹³ Sadly, the place of residence of Vander Snickt's trading partners was rarely recorded. One transaction was conducted with a man from Mechelen, while another stretched out to Baasrode – the point from where the Scheldt river became more easily navigable en route to Antwerp. The sheer size of the trade in which Vander Snickt was involved should not lead one to suppose an exclusive orientation on (foreign) export. Apart from the occasional French ('Vauson le Jeune' and 'seigneur Fransman') or Spanish name, most of Van Der Snickt's trading partners were Flemish, and a lot of them came from Aalst or its immediate surroundings.²¹⁴

The example of Peeter Van Der Snickt's linen trade serves to illustrate that eighteenth-century proto-industrial linen production in Aalst was not solely a low-cost export industry. Some of its output included fine linen of relatively high quality and price destined for local consumption among the well-to-do. Yet even the crude linen which was exported across the globe was valued for its presumed quality as much as for its price. The municipal ordinances of the eighteenth century repeatedly stress the fatal consequences for the town's reputation and welfare if the required quality standards would no longer be met. Urban legislation on the measurement and quality control of all linen sold on the market served to set uniform standards while simultaneously strengthening the urban merchant's bargaining power versus the interests of the independent rural weaver.²¹⁵ In accounting for the reluctance of the Flemish linen industry in applying new, labour-saving techniques, Guillaume Faipoult – writing circa 1802 – pointed out that the local merchants were especially concerned with the reputation of their products abroad.²¹⁶ If they were to lower the high quality requirements of their linen production, surely the Spanish would come to favour their Silesian competitors over them. Even though Faipoult extensively and repeatedly praised the innovation of the Ghent industrialist Lieven Bauwens, he readily conceded that the quality of Bauwens' textiles was not quite up to par with that produced by the thousands of spinsters and weavers toiling the Flemish countryside.

Even though the allure of the proto-industrial production of seventeenth and eighteenth century Flanders seems a world away from the internationally blossoming luxury economies of 15th and sixteenth century Bruges and Antwerp, it did not quite signify a complete fall from grace either.²¹⁷ Much like the 'economies of quality' that preceded it, the early modern Flemish proto-industry rested on a close functional specialization between town and countryside, was built on the labour of a myriad of small-scale producers who possessed their own means of production, and relied on a system of collective bargaining related to the standards of product quality.²¹⁸

²¹³ The value of the average house included in the after-death inventories of 1740-1745 was 996 fl.

²¹⁴ Some refer explicitly to nearby villages such as Assche, Erpe and Lede, whereas on other occasions the debtor is simply referred to as '*den cleermaecker*' (the tailor).

²¹⁵ This is made abundantly clear in a long ordinance from 1788 (MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18: 24 July 1788) which aimed to limit the "*numerous abuses affecting the linen market in this town, which cause great disadvantage and disreputation of the trade, and a total humiliation of this same market, on which so notoriously depends the welfare of this town and its countryside. All this is caused by the fact that rural folks weave their linen unequally, as a result of which they are not of the virtue and quality which is ascribed to them.*"

²¹⁶ Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 167-69.

²¹⁷ Compare with Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics".

²¹⁸ The accounts of an anonymous linen merchant operating in Aalst in the years 1800-1808 repeatedly refer to quality concerns related to the finishing of rurally produced linen. For instance, the merchant explicitly stipulates

A ledger from an anonymous linen merchant operating in Aalst between 1800 and 1808 provides some more insight into the functioning of the linen market at the beginning of the nineteenth century.²¹⁹ Prices for linen textiles had considerably declined since Vilain's writings around the middle of the eighteenth century. As opposed to the minimum of 24 styvers per el he cited, the average price attained in the 1800-1808 ledger was no higher than 14 styvers (min. 9 st., max. 31 st.; see figure 2.5).²²⁰ The scale of the merchant's operation was rather modest compared to the tens of thousands of pieces yearly sold at the Aalst market: he traded between 20 and 60 pieces per year (over a 9 years period). Most of these linens were sold in Brussels, as is clear from the many transport costs recorded in his accounts.²²¹ Before that, however, the merchant arranged for the bleaching and dying of the coarse linen. Whereas the dying and occasional printing of the linens happened in Aalst itself, the bleaching did not. The author of the ledger contracted eight different textile bleachers, none of which operated in Aalst itself. The majority of linens was bleached along the shores of the Scheldt in Wetteren, whereas the remainder was bleached in the marshlands of Lokeren and Waasmunster. The actual purchase of the coarse linens is conspicuously absent from the merchant's account book. Yet the day of the week on which he contracted the bleachers suggests that the linens were bought on Aalst's weekly linen market, which took place every Saturday (figure II.6).

which linens should be bleached with milk and which should not and he regularly returns to the bleacher those linens which according to him have not been bleached satisfactory. From time to time he also sells pieces of linen with a trademark (the initials "L.v.W."). MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 178.

²¹⁹ The ledger was penned down on the empty pages of an account book for the collection of a toll from the years 1786-1794. Probably the toll collector Jean Baptiste Impens (at that time a justice of the peace in Aalst) started re-using the account book for his personal affairs after it had been reviewed by the provincial administration in December 1800.

²²⁰ Based on a total of 337 pieces of linen.

²²¹ There were payments for 125 voyages to Brussels. Ghent was only mentioned once, Dendermonde only rarely.

Figure II.6. Price histogram of linens sold by a linen merchant from Aalst, c. 1800.

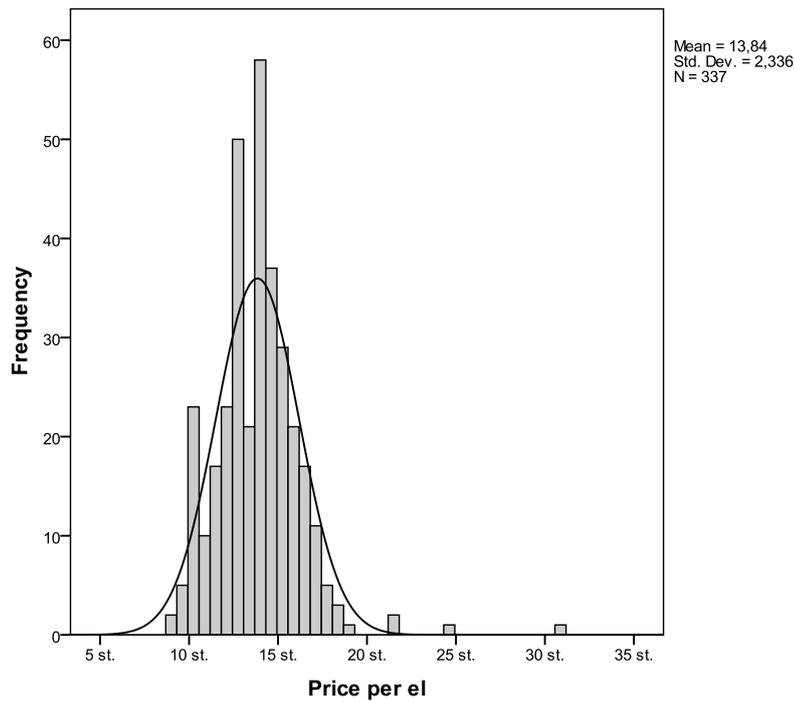
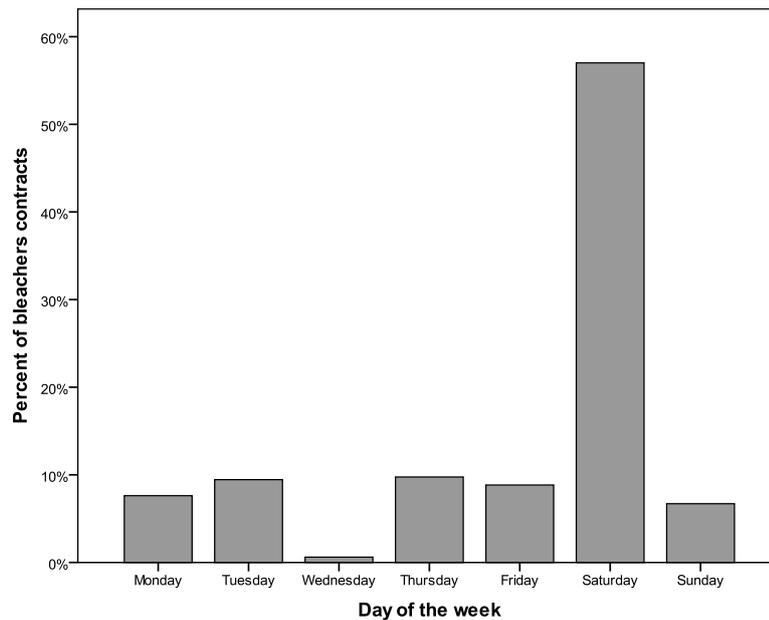


Figure II.7. Days of the week of linen purchases by a linen merchant in Aalst, c. 1800.



Note:

N = 337.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 178.

After the labour-intensive rural production of coarse linen textiles was completed and its end product had been sold on the Saturday market of Aalst, the urban merchant supplied his capital to the further finishing, amelioration and exportation. As is clear from the 1800-1808 ledger not everyone involved necessarily undertook mercantile operations on a big scale. The merchant in question most likely

worked in the urban administration and was involved in the linen trade only as a side activity, buying small numbers of linens on the local market once every few weeks. His involvement in the linen trade was recorded side by side with his investments in and revenues from a small number of urban houses and parcels of land. For a substantial share of Aalst's population the linen trade offered just that: an investment opportunity for those with surplus capital to spare. In the regional economy of Aalst, the countryside supplied the raw materials and labour whereas the urban elites infused the production process with capital.

From the final quarter of the eighteenth century onwards, the by now traditional functional specialization between town and countryside became increasingly challenged. Urban textile production slowly re-emerged, albeit in a different shape. No longer relying on household production by independent craftsmen, labour and capital were increasingly concentrated in weaving manufactures. In 1773, François Devillers and Pierre Leyot, two entrepreneurs from Charleroi, founded the first cotton weaving manufacture in Aalst. Ten years later a cotton and wool spinning manufacture emerged as well, and remained in service until at least the 1790's.²²² It is probably the same manufacture that was mentioned in 1802 by Guillaume Faipoult as producing cheap mixed fabrics destined for export.²²³ It is striking that no similar spinning or weaving manufactures for *linen* surfaced during this period. This did not escape the attention of Faipoult who noted that, despite the rapidly booming mechanization of cotton weaving and spinning, "*the weavers of linen, usually scattered in the countryside and small towns, work for themselves. [...] everything is manufactured on behalf of the worker. Throughout the whole department, not one factory of unbleached linen can be found that works with three weavers in one space.*"²²⁴ No matter the rapidly changing organization of labour and capital, urban production of linen was still no match for the flood of yarn and cloth fabricated at low labour costs on the countryside.²²⁵

The finishing stages of the linen production did not remain equally untouched however. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Aalst boasted only a single cotton printing manufacture (whereas Ghent counted 16), but it did hold the most linen printing manufactures of the entire department. Together these printing manufactures may well have employed several hundreds of labourers, including women and children.²²⁶ Even though budding mechanization and industrialization kept well out of the way of rural linen production itself, the traditionally urban function of finishing the woven textiles was nevertheless susceptible to their lure.

It was not only in the newly emerging industries of cotton, mixed fabrics and printing that new ways of organizing labour and capital emerged. Already from the late seventeenth century a modest degree of capital and labour concentration was evident in the production of lace. Although lacework in Aalst was never quite as developed and did not reach the quality standards as that of major production

²²² De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*. The spinning manufacture was still included in the 1792 housing tax (MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 277-279).

²²³ Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 172.

²²⁴ Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*.

²²⁵ See also the divergent interpretations of the late breakthrough of industrial capitalism in Inland Flanders in Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'" (from a rural, bottom-up perspective) and Van Der Wee and D'haeseleer, "Ville et campagne" (from a merchant capitalist, top-down perspective).

²²⁶ The 23 linen printing manufactures employed a total of 2.500 men and women in the department, excluding children. The average imprinter thus employed about a hundred labourers. Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 172.

centres such as Brussels, during the first half of the eighteenth century some 17 % of households in Aalst seem to have been involved in it (table 2.2). Increasingly the labour of young women was concentrated in ateliers who worked the raw materials provided to them by merchant capitalists – usually women.²²⁷ This lace seems to have been destined for both internal and external consumption, as is demonstrated by the inventory of Marie Van Den Bossche († 1744), who sold large quantities of lace to merchants in nearby Ghent as well as in Châlons-en-Champagne, some 250 km away.²²⁸ Lacework however never became quite as important an economic activity as the proto-industrial production of linen, nor did its putting-out systems of production spill over into the traditional ways of organizing labour and capital in the linen industry.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the textile market of Aalst was dominated by the small-scale production of linen on the countryside. As rural involvement deepened and Aalst increasingly manifested itself as a specialised marketplace, the amount of linens changing hands on its weekly market grew year by year. This spectacular and continuous growth, evidenced most outstandingly by the urban linen excise, profited first and foremost those urban artisans and labourers occupied in the finishing industries. While the craft guild of the linen weavers was disbanded, the dyer's corporation prospered and came to occupy well over a hundred employees. Though their control over the means of production was limited, the linen merchants surely profited as well, and throughout the long eighteenth century some of them invariably show up among the upper crust of the town's political and social elite. Perhaps the urban economy of market towns like Aalst benefited from proto-industrialization in other ways as well. If the mounting linen production boosted the rural living standards of its producers – a matter that by all means remains a debated issue – it is quite likely that rural demand for consumption goods and services surged.²²⁹ The urban middling groups of central places such as Aalst were of course ideally suited to meet such growing demand.²³⁰ Yet even in the absence of improving rural living standards the flourishing of linen production might have allowed higher rental incomes and increasing surplus extraction to flow into the hands of the urban property owners.²³¹ It is to these issues that we turn later on.

²²⁷ Vermoesen, "Gescheiden door de wallen?", 117-18 for a more detailed look at the organization of production and distribution of lacework in Aalst, and Laura Van Aert and Danielle Van Den Heuvel, "Sekse als de sleutel tot succes? Vrouwen en de verkoop van textiel in de Noordelijke en Zuidelijke Nederlanden ca 1650-1800," *Textielhistorische bijdragen* 47 (2007) more generally. On the expansion of lace production as a sign of impoverishment, see Soly, "Social aspects".

²²⁸ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1861 (Marie Van Den Bossche).

²²⁹ A recent contribution to this long-standing debate is Vermoesen, "Markttoegang".

²³⁰ See in this general vein for instance the arguments developed in Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*; De Vries, *European urbanization*; De Vries, "Peasant demand"; Vandenbroeke, "Levensstandaard en tewerkstelling"; Vandenbroeke, "The regional economy".

²³¹ See for instance Klep, *Bevolking en arbeid*, but most explicitly in Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'" and Ph. Kint, *Prometheus aangevuurd door Demeter. De economische ontwikkeling van de landbouw in Oost-Vlaanderen 1815-1850* (Amsterdam: 1989).

2.2. The trade in hops

The cultivation of flax and the weaving and spinning of linen were not the only agricultural activities of which Aalst as an urban central place reaped profits. Already since the sixteenth century the cultivation of hops expanded considerably in the area.²³² In 1609-1613 an official staple market for hops was established in Aalst, covering most of the area between the rivers Scheldt and Dender, and Dender and Zenne.²³³ Since the late Middle Ages most brewers in the Low Countries were convinced of the usefulness of adding hops to their beers in order to obtain a more stable product with a longer preservation time. As the early modern era progressed, beers became more and more hopped, guaranteeing an incessantly high demand for hops. The principal brewing towns of the Southern Netherlands such as Lier and Leuven heavily relied on the importation of hops from Aalst, which were sold either directly on the market in Aalst or in Antwerp. The many petitions from Brabantine brewers throughout the eighteenth century to obtain export prohibitions for hops attest to the high demand for Southern Netherlandish hops abroad which drove up the price.²³⁴

Aalst managed to retain its position as a distribution centre for locally produced hops throughout the early modern period (and even well into the nineteenth century).²³⁵ Indeed, according to Vilain XIII, around the middle of the eighteenth century, the economic importance of the local hop trade was second only to that of linens. In fact, he argued, the size of the hop exports from Aalst to Antwerp (and beyond) was itself reason enough for the construction of a canal to the river Scheldt.²³⁶ Following a new ordinance on the regulation of the hop market in 1648, a weigh house ('waag') was established on what had formerly been known as the cattle market.²³⁷ There an excise tax was collected of one styver per 100 pounds on all hops destined for export. The revenue of this excise traces the contours of the trade throughout the period under consideration (figure II.8).

²³² Kristof Papin, "De hophandel tijdens de Middeleeuwen in Noord- en Midden-Europa," *Handelingen der maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde te Gent* 58 (2004). Hop cultivation already existed in the areas of Aalst and Ninove in the 14th century: Peter Stabel, *De kleine stad in Vlaanderen. Bevolkingsdynamiek en economische functies van de kleine en secundaire stedelijke centra in het Gentse kwartier (14de-16de eeuw)* (Brussel: 1995), 233.

²³³ R. Vermoesen, "Urbanisatie en ruralisatie van de Aalsterse regio (1667-1714)," *Het Land van Aalst* 55 (2003).

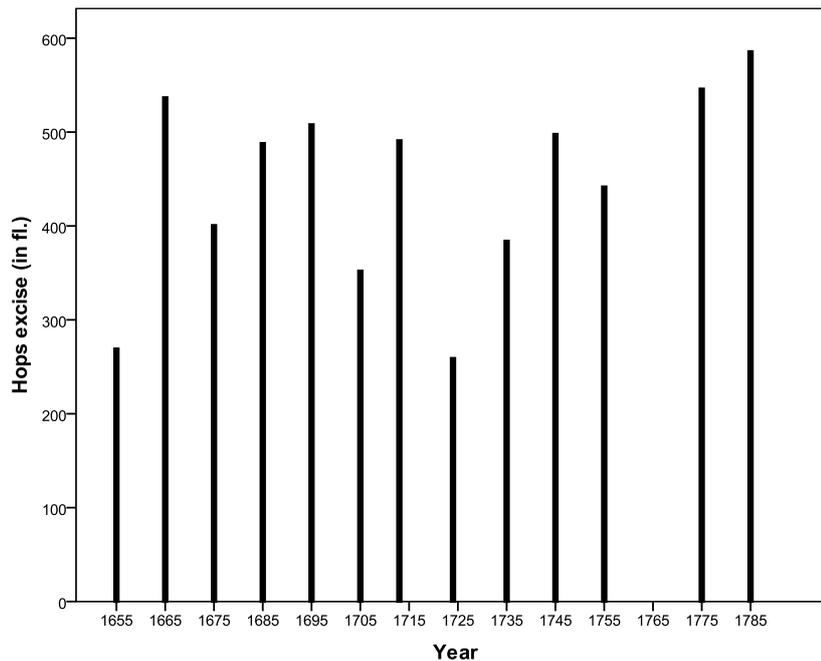
²³⁴ See on the conflicts of interest involved in the hop trade Aerts 1999. An example of such export prohibition in P. Verhaegen, *Recueil des ordonnances des Pays-Bas autrichiens. Troisième série 1700-1794. 1er janvier 1787 au 28 décembre 1790*, vol. XIII (Brussels: 1914), 165, 95.

²³⁵ On the hop trade in nineteenth century Aalst: Hendrik Strijpens, *Veuve De Wolf-Cosyns & fils. Deel 1 1747-1860* (Aalst: 1990).

²³⁶ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3683, art. 5: "Le second objet qui consiste dans les houblons est si considerable qu'il n'y auroit peu etre pas d'exaggeration si l'on avancoit qu'il pourroit seul suffire pour rendre utile et meme necessaire l'ouverture d'un canal d'Alost sur Basserode, puisque les marchands de houblons qui doivent aujourd'huy payer quatres escalins pour le transport d'une balle de houblon jusqu'à l'escaut n'en paieroient plus que quatre sols, si ce canal avoit lieu."

²³⁷ On the new regulations, see De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*, 318 and Vermoesen, "Markttoegang", 226. On the new weighing scale: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst, Stadsrekeningen*, n° 417.

Figure II.8. Revenue from the hops excise in Aalst.



Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417-541.

The importance of the hop export in Aalst proved to be rather stable throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hop cultivation's great vulnerability to weather conditions made for large fluctuations in the year to year production volume, but by and large the trend was stable. Between 1655 and 1785 an average of approximately 385.000 kg. hops a year was subjected to the export tax in Aalst.²³⁸ According to estimates by Erik Aerts some 7.000 to 14.000 kg. of hops from Aalst were incorporated in the beers of Lier, leaving plenty for other export destinations.²³⁹ The value of the hops exported from Aalst must have been huge: at a minimum price of 10 fl. per hundred pounds, its total value amounted to no less than 88.616 fl a year.²⁴⁰ Although the total value of the linen market in Aalst was probably over three times as high by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, its contribution to local commerce was nevertheless impressive.²⁴¹

This commercial importance stands in stark contrast to the limited acreage in the area reserved for hop cultivation. Herman Van Isterdael estimated a fairly constant proportion of 1% of total land

²³⁸ Based on the tariffs and revenues in the urban accounts (MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417-541). A 100 lb in Aalst converts to 0,43385 kg (P. Vandewalle, *Oude maten, gewichten en muntstelsels in Vlaanderen, Brabant en Limburg* (Oostende: 1984)).

²³⁹ E. Aerts, "Hop en bier. Handelsrelaties tussen Aalst en Lier (17de-18de eeuw)," *Het Land van Aalst* 51 (1999). The small percentage of hops from Aalst used by brewers in Lier seems somewhat incredible when compared to the total size of the Aalst hop market. If our estimates of the Aalst hop market are correct, perhaps the primordial position of Lier as one of the principal export destinations should be reconsidered.

²⁴⁰ Prices in Aalst fluctuated between 10 fl. and 20 fl. in normal years during the second half of the 18th century (Aerts, "Hop en bier", 123). An after-death inventory from 1674 contains 900 lb. of hops valued at 90 fl., confirming this price fork for the late seventeenth century (MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1795 (Maria Vander Biest)).

²⁴¹ According to a conservative estimate for 1785 (based on the figures given supra), calculated at a price of 20 styvers per el, the total value of linens sold at the Aalst market probably came close to 2.000.000 fl.

devoted to hop growing for the whole area of *het Land van Aalst*.²⁴² Since hop cultivation was mostly concentrated in the parishes close to Aalst and to the East towards Asse (which falls outside of *het Land van Aalst*) the proportions there were probably higher. The proportion of land dedicated to hop cultivation owned by citizens of Aalst themselves was in any case not much larger: at its peak, ca. 1670, hops occupied just 1,15% of the total acreage owned.²⁴³ From that point onwards, hop cultivation on land owned by citizens of Aalst seems to have been in decline. By 1710 only 0,99% was devoted to hops, by 1745 this had dropped to 0,24% and ca. 1790 no land with hop cultivation could be found in after-death inventories at all. Reinoud Vermoesen and Joseph De Brouwer similarly attested a decline of households involved in hop cultivation in Aalst's neighbouring parishes (table II.5).

Table II.5. Proportion of households involved in hop cultivation.

	Aalst ²⁴⁴	Denderleeuw	Erembodegem	Hofstade, Herdersem, Gijzegem
c. 1650			81 %	35 %
c. 1670	10 %	93 %		
c. 1710	6 %	56 %	89 %	10 %
c. 1750	3 %	39 %	85 %	10 %
c. 1790	0	19 %	61 %	6 %

Sources:

Aalst: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

Denderleeuw: De Brouwer, "Denderleeuw", 30.

Erembodegem, Hofstade, Herdersem, Gijzegem: calculated from the appendices in Vermoesen, "Markttoegang".

The number of households involved in hop cultivation declined everywhere, but remained important in the parishes of the core hopping area to the South-East of Aalst (Erembodegem and to a lesser extent Denderleeuw). Despite the almost complete disappearance of hop cultivation on land owned by the inhabitants of Aalst and many of its neighbouring parishes, the total volume of hops traded on the Aalst market did not shrink. The specialized and perhaps increasingly concentrated hop cultivation in the core areas to the South-East remained equally geared towards the Aalst market for export. These cultivators sold their produce on the urban hop market either directly or through rural middling men – usually wealthy farmers.²⁴⁵ The hop merchants of Aalst, unified in the powerful guild of Saint Rochus, controlled the further exportation and distribution of the hops as soon as they were sold on the urban market. The handful inventories of such hop merchants of whom after-death inventories have been

²⁴² H. Van Isterdael, "Landbouwstructuren in het Land van Aalst (17de-18de eeuw)," *Het Land van Aalst* 40, no. 5-6 (1988): 276; Vermoesen, "Markttoegang", 140, 52.

²⁴³ Based on the database of after-death inventories from MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

²⁴⁴ The proportion for Aalst has been calculated relative to all households with rural real estate.

²⁴⁵ Vermoesen, "Markttoegang"; R. Vermoesen, "Paardenboeren in Vlaanderen. Middelaars en commercialisering van de vroegmoderne rurale economie in de regio Aalst 1650-1800," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 7, no. 1 (2010).

found, indicate that they belonged to the richest deciles of the urban population.²⁴⁶ Although the growing and picking of hops was a particularly capital intensive procedure, none of these urban merchants seems to have employed their mercantile capital to interfere in the production process itself. Conversely, there is not a single indication that any of the urban households possessing land used for hop cultivation was involved in the wider hop trade. These lands were generally part of a wider rural estates leased out to local peasants.

In the context of a persistently high demand for hops from local, Brabantine and foreign brewing industries, an elevated degree of rural landholding in the hands of the urban citizenry and an ideal local soil condition, this absence of urban capital in the production process is striking.²⁴⁷ Industrial and mercantile interests were far from integrated at this point. Not unlike the organization of the linen production in the region, the role of Aalst as a trading place for hops was not in a direct, capitalist exploitation of the produce of its hinterland. If the wealthy citizens of Aalst reaped a substantial profit from the hop cultivation by nearby peasants, their manners of surplus extraction were decidedly commercial and feudal rather than capitalist in nature.²⁴⁸

2.3. Commercial traffic in and around Aalst

Aalst's markets for linens, hops and grains together constituted the economic pillars on which, according to Vilain XIII, its eighteenth century prosperity rested.²⁴⁹ Within this perspective on the town's economy, the further development of the regional transport infrastructure constituted a key enabler of economic expansion. Already from an early stage Aalst had been integrated in the rapidly expanding network of paved roads which came to crisscross the Southern Netherlands. The paved road constructed in 1705 between Brussels and Ghent pulled right through Aalst, thereby greatly improving the town's access to both important markets.²⁵⁰ When in 1768 the river Dender between Aalst and Dendermonde was canalized, transaction costs in the trade through and with Antwerp significantly fell as well. These infrastructural enhancements certainly aided the eighteenth century expansion of Aalst's linen, hop and grain markets.²⁵¹

Conversely, however, the merchants, peasants and citizens that travelled these roads and rivers might also speak of the economic development in Aalst itself. A handful of toll and excise taxes collected at the city gates, nearby road barriers and river sluices, can inform us almost year to year how commercial trafficking around Aalst flourished. Two accounts documenting the collection of the barrier toll on the paved road from Aalst to Ghent have survived. The first one dates from 1746 and records a total sum of 754 fl 13 st collected at the barrier just outside of the North-Western city gate of Aalst.²⁵² According to the barrier tariff mentioned by Vilain XIII, this figure would relate to a traffic

²⁴⁶ For instance widow Joanna Cardenas († 1748) and Hendrik Stockman († 1669) who both belonged to the 7th decile of the urban tax distribution. MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790 and 1864.

²⁴⁷ Aerts, "Hop en bier".

²⁴⁸ Compare with Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'"; Lis and Soly, "Different paths of development".

²⁴⁹ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3683.

²⁵⁰ L.P. Gachard, *Recueil des ordonnances des Pays-Bas Autrichiens* (Brussels: 1860-1942), I, 499 (Ordonnance et règlement de Philippe V, Brussels, april 2, 1704).

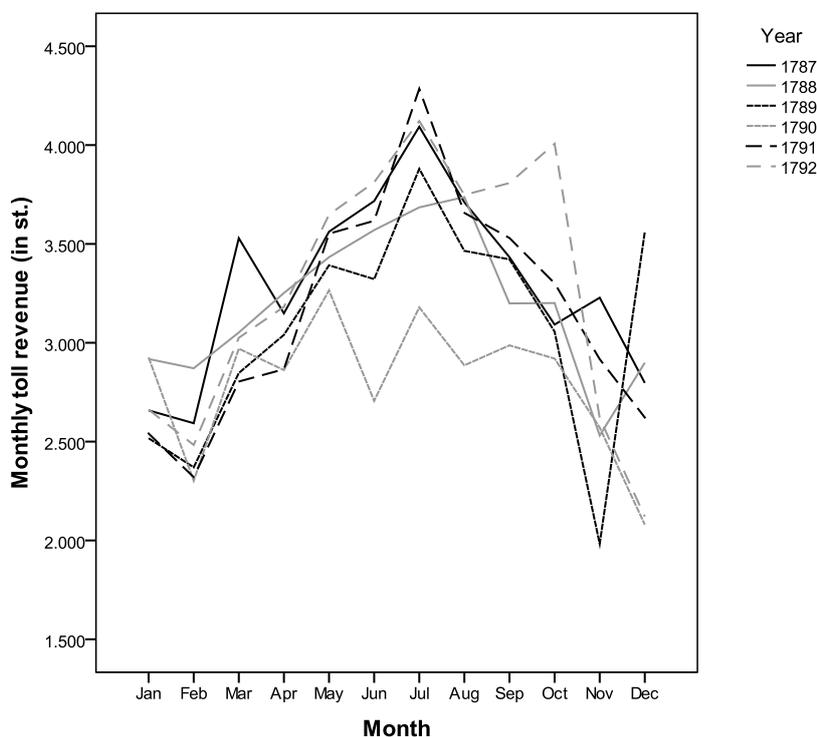
²⁵¹ See the arguments laid out in Blondé, "At the cradle of the transport revolution" for the Brabantine case.

²⁵² MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3571 (Ontvangst Bareel Nieuwstraatpoort).

volume of approximately 1.100 wagons over the whole year – or 3 per day.²⁵³ According to a second preserved account this figure had been more than doubled by the 1790s. In the period 1787-1792 an average of 1.881 fl was collected every year, corresponding to an estimated number of 7 loaded carts and wagons per day.²⁵⁴ At least as far as road transport in the direction of Ghent was concerned, the second half of the eighteenth century proved to be a particularly expansive era. In fact, the scale of this growth spurt surpassed both the size of the demographic expansion in Aalst and the enlargement of its linen market over the same period.

The bulk of this cargo was transported over the summer months, starting in May, peaking around mid-July and subsequently tracing a prolonged decline during the autumn (figure II.9). Up to a certain degree this pattern reflects the inconveniences caused by wintery weather conditions, but at least partially it also mirrors the economic cycle of the agricultural and proto-industrial year. The high levels of activity during late summer point towards the importance of the grain and hop harvests for commercial trafficking around Aalst. The linen trade was probably more spread out over the year, but it might be surmised that the busiest period probably took place immediately after the winter months – when spinning and weaving were practiced most industriously – and before the agricultural labour-intensive months of the summer set in. This would account for the high levels of activity during the months of April, May and June.

Figure II.9. Monthly revenue from the toll on the paved road between Ghent and Aalst, just outside the Nieuwstraat gate in Aalst.



²⁵³ See MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3683, art. 9. This tariff seems all the more credible as it is very similar to the one levied by the Estates of Brabant on the barriers between Aalst and Brussels: Gachard, *Recueil des ordonnances*, I, 675-76 (Règlement des députés des états de Brabant pour la chaussée de Bruxelles à Gand, Brussels, february 5, 1706). The tariff depended on the type and weight of the cart – here it has been assumed that there were equal ‘heavy’ (over 1.200 lb.) and light (under 1.200 lb.) wagons on the road.

²⁵⁴ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 178 (Ontvangst Bareel Nieuwstraatpoort).

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 178 (Ontvangst Bareel Nieuwstraatpoort).

The seasonal influence on road traffic between Aalst and Ghent points again towards the importance of the agricultural and proto-industrial activities near Aalst itself. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the eighteenth-century expansion of road traffic around Aalst was not limited to the principal commercial axis towards Ghent alone. Throughout almost the entire eighteenth century the revenue of the *urban excise at the city gates* grew from year to year. Ever since the construction of the paved Brussels-Ghent road and the establishment of a separate toll barrier there this excise was only levied at the three remaining city gates.²⁵⁵ These gates connected Aalst to its immediate hinterland in the North, North-East and South-West, and the traffic that passed it is thus less likely to have been in transit.²⁵⁶ Commerce along these sprawling tracks nevertheless seems to have been growing over the course of the eighteenth century (table II.6).

Table II.6. Revenue from the ‘calseyde’ excise revenue collected at three city gates of Aalst.

Year	Revenue (in st.)	# of wagons
1715	725	483
1725	972	648
1735	999	666
1745	1.500	1.000
1755	2.255	1.503
1765	2.210	1.473
1775	3.272	2.181
1785	(752)	(501)

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 472, 482, 492, 502, 511, 521, 531, 541.

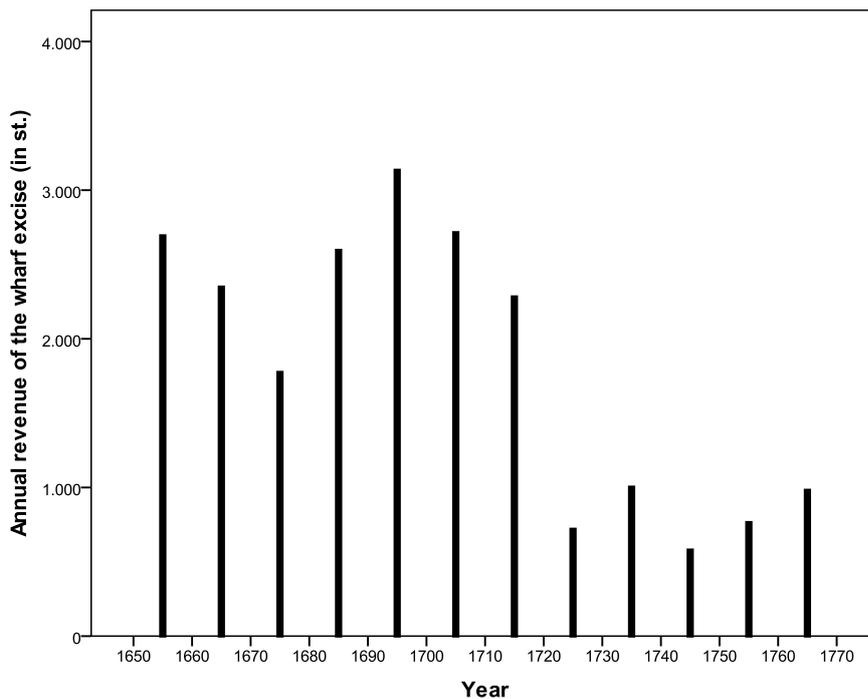
If the evolution of the ‘calseyde’ excise can be relied upon to adequately represent the volume of traffic passing through the three aforementioned city gates, it seems that the growth in local commerce around Aalst was similar to that taking place along its main trade axis. The estimated number of wagons and carts passing these three gates was nevertheless smaller than the numbers calculated for the Nieuwstraatpoort leading to Ghent. In fact, around 1745 about equal numbers of wagons travelled the paved road towards Ghent as passed the three ‘rural’ gates of Aalst combined. The sudden drop in the ‘calseyde’ revenue in 1785 has to remain unaccounted for, but might be attributed to the construction of a new paved road towards Geraardsbergen which was then taking place, probably affecting the collection of the traditional ‘calseyde’ excise.

²⁵⁵ This is evident from the description in the municipal accounts from then onwards: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 472. The excise revenues of the ‘calseyde’ are not easily interpretable before the beginning of the 18th century since it is sometimes (but not always) combined with the ‘Aelstersche tol’, and no tariffs for either levy are available.

²⁵⁶ Those three gates were the Molenstraatpoort (N-E), Zoutstraatpoort (S-W) and Kattestraatpoort (N). The paved road between Ghent and Brussels passed through the Pontstraatpoort (S-E, towards Brussels) and the Nieuwstraatpoort (W, towards Ghent).

One alternative to road transportation was offered by the river Dender, which lead up to Dendermonde on the river Scheldt. From there, both Ghent (upstream) and Antwerp (downstream) could be reached, with the latter offering access to Zeeland, Holland and the world seas. Although the Dender was used for the transportation of such relatively long-distance trade goods as linen, lace and hops, agricultural trade figured prominently as well. Around the middle of the eighteenth century Vilain XIII complained of the many losses suffered due to large quantities of ‘grains left rotting’ as a result of the poor passage on the river. As a result, many farmers in nearby parishes chose to bring their grain to the small town of Wichelen, which was situated along the river Scheldt and thus provided a more secure focal point for the further distribution of their agricultural produce.²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in 1764 some 15% (17) of all parishes in het Land van Aalst used the Dender as the principal outlet for their grain produce.²⁵⁸ Once again, the urban excises offer us some insight into the development of river traffic in Aalst. An excise on the wharf at the Molenstraatpoort was levied on all crates, chests, tons or sacks loaded off or on the ships.²⁵⁹ Individual tariffs were mentioned for grain, hop, wood and oil. The loading and unloading of wine, and most likely beer as well, were excluded from the tax.²⁶⁰

Figure II.10. Annual revenue from the wharf excise in Aalst.



Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417-541.

²⁵⁷ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3683, art. 6.

²⁵⁸ Calculated from the list provided by commissaire de Patin: ARA, *Junta*, Besturen en Beden, n° 604.

²⁵⁹ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 502 offers the most elaborate description of the excise.

²⁶⁰ The unloading (‘schrooden’) of wine was explicitly excluded from the excise. As for beer, there are frequent references in the accounts to a separate ‘spaygeld’ (sluice tax) paid for the import of beer, which was included in the beer excise.

The annual revenues from the wharf excise seem to have been relatively stable during the second half of the seventeenth century. At the beginning of the eighteenth century an impressive decline set in, followed by consolidation at a much more modest scale until 1765 when the tax was abolished. The drop at the start of the eighteenth century coincides with the construction of the paved roads towards Ghent and Brussels, which probably caused some of the river traffic to be redirected landwards. The low level of activity from that point onwards certainly accords with the image sketched by Vilain XIII of an unreliable and impractical waterway. While the frost prevented smooth transportation during winter, inundations regularly barred a free passage during spring, and in summer the river was plagued by low water levels.²⁶¹ Unfortunately the wharf excise was abolished upon the partial canalization of the Dender in 1768 when water traffic presumably became much more practical again.

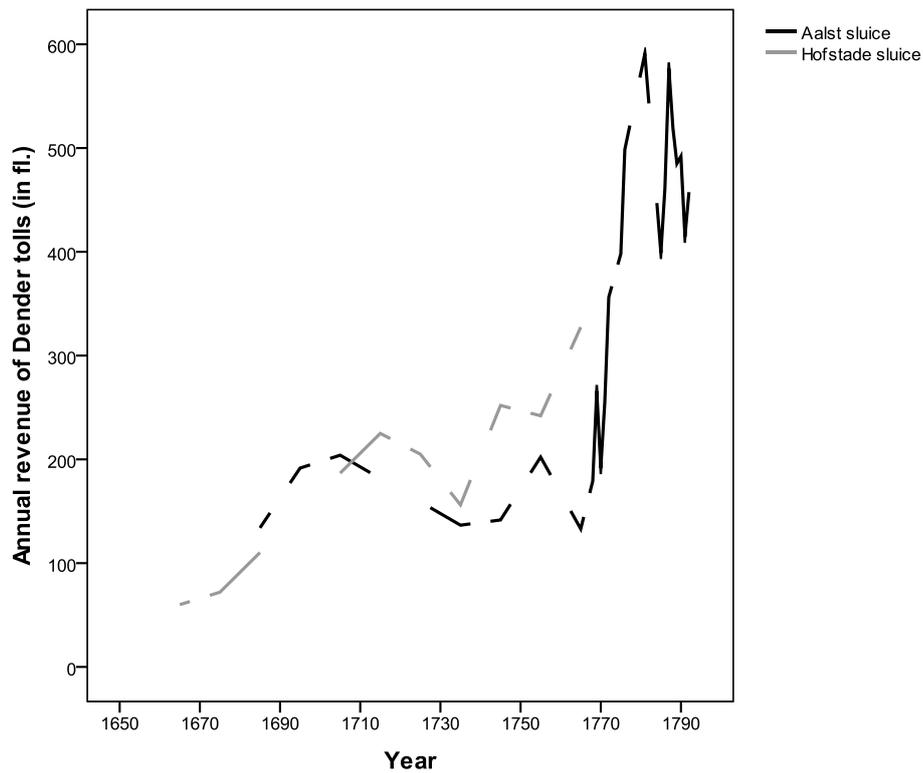
Of more use in gauging the level of total activity on the river Dender, including transit shipments passing through Aalst, are the tolls levied at the various sluices in the river. Data on the revenues of two tolls are available for the seventeenth and eighteenth century: the most important one was levied in Aalst itself, situated just downriver from the wharf.²⁶² Some scattered figures are also available from the sluice at Hofstade, a few kilometers further downstream towards the Scheldt. The tariffs on both tolls were the same and remained unchanged throughout the entire period.²⁶³

²⁶¹ MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 3683, art. 6.

²⁶² In 1770-1773 the sluice toll and the toll at St. Anne's bridge (right by the wharf) were farmed by the same person (MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 677). He remarked that there was only a small portion of ships that did pass the bridge, but not the sluice, as they remained at the quay in Aalst. Since the majority (rather than the minority) of ships can be expected to have come from downstream rather than upstream, it seems reasonable to situate the sluice downstream from the wharf. This is confirmed by the fact that in 1782-1783 the sluice was referred to as "Nedersas" or "bottom sluice" (MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 5986).

²⁶³ Tariffs in Gachard, *Recueil des ordonnances*, I, 13 (February 12, 1701) and Gachard, *Recueil des ordonnances*, VIII, 212 (June 28, 1758). These same tariffs were also in use during the 1767-1793 period, as confirmed by the accounts in: MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 677, 5986, 5987 and 5988.

Figure II.11. Annual revenue from tolls on the river Dender near Aalst.



Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417-541.

MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 5987 (1767-1770), n° 677 (1770-1773), n° 5986 (1774-1777), n° 5988 (1780-1793).

The story told by these waterway tolls is largely comparable to that of the wharf excise. There was growth in the second half of the seventeenth century, followed by decline in the first half of the eighteenth – possibly again the result of the Brussels-Ghent road taking some pressure of the river traffic. Most spectacular, however, is the exponential growth taking place after the partial canalization of the river from 1768 onwards. Since detailed day-to-day accounts have been preserved for this period, it is possible to reconstruct precisely how many boats passed through the sluice at Aalst (table II.7).

Table II.7. Average number of ships passing the Aalst sluice per year (1765-1795).

	Loaded	Unloaded	Total	N (years)
1765-1774	301	230	531	5
1775-1784	555	544	1.099	3
1785-1795	534	512	1.046	8

Sources:

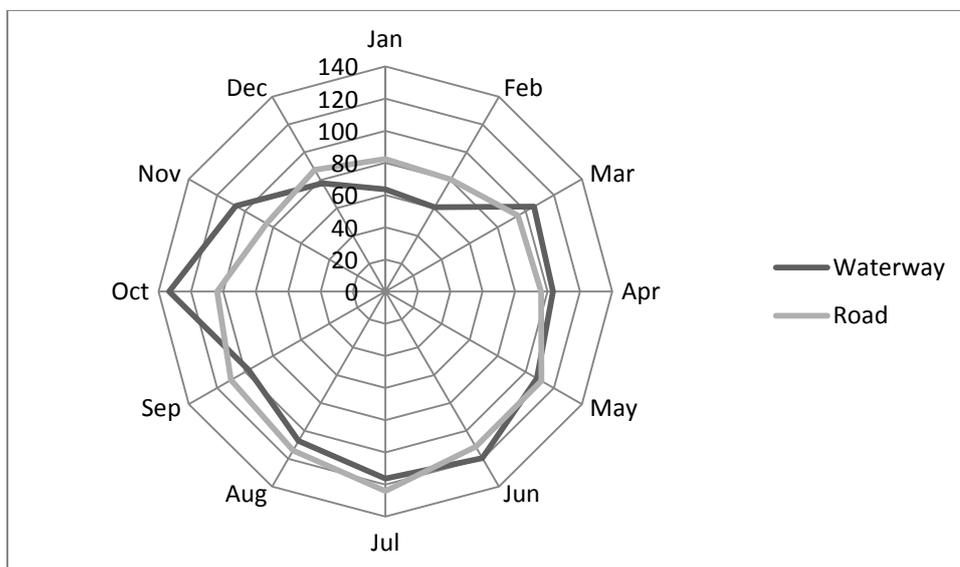
MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 5987, 677, 5986, 5987, 5988.

This table once again shows the remarkable increase in the number of (loaded) ships approaching Aalst in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In only a couple of years' time river traffic through

Aalst more than doubled. During the first half of the nineteenth century activities on the river Dender increased further still. By the 1840's an estimated total of over 3.000 ships passed through Aalst.²⁶⁴

As with road traffic, seasonal influences affected shipping as well – even after the partial canalization of the Dender had significantly reduced the impact of weather conditions. From December until February the passage of ships was clearly reduced – and in some years even impossible for an entire month due to frost.²⁶⁵ The peak month was October, when most harvesting of grains and hops had been done, although already from March onwards passing ships were quite numerous (figure II.12). By the end of the eighteenth century, the Dender was certainly not used for the transportation of hops alone.

Figure II.12. Seasonality of number of loaded ships passing through the Aalst sluice (1768-1793) and the value of goods transported on the road towards Ghent (1787-1792).



Note:

The graph represents the average index of ships/toll value per month, whereby 100 is the total average per year.

Sources:

MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 677, 5986, 5987 and 5988.

This brief overview of land and water traffic time and again demonstrates a remarkable growth during the second half of the eighteenth century. Growth is evident already from the first decades of the eighteenth century on the secondary roads connecting Aalst with its hinterland, when the agricultural revival of the time undoubtedly reinvigorated Aalst's market functions. Truly spectacular expansion set in from mid-century and was followed by a rapid increase in waterway traffic as soon as the river Dender was partially canalized in 1768. Until the end of the eighteenth century both road and waterway traffic continued to show seasonal patterns corresponding closely to the 'agricultural year'. Commerce in Aalst was, and remained, deeply affected by its relationship with the surrounding countryside. Nevertheless, the vigorous debates over the construction of the Aalst-Baasrode canal

²⁶⁴ Calculation based on *Rapport sur les Octrois Communaux de Belgique*, Brussels, 1845, t. III, pp. 145-146.

²⁶⁵ This was the case in 1770 for instance: MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 677.

during the 1750's already demonstrate strikingly the relentless desire of the Aalst elites to be more fully immersed in the commercial world beyond its walls. The further improvement of the town's transport infrastructure and the demographic and proto-industrial expansion of the ensuing decades seemingly endowed Aalst with a potent 'urbanisation from below.'

The political ordinances issued by the town's aldermen further underscore Aalst's rapidly expanding markets during the final quarter of the eighteenth century. In November 1786 the town's magistrate was confronted by the fact that the weekly grain market had expanded so fiercely that it could no longer be physically contained within the area that had been designated for it. Henceforth grains for sale on the market could also be laid out on the precinct of a former cemetery.²⁶⁶ Six years later the flax and yarn markets found themselves in a similar situation. The market spilled out over the nearby streets, thus effectively blocking the passageway through town. A thorough reorganization of designated market places was necessary in order to properly contain the "*notable growth in all products brought to the market from outside.*"²⁶⁷ Given this expansion, it is hardly a surprise that in the 1780's an excess of heavy freight traffic over one of the bridges over the river Dender threatened it with collapse. The particular bridge, which '*was never built for such heavy weights*', would henceforth be accessible only to wagons loaded with less than 5.000 lb.²⁶⁸ Traffic on the Dender itself seems to have been hardly less crowded, driving the skippers of the barge between Dendermonde and Aalst to despair as they could seldom find a free place to moor at the quay in Aalst anymore.²⁶⁹

Much of the prosperity enjoyed in Aalst during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was literally brought to it by the numerous peasants entering its gates from the surrounding countryside. The political ordinances repeatedly speak of the countrymen visiting the town's markets and behaving improperly or dangerously – even threatening the cloth hall with fire by means of their abundant pipe smoking.²⁷⁰ Apparently some peasants came to Aalst not only to sell their produce for eventual export on the grain, linen or hop markets, but also provisioned themselves on the urban markets. Others engaged with the Aalst market through the mediation of farmers as brokers and go-betweens.²⁷¹ The rapid expansion of the flax and yarn market mentioned above serves as a case in point. Not all rural

²⁶⁶ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (3 November 1786): "*Alsoo door het aengroeyen van de merkten binnen dese stad, de gedesigneerde plaetsen tot het verkoopen de graenen ende voordere vruchten niet suffisant en zijn om de selve aldaer te placeren waer toe, tot meerdere faciliteyt eenige plaetsen van het gesupprimeert kerkhof zijn aengenomen tot vermeerderinge van diere.*"

²⁶⁷ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (24 October 1793): "*Alzoo de wekelijksche merkten binnen deeze stad merklijk sijn aengroyende in alle de artikelen generaelijk alhier van buyten ter merkt gebracht wordende soo daenig dat er eenige van diere, naemenlijk de goone van vlasch en gaeren, die haer soude moeten houden tusschen de afspanninge den Conincq van Spagnien ende S'catherina Camer nederwaerts de Veemerkt in haere limieten niet connende blijven, haer uytspreyt over de Nieuwstraete tot aende huysen van d'ander seyde waer door beleth wordende de publicque passagie met voituren waegens en peerden door de stad.*"

²⁶⁸ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (23 February 1783): "*Alzoo diveersche personen zig vervoorderen te rijden over de Brugge van de Vischmerkt met swaer gewigt, tot groot perijckel van met voituren ende peerden in de riviere te vallen, door dien de brugge voor zoo swaer gewigt noyt en is gemaekt.*" It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the 18th century weights of over 5.000 lb were not even allowed on the paved road between Brussels and Ghent: Gachard, *Recueil des ordonnances*, t. I, 675 (5 February 1706).

²⁶⁹ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (14 December 1784).

²⁷⁰ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (23 July 1767): "*Alsoo men ondervindt dat de buytenlieden alhier commende ter laeken halle op het stadthuys, sommige van diere daer op comen met brandende toeback pijpen, niet sonder perijckel van brandt.*"

²⁷¹ Vermoesen, "Paardenboeren in Vlaanderen".

weavers cultivated their own flax, nor did they all spin their own yarn. Hop cultivators similarly visited the Aalst market during autumn or winter in order to buy the rhizomes from which the new hop seeds were cut.²⁷² Although the jury on the evolution of rural living standards during the early modern period is still out, it seems likely that the vibrant flows of commercial peasants in and out of the city must have positively affected demand for Aalst's goods and services.

2.4. The evolution of household wealth in Aalst

2.4.1. Wealth and living standards

The evidence on the economic growth of eighteenth-century Aalst presented thus far pertains almost exclusively to the macro-level of the economy. To conclude this chapter, however, it might prove worthwhile to descend towards the micro-level of analysis: the household. Although the macro-indicators available indicate stability in Aalst until the middle of the eighteenth century, followed by strong commercial growth until well into the nineteenth, this does not imply that the living standards of Aalst traced a similar pattern. Nevertheless, the question of how these living standards in Aalst evolved, is not without importance in its own right.

Ever since Deane and Cole's estimates of British economic growth during the industrial revolution were notoriously revised, economic historians have been searching for solid evidence documenting improving living standards during the early modern period.²⁷³ For the English case, the challenge seems straightforward: any evidence concerning the evolution of early modern living standards in England will undoubtedly improve our understanding of both the causes and effects of the industrial revolution. On the other hand, in order to fully understand how and why England was different, we need to explore how early modern living standards diverged in and across the rest of Europe as well.²⁷⁴ The evolution of living standards in the southern Low Countries, and of the region of Flanders in particular, offers some promising prospects in this respect.²⁷⁵

Traditional accounts of the economic history of Flanders during the early modern period often abound in pessimism. After the commercial and urban miracles of the High Middle Ages and the Burgundian splendor of the 14th and 15th centuries, it seems as if a long state of almost perpetual decline set in. Especially after the closing of the Scheldt in the late sixteenth century and the repeated war faring in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it seems as if the whole of the Southern Netherlands had steadily slipped from the front row of economic development to the backseats. Yet in the second quarter of the nineteenth century the region would quickly re-emerge as the continental forerunner of the industrial revolution.

²⁷² See for instance the ordinance on the organization of the market for 'hopkeesten' in Aalst: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (23 February 1783).

²⁷³ Wrigley, "The quest"; Crafts, *British Economic Growth*; De Vries, "Economic growth"; Shepard and Spicksley, "Worth, age, and social status"; Jan Luiten Van Zanden, "Early modern economic growth. A survey of the European economy, 1500-1800," in *Early Modern Capitalism. Economic and Social Change in Europe, 1400-1800*, ed. Maarten Prak (London: 2001).

²⁷⁴ Robert C. Allen, "The great divergence in European wages and prices from the middle ages to the first world war," *Explorations in Economic History* 38 (2001).

²⁷⁵ See the claims in Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics"; Lis and Soly, "Different paths of development".

This relatively rapid industrialization of an area that was definitely not among the most dynamic economic powers of the early modern period has been approached from various perspectives. Traditional accounts have often focused on the dynamism of the rural proto-industry, which was mainly involved with the rural spinning and weaving of linen. Scholars following the lead of Henry Pirenne have argued that the economic center of gravity shifted to the countryside after the Middle Ages in order to lower wage costs and avoid restricting corporatist regulations.²⁷⁶ This dislocation of the production of cheap textiles was seen as directly damaging to the industrial prowess of the urban centers, while the international demand for high-quality products was waning. Especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this supposedly led to urban de-industrialization and crisis.²⁷⁷ Even though the effect of proto-industrialization on rural living standards and the question as to whether or not this development helped induce industrialization are both highly debated issues, the negative assessment of any *urban* economic dynamism during this era seems quasi universal.²⁷⁸

Others however have drawn attention not so much to the expansion of rural proto-industry – which after all had existed since the Middle Ages and usually functioned in symbiosis rather than competition with urban centers of production – but to the remarkable resilience of the urban manufacturing dynamics in the Southern Low Countries during this period.²⁷⁹ A high degree of local demand, itself caused by consistently high living standards that resulted from the region's success story in the late medieval period, seemed able to sustain high levels of urbanization and affluence throughout the entire early modern era. Despite the unfavorable circumstances of the 'long eighteenth century', there seemed to be plenty of room for a diversifying and expanding material culture and increased consumption within the area's cities and towns.²⁸⁰ Instead of having become economically redundant as a result of rural proto-industrialization, urban centers seem to have purposefully interacted with their rural surroundings in a much more complicated and perhaps more mutually profitable way than has traditionally been supposed.²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. IV (Brussels: 1919), quoted in Lis and Soly, "Different paths of development".

²⁷⁷ For a balanced overview of this period, see Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics"; Soly, "Social aspects"; Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes".

²⁷⁸ See for instance the obvious contrasts between Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'" on the one hand and Vandenbroeke, "The regional economy"; De Vries, *The industrious revolution* on the other. As for the link between rural proto-industry and later industrialization in Flanders, see Mendels, *Industrialization and population pressure*. A recent contribution to these debates and focused on the rural surroundings of Aalst is Vermoesen, "Markttoegang".

²⁷⁹ Most explicitly in Lis and Soly, "Different paths of development", but also H. Van Der Wee, "Antwoord op een industriële uitdaging: de Nederlandse steden tijdens de late middeleeuwen en nieuwe tijd," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 100 (1987); Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics" and Jord Hanus, "Affluence and inequality in the Low Countries" (PhD., University of Antwerp, 2010).

²⁸⁰ Blondé, "Tableware"; B. Blondé and I. Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes in a declining urban economy: Antwerp (1650-1750)," *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 3 (2010); H. Deceulaer, "Urban artisans and their countryside customers: different interactions between town and hinterland in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent (18th century)," in *Labour and labour markets between town and countryside (middle ages - nineteenth century)*, ed. Bruno Blondé, Eric Vanhaute, and M. Galand, *Corn publication series. Comparative rural history of the North Sea area 6* (Turnhout: 2001); H. Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen en een verschillende snit. Sociaal-economische, institutionele en culturele transformaties in Antwerpen, Brussel en Gent, ca. 1585-ca. 1800* (Amsterdam: 2001).

²⁸¹ Peter Stabel, "Town and countryside in the Southern Low Countries in the late 15th – early nineteenth century. Preliminary reflections upon changing relations in a pre-industrial economy," in *Town and countryside in Western Europe from 1500-1939*, ed. R. Ni Neill (Leicester: 1996).

According to this perspective it is not the spectacular decline and equally surprising early industrialization that needs to be explained, but rather the remarkable stability of living standards and continued economic potential of this highly urbanized region throughout the early modern era. Urban wealth holdings and capital investments apparently allowed for a relatively high domestic demand to keep the urban economy afloat. Yet current approaches to living standards, based on estimates of labor income, do not usually allow for such a perspective and in fact provide only a limited part of the picture.²⁸² In general, the evolution of real wages in the southern Netherlands during the early modern period offers a rather pessimistic picture of the trend in living standards. The reconstruction of 'national accounts' in order to estimate GDP per capita in the past remains a hazardous exercise meanwhile, so that only now some preliminary estimates are becoming available.²⁸³ Moreover, such GDP/capita calculations do not offer insight into the changing distribution of wealth and income over society. It might be advisable then, to consider the study of wealth as one of the alternative routes towards a fuller understanding of pre-industrial living standards. Given the emphasis on the demand side rather than the production side of the pre-industrial economy, this would seem to be a reasonable choice.²⁸⁴

Definitions of wealth have, of course, varied widely since the practitioners of eighteenth century political arithmetic directed attention to the issue.²⁸⁵ Although the inclusion of immaterial and intangible wealth components such as social and human capital, trust or creditworthiness might prove invaluable to any thorough theoretical approach to the subject, in empirical practice most definitions have settled on rather narrow definitions encompassing financial assets and debts, real estate and durables. Contrary to most income and national accounting approaches to living standards, the reconstruction of household wealth allows for an analysis of how living standards and resources were distributed within society. As such, it might provide clues on the origins of the historically high level of inequality during the nineteenth century: whereas this was traditionally attributed to the process of industrialization itself, recent scholarship suggests that impoverishment and polarization preceded the nineteenth century and were instead rooted in (Malthusian) processes from the Ancien Régime.²⁸⁶ Since evidence on the two-way relationship between economic development and social inequality is

²⁸² Hanus, "Affluence and inequality"; B. Blondé and J. Hanus, "Beyond building craftsmen: economic growth and living standards in the sixteenth-century Low Countries: the case of 's-Hertogenbosch (1500-1560)," *European Review of Economic History* 14 (2009).

²⁸³ To my best knowledge, no results for the Southern Netherlands have as yet been published, although preliminary estimates are available in conference papers by Erik Buyst (KUL).

²⁸⁴ See Seymour Spilerman, "Wealth and Stratification Processes," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000) on the importance of wealth in shaping demand patterns.

²⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* did not attempt to define 'wealth', and certainly not household wealth (as opposed to national wealth): Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Bantam Classics (New York: 2003 (orig. 1776)).

²⁸⁶ For nineteenth century Belgium: Patricia Van den Eeckhout and Juul Hannes, "Sociale verhoudingen en structuren in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1770-1840," in *Nieuwe Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (1981); Hannes and Vanhaute, "Economische verandering"; Yves Segers, "Oysters and rye bread: Polarising living standards in Flanders, 1800-1860," *European Review of Economic History* 5 (2001). See for comparable argument for France: Thomas Piketty, Gilles Postel-Vinay, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, "Wealth concentration in a developing economy: Paris and France, 1807-1994," *The American Economic Review* 96, no. 1 (2006).

extremely scarce for the pre-industrial period, this could provide important insights into the character of pre-industrial growth and its consequences.²⁸⁷

What is more, information on wealth holding, composition and distribution is fairly easy to come by (at least from the early modern period onwards) for a wide range of areas. In some exceptional cases fiscal records provide us with detailed estimations of the wealth holdings of (almost) all households in a particular locality, as is the case with for instance the Florentine *catasto* studied by Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber.²⁸⁸ Yet the most commonly used source for the reconstruction of wealth holdings is the post-mortem inventory.²⁸⁹ Although its shortcomings are many, inventories were already used successfully and influentially to estimate living standards and social inequalities for seventeenth and eighteenth century North-America more than thirty years ago.²⁹⁰ In documenting nineteenth-century economic development they have been employed as well, touching upon a wide variety of areas including Scandinavia, Canada, Australia, Brazil and Jamaica.²⁹¹ Even though inventories have been examined extensively and frequently by economic historians of Western Europe, they have only rarely been used to study economic growth, living standards or inequality – especially in a larger than local context and over a longer time span.²⁹²

Although no major synthesis of the evolution of wealth holding and its distribution has been drawn up for the early modern Southern Low Countries, the topic is not wholly uncharted territory either. Especially during the 1970's and -80's the reconstruction of eighteenth century urban property holding and composition proved to be a popular topic.²⁹³ Numerous smaller studies and master's

²⁸⁷ Jan Luiten Van Zanden, "Tracing the beginning of the Kuznets Curve: Western Europe during the early modern period," *The Economic History Review* 48, no. 4 (1995); P.H. Lindert, "When did inequality rise in Britain and America?," *Journal of Income Distribution* 9, no. 1 (2000); A. McCants, "Inequality Among the Poor of Eighteenth Century Amsterdam," *Explorations in Economic History* 44, no. 1 (2007); Hanus, "Affluence and inequality"; Branko Milanovic, Peter H. Lindert, and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Pre-Industrial Inequality," *The Economic Journal* 121, no. 551 (2011).

²⁸⁸ Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*. Somewhat similar fiscal sources are occasionally found at later dates in for instance Italy (Alfani, "Wealth inequalities"), Germany (Friedrichs, *Urban society*), Catalonia (Fynn-Paul, "The Catalan city") or the Netherlands (Zuijderduijn, *Medieval capital markets*; Soltow and Van Zanden, *Income and wealth inequality*), to name just a few.

²⁸⁹ An interesting alternative has recently been offered by means of a large-scale analysis of 'statements of worth' by witnesses in English church courts (Shepard and Spicksley, "Worth, age, and social status").

²⁹⁰ The seminal studies are Alice Hanson Jones, *Wealth of a Nation to Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: 1980); Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*; Main, *Tobacco colony*; Main and Main, "Economic growth"; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: 1985).

²⁹¹ Respectively Markkanen, "The Use of Probate Inventories"; Livio Di Matteo and P. George, "Patterns and determinants of wealth among probated decedents in Wentworth County, Ontario, 1872-1902," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 31, no. 61 (1998); Livio Di Matteo and P. George, "Canadian wealth inequality in the late nineteenth century: A study of Wentworth County, Ontario, 1872-1902," *Canadian Historical Review* 73 (1992); Livio Di Matteo, "Patterns and Determinants of Wealth Inequality in Late-Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Social Science History* 25, no. 3 (2001); Di Matteo, "Wealth and inequality"; Julian Gwyn and Fazley Siddiq, "Wealth distribution in Nova Scotia during the Confederation era, 1851 and 1871," *Canadian Historical Review* 73, no. 4 (1992); Lars Osberg and Fazley Siddiq, "The Inequality of Wealth in Britain's North American Colonies: The Importance of the Relatively Poor," *Review of Income and Wealth* 34, no. 2 (1988); Shanahan, "Personal Wealth"; Zephyr Frank, "Wealth Holding in Southeastern Brazil, 1815-1860," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (2005); Burnard, "Prodigious riches".

²⁹² A notable exception here is a forthcoming article by Mark Overton, which is essentially based on the inventories gathered during the research for Overton et al., *Production and consumption*. See Mark Overton, "Household wealth, indebtedness, and economic growth in early modern England," (forthcoming).

²⁹³ G. Feyaerts, "Peiling naar de bezitstructuur van de Antwerpse bevolking omstreeks 1738" (Ma Thesis, UGent, 1967); Vanaverbeke, *Peiling*; L. Jacobs, "Peiling naar de bezitsstructuur van Gent rond 1788" (VUB,

theses' dealing with mostly rural localities have similarly used post-mortem inventories in order to reconstruct basic estimates of wealth holding and distribution.²⁹⁴ Divergent ways of dealing with the numerous methodological issues involved have however led to very disparate results in terms of reliability and comparability. No synthesis that can offer insights into the long-term accumulation and distribution of wealth during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has consequently emerged from this material thus far.

2.4.2. Sources & methodology

The sample of approximately 500 after-death inventories gathered from the Aalst municipal archives for four sample periods (1670-1681; 1705-1715; 1745-1750; 1790-1795) allows for a reconstruction of the total level of household wealth during the long eighteenth century. As noted in chapter 2, the inventories in Aalst typically mention all possessions and liabilities of a household, including real estate, movable goods, obligations, shop stock, and all kinds of small debts owed to and by the deceased.²⁹⁵ This means that contrary to probate inventories in the Anglo-Saxon world, which usually exclude real estate and debts owed by the deceased, the sources in Aalst allow for the calculation of any household's total net worth. The participation of the surviving spouse, custodians from both sides of the family, independent appraisers and all sorts of witnesses in the editing of the inventory, all combined to create a system of checks and balances which seems to guarantee that these sources provide a fairly accurate view of a household's total wealth and its composition.

It is by now common knowledge however that the use of post-mortem inventories for the reconstruction of wealth, inequality or consumption patterns for a society as a whole poses serious issues of representativeness.²⁹⁶ Most importantly, there is the problem of what Alice Hanson Jones dubbed 'nonprobate wealth' and its distribution over the households of the deceased. Since not every household left an inventory, we are forced to estimate both the proportion of non-inventoried households and the wealth they possessed. Any given sample of inventories would otherwise be biased towards the richer strata of society. As I have explored in chapter 2, this problem has been approached by nominally linking the available inventories to the tax lists of nearby years. Over 60% of all inventories in the sample could be positively identified in the registers of the town's housing taxes.²⁹⁷ Since in principle all households living within the city walls of Aalst were recorded in these lists, it should be possible to infer any household's relative position within the socio-economic hierarchy of

1981); G. Vandervorst, "Peiling naar de bezitststructuur van Antwerpen rond 1789" (Ma Thesis, VUB, 1977); M. Spinnox, "Bijdrage tot de studie van de bezitssituaties te Antwerpen in het midden van de 18de eeuw. De "staten van goed" (1750-1751)" (Ma Thesis, KUL, 1986) are the most important ones. See also Willems, *Leven op de pof*.

²⁹⁴ See for instance Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*; Zeischka, "Strukturen en leefpatronen".

²⁹⁵ Only in 34% of inventories was real estate valued in monetary terms rather than merely described in acreage. In the (rare) cases where specific real estate was kept outside of the 'community of property' by means of a marriage contract these goods are only excluded from the inventory of the spouse. Otherwise the community of property within marriage extended to goods acquired both before and during marriage.

²⁹⁶ For more detailed discussions on the various issues involved in working with inventories see Spufford, "The limitations"; Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, "Boedelinventarissen"; Arkell, "Interpreting probate inventories"; Moore, "Probate inventories".

²⁹⁷ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, nrs. 264-279.

the entire community from its place within the tax distribution. Based on this assumption, a modified version of the so-called ‘estate multiplier technique’ can be used to overcome the social bias inherent in the source material.²⁹⁸

The estate multiplier technique involves the re-weighting of the sampled inventories in order to better align them with the composition of the total population. Inventory samples could be weighted by age- or occupational group, for instance, if the share of each group in the total population were known. In this case, the *deciles* of the tax distribution were used for this purpose: all inventories of which the decile group in the tax could be determined, were re-weighted accordingly. The result is a weighted distribution which should better reflect the totality of the taxed population than the original inventory sample does (see chapter 2 for a more extensive testing of this methodology). This only works however as long as the tax distribution can be held to accurately represent the socio-economic position of the entire urban population. As has been demonstrated supra, there is plenty of reason to believe that this ceased to be the case at the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas the ratio of inventories to burials remained unchanged, the housing tax lists were increasingly less representative of all households in Aalst. For this reason, the use of the weighting method does probably not produce reliable results for the final sample period.

Moreover, the use of this ‘decile weighting’ method is highly prone to distortions due to outliers in the data. Since the inventories at the bottom of the tax distribution are attributed large weighting scores, the small number of inventories traced to the bottom regions of the tax distribution exert a huge influence on the total results – even though they might not be very representative of the poorer households as a whole. The robustness of these estimates may thus very well be rather shaky.

The use of both the unweighted and the weighted inventory data each have their flaws. Whereas the unweighted data turn a blind eye towards the poor households of Aalst and thus overestimate the aggregate wealth levels in the town, they do seem able to accurately capture the evolution of wealth holdings over time. Given the constant ratio of inventories over burials throughout the entire period under study, it is unlikely that the social bias of the inventories would have changed much. The weighted data on the other hand allow for a more reliable picture of actual aggregate wealth holdings, taking into account the social bias induced by the source material. At the same time, the smaller number of usable inventories and the excessive influence of some outlying cases, reduces the overall robustness of the estimates. By the end of the eighteenth century the tax data apparently cease to reflect the changing social structure of the time, thus making the weighted estimates less preferable for tracing developments over time.

2.4.3. The evolution of household wealth in Aalst

Since the two proposed methods have their specific benefits as well as flaws, the results of both are presented here (table II.8). The most complete measure included in the analysis is “net worth”, which

²⁹⁸ The estate multiplier technique was used for instance in A.B. Atkinson and A.J. Harrison, *Distribution of personal wealth in Britain* (Cambridge: 1978) and was pioneered in historical research by Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*; Alice Hanson Jones, "Estimating Wealth of the Living from a Probate Sample," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 13, no. 2 (1982).

captures all moveable and immoveable goods and credits and deduces debts and liabilities from them. Some scholars have argued that the deduction of outstanding debt from total wealth distorts the wealth profile of households. Since the ability to gain credit was a sign of good reputation and expected future income, it was a prerogative not of the poor but of the well-to-do. As a result, net worth would be a less reliable indicator of a household's consumption potential or living standards.²⁹⁹ However, since these distortions are to a large extent caused by life-cycle effects of indebtedness, they can be expected to largely cancel each other out when considered on a societal level. Nevertheless, the value of 'total assets' (all real estate, moveable goods and debt owed to the deceased) has been included in the table as well. A third measure is 'personal wealth', which encompasses only the moveable, physical possessions of a household. Although this measure is the least 'complete', it is the one that is most suitable for international comparisons.

Between the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the middle of the eighteenth average net worth increased remarkably in Aalst – both in the unweighted and the weighted estimates. Across the three types of household wealth (net worth, total assets and personal wealth), the two measures of central tendency (mean and median) and both the weighted and the unweighted data, the rise in aggregate household wealth between 1670 and 1745 seems fairly robust. Although the difference in absolute aggregate wealth between the original data and the weighted sample is considerable (ca. 60% lower in the 1670 weighted estimate), the same evolution over time nevertheless holds.³⁰⁰

In the second half of the eighteenth century average household wealth declines in both the weighted and unweighted samples. Although change is again more modest in the median figures, here as well the end of the eighteenth century shows a clear change in fortunes. As far as net worth is concerned, median households were by the 1790s approximately 25% less well off than they had been around mid-century. If the trend of the unweighted sample is indeed to be trusted (and, as has been argued earlier, it is certainly preferable to the weighted series with regards to the measurement of change over time in the second half of the eighteenth century), the households of Aalst entered the nineteenth century in a remarkably poorer state than they had been a century earlier. This decline of aggregate wealth manifests itself most clearly in the figures for 'net worth', and less in the gross level of 'total assets'. At least a part of this impoverishment thus seems to be attributable to higher levels of indebtedness compared to the middle of the eighteenth century.

²⁹⁹ See for instance Willems, *Leven op de pof*.

³⁰⁰ The comparison of median wealth in 1672 (the moment when the housing tax was first drawn up and is at its most reliable) is probably the best possible estimate of the distortion caused by the social bias of the unweighted inventory sample. It is interesting to note that a reduction of the median by 60% almost exactly matches Overton (forthcoming)'s technique of adding 40% 'poor' (assessed at an arbitrary £1) to the inventory sample. This seems to strengthen confidence in both techniques, although it does not solve Overton's inability to deal with a changing social bias over time.

Table II.8. Household wealth in Aalst (in fl.), 1670-1795 (in constant 1670-1681 prices).

	1670-1681	1705-1715	1745-1750	1790-1795
Unweighted				
Net worth				
Median	1.111	1.233	1.210	904
Mean	3.989	5.602	6.176	3.381
CV	2,51	3,98	2,26	2,16
Total Assets				
Median	1.805	1.874	2.227	2.144
Mean	5.170	6.542	7.069	4.834
CV	2,02	3,40	2,10	1,63
Personal Wealth				
Median	486	735	708	409
Mean	916	1.781	1.886	1.234
CV	1,22	2,34	1,75	1,72
N	124	126	120	133
Weighted				
Net worth				
Median	662	721	1.235	869
Mean	3.393	2.404	4.546	4.455
CV	2,19	2,62	2,12	2,01
Total Assets				
Median	1.362	1.280	2.299	2.831
Mean	4.640	3.153	5.353	6.521
CV	1,84	2,02	1,86	1,48
Personal Wealth				
Median	444	363	612	497
Mean	995	995	1.855	1.531
CV	1,16	1,63	1,93	1,60
N	55	62	44	63

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Fiscal records: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, nrs. 264-279.

Note:

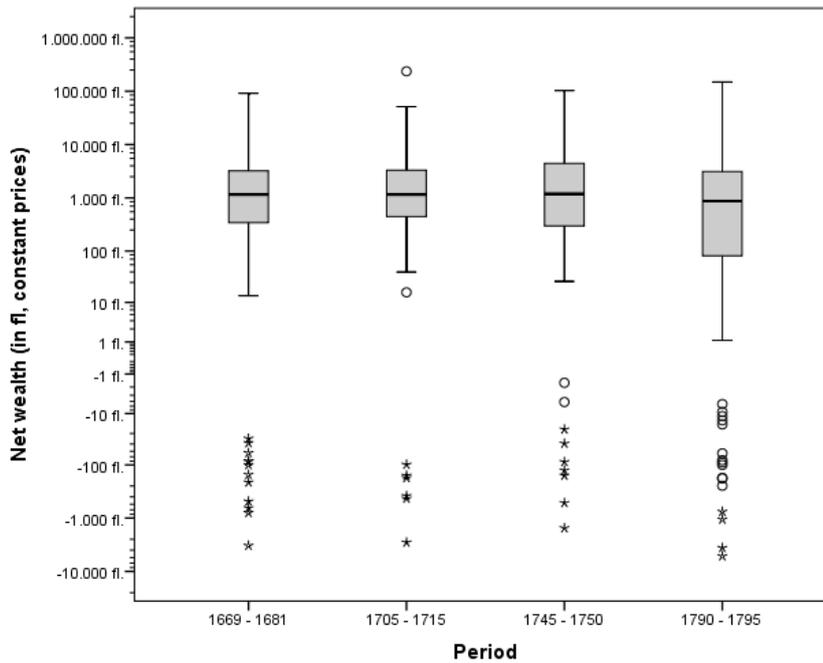
Constant prices were calculated using Allen's Antwerp CPI (Allen, "The Great Divergence", based on Van Der Wee). The 10% allowance for rent in the CPI has been replaced by the Ghent housing index calculated by Van Ryssel (Van Ryssel, "De Gentse Huishuren").

When looking at the figures for personal, movable wealth only, it is first of all clear that these constituted only a minor share of total household wealth. Clearly, real estate and debts typically constituted a large and important part not only among elite household portfolio's, but at the median level as well. The fact that the differences in personal wealth between the weighted and unweighted estimates are less pronounced than was the case for net worth and total assets furthermore indicates that the social bias of the source material had less influence on this dimension of wealth holding. Since personal wealth was distributed more equally than other types of asset holding (cf. *infra*), this is not an unlikely result. The evolution of personal wealth levels over time however, generally holds to the

same pattern as described above: growth during the first half of the eighteenth century, followed by a more rapid retreat to the seventeenth century level afterwards.

Although the coefficient of variation indicates that the degree of dispersion around the mean did not increase during the second half of the eighteenth century, the inter-quartile range certainly increased. The boxplot of net household wealth over the four periods suggests that a larger segment of poorer households both widened the wealth distribution and depressed the mean and median wealth levels (figure II.13).

Figure II.13. Boxplot of household net worth, unweighted inventory data.



Sources:

Inventories: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Despite the many methodological caveats that can and have been raised against the inherent biases of the source material and the various definitions of wealth, the evolution of household wealth in Aalst throughout the long eighteenth century seems rather clear-cut. In fact, the results obtained by the application of two different sampling schemes, and from three different wealth parameters, do not lead to wildly divergent conclusions. In very general terms, household wealth in Aalst seems to have grown slowly but steadily from the final decades of the seventeenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century. When population growth, commerce and urban industry supposedly paced up in the latter half of the century, however, aggregate household wealth in Aalst quickly decreased.

The evolution of inventoried wealth in Aalst does not seem to fit particularly well with other proxies of living standards, such as real wages or GDP/capita (table II.9). Since very different aspects of financial living standards are being measured here, this is not in itself unexpected. All the more so since quite dissimilar social and spatial units are surveyed here: the urban citizenry of Aalst, the wage labourers of Antwerp and the total, urban and rural, population of the Southern Netherlands.

Table II.9. Annual growth rates compared: net worth, real wages and GDP/capita, in %.

Period	Household net worth (Aalst)		Real wages (Antwerp)	GDP/capita (Southern Netherlands)
	Mean	Median		
1670 – 1710	0,99	0,30	- 0,21	- 0,10
1710 – 1745	0,26	- 0,05	0,15	- 0,02
1745 – 1790	- 1,33	- 0,65	- 0,41	0,16
1670 – 1790	- 1,14	- 0,18	- 0,15	

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Real wages: Allen's data at: <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/users/allen/studer/antwerp.xls>.

GDP/capita: preliminary estimates by Erik Buyst, paper presented at the "Quantifying Long Run Economic Development" conference in Venice, 22-24 March 2011.

Note:

Growth rates for net worth are calculated in constant prices.

The net worth figures for the unweighted series were used in this tabulation (see chapter 1 for why these are preferable for measuring change over time).

Notwithstanding the diversity of the three approaches, the divergences in the resulting growth rates seem quite striking. The rather rapid growth of household wealth between 1670 and 1710 is at odds with the concurrently declining rates of real wages and estimated GDP/capita. Perhaps this discrepancy can be attributed to the social bias of the inventories, as the weighted estimates seem to indicate a simultaneous decline in household wealth. The evidence is more conclusive when considered over the entire 1670-1750 period: growth rates for households wealth in Aalst were clearly more favorable than those of either real wages or GDP/capita. This modest growth in a time of de-urbanization and urban de-industrialization is quite striking. The vast expansion of proto-industrial textile production in the hinterland of Aalst did not, it seems, in any way hinder the upturn of aggregate household wealth in the town itself. The urban economy that remained during this time of 'urban de-industrialization' was one in which many enjoyed a relatively high degree of prosperity.³⁰¹

This optimistic picture stands in stark contrast to the second half of the eighteenth century, when household wealth plummeted spectacularly below its 1670 level. The same downturn is witnessed in the Antwerp real wages, but *not* in the GDP/capita estimates where growth prevailed. The discrepancy between GDP/capita and real wages in the final period perhaps hints at diverging economic experiences on the spatial and social level. Spatially, Bruno Blondé has contrasted the diverging fates of the industrial, export-oriented economic centres such as Antwerp to that of the prospering secondary towns in southern Brabant.³⁰² Others have stressed the mounting social disjunctions caused by falling real wages and increasing industrialization in this period.³⁰³ It is noteworthy that household wealth in Aalst seems to have followed the negative trend of the real wages

³⁰¹ See also Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics"

³⁰² Van Der Wee, "Industrial dynamics".

³⁰³ For instance Catharina Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor: Antwerp 1770-1860* (New Haven: 1986); Soly, "Social aspects"; Karel Degryse, "Sociale ongelijkwaardigheid te Antwerpen in 1747," *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 58 (1974); Van den Eeckhout and Hannes, "Sociale verhoudingen".

rather than the positive trend of GDP/capita. This seems to exclude Aalst from the category of towns that could profit economically from the round of ‘home-led growth’ and ‘urbanisation from below’ which befell many central places of the time.³⁰⁴ Despite its position as a regionally important commercial hub in a rapidly growing and fully commercialized countryside, the economic expansion of the second half of the eighteenth century did not, in aggregate terms, bring any added prosperity to the households of Aalst.

2.4.4. The wealth of Aalst households in perspective

Having established the general evolution in household wealth during the long eighteenth century in Aalst, the question arises as to how the absolute wealth level in Aalst should be understood. Did household wealth oscillate at a point of relative affluence, or rather near a bare subsistence level? In 1672 median net worth per household (re-weighted to correct for the source’s social bias) equaled more than two full yearly wages of a skilled master craftsmen.³⁰⁵ At the mean, this rose to over 11 yearly wages. Expressed in levels of consumption potential, median net worth in 1672 came to almost 5 of Allen’s welfare ratio’s – which represent the consumption basket needed for the survival of a family of four during a whole year.³⁰⁶

Comparing these figures to the situation elsewhere is, due to a general lack of comparable data and adequate conversion methods, a rather haphazard endeavor. Table 4.3 nevertheless presents a (necessarily rather crude) comparison between median *personal wealth* in Aalst, Cornwall and Kent. Since most English inventories do not allow for the inclusion of real property and debts owed by the deceased, the less complete measure of personal wealth has been used for comparison.³⁰⁷ The wealth levels have, again, been converted to Allen’s welfare ratio’s so as to be more easily interpretable and at once take account of relative price levels in the Southern Netherlands and England.³⁰⁸

Table II.10. Welfare ratio’s of median personal wealth, Aalst, Cornwall and Kent.

	Aalst	Cornwall	Kent
1670-1681	3,1	2,1	4,7
1705-1715	4,4	1,9	6,5
1740-1745	4,5	2,7	5,9
1790-1795	2,2		

³⁰⁴ De Vries, *European urbanization*; Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*; W. Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling en sociale repercussies in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden. Nijvel in de achttiende eeuw," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 7, no. 3 (2010).

³⁰⁵ Calculated at 24 styvers a day, with a working year of 250 days.

³⁰⁶ Mean net worth in 1672 converts to almost 24 welfare ratio’s. On these ratio’s, see Allen, "The great divergence"; Robert C. Allen, T. Bengtsson, and M. Dribe, eds., *Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well-Being in Asia and Europe* (Oxford: 2005).

³⁰⁷ Our definition of ‘personal wealth’ is the same as Overton’s ‘material wealth’.

³⁰⁸ The conversion has been based on Allen’s CPI’s, which are mostly based on price data from London on the one hand and Antwerp on the other. The cost of living was probably considerably lower in the places studied here, so that ‘actual’ welfare ratio’s in all three of these cases are likely to be underestimates.

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.
Cornwall and Kent: Overton, "Household Wealth".

Kent and Cornwall have often been cast as two extremes in the economic development of early modern England: Kent as a thriving region strongly affected by the growth of London on the one hand, and Cornwall as a remote and under-developed area on the other.³⁰⁹ In interpreting the results of this comparison, it should be kept in mind that the English regions studied here encompassed both urban and rural communities, whereas only the urban inventories from the Aalst jurisdiction have been examined. It is quite possible therefore, that the Aalst figures are relatively higher than they would have been, had the surrounding countryside been taken into account as well. Nevertheless, in terms of the personal wealth possessed by households, Aalst seems to have occupied a middling position in between Kent and Cornwall throughout the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth. During this same period the growth rate of personal wealth in Aalst proved to be remarkably similar to the growth estimates compiled by Overton: +0,54% per year in the former and +0,55% in the latter. Unfortunately no English aggregate estimates of household wealth are available for the second half of the eighteenth century, so that for the time being it remains unknown if both areas began to diverge when wealth levels in Aalst started to fall.

No doubt closer to the everyday experience of the early modern citizenry of Aalst, it is also possible to compare their wealth to that of the inhabitants of the Flemish countryside. Some Master dissertations and studies of local history have used probate inventories to assess early modern living standards in particular rural communities. The data from three of those have been used here for comparison.³¹⁰ Unfortunately, aggregate wealth levels are not available for these case studies, so that the distribution of inventories over the absolute wealth categories employed in the original studies had to be retained (tables II.11 and II.12). Also, contrary to the previously presented figures, these wealth brackets are expressed in nominal terms rather than in constant prices.

Table II.11. A comparison between net worth in Aalst and in the region of Nevele (in percentages).

Wealth	1670-1681		1705-1715		1740-1745		1790-1795	
	Aalst	Nevele	Aalst	Nevele	Aalst	Nevele	Aalst	Nevele
< 0 – 300 fl.	24	59	17	49	24	44	32	31
300-1500 fl.	37	29	38	30	32	32	23	24
1500-6000 fl.	23	12	29	21	23	20	25	30
> 6000 fl.	17	0	17	0	22	4	20	14
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.
Nevele: Schelstraete, et al., "Het Einde Van De Onveranderlijkheid".

³⁰⁹ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*.

³¹⁰ On the region of Nevele (Land van Nevele): Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*; on Zaffelare: Zeischka, "Strukturen en leefpatronen" and on Melsele: Greet Van Der Hertem, "Een onderzoek naar de materiële leefwereld in een plattelandsgemeenschap: casus Melsele in de 17de en de 18de eeuw" (Ma Thesis, Ghent University, 1999).

The region of Nevele (Land van Nevele) comprised an area of 13 villages to the West of Ghent (North-West from Aalst), situated in Inner-Flanders. Much like the countryside around Aalst it was dominated by peasant smallholding and a strong involvement in linen production.³¹¹ The village of Zaffelare was located to the North of Aalst and characterized largely by the same features of commercial proto-industrialization and peasant agriculture. Melsele was situated on the Eastern fringes of Flanders, bordering the Antwerp region – an area characterized less by proto-industrialization and smallholding than Inner-Flanders.

Table II.12. Net worth, minus real estate in Aalst, Zaffelare and Melsele (in percentages).

Wealth	1670-1681			1705-1715			1740-1745			1790-1795		
	Aalst	Zaff.	Mels.									
<0 – 600 fl.	44		89	32	86		38	75	79	44	49	58
600-1.800 fl	24		8	27	12		23	15	17	20	27	28
>1.800 fl.	32			41	0		39	10	5	36	24	14
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Zaffelare and Melsele: Zeischka, "Strukturen En Leefpatronen".

Despite their geographical disparity, the evolution of wealth holdings in the three rural regions was remarkably similar. All three witnessed a gradual rise in nominal wealth levels from the late seventeenth until the middle of the eighteenth century. Over the following four decades however, the proportion of inventories in the higher (nominal) wealth brackets grew rapidly. By the end of the eighteenth century, the area of Nevele was the most prosperous of the three, with Zaffelare coming in second and Melsele in last place.³¹² Regardless of the extent of this growth in real terms, the contrast with Aalst is particularly striking. Whereas in Nevele the proportion of inventories worth less than 300 fl. dropped from 59% around 1670 to 31% by 1790, the share in Aalst actually rose from 24% to 31%. The reverse happened in the higher wealth brackets: only 12% of inventoried households in Nevele left more than 1.500 fl. around 1670, but 44% did so by the end of the eighteenth century. In Aalst this share rose much more modestly from 40% to 45%. A similar contrast between relatively stable wealth holdings in Aalst versus rapidly growing household wealth in the countryside is evident in the data from Zaffelare and Melsele.

While most households living in Aalst at the turn of the seventeenth century enjoyed significantly larger wealth holdings than did their rural counterparts, this advantage had all but disappeared by the end of the following century.

³¹¹ See also Maja Mechant, "Levensomstandigheden en overlevingsstrategieën van armen in het Land van Nevele (1690-1789)" (Ma Thesis, Ghent University, 2006).

³¹² The relative prosperity of Nevele compared to the rest of rural East-Flanders is confirmed by the poverty counts from the beginning of the nineteenth century: Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*, 197-98.

2.5. Conclusions

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the economy of Aalst was barely of more than local importance. In the eyes of both contemporary writers and modern historians, the town's importance was easily surpassed by both that of the fertile and industrious countryside that surrounded it and of the much more populous and commercial cities of Ghent and Brussels, each within no more than half a day's travel. Secondary towns like Aalst nevertheless fulfilled essential functions within the workings of the regional economy. Its markets bustled with activity as the enormous volumes of flax, yarn and linen produced on the countryside was brought to its markets and exported towards Ghent, Brussels or Antwerp – and even further from there. Large quantities of hops similarly passed through the markets of Aalst, and so did grains and other types of agricultural produce. For many of the town's tradesmen or craftsmen in the finishing industries, such commercial activity provided plenty of opportunity for important economic gains, especially during the second half of the eighteenth century when all activities on the Aalst market seem to have greatly expanded. Their involvement was nevertheless limited to a purely commercial role. There is no evidence of putting-out systems to be found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst, except perhaps on a small scale in the lace industry; nor is there much evidence for substantial urban investment in the production of hops. With respect to its principal trades, the town's involvement, especially during the 1670-1750 period, was overwhelmingly passive.

The disappearance of urban dynamism, the lack of urban industry and capitalist involvement, does not imply a state of poverty. During the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, estimated levels of household wealth were stable, or even slightly increasing until mid-century. The urban population left over in Aalst during this era of 'urban crisis' and demographic stasis was a relatively affluent one – more affluent than the industrious peasants on the countryside who experienced their 'golden age' during this time.³¹³

The second half of the eighteenth century brought a series of far-reaching changes to the economy of Aalst. The demographic growth experienced during this time, confirms the occurrence of a round of 'urbanisation from below' in which the town, in close interrelation with its thriving hinterland, was propelled forward. In a relatively short time-span both the town's population and its commercial activity expanded rapidly. The quantities of linen sold at the Aalst market reached new heights, while the partial canalization of the Dender enabled ever expanding volumes of commercial traffic to pass through the town. Notwithstanding this accelerating dynamism, the average wealth of households declined significantly during this period, and growing numbers of urban households resorted to spinning to make ends meet.

³¹³ Vandenbroeke, "Proto-industry in Flanders", 112.

III. THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF AN URBAN ECONOMY

1. Introduction

The previous chapter has attempted to outline, in general terms, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century economic fate of a provincial town in a heavily proto-industrialized region. It has drawn attention to the general disappearance of urban-based industries in Aalst, and its replacement by a rapidly expanding involvement in the commercialization of rurally-produced linen textiles. The markets of Aalst moreover served as an important trading hub for hops, as well as a growing local market for agricultural produce. The disparate source material from excise revenues, toll accounts and population counts indicate the close connection between the urban economy of Aalst and the rural hinterland which surrounded it, as well as its indirect ties to export-oriented commerce on a global scale.

However, what these flows of goods in and out of the town largely fail to reveal, is the social and economic character of the local, urban, economy itself. The portrait of Aalst's economic structure as sketched by Vilain XIII was an overwhelmingly passive one, it presented a regional market town wholly at the mercy of the developing agricultural and proto-industrial activities deployed in its surrounding hinterland. Yet how the urban economy benefited from proto-industrialization and commerce, and how this affected its social composition, is far from self-evident. Did the population of Aalst thrive on a parasitic, almost feudal, exploitation of their proto-industrial hinterland? Or were the town's broad middling layers uplifted by an *'urbanization from below'*, as prospering country dwellers drove up demand for their goods and services? And how did the booming trade in rurally produced linens which was conducted on its markets affect its citizenry? The aggregate indicators presented in the previous chapter leave these questions largely unanswered. Without closer scrutiny of the various social and economic relations and interdependencies involved, it seems difficult to discern whether the economy of Aalst was primarily driven by a class of rentiers, a commercial bourgeoisie, or broad, and prospering middling sorts – or any combination of these.

The question as to the socio-economic character of eighteenth-century Aalst is closely related to long-standing historiographical debates on the principal processes of early modern social transformation. What social changes, it could be asked, did the strong intensification of proto-industry, the commercial recovery of the later eighteenth century, the timid appearance of urban manufactures,

and the gradual monetization of the early modern economy bring about? As in the debates on the nineteenth-century standard of living, interpretations diverge and alternate theories abound. In 1972, when Franklin Mendels first proposed the 'theory of proto-industrialization', it was the region of Inland Flanders which served as his main case study. He described the area as an economy trapped in a perverse Malthusian cycle which permitted no long-term increase in the living standards of the rural population.³¹⁴ Such pessimism was vehemently denied by Chris Vandebroek, who argued that, on the contrary, eighteenth-century Flanders "was a thriving region, with a relatively high purchasing power and a large volume of profits deriving from competitive success in those sectors which specialized in exports."³¹⁵ Whereas Mendels envisaged processes of proletarianization and commercial exploitation in an impoverished Flemish countryside, Vandebroek described a widespread expansion of economic opportunities until at least the middle of the eighteenth century. Interpretations are hardly less contradictory with regards to the social transformations in the eighteenth-century urban world. Hugo Soly and Paul Klep for instance, discerned pronounced processes of proletarianisation and polarisation in the eighteenth-century towns of the southern Netherlands.³¹⁶ Their reading of eighteenth-century social history has been largely supported by the analyses of scholars interested in the social consequences of the Belgian industrial revolution. Although high levels of inequality and social polarization were accelerated by nineteenth-century industrialization, they were not caused by it, and were in fact firmly rooted in social processes which originated in the ancien régime.³¹⁷ Such claims of profound pre-industrial polarization in the Southern Netherlands have generally found support in the structuralist research on social stratifications carried out during the 1970's.³¹⁸ Bruno Blondé on the other hand, saw in the growth of a number of secondary towns in the southern part of Brabant during the second half of the eighteenth century, evidence for an 'urbanisation from below' that mostly benefited the urban social middling groups.³¹⁹ Seen from this perspective, the demand for urban goods and services generated on the prospering proto-industrial countryside served to counteract the tendencies towards proletarianization and impoverishment evident in the larger, industrializing cities such as Antwerp.³²⁰

³¹⁴ Mendels, "Proto-industrialization"; Mendels, *Industrialization and population pressure*. A substantial part of his research was based on the evidence for the parish of Erembodegem, close to Aalst. See also Vermoesen, "Markttoegang"

³¹⁵ Vandebroek, "Proto-industry in Flanders", 117.

³¹⁶ Klep, *Bevolking en arbeid*, 261, 328; Soly, "Social aspects"; Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes", 231.

³¹⁷ Van den Eeckhout and Hannes, "Sociale verhoudingen"; Segers, "Oysters and rye bread"; Hannes and Vanhaute, "Economische verandering".

³¹⁸ Conclusions from these research projects are hardly unequivocal, however. Much research unfortunately remained unfinished or remained largely focused on deciding on the methodological criteria of determining 'stratifications'. See J. De Belder, "Elementen van sociale identifikatie van de Antwerpse bevolking op het einde van de XVIIIde eeuw" (doctoral thesis, UGent, 1974); Degryse, "Sociale ongelijkwaardigheid"; Herman Balthazar, "Fortuins- en inkomensonderzoek (19de-20ste eeuw). Een kritische status questionis," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 84 (1971). An overview in Eric Vanhaute, "Het debat dat er geen was. Sociale stratificatie in de geschiedschrijving," in *Docendo discimus. Liber amicorum Romain Van Eenoo*, ed. J. Art and L. François (Ghent: 1999).

³¹⁹ Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*.

³²⁰ Similar interpretations in De Vries, *European urbanization*; Vandebroek, "Levensstandaard en tewerkstelling"; Vandebroek, "The regional economy".

In the present chapter the nature of the Aalst economy, and the ways in which it was transformed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will be scrutinized more closely. This will be attempted in four steps, the first of which confronts directly the issue of socio-economic inequality in the town. The second section turns towards the 'parasitic' aspect of the early modern town, by considering the relations of surplus-expropriation which tied the rentier population of Aalst to their rural surroundings. The subsequent part examines the social position of the urban middling groups, whereas the last part explores the interrelated issues of impoverishment, debt and monetization.

2. Economic inequality in Aalst

In studies of the historical evolution of social inequality, most interest has converged upon the issue of the relationship between economic growth and the (un)equal distribution of its gains. The way in which the riches of society are distributed over its composing layers and how this changed over time has always been central to theories of political economy, so that competing models of economic and societal development have proposed diverging ways of theorizing this relationship. In spite of a number of grand narratives that concern the evolution of pre-industrial inequality, such as the so-called Kuznets curve or the long-term relationship between proletarianisation and capitalism, few empirical studies have been able to trace patterns of socio-economic inequality throughout the early modern period.³²¹ Even for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England – certainly the most researched case so far – the empirical evidence presented in the literature seems inconclusive. Initial calculations based on the 'social tables' drawn up by contemporaries such as Gregory King led to a 'tentative hypothesis' of stability in income inequality throughout this period.³²² Based on similar, but extended and reconsidered archival material, this hypothesis was revised and replaced by an assertion of rising income and wealth inequality from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards.³²³ Despite extensive criticism on both the sources and methodologies of such research, the general consensus appears to hold that (real) inequality rose at some point between 1500 and 1850, although this has rarely been empirically tested for other parts of Europe.³²⁴ A recently published survey of 'pre-

³²¹ As a general introduction, see H. Kaelble and M. Thomas, "Introduction," in *Income Distribution in Historical Perspective*, ed. Y.S. Brenner, H. Kaelble, and M. Thomas (Cambridge: 1991); Van Zanden, "Tracing the beginning"; Soltow and Van Zanden, *Income and wealth inequality*; Branko Milanovic, *The haves and the have-nots. A brief and idiosyncratic history of global inequality* (London: 2011).

³²² L. Soltow, "Long-run changes in British income inequality," *Economic History Review* 21 (1968).

³²³ P.H. Lindert and J.G. Williamson, "Revising english social tables 1688-1812," *Explorations in Economic History* 19, no. 4 (1982); P.H. Lindert and J.G. Williamson, "Reinterpreting Britain's social tables, 1688-1913," *Explorations in Economic History* 20, no. 1 (1983); P.H. Lindert, "Unequal English wealth since 1670," *The Journal of Political Economy* 94, no. 6 (1986); Lindert, "When did inequality rise?"; Williamson, *Did British capitalism*.

³²⁴ This view is still mostly based on the pioneering research done by Lindert and Williamson (cited in the previous note), despite the fundamental criticisms in C.H. Feinstein, "The Rise and Fall of the Williamson curve," *Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988) and R.V. Jackson, "Inequality of Incomes and Lifespans in England since 1688," *Economic History Review* XLVII, no. 3 (1994). For recent interpretations that endorse the view of pre-industrial rise in inequality see Hoffman et al., "Real Inequality"; Lindert, "When did inequality rise?"; Luis Angeles, "GDP per capita or real wages? Making sense of conflicting views on pre-industrial Europe," *Explorations in Economic History* 45 (2008).

industrial inequality' around the world, on the other hand, concluded that "*the variance of inequality among countries then and now is similar, and this variance is much greater than any difference in average inequality between them then and now*".³²⁵

Based upon evidence on wealth inequality from cities in the Northern Netherlands and supported by disparate data from elsewhere in Europe, Jan Luiten van Zanden has proposed a so-called 'super Kuznets curve' for early modern Europe.³²⁶ He argued that even long before the industrial revolution and the onset of 'modern economic growth', economic development was positively related to inequality. Although a creeping level of inequality in early modern Europe seems to be generally accepted and increasingly well documented, the relationship with economic growth is not uncontested.³²⁷ Guido Alfani, for instance, has shown how wealth inequality continued to rise despite deteriorating economic conditions in Italian cities, and Mark Overton has demonstrated that inequality in England increased particularly fast during a period of stagnation and decline.³²⁸

A proxy frequently used for determining levels of income inequality has been the inequality of the (rental) value of houses. Since many early modern city magistrates in North-Western Europe assessed the value of houses for purposes of direct taxation, this is one of the few sources that provides an indication of levels of economic inequality. The value of the house inhabited by a family is thought to be more or less proportional to its income. Hence, the complete distribution of the (rental) value of all houses in a city might tell us something about its income distribution. However, some caveats are in order. The relationship between expenditure on housing and total income is not a strictly linear one. Due to Engel effects and a generally larger pressure at the bottom of the urban housing market, poorer households tended to spend a significantly larger proportion of their income on housing than the richer ones. Consequently, the inequality of housing is generally an underestimation of actual income inequalities. Another problem attached to the use of housing distributions rather than income data, is the recurring observation that a certain share of the population is systematically absent from the housing taxes.³²⁹ This should not come as a surprise, since eighteenth-century census data demonstrates that a substantial number of families rented rooms or basements in the houses of others. These heads of household, together with the share of the urban population that was inherently mobile, are hard to trace. More often than not, these groups will have been less well-off than their taxed counterparts, even though that should not count as a general rule. Conversely, those households providing room for boarders are most likely to have belonged to the middling groups, which similarly suggests that actual inequality might have been higher than the housing taxes would allow for.

As has been established in chapter 2, the fiscal archives of Aalst provide us with a number of tax rolls based on the value of houses for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first serious effort to carefully record the housing value of all urban dwellings in Aalst was undertaken with the

³²⁵ Milanovic, Lindert, and Williamson, "Pre-Industrial Inequality", although they went on to add that since modern societies convert less 'potential inequality' into 'actual inequality', the relative 'extraction' and 'repression' were much greater in the past.

³²⁶ Van Zanden, "Tracing the beginning". The analogy is with Simon Kuznets, "Economic growth and income inequality," *American Economic Review* 45 (1955).

³²⁷ Recent publications are Angeles, "GDP per capita or real wages?"; Hanus, "Affluence and inequality"; Jackson, "Inequality of Incomes"; Hoffman et al., "Real Inequality".

³²⁸ Alfani, "Wealth inequalities"; Overton, "Household wealth".

³²⁹ This was the case throughout Europe, during the whole medieval and early modern period. Compare for instance with the figures gathered in R. Goldthwaite, *The economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: 2009); R. Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 1994)

'prijisje' (lit. 'assessment') of 1672.³³⁰ From that year onwards, this (proto-)cadastral survey would serve as the basis for collecting the yearly housing levies until the end of the eighteenth century. The contribution 'attached to' each house relative to the others remained the same for over a century.³³¹ Whenever new dwellings were constructed, they were valued according to the same criteria used in 1672. Since no full-scale re-evaluation of the rental value of the houses was undertaken until the end of the ancien régime, the consecutive tax lists show a great deal of immobility. Only when houses were split, merged, (re)built or demolished, did the distribution of housing values change. In other words: after 1672 it becomes difficult to track short-term changes in overall inequality levels based on the taxation of housing values. Nevertheless, given the fact that between 1672 and 1791 more than 25% new houses (that were newly assessed) were added to the tax lists, the housing taxes throughout the eighteenth century can at least continue to offer us some indication of the direction in which economic inequality was moving. A full re-evaluation of all housing values – similar to the assessment of 1672 – was undertaken at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the development of the cadastral system.

Table III.1. Housing inequality in Aalst, 1602-1890.

Year	Gini	Theil	Share of Middle 50%	Median value (in fl.)³³²	N
1602	0,467	0,372	37 %		526
1672	0,493	0,445	33 %	775	809
1705	0,486	0,418	34 %	750	850
1742	0,481	0,403	35 %	750	865
1791	0,507	0,451	33 %	649	1.014
1834	0,512	0,440	33 %	1.679	1.690
1860	0,515	0,451	30 %	1.331	1.930

Sources:

MAA, OAA, nr. 265 (1602), nr. 264 (1672), nr. 269 (1705), nr. 273 (1742), nr. 277 (1791) and Jacob, "Grondgebruik".

Note:

The Gini coefficient can vary between 0 (total equality) and 1 (total inequality).

The Theil coefficient also denotes larger inequality as the coefficient rises above 0 (total equality), but contrary to the Gini it does not have an upper bound.

³³⁰ MAA, OAA, nr. 264.

³³¹ This does not mean that the income from these levies remained the same over time, as the city magistrate started to collect multiple rental taxes at once (for instance, in 1791 a tax was collected of 3,5 house levies).

³³² The median capital value of the house, expressed in guilders. The figures are strictly nominal, so they have not been deflated. To arrive at this capital value, the 'cadastral income' has been multiplied by 1.5 to arrive at the rental value, and has then been capitalized at a 4% rate. Contemporaries seem to have used the same multiplier to arrive at the theoretical value of the dwellings (Hannes and Vanhaute, "Economische verandering").

The data in table III.1 should be read and interpreted with due caution. The oldest tax list available, a levy from 1602, shows a considerably lower degree of coverage, as approximately 35% of the population was left out of it. Hence an underestimation of actual inequality around the beginning of the seventeenth century seems probable. Some degree of inertia seems furthermore likely in the tax lists of 1705, 1742 and 1791, as a large degree of house values were not updated from year to year. Moreover, since the number of boarding individuals and households increased by the end of the eighteenth century, it seems likely that the 1791 tax list in particular represents an underestimation of actual levels of inequality. The nineteenth-century data is based on cadastral surveys, which should yield a broadly comparable measure of inequality compared to the 1672 survey.³³³ When comparing the 1672 survey to the 1834 cadaster, a large degree of continuity seems to be most evident. The Gini coefficient increased from 0,49 to 0,51, but the Theil index of inequality declined slightly from 0,45 to 0,44.³³⁴ The share of total housing value held by the middle 50% was precisely the same in both tax lists. Between 1834 and 1860 inequality increased according to both the Gini and Theil coefficients, and the share held by the middle 50% of taxed households declined slightly. These results seem to suggest a relatively constant level of inequality during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (although this can in large part be attributed to the immobility of the sources), and a gradual increase during the nineteenth century.³³⁵ If the intervening tax lists offer any sort of indication, a slight decline in inequality might have taken place during the second half of the seventeenth- and the beginning of the eighteenth-century, followed by a gradual deepening of the social divide from mid-century onwards.

This pattern is largely consistent with the 'pessimistic' interpretations of eighteenth-century social and economic development in the southern Low Countries mentioned earlier. Far from witnessing the numeric expansion of newly prosperous middling groups, the (half-)century leading up to the industrial revolution clearly prefigured the tendencies towards deepening inequality and polarization that continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century.³³⁶

³³³ Hannes and Vanhaute, "Economische verandering" for the nineteenth century. See on the seventeenth- and 18th-century sources in general: Coppens, "Fiscale bronnen"; Hannes, "Het primitieve kadaster".

³³⁴ The difference between both measures is determined mostly by a difference in distributional focus. Whereas the Gini is most sensitive to changes around the mode of the distribution, the Theil is disproportionately (non-linearly) affected by distributional transfers affecting the extremes of the distribution. See D.G. Champenowne, "A comparison of measures of income distribution," *Economic Journal* 84 (1974); Paul D. Allison, "Measures of Inequality," *American Sociological Review* 43, no. 6 (1978); F.A. Cowell, *Measuring Inequality* (Oxford: 2000).

³³⁵ The inequality figures that we found for seventeenth and 18th century Aalst are broadly comparable to the results of other case-studies based on the rental value of houses in pre-industrial times. For instance in 1561 Amsterdam exhibited a slightly higher Gini of 0,57 while the figures for Leiden and Dordrecht were somewhat lower (0,45 and 0,44 respectively), see W.C. Boeschoten and E. Van Manen, "Een welstandsverdeling van Haarlem in 1543. Kwantitatieve toetsing van een zestiende-eeuwse fiscale bron," *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 98 (1983); Van Zanden, "Tracing the beginning". The same is true of the North-Brabantine city of 's Hertogenbosch which was characterized by Gini coefficients of 0,47 and 0,45 in the seventeenth century (Hanus, "Affluence and inequality"). The small city of Nivelles in the agrarian region of Walloon Brabant also appears to have been characterized by a somewhat more equal income (housing) distribution than Aalst in 1672 (a Gini of 0,45). In Nivelles inequality had risen considerably by 1800, even though it remained at a lower level than in Aalst (see Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling").

³³⁶ See also Soly, "Social aspects"; Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes"; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*; Segers, "Oysters and rye bread"; Hugo Soly, "Economische en sociaal-culturele structuren: continuïteit en verandering," in *Stad in Vlaanderen. Cultuur en maatschappij, 1477-1787*, ed. J. Van Der Stock (Brussel: 1991); Van den Eeckhout and Hannes, "Sociale verhoudingen".

By and large, the data on wealth inequality gathered from the sample of approximately 500 after-death inventories corroborates these findings (table 2). The distribution of *total assets* (excluding outstanding debt) seems to demonstrate overall stability in the level of inequality, with perhaps a slight increase around the extremes, as suggested by the rising Theil and the share held by the top 10%. A similar tendency is clear in the figures for total *net worth* (including debt), which indicate a rising level of Gini inequality from 0,76 in the second half of the seventeenth century to 0,84 by the end of the eighteenth century.³³⁷ It is clear that the share in total net worth held by the middling 50% of inventoried households decreased throughout the period under scrutiny, while that of the top 10% expanded. It should be noted that, in terms of actual wealth inequality, these figures represent certain underestimations as a large number of poorer households did not leave after-death inventories. Since this bias did not seem to have changed significantly over time, it seems reasonable to assume that the evolution in the inequality of inventoried wealth reflects that of total wealth in Aalst (see chapter 2).

Table III.2. Wealth inequality in Aalst, as calculated from probate inventories (unweighted).

	Gini	Theil	Mid. 50%	Top 10%	N
1670-1681					
Net worth	0,76		17 %	61 %	124
Total assets	0,67	0,91	21 %	53 %	124
1705-1715					
Net worth	0,80		14 %	71 %	126
Total assets	0,72	1,35	17 %	63 %	126
1740-1745					
Net worth	0,78		14 %	64 %	120
Total assets	0,72	1,05	18 %	59 %	120
1790-1795					
Net worth	0,84		13 %	69 %	133
Total assets	0,72	1,13	20 %	58 %	133

Note:

The unweighted inventory data were used for this analysis.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; n° 1906-1915.

This unabatedly high level of inequality in wealth and income in Aalst was accompanied by an equally undiminished degree of poverty and destitution of many. In his detailed study of the '*problem of pauperism*' in the second half of the eighteenth century, Paul Bonenfant evoked the impressive pre-occupation of contemporary commentators and law-makers with the interrelated problems of poverty and mendicity.³³⁸ According to him, poverty remained a widespread and structural feature of early

³³⁷ These figures seem slightly higher than those established for 1427 Pistoia (Gini 0,71) and 1620 Ivrea (0,68), but roughly comparable to Leiden, Haarlem and Alkmaar in the 15th and 16th centuries (each around 0,75) – see Alfani, "Wealth inequalities"; Van Zanden, "Tracing the beginning".

³³⁸ H. Bonenfant, *Le problème du paupérisme en Belgique à la fin de l'ancien régime* (Brussel: 1934). The problems of poverty and mendicity are repeatedly stressed in the travel diary and letters from Derival de Gomicourt (1782-1784): Derival, *Le voyageur dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens ou lettres sur l'état actuel de ces pays*, 6 vols. (Amsterdam: 1784).

modern society in the Southern Netherlands. The frequent aldermen decrees ordering the expulsion of all beggars from the streets of Aalst, indicate that the local policy makers were equally concerned with the issue throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³³⁹ The problem had certainly not been alleviated by the second half of the eighteenth century. In May 1777, the magistracy acted upon the swelling streams of “foreign beggars and idlers [...] that take the bread and alms of the needy that are incapable of working.”³⁴⁰ A few years earlier, in November 1770, the town’s aldermen wrote that “a great number of labourers, in all sorts of trades, remain without employment during part of the year, so that many are forced to beg for alms during wintertime.”³⁴¹

Around that time, an exceptional listing of all households receiving financial aid from the parochially organized *Tables of the Holy Spirit*, lists 98 provisioned households in four of the five town quarters.³⁴² When extrapolated to the whole town *intra muros*, this would suggest that approximately 15% of all households received regular aid from the parish. Most of the aid was reserved for the widowed and disabled, but winter and summer distributions were organized for the seasonally unemployed as well.³⁴³ Throughout the eighteenth century the amount of financial support provided by the parish in Aalst gradually increased (figure III.1). Although it is notoriously difficult to draw any firm conclusions with regards to actual levels of poverty from the extent of local poor relief, the data nevertheless suggest an undiminishing presence of poor households throughout the entire century. Given the progressively hardening attitudes of policy-makers towards poor relief during the second half of the eighteenth century, it seems particularly unlikely that a growing leniency with regards to provisioning might account for the attested increase.³⁴⁴ This attitude seems to be reflected in the declining number of alms yearly collected among the inhabitants of Aalst during the yearly house-to-house visits (figure III.1).

³³⁹ See for instance MAA, OAA, n° 17 (1661): “Alsoo men bevindt dat binnen dese stede ende schependom door de voorleden quade coniuncture des tijts sijn ghecommen ende noch daegelickx commen veele bedelaers ende vremdelinghen van alder aude soorten ontvreemdende de aelmoesen aende aerme inboorlinghen die op aelmoesen moeten leven, causerende overlast aen den huysshaudende borghers daer inne blijven continuerende niet teghenstaende alle voorgaende voorgeboden.” Similar measures were repeated every few years.

³⁴⁰ MAA, OAA, n° 18 (1777): “Alsoo niet iegenstaende haere Majesteyts placcaeten ende de ordonnantien politique geemaneert op het fait van vremde bedelaers ende lediggangers, daegelijcx dezelve meer ende meer toekomen, benemende het brood ende aelmoessen vande behoefte bedelaers die niet bequaem en zijn om te werken, omme waer inne te voorzien.”

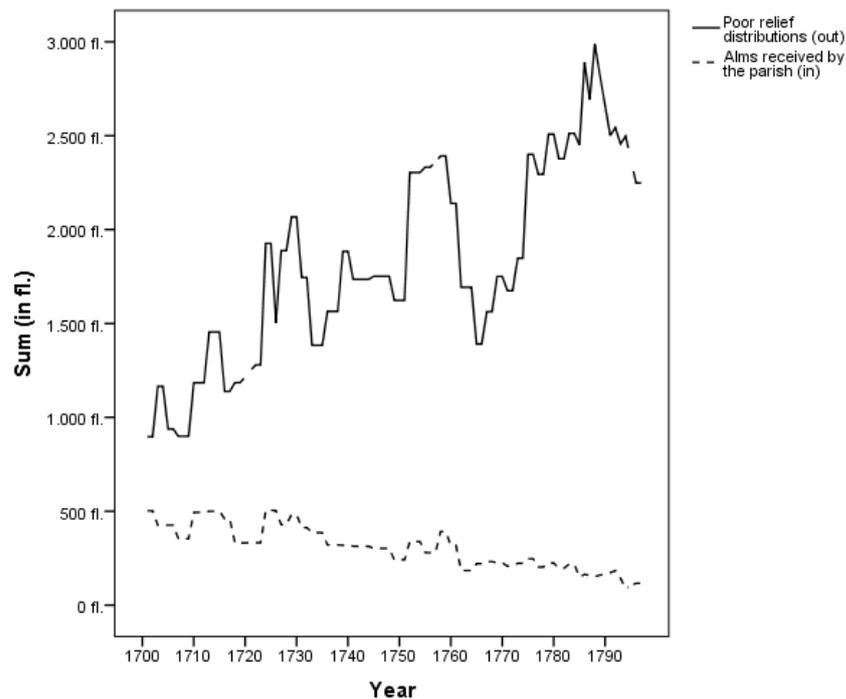
³⁴¹ MAA, OAA, liasse 933: “Un grand nombre d’ouvriers, dans toutes sortes de métiers, est une partie de l’année sans ouvrage et plusieurs sont obligés de demander des aumônes pendant l’hyver.” Cited in Bonenfant, *Le problème du pauperisme*.

³⁴² Jelle Moens, “De sociale politiek van de Heilige Geesttafel: Armeezorg te Aalst in de achttiende eeuw” (Ghent University, 2002), appendix 23; MAA, OAA, n° 2066.

³⁴³ See for instance the ‘summer roll’ of 1798, which counted 75 poor households (excluding the 16 individuals in the hospital): MAA, OAA, n° 2059. See also Moens, “De sociale politiek”, 104-17.

³⁴⁴ In general: Jütte, *Poverty and deviance*; Lenders, *Vilain XIII*; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*.

Figure III.1. Distribution of financial aid and alms by the Tables of the Holy Spirit, Aalst, 1700-1797.



Source:

Moens, "De Sociale Politiek", appendix 16.

Although indirectly, the poor relief distributions by the parochial Tables indicate that the number of households in financial distress did not decline throughout the eighteenth century. Among the inventoried households as well, poverty seems to have been all but alleviated by the end of the eighteenth century. The share of inventories that were recorded free of charge or '*pro deo*' rose from none in the 1670's to 4% circa 1710, 7% around mid-century and eventually 16% by the 1790's.³⁴⁵ There seems to be little reason then, to assume an amelioration in the living standards of the lower social strata in eighteenth-century Aalst. The incidence of poverty remained a structural feature of early modern urban society, and probably deepened even further towards the end of the ancien régime.

3. Aalst as a rentier economy

Having sketched the broad contours of socio-economic change in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst, the character of both that economy and the transformations which it went through, can be studied in somewhat more detail. An important question in this respect is whether Aalst, deprived of large-scale industrial activities, but with stable levels of household wealth until the middle of the eighteenth century, and situated amidst a vibrantly industrious countryside, sustained its economic power by means of a 'parasitic' relation to its hinterland. This question essentially harks back to the long-standing historiographical debate on the nature of early modern urbanity. It is, essentially, another way of asking whether the post-medieval, pre-industrial city was essentially a force for

³⁴⁵ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1815.

modernity or for traditionalism in European history. Whether it was, in somewhat hyperbolic terms, a harbinger of modern economic growth, or a parasite that hindered the transgression from a proto-industrial to an industrial world. Most of the traditional sweeping accounts of European economic history attributed a primordial role to urbanization as one of the principal dynamic factors in pre-industrial society.³⁴⁶ Yet deprived of its medieval demographic growth spurt and preceding its later industrial transformation, the contribution of the intervening *early modern* urbanity to economic history is not self-explanatory.³⁴⁷ In Flanders particularly, it is hard to see urbanization in itself as a major driving force from the late middle ages onwards. This ‘period of fallow’ in the history of European urbanization has given rise to a broad historiographical strand of research arguing for the passivity of the urban sector before the industrial revolution, and allocating the dynamics of change and modernity to the early modern countryside instead. Robert Brenner’s agrarian capitalism portrayed early-modern towns as rent-seeking communities, practically taking the place of medieval feudal lords.³⁴⁸ Although Brenner himself mostly focused on the contrasting social property relations in England, France and Central Europe, a similar stance has been laid out by Erik Thoen for the highly urbanized region of Inland Flanders.³⁴⁹ In this account, the towns of Inland Flanders are reduced not just to a traditionalized economic sector, but to an important obstacle for modernization and industrialization. By effectively expropriating any economic surplus produced by the rural peasantry, the early modern town delayed economic modernization. In such an economy where on the one hand economic development seems almost entirely dependent on rural productivity, yet at the same time this development is harnessed by the quasi-feudal power of an immobile urban bourgeoisie, endogenous growth seems quite unthinkable. Not only did such unequal property relations reduce the living standards and consumptive potential of the region’s peasant population to a minimum, according to Thoen they did not benefit the urban centres themselves much either. Endowed with incessant capital flows in the hands of the urban elites, many Flemish towns devolved from dynamic centres of production into mere commercial hubs of local importance at best.³⁵⁰ In such a Brennerian or Neo-Marxist perspective, the thriving markets of eighteenth century Aalst do not bode well, as they might symbolize nothing more than a final convulsion along a developmental dead end.

³⁴⁶ For instance Henri Pirenne, *Economic and social history of medieval Europe*, trans. I.E. Clegg (London: 1947); Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. II (London: 1978); F. Braudel, *The wheels of commerce*, trans. S. Roberts (London: 1982); M.M. Postan, *The medieval economy and society* (Harmondsworth: 1975); I. Wallerstein, *The modern world-system* (New York: 1974).

³⁴⁷ Recent (and diverging) perspectives in Paolo Malanima, *Pre-Modern European Economy. One thousand years (10th-nineteenth centuries)*, Global Economic History Series (Leiden: 2009), 201-53; Bruno Blondé and Ilja Van Damme, "Early Modern Europe: 1500-1800," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, ed. Peter Clark (Oxford: 2012). The most important exploratory surveys on this issue are Hohenberg and Lees, *The making of Urban Europe*; Bairoch, Batou, and Chèvre, *La population des villes*; De Vries, *European urbanization*.

³⁴⁸ Robert Brenner, "Agrarian class structure and economic development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past and present* 70 (1976). His treatment of the early modern city obviously harks back to the older debates on the ‘generative’ or ‘parasitic’ city: B.F. Hoselitz, "Generative and parasitic cities," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 3, no. 3 (1955); G. Sjoberg, *The Pre-Industrial City: Past and Present* (London: 1965); E.A. Wrigley, "Parasite or stimulus: the town in a pre-Industrial economy," in *Towns in Societies*, ed. P. Abrams and E.A. Wrigley (Cambridge: 1978).

³⁴⁹ Thoen, "A ‘commercial survival economy’”.

³⁵⁰ Thoen, "A ‘commercial survival economy’”, 141.

Although arguing from a different vantage point, Paul Klep had earlier reached similar conclusions for eighteenth-century Brabant.³⁵¹ He portrayed early modern urbanity as a typical case of rent-seeking capitalism, with capital flows from country to town again playing first fiddle. When Malthusian pressures in the countryside built up during the second half of the century, land prices rose and capital flows towards the urban bourgeoisie increased.³⁵² Again, urban parasitism supposedly topped off all surplus wealth created on the countryside, thereby inhibiting all potential for rural consumptive demand, and effectively draining it towards elitist conspicuous consumption. Although Klep originally contrasted the Brabantine experience of delayed industrial development with the much more dynamic situation in (proto-)industrializing Flanders, Phil Kint later applied a similar model to the case of nineteenth century Ghent.³⁵³ In his view, the economic growth kindled on the Flemish countryside was again entirely drained off to the towns – although Kint envisioned a more positive effect than the ill-fated consequences suggested by Thoen and Klep. Instead of being spent entirely on obsolete conspicuous consumption, Kint suggested that the mounting capital flows produced by rising agricultural productivity, spurred industrial investment in rapidly mechanizing Ghent. With regards to the timing and extent of mechanization however, Ghent was an exception in Flanders, and definitely not the rule. Even though budding industrialization was not entirely absent from places like Aalst since the end of the eighteenth century, a full scale deployment of industrial capitalism would only come about by the mid- to late nineteenth century. Given the prevalence of similar rural developments and the importance of rural to urban capital flows throughout most of Eastern Flanders, Kint's model lacks a thorough explanation of why these induced industrialization in Ghent, but not – for instance – in Aalst.³⁵⁴

In his study of urbanization in eighteenth century Brabant, Bruno Blondé also adapted the rent-seeking model of early modern urbanity proposed by Klep.³⁵⁵ He contrasted the diverging economic experience of the export-oriented, industrial cities in the north of Brabant (such as Antwerp or Lier) with that of the secondary central places in the south of the Duchy (such as Nivelles). Whereas during the second half of the eighteenth century, the former group experienced only modest urban growth and seemed to suffer from social and economic erosion, the latter grew at an unforeseen pace. Rural growth, stimulated by the development of a better transport infrastructure, improved agricultural productivity and expanding proto-industrial activity, contributed disproportionately to the development of the small- and medium sized towns. Blondé's analysis differed significantly from the traditional model of parasitic urbanization in his emphasis on the benign effects of this 'home growth' for the urban middling groups.³⁵⁶ The demand for urban services from the growing rural population as well as

³⁵¹ Klep, *Bevolking en arbeid*. A similar process is argued for in Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes", 231-34.

³⁵² The mechanics outlined by Klep resemble the structural model of town-countryside relations outlined in Hohenberg and Lees, *The making of Urban Europe*.

³⁵³ Kint, *Prometheus aangevuurd*.

³⁵⁴ The importance of capital flows between towns and country (and vice versa) in Flanders was already established in Paul Deprez, "Hypothekaire grondrenten in Vlaanderen gedurende de 18e eeuw," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 79 (1966).

³⁵⁵ Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*.

³⁵⁶ These positive social effects have been qualified somewhat in Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling".

from the ever-richer urban elites, had the potential of fuelling endogenous economic and urban growth.³⁵⁷

The image of disparate economic growth in the urban network of eighteenth century Brabant closely links up to Jan De Vries' assessment of European early modern urbanization.³⁵⁸ Whereas the period from 1650 to 1750 had been characterized by the development of a hierarchic urban system, the century after ca. 1750 witnessed a profound leveling of the urban rank-size distribution. Almost everywhere in Europe, it seems, did the small and secondary central places strengthen the base of the urban pyramid. Focusing on the urban network instead of the individual city has allowed De Vries to posit the generative and beneficial effects of a gradually commercializing *urban network* without denying the potentially parasitic rent-seeking behavior of any *individual* city.³⁵⁹ In such a perspective attention shifts away from the exploitative relationship between Aalst and its peasant hinterland and concentrates instead on the commercial ties between the town and the metropolises of Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels. Within this larger, Europe-wide urban system, numerous central places like Aalst served the function of commercially integrating their rural hinterlands through the marketing and distribution of their produce and the provisioning of specialized services and consumer goods.³⁶⁰ Any urban revival in eighteenth century Aalst would thus fit into a Malthusian narrative of symbiotic town-country relations, improving material living standards and endogenously created economic growth.

3.1. The composition of household wealth

In assessing the character of the early modern economy of Aalst, it might prove useful to consider not merely the level, but also the composition of household wealth. Since the stocks of wealth recorded in after-death inventories can be regarded as the frozen traces of a wide variety of income and expenditure flows, their composition offers no more than a tentative indication of the sources of income enjoyed and the economic relations sustained by the diversity of households which together comprised the urban society. With regards to the ability of households to *rentier*, to live from the income passively generated from prior investments in real estate or annuities, the wealth composition as revealed by the after-death inventories, is nevertheless particularly informative.

³⁵⁷ Also explored in B. Blondé, "The reconquista and the structural transformations in the economy of the Southern Netherlands." (paper presented at the Las Sociedades Ibéricas y el mar a finales del siglo 16: congreso internacional, Lisboa, 1998).

³⁵⁸ De Vries, *European urbanization*.

³⁵⁹ See also Epstein, "Town and country"; E.A. Wrigley, "City and country in the past: a sharp divide or a continuum?," in *Poverty, Progress, and Population*, ed. E.A. Wrigley (Cambridge: 2004), 256-57.

³⁶⁰ Here of course, De Vries' model of European urbanization connects most closely to his work on early modern consumer demand: De Vries, "Peasant demand"; De Vries, "Between purchasing power"; De Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

Table III.3. Average wealth composition of households in 1672, in guilders.

	Unweighted	Weighted	Bottom 20%	Middle 20%	Top 20%
<i>Absolute</i>					
Home	854	831	94	380	2.457
Household goods	567	587	125	468	1.390
Production capital	184	163	25	77	476
Cash	166	245	33	90	541
Short-term credit	370	300	14	157	1.304
Houses rented out	201	263	0	97	693
Rural property	890	958	11	215	3.454
Annuities & obligations	1.913	1.254	17	260	8.284
Total	5.144	4.601	319	1.745	18.601
Debt	1.181	1.247	228	685	3.044
<i>Percentages</i>					
Home	17 %	18 %	29 %	22 %	13 %
Household goods	11 %	12 %	39 %	27 %	7 %
Production capital	4 %	4 %	8 %	4 %	3 %
Cash	3 %	5 %	10 %	5 %	3 %
Short-term credit	7 %	7 %	4 %	9 %	7 %
Houses rented out	4 %	6 %	0 %	6 %	4 %
Rural property	17 %	21 %	4 %	12 %	19 %
Annuities & obligations	37 %	27 %	5 %	15 %	45 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
% Indebtedness	23 %	27 %	72 %	39 %	16 %

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801.

Tax list (for weights): MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 264.

Table III.3 presents a breakdown of household wealth in 1672 Aalst over seven main categories. The first two columns demonstrate that there is little difference between the original data and the adjusted sample which attempts to take the social bias of the sources into account.³⁶¹ On average, real estate (buildings and land holdings) took up the largest share of a household's wealth, accounting for 38-45% of the total. In second place came long-term credit investments (27-37%), followed only in third place by household goods (11-12%). The importance of credit owed to the deceased – in the form of annuities, obligations and short-term loans, should be qualified by taking into account that the average household also owed 23-27% of its total wealth in either short- or long-term credit. Nevertheless, the importance of income-yielding assets – in the form of real estate, annuities and obligations, is quite overwhelming. Even accounting for the social bias of the sources, the average household around 1672 had 54% of its total wealth invested in the form of income-yielding capital. In absolute terms this amounted to a total of 2.475 fl., an investment which was capable of yielding approximately 100 fl. in capital interest per year – or roughly one third of a fully

³⁶¹ See chapter 1 on the details of this weighing method.

employed, skilled master craftsman's yearly wage.³⁶² At a time when urban industrial production gradually disappeared, such capital income flows must surely have played an important role in the economic structure of the town. There is thus good reason why at least to some extent, the economy of Aalst in the second half of the seventeenth century might be seen as a rentier economy.

Average households in late seventeenth-century Aalst apparently enjoyed a reasonably comfortable financial buffer of income-yielding capital goods to supplement their household labour incomes. This finding furthermore seems fairly robust, given that there is barely any difference to be found between the original and the adjusted (weighted) results. Averages can be misleading however, and all the more so when dealing with highly skewed distributions such as those of wealth holdings. The three rightmost columns in table 4.6 illustrate the differences in absolute and relative wealth composition between the top, middle and bottom quintiles of the inventory sample. It is clear that the asset portfolios of top- and bottom-tier households had little in common. Whereas among the top 20% of the inventoried population 68% of wealth was on average invested in income-yielding forms of capital, this amounted to only 9% in the lowest quintile. The middle 20% of taxed households nevertheless had, on average, 33% of their wealth invested in income-yielding assets. At the other end of the wealth spectrum, the value of domestic household goods and the home itself together occupied 68% of total assets among the poor group, as opposed to only 20% among the former. This is not to say that the richer inhabitants of Aalst spent less on their domestic comfort than poorer inhabitants did, but rather that Engel effects manifested themselves very clearly with regards to the distribution of household wealth over its diverse components. Although the share of these 'domestic' wealth constituents proved remarkably rigid throughout the long eighteenth century, the proportion of capital goods did not (table III.4).

The proportion of all income-yielding assets (land, long-term credit and rented out houses) in total wealth clearly declined over time: from 58% in the 1670's, to 52% at the beginning of the eighteenth century, 43% in the middle of the eighteenth and finally a mere 38% by the end of the century. If Aalst had been a rentier society around the end of the seventeenth century, it appears to have been so to a diminishing extent as the subsequent century progressed. In the following paragraphs the nature and declining extent of these urban investments will be further considered.

³⁶² Calculated at a fairly modest capital rent of 4%. A master craftsman's wage is taken at 24 styvers per day, at 250 working days a year. C. Verlinden and E. Scholliers, *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant*, 4 vols. (Brugge: 1973).

Table III.4. Wealth composition in Aalst over time, unweighted data, in fl., constant 1670-1681 prices.

	1670-1681	1705-1715	1740-1745	1790-1795
<i>Absolute</i>				
Home	854	892	961	1.478
Household goods	566	730	719	495
Production capital	184	449	651	506
Cash	166	610	521	237
Short-term credit	370	505	1.130	320
Houses rented out	201	305	218	263
Rural property	890	453	1.091	440
Annuities & obligations	1.913	2.600	1.769	1.054
Total	5.144	6.543	7.060	4.794
Debt	1.181	943	895	1.457
<i>Percentages</i>				
Home	17 %	14 %	14 %	31 %
Household goods	11 %	11 %	10 %	10 %
Production capital	4 %	7 %	9 %	11 %
Cash	3 %	9 %	7 %	5 %
Short-term credit	7 %	8 %	16 %	7 %
Houses rented out	4 %	5 %	3 %	5 %
Rural property	17 %	7 %	15 %	9 %
Annuities & obligations	37 %	40 %	25 %	22 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
% Indebtedness	23 %	14 %	13 %	30 %

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

3.2. The ownership of rural real estate

Real estate was one of the principal components in the asset portfolios of the inhabitants of early modern Aalst, constituting 38% of the value of average household wealth in 1672. Urban land ownership in the countryside is just one dimension of this investment in real estate, but a dimension that has been discussed with notable frequency and passion in historiography. As the most palpable symbol of rural surplus-expropriation by the early modern city, it has been central to debates concerning the character of both the urban and the rural pre-industrial European economy. Such direct flows of income from town to country have been considered crucial in both directions. On the one hand the influence of the urban bourgeoisie and its various consecutive 'offensives' on the rural countryside have been regarded as essential in the transformation from a feudal to a capitalist agrarian organization. On the other hand, these income flows have been seen as essential to the patterns of economic development, rent-seeking and consumption potential of the early modern city itself.

In the first sample period (1670-1681) fully 44% of all inventoried households were in the possession of rural real estate. Taking the upward social bias of the sources into account (by

reweighting them as described above), yields an estimated total of 32% with land holdings in the entire town. Throughout the entire period studied, the proportion of households holding rural real estate declined. From 44% of inventoried households in the first sample period, the share of landowning households fell to 39% c. 1710, to 31% by the middle of the eighteenth century, and finally 24% around the turn of the century. The proportion of inventories with land holdings had thus almost been halved over the course of the long eighteenth century. Far from an increasing involvement of the urban bourgeoisie on the countryside, these figures suggest a gradual retreat from it – at least as far as the majority of urban inhabitants is concerned.³⁶³ Table III.5 shows that this withdrawal from the countryside by a growing share of the urban population was initially countered by the expanding acreage owned by those that did remain active on the rural land market. Their average land holding increased to a peak of almost 5,5 ha per household in the middle of the eighteenth century. Between 1670 and 1745 there was a clear process of polarization taking place in rural land ownership among the inhabitants of Aalst. Increasingly less households owned progressively more rural property, whereas a growing share of the Aalst population was no longer involved in rural land ownership at all. In the second half of the eighteenth-century the ownership of rural real estate would decline even more rapidly, both in the proportion of households with ownership and in the mean size of estates possessed.

Table III.5. Ownership of rural real estate in Aalst inventories.

Period	% of inventories with land holdings	Mean number of ha per household	Mean number of ha per household with land holdings
1670-1681	44 %	1,55 ha	3,57 ha
1705-1715	39 %	1,45 ha	3,74 ha
1740-1745	31 %	1,69 ha	5,48 ha
1790-1795	24 %	0,36 ha	1,49 ha

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Throughout the last quarter of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries however, the rural real estate of the urban citizenry amounted to approximately 1,5 ha per household. Although this hardly turns the average inhabitant of Aalst into a large landowner, such ownership is not entirely deprived of significance either. In fact, many peasants in the villages nearby had to make do with smaller parcels. At the end of the seventeenth century, 44% of households in rural Lede cultivated less than 1 ha of land – a proportion which dropped to 36% in 1751, but rose to 49% by the end of the eighteenth century.³⁶⁴ In Haaltert, Denderleeuw and Pollare as well, 34%, 36% and 37% respectively subsisted on land holdings smaller than 1 ha around the middle of the eighteenth century.³⁶⁵ In light of this pre-dominance of smallholding in the countryside around Aalst, an average of 1,5 ha per

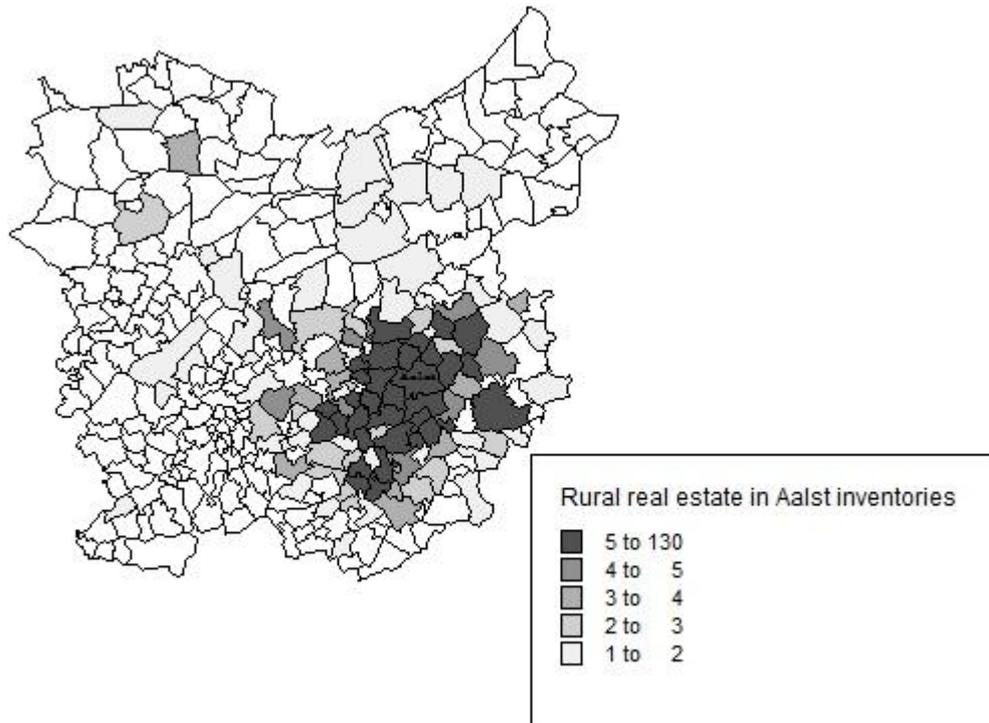
³⁶³ Compare with Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'" and also indirectly Kint, *Prometheus aangevuurd*.

³⁶⁴ J. De Brouwer, *Geschiedenis van Lede: het dorpsleven, het parochieleven, het volksleven* (Lede: 1963).

³⁶⁵ J. De Brouwer, "Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van Denderleeuw," *Het Land van Aalst* 1 (1960); J. De Brouwer, "De staten van goed als bron voor het leefmilieu gedurende de 17de-18de eeuw te Haaltert en te Kerksen," *Land van Aalst* 26 (1974); J. De Brouwer, "Geschiedenis van Pollare," *Het Land van Aalst* 25, no. 1 (1973).

household implies a sizable source of surplus extraction to be gained through rental incomes. However, for the majority of urban households the ownership of rural real estate was never more than a modest wealth buffer and a supplementary income. In many cases this rural real estate was little more than the remnants of earlier migration from the countryside. The share of inventoried households able to live entirely from the leases paid for their rural estates alone, constituted only between 3% and 6% throughout the period under scrutiny.³⁶⁶

Map III.1. Rural real estate in Aalst inventories (seventeenth & eighteenth centuries).



Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The retreat of the urban bourgeoisie from the rural land market during the second half of the eighteenth century, when average acreage per inventoried household declined to less than 0,4 ha, is corroborated by evidence from the rural communities in the immediate surroundings of the town. In Lede, eight kilometers to the North-East of Aalst, the (absolute) number of property owners from Aalst who held their estate in direct exploitation declined from 30 to 18 between the beginning and the end of the eighteenth century.³⁶⁷ Their share in the total territory under cultivation in Lede similarly dropped from 37% to 20% over the same period. Data on the buyers of land in Okegem likewise

³⁶⁶ This was 4% in the 1670's, 5% around 1710, 6% in the 1740's and 3% around 1790. The estimated income received in lease (see table *** for the median lease price used) from these estates exceeded the level of 1 welfare ratio, meaning that it represents the equivalent income necessary to provide in the cost of living for a family of four (Allen, "The great divergence"; in this case Allen's Antwerp CPI has been used).

³⁶⁷ De Brouwer, *Geschiedenis van Lede*, 215-16.

confirms the low degree of urban involvement in rural real estate in het Land van Aalst.³⁶⁸ During the second half of the eighteenth century, only 4% of all buyers on the land market there were urban inhabitants.

The declining urban involvement on the land markets of het Land van Aalst sits uncomfortably with the usual account of increasing bourgeois speculation and surplus expropriation in eighteenth-century Flanders. Fragmentary evidence for Nevele, Meigem and Eke – to the North and North-West of Aalst, all under the influence of Ghent – suggests a rising, or at least stationary degree of urban involvement throughout the eighteenth century.³⁶⁹ Land speculation by the urban bourgeoisie has been commonly invoked in order to explain the rapidly rising levels of land prices and rents in Flanders.³⁷⁰ Such an explanation seems inadequate to account for the situation in Aalst, however, as land prices surged during the very same period in which urban households were abandoning their rural land ownership. Table III.6 shows mean and median prices gathered from a random sample of land parcels owned by inventoried households in Aalst. Prices for over 700 different lots of arable land owned by the inhabitants of Aalst were gathered. When lease prices were recorded they have also been included, although these were much scarcer in the data used here.

Table III.6. Land prices of arable property owned by inhabitants of Aalst.

	Land selling price (st. per roede)			Land lease price (st. per roede)			Mean land rent	Median land rent
	Mean	Median	N	Mean	Median	N		
1670-1681	26	20	160	0,5	0,5	6	1,9 %	2,5 %
1705-1715	19	18	119	0,6	0,7	8	3,2 %	3,9 %
1740-1745	40	40	23	1,1	1,1	71	2,8 %	2,8 %
1790-1795	117	105	31	2,2	2,2	76	1,9 %	2,1 %

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Between the third quarter of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, land prices were gradually declining. Since lease prices remained stable or increasing, the annual return on investments in rural land holdings increased significantly: from an estimated 1,9% in the 1670's to 3,2% around 1710. From the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards, land prices started to rise, with the lease and profit largely keeping pace. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the value of rural property exploded. Between 1710 and 1790, the price of rural land had increased six

³⁶⁸ H. Van Isterdael, "Evolutie van de grond- en pachtprizen te Okegem (17de-18de eeuw)," *Het Land van Aalst* 32 (1980): 207.

³⁶⁹ For Nevele see P. Deprez, "De boeren in de 16de, 17de en 18de eeuw," in *Flandria Nostra*, ed. L. Broeckx (Antwerp: 1957), for Eke: G. Coppieters, "Eke 1571-1834 : een landschap in historisch perspectief aan de hand van kadastrale documenten" (Ma Thesis, Ghent University, 1991), and for Meigem: P. Deprez, "Uitbatingen en grondbezit in Meigem (1571-1787). Een methodologisch artikel," *Handelingen van de Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 10 (1956).

³⁷⁰ See P. Deprez, "Hypothecaire grondrenten in Vlaanderen gedurende de 18e eeuw," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 79 (1966); F. De Wever, "Pachtprizen in Vlaanderen en Brabant in de achttiende eeuw. Bijdrage tot de conjunctuurstudie," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 85 (1972); F. De Wever, "Pacht- en verkoopprijzen in Vlaanderen (16de - 18de eeuw). Bijdrage tot de conjunctuurstudie tijdens het Ancien Régime," *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 59 (1978).

fold. As has been attested for other rural case-studies in Flanders as well, lease prices did not follow suit: they increased with a factor of 3,7 between 1710 and 1790. Hence, the return from investments in rural property dropped considerably, to less than 2%.

The evolution of lease- and selling prices of arable land owned by the citizens of Aalst was comparable to that in Okegem, where prices increased 5-fold between 1710 and 1790. In Brabantine Asse, only 14 km. to the East of Aalst, prices increased 4-fold. In Zele, in the Eastern part of Flanders, where proto-industrialization was much less intense and small-holding not quite the norm, the increase was more modest, although selling prices nevertheless tripled. Even though the prices of rural real estate owned by the inhabitants of Aalst rose rapidly throughout the eighteenth century, this does not seem to have been out of step with the evolution outside the region.

Table III.7. Average selling prices of arable land in Flanders & Brabant, in styvers per roede.

	Aalst	Okegem	Nevele	Zele	Asse
1670-1680	26	20		42	
1705-1715	19	24	10	41	22
1740-1745	40	41		53	
1790-1795	117	128	113	112	95

Sources:

Aalst:	MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.
Okegem:	Van Isterdael, "Evolutie".
Nevele:	Deprez, "De Verkoopprijs".
Zele:	De Kezel, "Grondbezit in Vlaanderen".
Asse:	Van Buyten, "Grondbezit En Grondwaarde".

Erik Thoen has explained the temporary lull in the 'bourgeois infiltration of the countryside' in Inland Flanders by referring to the rural affluence generated by the then blossoming proto-industry on the countryside. The linen cottage industry profited from an increased supply of labour during this period, which resulted in a growing division of land holdings, a larger participation of peasants on the land-market and eventually rising land prices.³⁷¹ Since lease prices increasingly lagged behind selling prices, capital investments in land became less lucrative for those who were not directly involved in the 'commercial survival economy' of Inland Flanders. Land ownership in Aalst proves to be a case in point, as the withdrawal of urban capital from the rural land market took place in a context of dwindling returns on rural property investments. The fact that even the richest 5% of inventoried households invested substantially less in rural property than half a century earlier (from 20% of their total assets around 1740 to 13% in the 1790's), indicates that this disinvestment was not only driven by inability, but also by changing opportunities and relative profit margins.

The final years of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth witnessed a so-called 'third offensive of the bourgeoisie' in Inland Flanders. As rural estates that had previously belonged to religious institutions were being publicly sold on a large scale, urban elites especially are

³⁷¹ Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'", 135; Vandebroek, "The regional economy"; Mendels, "Proto-industrialization".

thought to have considerably expanded their rural portfolio's.³⁷² As agricultural productivity and rental incomes from the countryside started to grow, these investments began to pay off for the urban social groups that invested in them. Phil Kint has estimated that in the first half of the nineteenth century, approximately 35% to 45% of all land income generated in the province of Eastern Flanders flowed toward the urban economy.³⁷³ According to his (rudimentary) calculations, the size of rental incomes in Ghent even surpassed the total income created by the industrial cotton industry – the economic sector that, after all, was to be the cradle of further industrialization in Flanders.

Ghent might have been the exception rather than the rule, however. The ability of Aalst to extract a comparable share of the rural surplus was much more limited. Already at the end of the eighteenth century when urban landholding in Aalst was at its lowest, the wealthy bourgeoisie of Ghent had considerably expanded its belongings in nearby communities such as Meigem, Nevele or Eke.³⁷⁴ In terms of involvement in the rural land markets, Ghent had a huge head start compared to Aalst. It is unlikely that urban capital in Aalst followed the example of Ghent during the 'third offensive of the bourgeoisie.' By the middle of the nineteenth century, the countryside around Aalst still sported the highest percentages of peasant land ownership in the entire province: on average at least 45% of the total acreage under cultivation was exploited directly by peasant land owners.³⁷⁵ In fact, the whole region to the East and South-East of Ghent, including Aalst and its hinterland, was characterized by much higher levels of peasant ownership in the middle of the nineteenth century than was the case elsewhere (map III.2).³⁷⁶ The fragmentary evidence available suggests that these differences had already been in place since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁷⁷ Table III.8 shows the contrast in the share of cultivated land held by land-owning farmers or peasants between the area surrounding Aalst (Haaltert, Denderleeuw and Lede) and the communities within the sphere of influence of Ghent (Meigem, St-Martens-Latem and Zaffelare).

³⁷² Thijs Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie in Vlaanderen tijdens de 18de eeuw" (PhD Thesis, Ghent University, 2007); Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'"; E. Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen in de Belgische en Vlaamse landbouw tijdens de 18de en de 19de eeuw," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 24, no. 1 (1993); E. Vanhaute, "Chacun est propriétaire ou espère le devenir. Het grondbezit in Vlaanderen begin 19de-begin 20ste eeuw," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 26, no. 1-2 (1996).

³⁷³ Kint, *Prometheus aangevuurd*.

³⁷⁴ Most clearly in Deprez, "Uitbatingen en grondbezit", 169-70, but also Deprez, "De boeren"; Coppieters, "Eke 1571-1834"; Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie". Deprez' argument for increasing urban land holdings in Nevele has been criticized by Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*.

³⁷⁵ Kint, *Prometheus aangevuurd*.

³⁷⁶ Also Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen".

³⁷⁷ See also Vermoesen, "Markttoegang", 201 who documents a rise in the number of debts for lease arrears between 1650 and 1700 (from 60% to 75% of inventoried households), followed by stability until c. 1750, and a pronounced decline of lease arrears towards the end of the 18th century (50% in 1790).

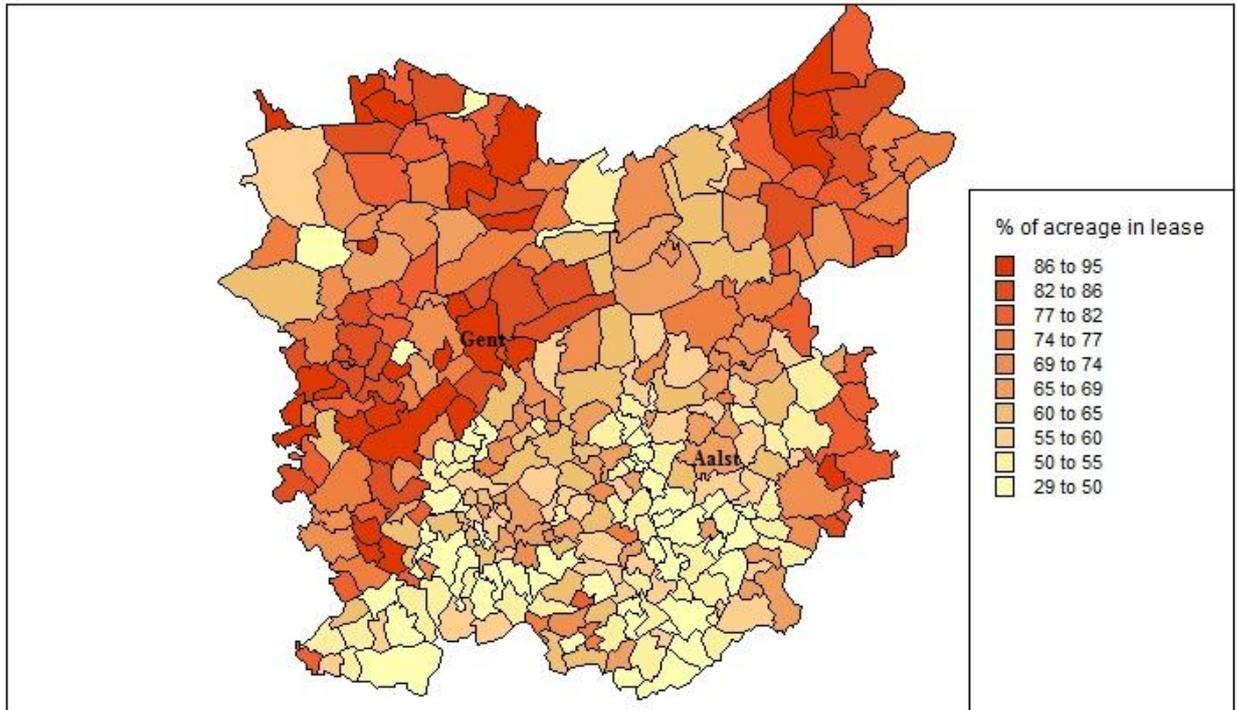
Table III.8. Proportion of farmland held in lease.

	Region of Aalst				Region of Ghent		
	Haaltert	Lede	Denderleeuw	Pollare	Meigem	St-Martens-Latem	Zaffelare
2 nd half 16 th C.	48 %	49 %	41 %		84 %		
2 nd half 17 th C		37 %	31 %		89 %		
1 st half 18 th C	35 %					60 %	
2 nd half 18 th C				45 %	86 %		68 %
1846	49 %	44 %	36 %	50 %	84 %	67 %	62 %

Sources:

De Brouwer, "Geschiedenis Van Lede", De Brouwer, "De Staten Van Goed", De Brouwer, "Denderleeuw", Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen", Deprez, "Uitbatingen En Grondbezit", Zeischka, "Strukturen En Leefpatronen"

Map III.2. The share of cultivated land held by tenants (as opposed to proprietors) according to the agricultural census of 1846.



Sources:

Census data from HISGIS (<http://www.hisgis.be>)
 Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen".

These figures lend little credibility to any grand narratives on the increasing involvement of the urban bourgeoisie in rural land holding during the long eighteenth century. They do draw attention, however, to the profound regional disparities within Flanders. In the region of Aalst urban investments in rural property were already comparatively low during early modern times, and further declined throughout the eighteenth century. The means of agricultural production and subsistence remained pre-dominantly in the hands of the smallholding peasants and the occasional horse-holding farmers. As the rural population boomed and proto-industrial linen production prospered throughout the eighteenth century,

and especially during the latter half of the century, prices surged as a result of the growing demand for land from the countryside itself. The return on investment for urban land holders fell considerably, further limiting the opportunities for direct surplus expropriation by the urban bourgeoisie. Even the sale of large estates formerly owned by ecclesiastical institutions at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century does not seem to have had the effect of establishing a tight urban grip on the agricultural means of production. A shortage of available urban capital or the particularly strong intra-rural pressures in the region around Aalst thus led to a gradual withdrawal from the rural land market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, instead of the occurrence of a so-called 'third offensive of the bourgeoisie'.³⁷⁸

The city of Ghent found itself in quite different circumstances. Bordering the Western and North-Western areas of Inner Flanders where agricultural exploitation by tenants and urban land ownership increasingly came to dominate rural property structures (such as in Nevele or Meigem), the opportunities for rural investments were actively seized upon by the urban bourgeoisie. At the same time intermediary tradesmen – the so-called *cutsers* – bought the linen production of independent, smallholding proto-industrial households from the South and South-East region, and sold it on the Ghent markets. In this sense, perhaps, the city of Ghent straddled the best of two worlds. If Kint's thesis on the importance of agricultural development for the industrialization of nineteenth century Ghent is indeed correct, the contrast with the inability of Aalst's eighteenth century bourgeoisie to sustain its direct rural surplus expropriation suggests at least one reason why industrialization in the rest of Flanders did not follow Ghent's example until late in the nineteenth century.³⁷⁹

The decline of land holding by the inhabitants of Aalst during the eighteenth century did not preclude the existence of exceptional rural estates in the hands of the urban elite. For these elite rentiers, the prestige and influence that came with the preservation of the family patrimony perhaps outweighed any considerations with regards to declining land rents. When Maria Beeckman, the wife of Jacobus Dommer, died in 1745, the household possessed a total of 82 ha in rural property.³⁸⁰ Belonging to a family of recently immigrated ennobled merchants from Amsterdam, the Dommer family would come to occupy a crucial place in the politics of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Aalst.³⁸¹ Their vast rural patrimony consisted mostly of arable land and homesteads (75%), but also included 15 ha of marshlands, more than 2 ha in woods and a large garden ('lochtink').

³⁷⁸ When comparing with Vermoesen, "Markttoegang", 139-46, it seems that the larger horse-owning farmers were most expanding their landholding during this period.

³⁷⁹ Compare and contrast with Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'"; L. De Kezel, "Grondbezit in Vlaanderen 1750-1850. Bijdrage tot de discussie over de sociaal-economische ontwikkeling op het Vlaamse platteland," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 14 (1988); Deprez, "De boeren"; Kint, *Prometheus aangevuurd*; Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie"; Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen"; Vanhaute, "Chacun est propriétaire".

³⁸⁰ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1861 (Maria Beeckman).

³⁸¹ Their son would become the chief bailiff of the Marquisate of Rode, whereas his brother Jan Dommer was alderman from 1750 to 1752 and pensionary of het Land van Aalst (M. Cherrette, "De stadsmagistraat van Aalst in de 18de eeuw," *Spiegel Historiae. Maandblad voor geschiedenis en archeologie* 17, no. 1 (1982); De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*). The latter's grandson would play an influential role in early nineteenth century Dutch politics: *Nieuw Nederlands Biografisch Woordenboek* ('Dommer').

Strengthening their claims as a regional rather than a local powerhouse, their property was spread out over no less than 23 different parishes, all within the region of het Land van Aalst.³⁸²

Despite the declining number of households in Aalst with rural real estate, some rentier families nevertheless retained impressive patrimonies even by the end of the eighteenth century. Judocus Ignatius Boone, lawyer at the Council of Flanders and a former town alderman, had amassed 44 ha in 25 different parishes of the region.³⁸³ These included nine properties that come with feudal rights attached. Among his debtors were 118 different tenants, which suggests that he leased off his land in parcels much smaller than 1 ha, instead of preferring large, commercial tenant holdings. The cases of Judocus Boone and Jacobus Dommer seem typical for the large land owners prevalent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were invariably involved in urban and regional politics, enjoyed geographically disparate patrimonies and leased them out in small, fragmented parcels. Jacques de Craeker, a doctor in medicine who died in 1680 after having served half a century on the town's aldermen bench, similarly left behind 29 ha distributed over eleven different localities near Aalst.³⁸⁴ Jan Tack the elder sat on the aldermen's bench between 1695 and 1706 and owned 23 ha in five parishes.³⁸⁵ The estate 'Rode Mere' in nearby Lede comprised more than 36 ha and was owned by Jacques de Smet, then mayor of Aalst.³⁸⁶ According to the estate's lease contract, half of the doves bred at the dovecote were to be granted to him each year, a symbol not devoid of undertones related to medieval feudality and lordly prerogatives.³⁸⁷ The connection between political power and the rural patrimony did not cease to be of importance as the eighteenth century progressed.

The extraction of rural surplus value through bourgeois land ownership was firmly rooted in the political and cultural practices of the ancient régime, and could provide incentives for acquisition or preservation of rural estates that went beyond or even counter to economically motivated strategies. Nevertheless, by the end of the eighteenth-century the majority of the urban population had largely withdrawn from the rural land markets. The proto-industrial expansion and demographic growth on the countryside had rendered investments in rural property too expensive for the majority of urban households to be able or willing to participate in it.

3.3. The ownership of urban real estate

For most households the ownership of rural land was not the most important aspect of their real estate. More common was the investment in housing. Not only did this provide an additional degree of financial and domestic security, but the ownership of real collateral also provided full access to the early modern credit market. Investments could take up a substantial share of a household's portfolio – about 15% of total wealth on average. Large differences prevailed between those who rented their

³⁸² Almost sixty different tenants owed credit to the couple, indicating the fragmented nature of land exploitation.

³⁸³ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1907 (Judocus Ignatius Boone, † 1788).

³⁸⁴ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1800 (Jacques de Craeker). On his political mandates, see De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*.

³⁸⁵ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1830 (Jan Tack); De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*.

³⁸⁶ De Brouwer, *Geschiedenis van Lede*.

³⁸⁷ F. Buylaert, W. De Clercq, and J. Dumolyn, "Sumptuary legislation, material culture and the semiotics of "vivre noblement" in the county of Flanders (14th – 16th centuries)," *Social History* (2011).

homes and those who possessed their own. In the tax assessment of 1672, which lists all houses present within the city walls at the time, only 51% of all households occupied their own home.³⁸⁸ Of course this proportion varied with the social groups considered. Among those occupying the most expensive 20% of taxed houses, almost 75% of households possessed the home they occupied. Among the cheapest 20% of houses, this proportion was only 38%.

Compared to other cities in the Netherlands around the same time home ownership in Aalst seems to have been particularly widespread. In 1667 Antwerp only 23% of houses was owned by the occupant, and in Bruges during the same year this was only 26%.³⁸⁹ Even in medium-sized Deinze around the end of the seventeenth century only 33% of households owned their own home. In 's-Hertogenbosch (1656) and Nivelles (1680) this proportion came closer to the Aalst figure, with 48% and 41% respectively.³⁹⁰ Home ownership in Aalst seems to have been relatively widespread during the second half of the seventeenth century, which can probably be explained by a relative lack of pressure on the urban real estate market – especially compared to such large cities as Antwerp and Bruges. With almost 8% of the extant dwellings in Aalst being vacant at the time, the housing supply easily outnumbered demand.

Throughout the long eighteenth century, relatively little changed in terms of home ownership by Aalst households. The proportion of inventoried households with home ownership declined modestly between the 1670's and the end of the eighteenth century, but not quite outside of the margin of error. Despite the gradually mounting pressure on the housing market – evident from the rapidly rising house rents – there is no evidence of increasing polarization in home ownership in Aalst. A certain degree of polarization did however occur in the market for rental houses (table III.9).

Table III.9. House ownership among Aalst households.

	% hh's with houses rented out	Mean number of houses (> 0)	N
1670-1780	27 %	1,65	124
1705-1715	29 %	2,05	126
1740-1745	19 %	1,83	120
1790-1795	11 %	3,12	133

Sources:

Inventories: MAA, OAA, nrs. 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Between the beginning and end of the eighteenth century the share of inventoried households with rental houses in their portfolio's declined from 29% to 11%. Meanwhile the average number of houses in their possession increased slightly from 2 to 3. Whereas home ownership in Aalst was not significantly affected, rental houses were increasingly concentrated in the hands of a smaller number of households. At least for a small group of better-off households, the ownership of rental houses presented itself as an opportunity for 'rentier investment' to compensate for the declining land rents realized on the countryside. Important, in this respect, are the large new construction works being undertaken in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although this aspect of the town's history

³⁸⁸ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 264.

³⁸⁹ H. Deneweth, "Huizen en mensen. Wonen, verbouwen, investeren en lenen in drie Brugse wijken van de late middeleeuwen tot de negentiende eeuw" (PhD Thesis, Free University of Brussels, 2008), 96.

³⁹⁰ Hanus, "Affluence and inequality"; Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling".

remains largely underexplored, the number of newly built town quarters and housing development during this period is remarkable.³⁹¹ Some, such as the rich master mason Joannes Vander Gucht († 1791), who owned twelve rental houses in town, were certainly able to profit substantially from the rising housing prices during the town's expansion of the late eighteenth century.³⁹²

3.4. The ownership of financial assets: annuities and obligations

The ownership of real estate was not the only way in which urban households could invest capital in exchange for a steady source of income. The most wide-spread and common form of investment in both town and countryside of North-Western Europe were the long- and medium-term loans: annuities and obligations respectively.³⁹³ Annuities or 'renten' (often referred to with the French 'constitutions de rentes') were long-term credit arrangements in which the 'rent buyer' provided a capital sum to a 'rent seller', who would henceforth be obliged to make him or her a regular, periodic payment in return. Such annuities were often fixed on collateral in real estate, usually one or more houses or parcels of land. Although they had originally been 'perpetual', by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries all annuities were redeemable by the seller, in exchange for the full amount of the originally supplied capital.³⁹⁴ Since annuities were fixed on real estate as collateral, their registration in the aldermen registers was compulsory throughout the medieval and early modern era. As a result, the long-term component of the pre-industrial credit market in the Southern Netherlands has been comparatively well-studied. The annuity markets of several towns in the region were studied as parameters of urban economic development and commercial activity.³⁹⁵

Rural historians have traditionally approached the subject from an entirely different perspective. They have often seen the sale of annuities by peasant land-owners as a sign of creeping proletarianization and impoverishment, undermining the independent peasant's ownership of the means of subsistence.³⁹⁶ In this perspective, the widespread presence of annuities on the countryside has been seen as a force alien to the rural economy, signaling 'commercialization from above' and eventually resulting in rising levels of indebtedness and the loss of independent landholding to the ever-invasive urban bourgeoisie. Recent research has empirically qualified most of these arguments. Thijs Lambrecht has shown that in eighteenth century Flanders the total burden of annuities was generally low. Even though the annuity burden was proportionally higher for smaller estates, most

³⁹¹ See Reinoud Vermoesen, "Van transporteur naar handelaar? Aalsterse binnenschippers in een tijdperk van veranderingen (1650-1800)," in *In behouden haven: Liber Amicorum Greta Devos. Reflecties over maritieme regio's*, ed. Hilde Greefs, Ilja Van Damme, and Greta Devos (Tiel: 2009).

³⁹² MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1909 (Joannes Ludovicus Vander Gucht, † 1791).

³⁹³ A good introduction to the use of both in the countryside of the Southern Netherlands in Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie". See Deneweth, "Huizen en mensen" for an extensive urban case-study.

³⁹⁴ Deneweth, "Huizen en mensen".

³⁹⁵ H. Soly, *Urbanisme en kapitalisme te Antwerpen in de 16de eeuw: de stedeboekkundige en industriële ondernemingen van Gilbert van Schoonbeke* (Brussel: 1977); M. Boone, M. Dumon, and B. Reusens, *Immobilienmarkt, fiscaliteit en sociale ongelijkheid te Gent, 1483-1503* (Kortrijk: 1981); Jord Hanus, "Een efficiënte pre-industriële kapitaalmarkt? Het vroeg zestiende-eeuwse 's-Hertogenbosch als voorbeeld," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 6, no. 3 (2009); Deneweth, "Huizen en mensen"; Dambruyne, *Mensen en centen*.

³⁹⁶ For instance Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before industrialization*, 102-07; Thoen, "A 'commercial survival economy'".

households were able to redeem their loans before the end of their life.³⁹⁷ Sheilagh Ogilvie et al have similarly demonstrated that even in the rural economy of seventeenth century Germany (Württemberg) debt was not necessarily or even generally a sign of submissiveness and impoverishment, but generally constituted a positive factor contributing to the efficiency of pre-industrial markets.³⁹⁸ In the historiography of annuities and obligations within an urban context as well, the benign effects of accessible credit markets have been increasingly emphasized. The well-established presence of social middling groups on the long-term credit markets of Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges has strengthened the conviction that most annuities were taken up for purposes of productive investment.³⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the large demand for credit, regardless of the productive uses to which it was potentially put, provided a lucrative investment opportunity for those with excess capital to spare. In the case of medium- to long-term debts these investments were capable of yielding a substantial profit from interests. Such gains accrued to a somewhat smaller share of the population than it originated from, with 57% of inventoried households owing outstanding long/medium-term debts, whereas 52% of households owned financial assets of the same type. This slight discrepancy increased throughout the eighteenth century. By 1740 still 52% of inventoried households had long & medium-term debts outstanding at death, whereas only 35% had such debts owed to them.⁴⁰⁰ Increasingly then, were the profits from financial investments concentrated in the hands of a smaller share of the population (table III.10).

Table III.10. The proportion of inventoried households carrying different types of credit owed to them.

	All long & medium-term debt	Annuities	Obligations	N
1670-1780	52 %	47 %	39 %	124
1705-1715	50 %	48 %	40 %	126
1740-1745	35 %	34 %	23 %	120
1790-1795	32 %	27 %	24 %	133

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The average value per annuity or obligation (expressed in constant terms) clearly increased between the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the middle of the eighteenth. After that, the value remained at a more or less constant level until the end of the century (table III.11). On average for all inventoried households, the total capital invested in annuities and obligations rose from 1.561 fl. in the 1670's to 2.041 fl. around the beginning of the eighteenth century. From that point onwards a decline set in to 1.650 fl. some 40 years later, and just over 1.000 fl. per household at the turn of the

³⁹⁷ Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie", 26-31.

³⁹⁸ S. Ogilvie, M. Küpker, and J. Maegraith, "Household Debt in Seventeenth-Century Württemberg: Evidence from Personal Inventories", Faculty of Economics (Cambridge: 2011).

³⁹⁹ Dambruyne, *Mensen en centen*; J. Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen. Aspiraties, relaties en transformaties in de 16de-eeuwse Gentse ambachtswereld* (Gent: 2002); H. Soly, "De schepenregisters als bron voor de conjunctuurgeschiedenis van Zuid- en Noordnederlandse steden in het Ancien Régime," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 87 (1974); Soly, *Urbanisme en kapitalisme*, 81-83.

⁴⁰⁰ The ratio of the share of households owing such debt over the share of households to which debt was owed rose from 1,1 in 1670 to 1,2 in 1710, 1,5 in 1740 and 1,4 in 1790.

century.⁴⁰¹ Taking into account the declining interest rates evident in Aalst throughout the period, it is clear that the capital gains raised by means of annuities and obligations declined considerably. The average profit from capital gains per household amounted to almost 100 fl. per year in the second half of the seventeenth century, but only 83 fl. in mid-eighteenth century, and just 41 fl. per year in the 1790's.

Table III.11. The average value of long- and medium-term annuities and obligations held by Aalst households.

	Mean value (fl.)	Median value (fl.)	Mean interest	Modal interest	N
1670					
Annuities	210	144	6,25 %	6,25 %	706
Obligations	239	96	6,18 %	6,25 %	150
1740					
Annuities	689	295	4,95 %	5,00 %	318
Obligations	351	170	4,88 %	5,00 %	301
1790					
Annuities	634	369	4,17 %	4,00 %	469
Obligations	408	152	4,13 %	4,00 %	222

Note:

The figures represent the averages of values per annuity or obligation recorded, not the total value of annuities or obligations held by all households.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

In the case of a highly unequal and skewed distribution such averages possess only limited meaning. In all periods except the first, just half of all households held any financial assets at all. At the opposite end of the spectrum some rentiers managed to amass enormous capital sums in long and medium-term debt. Anthonius 't Kint and Joanna Boone, who passed away in 1677, owned no less than 203 annuities and 23 obligations.⁴⁰² The large majority of those had been sold by private persons, most of whom lived in Aalst itself. Some 45% were nevertheless owed by inhabitants of the rural countryside surrounding Aalst, spread out over 32 different parishes. At the prevailing interest rate of 6,25% the couple could expect a return on these investments of over 3.700 fl. per annum – or roughly the equivalent of 12 yearly wages of a schooled master mason.⁴⁰³ Throughout the eighteenth century, some of the exceptionally rich continued to invest large sums in annuities and obligations. Upon her death in 1745 Marie Beeckman earned approximately 2.100 fl. per year in interests from her 70 long- and medium term loans.⁴⁰⁴ Catharina de Craecker and Emanuel van den Hende, living in the second half of the eighteenth century each year raised an impressive 1.215 fl. in interest payments.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰¹ All values are expressed in constant 1670 values.

⁴⁰² MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Inventories, n° 1797 (Joanna Boone, 1677).

⁴⁰³ Calculated at 24 styvers per day and a working year of 250 days.

⁴⁰⁴ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Inventories, n° 1861 (Marie Beeckman, 1745).

⁴⁰⁵ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Inventories, n° 1907 (Catharina de Craecker, 1791).

In these portfolios of the rich the importance of public as opposed to private annuities clearly increased over time. Out of Emanuel van den Hende's 24 annuities in 1791, nine were public: seven of them emanated from the royal treasury and one had been issued by the bank of Vienna. This finding reflects a broader evolution evident from the wider sample of annuities and obligations in the inventories as well. In the 1670's only 5% of long-and medium term debts had been sold by public institutions. The large majority of those were issued by the town and land of Aalst itself (52%) or by nearby rural parishes (26%). By the middle of the eighteenth century the share of public debts had risen to 17%, and would climb up to 20% of all annuities and obligations in the 1790's. The share of debts issued by the local authorities declined to 34% in mid-century and just 22% a couple of decades later. New investment opportunities opened up on the national and supra-national capital markets. In the 1740's Aalst inventories first mentioned the ownership of annuities sold by the prince (2%), which gained in popularity by the end of the eighteenth century (18%). In this latter period foreign investments now appeared as well, as 27% of all public annuities and obligations had now been issued by the banks of Denmark and Vienna among others. The globalizing scale of the European financial markets had finally reached the rich inhabitants of Aalst and offered them new opportunities for capital gains in a time of falling land rents and interest rates in the local economy.

Such remote financial transactions were the exception to the rule however, since the majority of credit relations did not extend its reach quite as far. Throughout the entire period under scrutiny the majority of annuities was bought from the inhabitants of the countryside surrounding Aalst. On average 60% of all annuities originated from the rural areas outside of Aalst, with no apparent increase or decrease over time. As noted earlier, Thijs Lambrecht has recently argued for the beneficial effects of the sale of annuities for the 'commercial survival economy' of early modern Flanders.⁴⁰⁶ Rather than a symptom of creeping impoverishment and a growing submission of the rural population to urban capital, he saw the sale of annuities as crucial to the reproduction of a system based on intensive exploitation of small-scale, self-owned plots of land. The rising number of debtors in the after-death inventories from Okegem, a rural parish in het Land van Aalst (just 10 kilometers from Aalst) should, when seen in this perspective, be interpreted in the context of the increasing number of self-owned farmsteads in Inland Flanders established earlier.⁴⁰⁷

Table III.12. Percentage of households with annuities owed to (credit) and outstanding annuities (debt) in Aalst and two contrasting rural communities.

	Aalst			Okegem		Ardoie
	Credit	Debt		Debt		Debt
1669-1680	47 %	48 %				
1710-1715	48 %	55 %	1716-1735	32 %	1703-1713	37 %
1740-1745	34 %	42 %	1736-1755	38 %	1746-1750	20 %
1790-1795	27 %	38 %	1776-1795	44 %	1788-1790	17 %

Sources:

Lambrecht, "Krediet En De Rurale Economie", 29, Van Isterdael, "Financiële En Fiscale Factoren", 195, Verfaillie, "Krediet", 171.

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

⁴⁰⁶ Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie".

⁴⁰⁷ Van Isterdael, "Belasting en belastingdruk", 195.

Whereas the share of households with outstanding capital debts rose in proto-industrial Okegem, it declined just as rapidly in Ardoois. The latter community belonged to a region where tenant holding began to dominate the prevalent property structures.⁴⁰⁸ It is striking that the rise in outstanding debt in the countryside of het Land van Aalst did not cause a growing share of urban households in Aalst to capitalize on this demand for credit. Not only did the proportion of urban households gaining capital income from annuities decline, but also the total number of annuities from outside of Aalst recorded in the inventories fell from 57 per year in the 1670's to 35 at the end of the eighteenth century. In terms of capital investments the urban bourgeoisie from Aalst was not able to tighten its grip on the rural means of production through the purchase of annuities.

The discrepancy between the rising rural demand for credit in the proto-industrial area surrounding Aalst (represented here by the data from Okegem) and the declining demand elsewhere is also borne out by the geographical disparities in interest rates during the eighteenth century (table III.13). The interest rate in Aalst turns out to have been remarkably high. Of course, the capital market of Antwerp was characterized by exceptionally low interest rates due to the emphatic presence of a large number of affluent financiers.⁴⁰⁹ But even compared to Bruges, the interest rate in Aalst seems quite high until the very end of the eighteenth century. And although the countryside was normally characterized by higher prices for capital than was common in the cities, the interest rate in Aalst occasionally surpassed that of the country.

Table III.13. Median interest rates on annuities throughout Flanders and Brabant.

	Aalst	Antwerp	Brugge (mode)	Eke	Zele	Ieper region
2nd half seventeenth C.	6,3 %	3,1 %	5 %			
Mid eighteenth C.	5,0 %	2,9 %	4 %	4,8 %	3,5 %	4,3 %
End eighteenth C.	4,2 %	3,4 %	5 %			4,2 %

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Lambrecht, "Krediet En De Rurale Economie", 25, Deneweth, "Huizen En Mensen", 812.

However, it is remarkable that the spread between the Aalst and the Antwerp interest rates declined from 3,2% in the seventeenth century, to 2,1% around the middle of the eighteenth and only 0,8% by the end of the century. In comparison to the interest rates in Bruges and the Ieper region, the spread dropped as well. Even though capital had been comparatively expensive in seventeenth-century Aalst then, in relative terms it became much cheaper than elsewhere in the southern Netherlands as the eighteenth century progressed. Given the high demand for capital generated by the growing share of self-owned rural exploitations surround Aalst (cf. supra), it seems unlikely that this relative

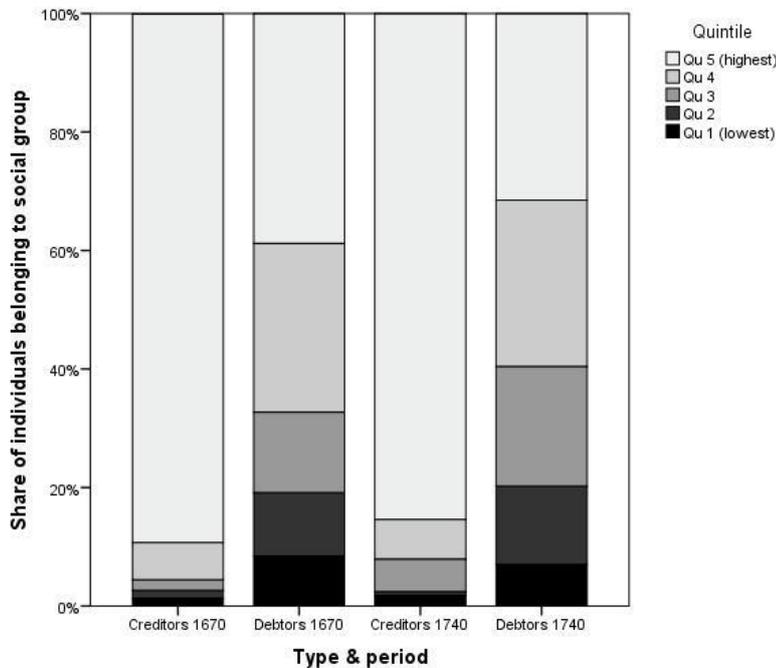
⁴⁰⁸ See on the East-West divide in this respect: Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen".

⁴⁰⁹ Willems, *Leven op de pof*; K. Degryse, *De Antwerpse fortuinen. Kapitaalaccumulatie, -investering en rendement te Antwerpen in de 18de eeuw*, Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis (2005: 2005); J.C. Riley, "Interest rates in Antwerp, 1664-1787," in *Entrepreneurship and the Transformation of the Economy (10th-20th Centuries). Essays in honour of Herman Van der Wee*, ed. P.M.M. Klep and E. Van Cauwenberghe (Leuven: 1994).

cheapening of capital was caused by a diminished demand from the countryside. And although increased supply of capital could perhaps be attributed to the disinvestment of many urban households in the rural land market, the simultaneous decline of investment in annuities and obligations suggests that a growing supply was unlikely to explain the falling interest rate and spread. Whether a shrinking urban demand for credit or a declining investment risk were responsible for the process, is hard to establish for now.

An efficiently functioning credit market offered plenty of opportunities for both financial and productive investment, but how did it relate to the town's internal social structure? Figure III.2 demonstrates the remarkable difference in social position between the suppliers of long- and medium term credit and the debtors. In both 1670 and 1740 the vast majority of creditors that could be identified in the tax records of nearby years stemmed from the upper 20% of the taxed population. Although some households in the lower quintiles did buy annuities or obligations, they seem to have been rather exceptional.

Figure III.2. The social profile of creditors and debtors in Aalst: quintile in the taks records.



Notes:

For 1670 creditors N = 223; 1670 debtors N = 214; 1740 creditors N = 165; 1740 debtors, N = 114

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1861-1866.

The situation is different for the debtors, since the demand for credit was much more widespread than its supply. The slight overrepresentation of the richer quintiles in figure III.2 is probably caused by the social biases introduced by the nominal linking procedure between the inventories and tax records, and by the social bias of the inventories themselves. It is nevertheless clear that supply and demand were differentially distributed over the social layers of society. As long- and medium term credit was obviously not supplied to immediate social peers alone, mediation perhaps played a significant role in

connecting supply and demand within the context of a highly unequal society.⁴¹⁰ Given the large discrepancy between the social position of creditors and debtors, it is no surprise to learn that long/medium-term credit flowed predominantly downwards: 80% of all debtors occupied a lower position in the tax records than their creditor.⁴¹¹ In the longer term, this of course also implies that capital incomes from interest on annuities and obligations predominantly flowed upwards into the hands of the upper crust of the urban society. Although credit doubtlessly provided plenty of opportunities to the social middling groups – and increasingly so as credit became cheaper during the eighteenth century, it also constituted an important investment mechanism for the upper classes through which capital was ultimately redistributed unequally.

3.5. A changing urban economy

Around the end of the nineteenth century, the Brussels socialist politician Emile Vandervelde described the urban landscape in Flanders as consisting of '*villes tentaculaires*', responsible for the long-term loss of peasant property.⁴¹² Similar perspectives on the gradual submission of agrarian property structures to the hegemony of urban capital have long been advocated in various Marxist traditions of economic history. Such an integrated model of capitalist expansion does not lend itself easily to application in the case of eighteenth century Aalst. Situated at the core of the proto-industrial heartlands of Inner-Flanders, the 'tentacles' of urban capital seemed increasingly constrained during the eighteenth century. Contrary to the regions to the West and North-West, where tenant farms, often owned by the urban bourgeoisie, became increasingly more common, the area to the South and South-West of Ghent was instead characterized by growing numbers of smallholding peasant-proprietors. As population pressure fuelled higher land prices, the ownership of real estate by urban households in Aalst fell considerably. Instead of being the instigators of any supposed 'offensive of the bourgeoisie', urban capital from Aalst withdrew from the land market. And when due to rising peasant land ownership the demand for investments in annuities grew, the urban bourgeoisie did not appear to increase their capital involvement either: whereas long-term indebtedness rose on the nearby countryside, the total value of urban capital invested in rural credit declined.

For all the commercial activity taking place on its markets, and all opportunities for rent-seeking provided by its increasingly prosperous and populated countryside, urban capital in Aalst by the end of the eighteenth century found itself less well off than it had been a century earlier. Moreover, the income gained from financial investments that remained, were increasingly concentrated in a smaller number of hands. During the second half of the seventeenth century a large proportion of urban households had gained a (supplementary) household income from the returns on invested capital (in housing, land or credit). In fact, the median inventoried households around 1670 had 25% of its total wealth invested in forms of capital that yielded a steady profit (either in leased out real estate or

⁴¹⁰ Hoffman, *Growth in a traditional society*; P.T. Hoffman, G. Postel-Vinay, and J.-L. Rosenthal, "Information and economic history: how the credit market in Old Regime Paris forces us to rethink the transition to capitalism," *American Historical Review* 104 (1999); Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie".

⁴¹¹ Calculated for the 1670's (79% downwards) and 1740's (81% downwards).

⁴¹² Emile Vandervelde, *La propriété foncière en Belgique* (Paris: 1900). His views have been analysed in Vanhaute, "Eigendomsverhoudingen"; Vanhaute, "Chacun est propriétaire".

in long- or medium-term credit). By the beginning of the eighteenth century this proportion had declined to 16%, and throughout the rest of the century the median inventoried household owned no such profit-yielding assets at all. Correspondingly, the share of households that did not own such investments rose from 43% in the 1670's to 47% around 1710, 62% in mid-century and eventually 66% in the 1790's. Compared to the much larger cities of Ghent (80% in 1788) and Antwerp (76% in 1789) this proportion was still relatively low, but a clear pattern of capital concentration in Aalst seems nevertheless apparent.⁴¹³

In her analysis of the wealth of the poor in eighteenth-century Amsterdam, Anne McCants has argued that financial assets became increasingly available to the poor of the time.⁴¹⁴ She saw this downward expansion of financial asset holding as a move towards modernity – away from the pre-modern economy of high risk and gross inequality. Yet the reverse seems to be true for the southern Low Countries. The importance of financial assets in total wealth holding steadily diminished from the end of the seventeenth century onwards. In Aalst, less and less households owned capital goods or land holdings that could provide capital income and financial security.

It is important to note that this development did not so much entail a process of impoverishment or proletarianization, but that it seems to reflect a broader transformation in the urban economy of Aalst as a whole. Among the top 5% richest inventoried households a similar transformation can be observed. Although throughout the entire period under scrutiny these elite households invariably retained large investments in real estate and credit, their involvement clearly declined as the eighteenth century progressed. Whereas, on average, 79% of the wealth comprised in these elite portfolios had been invested in real estate (28%) and annuities and obligations (49%), this share declined to 64% at the beginning of the eighteenth century, 57% by mid-century and eventually 55% by the 1790's.⁴¹⁵ Clearly, even among the richest households in town, the tendency to invest in profit-yielding estates and assets diminished over time. In fact, in the 1670 inventory sample this upper crust of elite households was almost exclusively composed of a rentier class that combined the ownership of vast rural and urban patrimonies with political power. Almost without exception, these households belonged to the principal families that delivered several generations of town aldermen and intermittently served as bailiff, receiver or town secretary.⁴¹⁶ With the exception of one doctor in medicine, all of these were primarily rentiers who lived of their land and assets. By the latter half of the eighteenth century the character of the economic elite in Aalst had changed fundamentally. Only one of the eight richest inventoried households (Catherina de Craecker, †1790) seems to have lived as a rentier, while all the others belonged either to the professions (doctors and lawyers) or were active as

⁴¹³ A similar evolution can be found in Ghent, where the proportion of households with income-yielding capital goods declined from 31% to 20% between 1738 and 1788 and in Antwerp where it fell from 32% to 24% in the same time span. Calculations based on Feyaerts, "Peiling naar de bezitstructuur"; Jacobs, "Peiling naar de bezitsstructuur"; Vanaverbeke, *Peiling*; Vandervorst, "Peiling", with the help of unpublished research notes provided by Bart Willems.

⁴¹⁴ McCants, "Inequality Among the Poor".

⁴¹⁵ The evolution of the median percentage traces the same evolution: from 76% (1672), to 68% (1710), 61% (1740) and finally 57% (1790). It is noteworthy that the share of both real estate and annuities and obligations declined to comparable degrees.

⁴¹⁶ These are Gheeraert Uyttersprot (†1670), Philips de Craecker (†1674), Anthonis 't Kint (†1677), Hendrick Merx (†1678), Jan Vanden Bossche (†1678), Jacques de Craecker (†1680), Gillis d'Haens (†1669) and Anthonis Govaert (†1669).

merchants, trading in a wide range of commodities – from beer, hops, wine and groceries, to linen and woolens.⁴¹⁷

The economic elite of Aalst then, much like the rest of the urban population, ceased to be defined primarily as a community of rentiers whose income and wealth were dominated by the profits gained from investments in real estate and long-term debt. They became increasingly associated with extensive commercial activities rather than with rent-seeking ‘tentacles’ which extended into the town’s surrounding hinterland.

4. Commercialization and the middle sort of people

This ‘commercialization’ of the economic elite of Aalst should not come as a surprise, given the extraordinary vigour with which commercial traffic in and around the town expanded over the course of the eighteenth century. The successful wholesale merchants and long-distance traders that managed to profit from this expansion obviously fared well from the town’s lucrative geographic position, its gateway function in a market-oriented rural area, and the continued amelioration of the town’s principal road- and waterways. The net wealth of those identified as wholesale merchants in the probate inventories increased concomitantly throughout the period under scrutiny.⁴¹⁸ Most of these merchants were involved in the regional trade, many of them serving the rural hinterland of Aalst. Gerardus Vander Snick for instance, purchased his French wine and brandy from a factor in Nantes (*‘de heeren Werrebroeck and Compagnie’*), and sold it not only in Aalst, but also in the nearby parishes, and even as far away as Ghent.⁴¹⁹ Joannes Geeraerts, meanwhile, sold high-quality beers from Leuven and Hoegaerden in at least twenty-five different localities, most of them situated in the proto-industrial region of het Land van Aalst.⁴²⁰ The mid-eighteenth-century wine merchant Ignatius Meert operated in an equally extensive territory, leaving credit notes for wine sold in thirty-three different parishes.⁴²¹ By provisioning the both demographically and economically expanding countryside, these tradesmen of substantial means were clearly able to tap into a lucrative market (see map III.3).

⁴¹⁷ These are Judocus Ignatius Boone (†1791), Joannes Geeraerts (†1791), Adriaen Frans van Assche (†1794), Peter Frans Mollaert (†1791), Joannes Ludovicus Vander Gucht (†1791), Jan Baptist Schouppe (†1790) and Laurentius Vanden Hauwe (†1794).

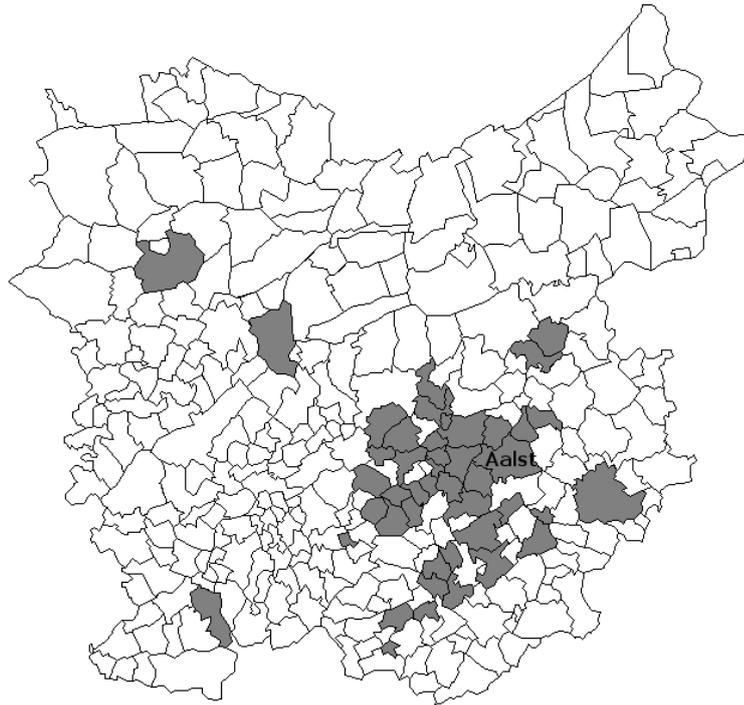
⁴¹⁸ From a median net wealth of 9.180 fl. around 1670, to 7.845 fl. by 1710, 13.937 fl. by the middle of the eighteenth century and 23.097 fl. in the 1790’s. The wealth level has been deflated using the adjust Antwerp CPI (cf. supra).

⁴¹⁹ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst, Staten van Goed*, n° 1909 (Marie Elisabeth Moreels, †1792).

⁴²⁰ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst, Staten van Goed*, n° 1907 (Joannes Geeraerts, †1789).

⁴²¹ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst, Staten van Goed*, n° 1865 (Ignatius Guillaume Meert, †1748).

Map III.3. Activity of five wine and beer merchants from Aalst (eighteenth century).



Note:

The map indicates the presence of commercial debts related to the sale of wine or beer by (inventoried) merchants from Aalst.

These merchants are: Gerardus Franciscus Vander Snick (†1790), Jan Baptist Moyersoen (†1792), Joannes Geeraerts (†1789), Ignatius Guillaume Meert (†1748) and Frans Arents (†143).

By and large, these tradesmen represent exceptional cases – both in the scope of their commercial activity and in the economic affluence they enjoyed. Many of the goods and services involved in commercial activities in Aalst were provided by the large urban base of artisans and retailers which crowded the streets of the town. These were not necessarily involved in the larger commercial industries that connected Aalst to the outside world, such as the trade in linen or hops. In the corporative census of 1738 it is the shoemakers and tailors who emerge as the two most populous craft guilds (together 40%), with linen dyers following only in third place (14%). With the exception of linen weavers (5%), the top ten is completed with even more crafts servicing the local market: bakers (6%), masons (4%), brewers (4%), carpenters (3%), coopers (3%) and cobblers (3%).⁴²² By the end of the eighteenth century tailors, carpenters, shoemakers and bakers (together 13%) still showed up among the most common occupations in Aalst, although they were now joined by the *fourre-tout* denominations which had not been included in the 1738 census: labourers (21%), merchants (11%), rentiers (8%) and innkeepers (5%).⁴²³ The crafts sector in its totality then occupied almost 30% of the population. In the sample of after-death inventories the proportion of inventories identifiable as belonging to craft guild members proved to be relatively stable (between 20 and 27%) throughout the

⁴²² Based on MAA, *Land van Aalst*, n° 1683. Total numbers of people employed per guild have been used rather than guild masters alone.

⁴²³ Calculated from MAA, *Modern Archief Aalst*, Bevolking, n° 1-5. Unfortunately only four of the five town quarters have been preserved.

entire period under scrutiny.⁴²⁴ These relatively populous occupational groups together constituted a solid urban base of craftsmen and retailers who together formed the heterogeneous ‘middle sort of people’.⁴²⁵

In the proto-cadastral survey of Aalst carried out in 1672 only five houses (on a total of 927) with an explicitly designated shop were counted.⁴²⁶ In contrast to the much more numerous manufactures (‘*bedrijven*’, 46) and workshops (‘*werkhuis*’, 13), the retail shop does not seem to have been a common element of the town’s economic infrastructure – or was at least not recognized as such by the cadastral surveyors. The accounts of the local mercer’s guild of Saint Nicolas point out that this did not necessarily imply a lack of retail activity in the town. Membership of St. Nicolas was required in order to set up a shop or to obtain a stall at the weekly Saturday market. Some 138 individuals paid their yearly contribution to the guild in 1670, rising slowly towards 160 in 1695.⁴²⁷ Each year between 8 and 15 new members joined the guild. Unfortunately no further account books are preserved until the 1730’s, when the membership total can be estimated at about 200. By then, the number of new members each year turned out to be slightly elevated as well, oscillating between 11 and 19.

Table III.14. Membership of the St. Nicolas guild in Aalst.

	Members	New members per year
1660-1669	178	
1670-1679	135	
1680-1689	152	10
1690-1699	159	13
...		
1730-1739	201	16
1740-1749	212	16
1750-1759	254	16
1760-1769	253	23
1770-1779	277	17
1780-1786	294	19

Note:

The numbers from 1690 onwards are calculated from the total revenue of the ‘jaercost’, since the actual membership list is no longer recorded in the accounts.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Rekeningen St. Nicolaas, 211-213.

⁴²⁴ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915. Occupational identification is based on the occasional explicit reference, on the occupation-specific items contained in the inventory and on the descriptions of all outstanding credit transactions relating to the deceased.

⁴²⁵ On the importance of the ‘urban base’, see Klep, *Bevolking en arbeid*; Hohenberg and Lees, *The making of Urban Europe*; Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*; De Vries, *European urbanization*. With regards to the ‘middle sort of people’: H.R. French, "Social Status, Localism and the 'Middle Sort of People' in England 1620-1750," *Past and Present* 166, no. 1 (2000); French, *The Middle Sort of People*; Keith Wrightson, "Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England," in *Language, History and Class*, ed. Penelope J. Corfield (New York: 1991); J. Barry, "The making of the middle class?," *Past and Present* 145, no. 1 (1994); J. Barry, "Introduction," in *The Middling Sort of People. Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, ed. J. Barry and C. Brooks (London: 1994); John Smail, *The Origins of Middle-Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660-1780* (Ithaca: 1994).

⁴²⁶ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 264.

⁴²⁷ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 211.

A sustained growth in the number of guild members seems to be evident throughout the eighteenth century – an evolution evidenced elsewhere in the Netherlands as well.⁴²⁸ It is noteworthy that this expansion occurred not only during the latter half of the eighteenth century, but also during the former. By September 1766, the weekly Saturday market of the St. Nicolas guild had so outgrown its limits that the usual three rows of stalls were no longer sufficient.⁴²⁹ Many of the St. Nicolas members were not full-time retailers but were in fact artisan-producers who, by means of a dual guild membership, obtained the right to sell their own produce on the market or in their shops.⁴³⁰ Unfortunately the guild accounts of St. Nicolas yield almost no information on the kinds of trade practiced by the mercers and shopkeepers who acquired membership.⁴³¹ Occasional references point towards a wide variety of activities, ranging from hatters, tailors and wigmakers to tobacco sellers and fishmongers. At the end of the seventeenth century almost half of these new retailers were foreigners from outside town. By the second half of the eighteenth century this proportion had considerably dropped. Perhaps this reflects the increasing re-vitalization of the urban economy, in which the retailing of specifically urbane goods or services gained ground. The share of women's involvement in retailing increased meanwhile, rising from 4% to 11% by the end the century. Although such rising female market-oriented labour activity fits the industrious revolution theses, a mere 11% seems to be rather low a figure to have exerted an important influence on the labour market and household income structures.⁴³²

Table III.15. Shares of foreigners and women among the new members of the St. Nicolas guild.

	% foreigners	% women
1680-1700	49 %	4 %
...		
1730-1760	32 %	9 %
1760-1790	30 %	11 %

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Rekeningen St. Nicolaas, 211-213.

As the eighteenth century progressed, retailing in Aalst thus became not only more widespread, but also a more urban and slightly more 'feminine' activity. Evidence from after-death inventories

⁴²⁸ For instance B. Blondé and H. Greefs, "Werk aan de winkel. De Antwerpse meerseniers: aspecten van de kleinhandel en het verbruik in de 17de en 18de eeuw," in *De lokroep van het bedrijf. Handelaars, ondernemers en hun samenleving van de zestiende tot de twintigste eeuw. Liber amicorum Roland Baetens, Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* (2001); Hanus, "Affluence and inequality".

⁴²⁹ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 18 (26 September 1766): "Ende gemerckt door de menigte van personen die sijn presenteren tot het staan met hunne waeren opde voors[eid]e merckt de drij roeten niet souffisant sijn om de selve te plasseren, soo statueren dat alle de gone de welcke hun willen plasseren opde vierde roete commende jegens het stadthuys, hun aldaer sullen mogen stellen ter provisie, ende dat sij sullen gepreffereert worden om op de drij andere roeten te staen indien daer eene plaetse open valt, nochtans altijt beginnende van het eijnde ende continuerende naar het middel vande voors drij roeten."

⁴³⁰ Sven De Schryver, "Aspecten van Sociale Mobiliteit binnen de 18de-eeuwse Aalsterse ambachtswereld. Een prosopografische benadering" (MA Thesis, UGent, 2001).

⁴³¹ The main trades practiced by the guild members are however listed in the 1735 statutes: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 217.

⁴³² Compare with D. Van Den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship. Female traders in the Northern Netherlands, c. 1580-1815* (Amsterdam: 2007).

confirms the general trend in retailing laid out by the accounts of the St. Nicolas guild. The proportion of inventories mentioning a shop declined from 26% around 1670 to 17% circa 1710. After this low point the proportion rose to 21% around 1750 and 29% in the 1790's.⁴³³ A tax survey from 1794 estimated the total number of shops in Aalst to be around 200.⁴³⁴

At least in quantitative terms, both the craft guilds and the retail sector in Aalst seem to have performed well throughout the eighteenth-century. However, how their members, this 'middle sort of people', fared in social terms is an altogether different question – and one, it could be added, that is particularly difficult to answer. With the help of the surviving account books of three eighteenth-century craft guilds, it is possible to trace at least some members of these middling groups by name. These three guilds are the bakers, the tailors and the retailers.⁴³⁵ Together they comprise a considerable portion of the urban middling groups in Aalst, especially since the latter guild was joined by many different sorts of craftsmen who increasingly sought to earn the right to retail as well.⁴³⁶ By tracing the members of these three guilds to their respective positions in the fiscal hierarchy, it is possible to trace the broad contours of change in their relative social position over time (table III.16).

Table III.16. The relative position of middling groups in the tax distribution of Aalst.

	Percentile (median)	Z-score (mean)	Z-score (st.dev.)	N
Tailors				
1705	55	-0,15	0,36	11
1742	51	-0,27	0,32	22
1791	39	-0,38	0,31	30
Bakers				
1742	63	-0,08	0,39	25
1791	59	-0,06	0,55	29
Retailers				
1742	57	0,00	0,74	103
1791	52	-0,07	0,61	76

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; n° 1906-1915.
De Schryver, "Aspecten Van Sociale Mobiliteit".

Around the middle of the eighteenth century all three groups enjoyed a relatively comfortable position near, and slightly above, the middle of the tax distribution. Their median percentile ranks were higher than the median percentile (50). The negative average Z-scores indicate that their mean tax was slightly lower than the town average (0), but not by much. During the following half-century, however, these middling groups all experienced a slight decline in their relative position. The bakers seem to have been most capable of holding on to their relative position, and the retailers only slightly

⁴³³ Based on MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

⁴³⁴ De Schryver, "Aspecten van Sociale Mobiliteit"; MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 215.

⁴³⁵ See De Schryver, "Aspecten van Sociale Mobiliteit"; Sven De Schryver, "De Aalsterse ambachten vanuit een sociaal-economische invalshoek (achttiende eeuw)," *Het Land van Aalst* 54 (2002).

⁴³⁶ Also Bert De Munck, "One counter and your own account: redefining illicit labour in early modern Antwerp," *Urban History* 37, no. 1 (2010).

lost ground as well. The tailors on the other hand, gradually descended the sports of the socio-economic ladder between 1705 and 1791. Even though these three occupations encompass only a limited sample of the much wider array of occupations that the urban middling groups comprised, it seems unlikely that their experience was entirely unrepresentative of the crafts and retail sectors as a whole. Far from suggesting the expansion and prospering of occupational middling groups, or a 'revolution from the middle', they seem to point towards relative stability at best.⁴³⁷

The exceptional success stories of the handful of tradesmen that increasingly replaced the oligarchic rentier families as the new economic elite of eighteenth-century Aalst, should not lead to hasty conclusions with regards to the prosperity enjoyed in the commercial sector of the town. Although the demand for locally produced goods and services guaranteed the numeric importance of a large urban base of shoemakers, tailors, bakers and masons, this quantitative weight did not prevent many of them from suffering a declining relative position in the town's economic hierarchy. The measures of economic inequality presented at the beginning of this chapter suggest that the share of wealth and income held by the 'middle 50%' of the town's households diminished slightly during the second half of the eighteenth century, while that of the 'top 10%' grew. Hugo Soly has described how the broad 'middle sort' of small artisans and retailers was faced with threatening proletarianization and pauperization during the eighteenth century, and especially its latter half.⁴³⁸ The secondary town of Nivelles (southern Brabant) seems to have followed a similar fate, despite profiting from a movement of 'urbanization from below.'⁴³⁹ Terence McIntosh, in describing the eighteenth-century economy of Schwäbisch Hall, a provincial town in southwest Germany, has argued that "*the disappearance of prosperous shoemakers, weavers, tailors, and potters*" from the urban economy ultimately helped to bring about "*the formal conditions for a distinctly modern class structure.*"⁴⁴⁰ According to McIntosh, the decline in the opportunities for social mobility among these occupational groups resulted in the creation of a new 'lower middle class', which was, in a later stage, expanded further by large-scale immigration from the countryside – a process which similarly affected Aalst during the second half of the eighteenth century.

In a sense, the process that played out in eighteenth-century Aalst, as in many other towns in the southern Netherlands, serves as a useful reminder that the early modern 'rise of the middle class' pertained only to a limited part of the broad 'middle sort'. The socio-economic experience of the wholesale tradesmen and members of the professions, who were invariably to be found among the top 20% of tax payers in Aalst, and who became progressively richer as the eighteenth century progressed, was certainly different from that of the numerous tailors, bakers and shoemakers faced with toughening competition from the countryside. John Smail has vividly described how in eighteenth-century Halifax a relatively heterogeneous 'middle sort' became increasingly detached from the 'middle class' that distinguished itself from it along social and cultural lines.⁴⁴¹ Although it falls out of

⁴³⁷ See also Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden*; Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling".

⁴³⁸ Soly, "Social aspects"; Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes".

⁴³⁹ Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling".

⁴⁴⁰ Terence McIntosh, *Urban Decline in Early Modern Germany. Schwäbisch Hall and Its Region, 1650-1750* (London: 1997), 189. The argument resembles that of Christopher R. Friedrichs, "Capitalism, mobility and class formation in the early modern German city," *Past and Present* 69 (1975), but focuses less on proletarianization and the organization of production.

⁴⁴¹ Smail, *The origins*.

the scope of this study to establish whether such a process of polarization similarly divided the eighteenth-century middle sorts of Aalst, it certainly appears to have been the case that the commercial expansion in Aalst was far more beneficial to the upper crust of the 'middle class' than to the broad urban base of the 'middle sorts'.

Broad layers of urban society, reaching from journeymen to day-labourers and the (seasonally) unemployed, were no doubt worse off. Especially during the second half of the eighteenth century, when diminishing returns in the linen proto-industry and high levels of land fragmentation pushed growing numbers of rural immigrants to the town, poverty and economic inequality in Aalst seem to have increased.

5. Eroding living standards and dietary polarization

Perhaps owing to the popular notion of a local self-proclaimed Burgundian lifestyle, there has long since existed a strong tradition of historical research into the consumption of food and drinks in the pre-industrial Southern Netherlands. Based on the abundance of urban and provincial excises on beer, wine and grain, numerous attempts have been made to estimate per capita consumption of the basic necessities of life in most parts of Western Europe.⁴⁴² This particular strand of scholarship long predates the interest in any early modern consumer revolution or shift in material culture. Rather than as an inroad to the world of consumer preferences and the transformative power of economic demand, most research has instead stressed the many stringencies imposed by the necessities of life. With little room for individual agency, the consumption of food and drink is often seen as dictated by a constant need to find the most calories per value, which in its turn was often wholly determined by the vagaries of agricultural supply.

Recently Jord Hanus has suggested a close correlation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Southern Netherlands between urban living standards on the one hand and per capita consumption of beer on the other.⁴⁴³ For an era in which there were few alternatives to drinking beer (in terms of both hydration and caloric intake) it seems reasonable to accept that income elasticity for demand of beer was inelastic but positive.⁴⁴⁴ In theory at least, the revenue of the urban excises on beer – expressed in per capita terms – could then provide tentative insight into the long-term evolution of living standards and the performance of the urban economy. Although such an analysis for the sixteenth century already poses a daunting number of methodological obstacles, the challenges seem greater still in an

⁴⁴² See for instance F. Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century (1979); C. Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation. L'agriculture et l'alimentation dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens. Contribution à l'histoire économique et sociale à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Gent: 1975); C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge: 1989); E. Aerts, "Het hoofdelijk bierverbruik in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (ca. 1400-1800). Enkele kanttekeningen," *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 81 (1998); C. Vandenbroeke, "Evolutie van het wijnverbruik te Gent (14de-19de eeuw)," in *Album aangeboden aan Charles Verlinden ter gelegenheid van zijn dertig jaar professoraat* (Gent: 1975); R. Van Uytven, "De drankcultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden tot de XVIIIde eeuw," in *Drinken in het verleden. Tentoonstelling ingericht door het stadsbestuur van Leuven, 9 juni-5 augustus 1973* (Leuven: 1973), to name just a few.

⁴⁴³ Hanus, "Affluence and inequality".

⁴⁴⁴ Thus the demand for beer increased with rising income, but at a slower pace: income elasticity was to be situated between 0 and +1.

eighteenth century context. The introduction and widespread adoption of distilled (gin and brandy) and colonial drinks (tea and coffee) increasingly constituted alternative to beer or wine drinking, even though their daily consumption remained limited.⁴⁴⁵ It is quite unlikely that the income elasticity of the demand for beer would have remained the same throughout the long eighteenth century. Even though this dismisses the use of per capita beer consumption as a single indicator of the development of urban living standards during this period, the evolution of aggregate beverage consumption might still provide important clues.

Aggregate food and beverage consumption have also been employed in order to explore living standards and social polarisation in the context of the rapid industrialisation of nineteenth century Belgium.⁴⁴⁶ Although its causes are subject to debate, a general impoverishment during the first half of the nineteenth century has been widely established based on a pronounced fall in average calorie intake. Simultaneous increases in the consumption of wheat (as opposed to rye) bread or luxury goods such as game, oysters or bottled wine have meanwhile suggested a growing gap between rich and poor. Lis and Soly have similarly made a case for increasing polarisation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Antwerp based on the increasing divergence in the consumption of cheaper local beer as opposed to the more expensive 'foreign' beers.⁴⁴⁷

Although municipal accounts from the late medieval and early modern period often lack the detail of the nineteenth century *octroi* excises, an exploration of aggregate consumption patterns of the basic necessities in Aalst is not entirely out of reach.⁴⁴⁸ The reconstruction of average levels of consumption based on excise revenues alone is nevertheless an endeavour fraught with hazard. Most excises did not actually tax consumption, but production or sale. Since information on exports is almost always missing, one often has to make do with the assumption that the resulting overestimation of consumption based on production or import figures would be duly compensated for by the equally undocumented phenomena of smuggling and fiscal fraud.⁴⁴⁹ A second problem is constituted by the farming out of the excise collection. Hence, not the actual revenue of a given excise is reported, but rather the sum offered by the highest bidder for collection rights. In the long run these probably followed the actual excise revenue quite closely, but in any particular year there might have been a

⁴⁴⁵ Johan Poukens, "Cambrinus uitgedaagd. Verschuivingen in de consumptie en distributie van dranken in het achttiende-eeuwse Hasselt," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 6, no. 1 (2009).

⁴⁴⁶ Y. Segers, "Nutrition and living standards in industrializing Belgium, 1846-1913," *Food & History* 2 (2004); Segers, "Oysters and rye bread"; G. Bekaert, "Caloric consumption in industrialising Belgium," *Journal of Economic History* 3 (1991); Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation*; Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, "Food Consumption in Antwerp between 1807 and 1859: a contribution to the standard of living debate," *Economic History Review* 30 (1977).

⁴⁴⁷ Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, "Food Consumption in Antwerp between 1807 and 1859. A contribution to the Standard of Living Debate," *Economic History Review* 30 (1977); Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*.

⁴⁴⁸ Numerous studies using municipal accounts include at least some considerations on basic consumption levels based on the excise revenues. For instance in the case of Ghent: M. Boone, *Geld en macht. De Gentse stadsfinanciën en de Bourgondische staatsvorming (1384-1453)* (Gent: 1990); Dambruynne, *Mensen en centen*; W. Ryckbosch, *Tussen Gavere en Cadzand. De Gentse stadsfinanciën op het einde van de middeleeuwen (1460-1495)* (Gent: 2008).

⁴⁴⁹ See the detailed remarks in Aerts, "Het hoofdelijk bierverbruik". The seventeenth and 18th century *political ordinances* of the Aalst aldermen abound with references to supposedly widespread fiscal fraud concerning the excises (of mostly beer): MAA, OA, nrs. 17-18.

substantial discrepancy between both.⁴⁵⁰ The compound nature of some excise tariffs also impedes the reconstruction of aggregate consumption over time. The main beer excise in seventeenth-eighteenth century Aalst for instance consisted of no less than seven different tax rates depending on the type of beer, whether it was destined for retail in alehouses, by whom it had been brewed and whether it would be sold *intra muros* or not.⁴⁵¹ Without any information on the changes in the respective shares of each differentially taxed section of the beer production (and consumption) over time, any conclusions based on the evolution of this particular excise revenue would be highly unreliable at best. A final issue which presents itself is the scarcity of information on the tariffs themselves. Since neither the urban accounts nor the municipal ordinances always inform us of tariff changes, the interpretation of some excise series is further complicated.

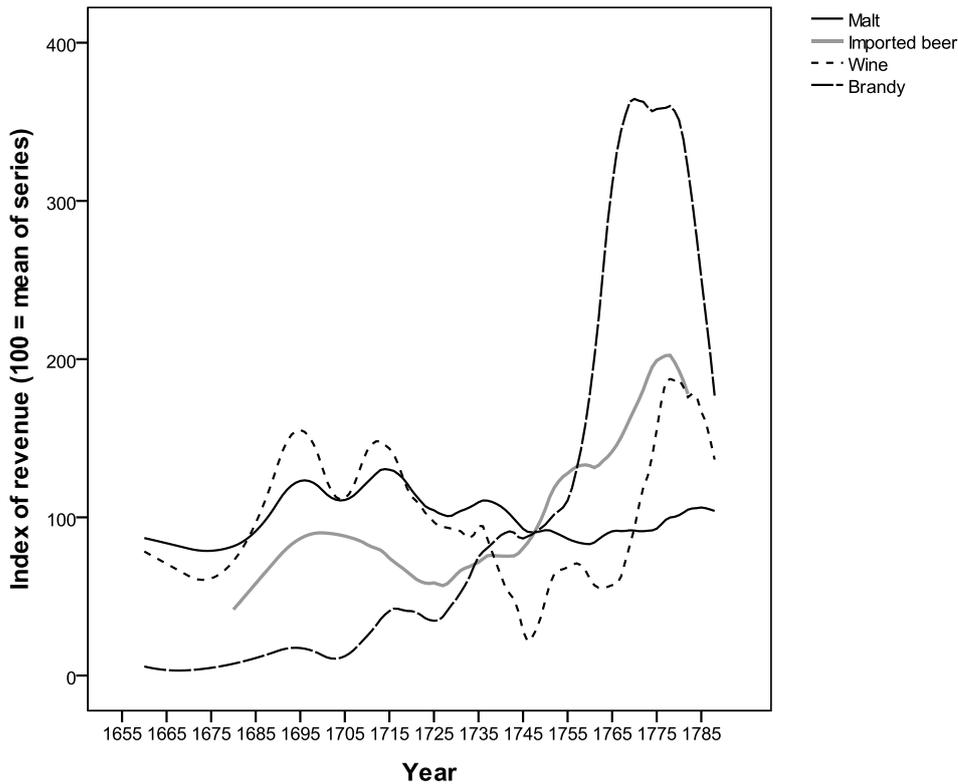
In the following section I have selected those excises which best lend themselves to straightforward interpretations in terms of aggregate consumption. Figure 2.13 traces the revenue of four excises concerned with the consumption of alcoholic beverages in Aalst. Together these taxes can be taken to represent the main components of aggregate beverage consumption in Aalst. The malt excise, which was levied on each sack of grain brewed in town, represents the size of the local beer production – with the exception of the cheapest *cleyn beer*, for which old malt was reused.⁴⁵² The excises on imported beers, wine and distilled spirits (usually only brandy was explicitly referred to) were all levied on retail by innkeepers and publicans.

⁴⁵⁰ R. De Boeck, "Bierbrouwerijen te Aalst in de 18de eeuw" (Free University of Brussels, 1993) provides some comparisons between actual revenue and the sum paid by the excise farmer of the beer excise in 18th-century Aalst.

⁴⁵¹ MAA, OA, *municipal accounts*, n° 434.

⁴⁵² Poukens, "Cambrinus uitgedaagd"; Aerts, "Het hoofdelijk bierverbruik".

Figure III.3. Ten-year moving average of excise revenues related to beverage consumption in Aalst (100 = mean of series).



Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417-541.

De Boeck, "Bierbrouwerijen Te Aalst".

A first and predictable pattern that emerges from figure III.3 is the steep rise to prominence of spirits (brandy and gin) from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. As elsewhere in the Southern Netherlands spirits increasingly challenged the dominant position of beer drinking in everyday sociability, especially for the lower social strata.⁴⁵³ What would become known as a typical 'working-class' drink by the nineteenth century quickly gained popularity in Aalst from 1750 onwards. The aggregate consumption of locally produced beer, by contrast, remained remarkably stationary. Even during the period of strong population growth after 1750, the revenue of the malt excises did not increase significantly. To be sure, the malt excise does not in fact indicate the quantities of beer produced but rather the amount of malt used in the brewing process. In seventeenth and eighteenth century Aalst there was no longer a *pegel* in force to legally prescribe the minimum amount of grain to be used for each type of beer, so that the beer output relative to malt input could vary through time.⁴⁵⁴ This was all the more the case since maximum beer prices were fixed, as a result of which brewers often compensated for rising production costs due to mounting grain prices by adding less malt to their beers. Even though the malt excise does not quite capture the total quantity of beer produced, as an

⁴⁵³ Compare with Poukens, "Cambrinus uitgedaagd".

⁴⁵⁴ De Boeck, "Bierbrouwerijen te Aalst".

indicator of the total nutritional value incorporated in local beer production however it serves the purpose rather well.

While the consumption of locally produced beer (calories) remained stable and even declined in per capita terms, the imported beers seem to have strengthened their position on the market of Aalst. These were generally the more expensive beers, such as the Peterman from Leuven or the Caves from Lier.⁴⁵⁵ At least from the second quarter of the eighteenth century the consumption of these slightly more upper-tier beers was on the rise. It seems then, that the consumption of the ordinary, locally produced beer in Aalst suffered from a double challenge. At the lower end of the market the distilled spirits gained in currency, whereas at the same time the demand for the more expensive imported beers also grew. Lastly, the pattern for wine follows a much more erratic course, with a first peak near the end of the seventeenth century, a deep fall during the first half of the eighteenth and a renewed surge in the final quarter of the century. The large year-to-year differences in revenue however suggests that changes in the way the excise collection was organised, or perhaps even in the underlying tariffs used, might have affected these figures. The fact that at the end of the eighteenth century wine consumption fell practically everywhere in the Southern Netherlands, whereas the wine excise revenue kept rising in Aalst, gives cause to even more caution.⁴⁵⁶

In order to add some substance to this rather crude reconstruction of excise revenues, these can be recalculated in terms of estimated per capita consumption at various points in time (table III.17).

Table III.17. Estimated yearly consumption per capita of alcoholic beverages (in litres), Aalst intra muros.

	Malt	Imported beer	Wine	Spirits	Population
c. 1670	110 l.	17 l.	4,2 l.	0,1 l.	7.682
c. 1710	148 l.	24 l.	6,1 l.	0,3 l.	7.586
c. 1750	111 l.	23 l.	1,7 l.	1,1 l.	7.702
c. 1782	102 l.	61 l.	7,8 l.	3,5 l.	9.204
c. 1828			1,7 l.	4,0 l.	14.571
c. 1843			2,7 l.	1,8 l.	16.769

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Stadsrekeningen, n° 417-541.
De Boeck, "Bierbrouwerijen Te Aalst"
(Nothomb 1845).

Notes:

Malt was taxed at 6 styvers the *sack*. Each *sack* contained 241,5 l. malt.
The imported beers were taxed at 10 styvers for every *tonne* sold at the tap. One *tonne* of beer contained approximately 161,8 l. of beer.
The wine excise was recalculated (following De Boeck) to 1,2 styvers per *stoop* (2,19 l.).
Spirits were taxed at 4 styvers per *stoop* (2,19 l.).

⁴⁵⁵ R. Van Uytven, "De Leuvense bierindustrie in de XVIIIde eeuw," *Bijdragen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 16 (1961); Aerts, "Het hoofdelijk bierverbruik"; Aerts, "Hop en bier".

⁴⁵⁶ On wine consumption in Ghent, but with many figures for other places in the Southern Netherlands during the 18th and nineteenth centuries: Vandenbroeke, "Evolutie van het wijnverbruik".

It must once again be stressed that these estimates are rudimentary at best, especially since the precise size of the taxed population is hard to establish.⁴⁵⁷ As Aalst evolved from a closed city to an open city during this period, thereby gradually incorporating the nearby rural communities of Schaarbeke and Mijlbeke, the collection of excises probably became harder in the eighteenth century than it had been before.⁴⁵⁸ Generally the same patterns nevertheless emerge: the strong spread of brandy and imported beers in the second half of the eighteenth century, the overall stability (or even decline) in the consumption of locally produced beer, and the rather erratic fluctuations of the wine excise. A rare surviving account by the receiver of the beer excises in 1782 reveals that the estimated 102 l. of malt per capita corresponded to the production of approximately 142 l. of beer per capita.⁴⁵⁹ Combining both locally produced and imported beers yields a total per capita consumption of 203 l. per year – only slightly lower than the 219 l. consumed in Ghent and Leuven around 1800.⁴⁶⁰ Perhaps the inclusion of the rural outskirts of Aalst in its population figures depresses this per capita estimate somewhat unduly since it stands to reason that the enforcement of such excise taxes was harder in a city where a third of the population lived extra muros. By 1828 per capita beer consumption in Aalst had dropped to just 96 l. a year, falling further still to a mere 55 l. by 1843.⁴⁶¹

Perhaps for similar reasons the per capita consumption estimates of wine and brandy in Aalst seem low when compared to data for other places in the region. Despite its spectacular ascent in Aalst during the eighteenth century, the consumption of brandy did not exceed 3,5 l. per year by the the 1780's. On average for the Southern Netherlands, Erik Aerts has calculated a figure of 5-6 l. per year, whereas in Hasselt consumption even rose to 7,5 l. by the end of the eighteenth century.⁴⁶² The figures for wine consumption in Aalst seem similarly depressed when compared to the 10-15 l. consumed in Ghent during the eighteenth century.⁴⁶³

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the consumption of beer, wine, bread and meat declined almost everywhere in the Southern Netherlands. This has usually been attributed to a long process of pauperization caused by budding industrial capitalism or mounting Malthusian pressures.⁴⁶⁴ Confronted with declining living standards, households increasingly resorted to cheaper substitutes such as coffee instead of beer and potatoes instead of cereals. Since excise data on those substitute goods is lacking, their actual consumption remains hard to trace. Although the drinking of cheap beer already declined markedly throughout the eighteenth century in Aalst, the decline was less pronounced

⁴⁵⁷ A comparison between the excise returns booked in the municipal accounts and collection registers of the imported beer excise has demonstrated that in 1782 only the intra muros part of the population was subjected to that particular excise (De Boeck, "Bierbrouwerijen te Aalst"). Intra muros population estimates have therefore been used for the per capita calculations of this excise, whereas estimates for the total population have been used in all other cases.

⁴⁵⁸ Vermoesen, "Urbanisatie en ruralisatie".

⁴⁵⁹ Calculated on the data provided in De Boeck, "Bierbrouwerijen te Aalst"

⁴⁶⁰ See many more figures in Aerts, "Het hoofdelijk bierverbruik".

⁴⁶¹ Nothomb 1845.

⁴⁶² E. Aerts, "Alcoholconsumptie in het hertogdom Brabant (14de-18de eeuw)," *Het Tijdschrift van Dexia Bank* 55, no. 217 (2001); Poukens, "Cambrinus uitgedaagd".

⁴⁶³ Vandenbroeke, "Evolutie van het wijnverbruik".

⁴⁶⁴ See the competing views in Lis and Soly, "Food consumption" and Segers, "Oysters and rye bread". More in C. Vandenbroeke, "Voedingstoestanden te Gent tijdens de eerste helft van de 19de eeuw," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 4 (1973); Segers, "Nutrition and Living Standards"; Bekaert, "Caloric consumption".

still than would be the case in the following century. In the case of imported beers, bread, wine and brandy however there was no evidence of shrinking consumption in Aalst until the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the gradual introduction of new additions to the diet was already evident long before the turn of the century. Although they do not yield information on any quantitative changes in the frequency or quantity of consumption, after-death inventories from seventeenth-eighteenth century Aalst show the gradual introduction of various new consumer goods in a wide range of households. Table III.18 shows the share of inventories in each sample period containing references to beverages. In the case of coffee and tea this mostly includes the possession of various kinds of tableware related to the preparation and consumption of hot drinks. For beer and wine these figures mostly concern storage in cellars. References to brandy or gin are usually related to specific drinking or pouring vessels.

Table III.18. Proportion of inventories indicating the (potential) consumption of selected beverages in Aalst.

	c. 1670	c. 1710	c. 1750	c. 1790	Diff (%)	Cramer's V
Beer	53 %	55 %	55 %	15 %	- 38	0,407 ***
Wine	11 %	12 %	19 %	27 %	+ 16	0,198 **
Spirits	2 %	3 %	8 %	12 %	+ 10	0,202 **
Coffee	0 %	1 %	23 %	84 %	+ 84	0,485 ***
Tea	0 %	7 %	64 %	88 %	+ 88	0,509 ***

Notes:

The difference and Cramer's V measure of association have been calculated on the first and last period.
*** denotes significance at the 1% level, ** at the 5% level and * at the 10% level.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

These figures should serve as crude indications of a general trend only. The possession of a teapot does not necessarily imply the daily drinking of tea, nor does the absence of a beer keg in the cellar preclude its regular consumption. It nevertheless seems reasonable to accept that a general increase or decrease in consumption might have affected specific household possessions upon death. The results largely corroborate the data from the excises. Whereas the prevalence of storing beer declined markedly in the second half of the eighteenth century, objects related to the drinking of coffee and tea spread spectacularly. The storage of wine also expanded over time, although only modestly so, and so did objects related to the consumption of gin and brandy. It is clear that already in the eighteenth century – and especially during its latter half – coffee and tea had found widespread acceptance in Aalst at the expense of beer consumption.⁴⁶⁵

A similar analysis can be carried out for the food reserves found in the homes of the deceased. Table III.19 demonstrates a general stability and perhaps even a modest decline in the presence of cereals and meat during the second half of the eighteenth century, as well as a simultaneous and sudden expansion of potato consumption.

⁴⁶⁵ See also Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer* for the Anglo-Saxon world.

Table III.19. Proportion of inventories indicating the (potential) consumption of selected foods in Aalst.

	c. 1670	c. 1710	c. 1750	c. 1790	Diff (%)	Cramer's V
Cereals (all)	19 %	26 %	19 %	6 %	- 13	0,197 **
Meat	13 %	12 %	16 %	12 %	- 1	0,011
Potatoes	0 %	0 %	0 %	28 %	+ 28	0,398 ***

Notes:

The difference and Cramer's V measure of association have been calculated on the first and last period.

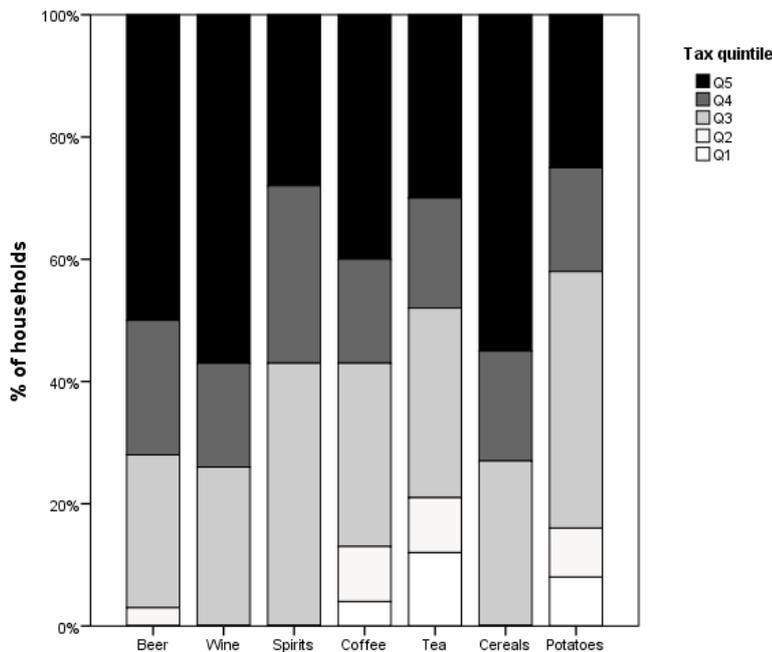
*** denotes significance at the 1% level, ** at the 5% level and * at the 10% level.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801, 1820-1830, 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

Pushing this cursory analysis of the after-death inventories one step further, it becomes possible to take a look at the social profiles of the consumers of these goods. Figure III.4 plots the distribution of the goods described above over the households in eighteenth century Aalst, divided into five quintiles. It is immediately clear that these distributions are highly skewed: the rich possessed these goods, or objects referring to them, much more often than those who were not so well off. In all likelihood these distributions are far more skewed than actual consumption patterns were, simply because the chances of having a cellar with food storage or a fully equipped dining room with all sorts of drinking equipment were much higher among the better off than among the poor. Comparing the different distributions to one another might nevertheless provide an indication of the social spread of a specific consumption good relative to another.

Figure III.4. Social distribution of items related to specific foods and beverages in Aalst inventories (1740-1795).



Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1861-1866, 1906-1915.

The graph expresses the possessions of items related to these selected food and drinks in relative terms in order to render their prevalence among different social layers of the urban society comparable. A telling contrast is revealed, for instance, between the possession of objects related to spirits (gin and brandy) on the one hand and wine on the other. Whereas the consumption of distilled spirits was relatively more common among the middling and lower social strata, wine was almost exclusively to be found among the well-to-do. Beer occupied a middling position, being less 'luxurious' than wine, but without emerging as a poor man's drink either. Evidence for the consumption of tea especially can be found in all layers of society, almost without any significant difference emerging among them – as would happen in the nineteenth century.⁴⁶⁶ Even though the drinking of coffee was not the exclusive domain of the lower social classes, after-death inventory evidence clearly shows that they at least had wide access to it by the end of the eighteenth century. The same argument can be made for the consumption of potatoes, which were found not only in the storage rooms and cellars of the poor, but pretty much throughout all layers of society. This seems to stand in stark contrast to the possession of cereals, although the precise relation between owning a sack of wheat or rye and the regular eating of bread may indeed be questioned.

It is noteworthy then, that the items of food and drink which gained most in popularity throughout the eighteenth century – coffee, tea, spirits and potatoes – were also the least 'luxurious' ones, and would in the subsequent century become associated with the labouring classes in particular. Indeed, some of the evolutions characteristic of the widespread pauperization and polarization that characterized the nineteenth century city seem already foreshadowed in eighteenth-century Aalst. It is tempting to read into this the effect of a gradual erosion of living standards and the playing out of a prolonged pauperization process from at least the middle of the eighteenth century onwards.⁴⁶⁷ In order to substantiate such a claim, however, a detailed analysis of calories per prices and their evolution through time would be in order – a task which surpasses both the scope and feasibility of this dissertation. Available anthropometric evidence for eighteenth century Flanders suggests that living standards changed little until the final two decades of the century.⁴⁶⁸

More pronounced than any evidence of creeping pauperization was a tendency towards polarization in dietary habits. While the consumption of cheap beer dwindled under the pressure of coffee and tea, both wine and the more expensive imported beers gained in popularity. Brandy and gin meanwhile emerged as true 'lower-class' drinks and greatly increased their market share as well. This dietary polarization appears to reflect some of the broader processes outlined above.

⁴⁶⁶ See *infra*, and also McCants, "Poor consumers"; Anne McCants, "Exotic Goods, Popular Consumption, and the Standard of Living: Thinking about Globalization in the Early Modern World," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 4 (2007); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants* (New York: 1992).

⁴⁶⁷ A similar suggestion has been made for pre-industrial England in Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer*

⁴⁶⁸ Nathalie De Bondt, "De levensstandaard in Oost- en West-Vlaanderen in de achttiende eeuw op basis van antropometrische indicatoren" (Ghent University, 2006); G. De Cooman, "De levensstandaard in Oost-Vlaanderen in de 18de en eerste helft van de 19de eeuw op basis van antropometrische indicatoren" (Ghent University, 2001).

6. Credit, debt and monetization

6.1. Household indebtedness

A final inroad to studying the character of the early modern economy of Aalst is offered by the fundamental mechanism which allowed the day-to-day functioning of the urban economy: credit and debt. As has been noted earlier, traditional accounts of pre-industrial debt which tended to associate indebtedness with pauperization, have long been replaced by a more positive perspective on the role of credit and debt in the early modern economy. The empirical rehabilitation of the role of credit in the pre-industrial economy fits particularly well within a wider narrative of European economic development in general. The liquidity and efficiency of financial markets is regarded as a necessary pre-requisite, and perhaps even a key enabler, of economic growth and development. Evidence on the functioning of medieval and early modern capital markets thus fits into a larger argument on the fuzzy boundaries between the traditional and modern economy – pushing back the origins of the latter (at least in North-Western Europe) back in time.⁴⁶⁹

Such an enterprise is not, of course, the one undertaken here. It is not the aim of this dissertation to assess the efficiency of the early modern capital market in Aalst, nor to argue for or against its modernity. In ‘The Economy of Obligation’ Craig Muldrew has portrayed England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a society involved in a gradual transformation towards a fully commercialized, utilitarian and abstract social structure.⁴⁷⁰ Pivotal in this transition was the role of credit, propelling consumption and commerce in an era of low cash supplies. Whereas Muldrew firmly relegates expanding market activity and the extension of credit during the middle ages to the realm of forced commercialization induced by taxes, rents and feudal dues, his take on the early modern credit economy is quite different.⁴⁷¹ This time around the growth in credit and commerce signaled increased consumption, higher living standards and a growing division of labour. Not only was practically everyone caught up in this ‘economy of obligation’, but at the same time every household’s creditworthiness was also in the scales all of the time. According to Muldrew then, the early modern credit economy allowed for both co-operation and competition between households to strengthen their grip in the context of an increasingly market-oriented and consumption-driven society. Long-term debt in the form of annuities and obligations, meanwhile, have been increasingly ascribed with the important function of allowing households to overcome issues of ‘nuclear hardship’ and life-cycle budget squeezes in an economy characterized by the European Marriage Pattern.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ This argument is laid out eloquently in Hoffman, *Growth in a traditional society*, 35-80. Furthermore see for instance Zuijderduijn, *Medieval capital markets*; Hoffman, Postel-Vinay, and Rosenthal, "Information and economic history"; O. Gelderblom and J. Jonker, "Completing a Financial Revolution: The Finance of the Dutch East India Trade and the Rise of the Amsterdam Capital Market, 1595-1612," *The Journal of Economic History* 64, no. 3 (2004).

⁴⁷⁰ Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation. The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Houndmills: 1998), 3-7.

⁴⁷¹ Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, 38-39.

⁴⁷² For instance J. Zuijderduijn and T. De Moor, "Spending, saving or investing? The asset management of sixteenth-century Holland households," *The Economic History Review* (2012); Ogilvie, K pker, and Maegraith, "Household Debt".

However, not unlike the pre-industrial economy in which it functioned, the early modern world of credit and debt was nevertheless subject to important constraints as well. Both on the market for secured debt, as in the area of short term debt, the strategies and opportunities available were mediated by concerns about creditworthiness and information asymmetries. Not everyone enjoyed the same degree of access to the credit market, and probably not to the same extent. At a macro level no less, the opportunities provided by the credit economy were significantly constrained. Craig Muldrew vividly described the surge in debt litigation trials in sixteenth and seventeenth century England which followed the expansion of commercial credit in the preceding period.⁴⁷³ Contemporary sources repeatedly alert us to the potentially problematic issue of over-indebtedness.⁴⁷⁴ Supposedly then, as now, problematic household debt does not serve merely as a barometer for creeping poverty or economic decline, but should probably be recognized as itself potentially undermining for the proper functioning of the early modern economy itself.

Any pessimistic or optimistic interpretation of the prevalence of pre-industrial credit should not distract from the inherent ambivalences of household debt. The particular situation of the debtor, the motivation for acquiring credit and its eventual effects on a micro and macro scale, were subject to a variety of influences – some beneficial, some not so much. The number of potential determinants of household debt identified in historical research is large. Life-cycle effects, social inequalities, the availability of securities, a desire for increased consumption, deficient monetization and commercialized economic activity are just some of the factors determining the prevalence of debt among early modern households. And prevalent it was: more than 90% of inventoried households had outstanding debts upon death (table III.20). In this, Aalst was no different from German Wildberg for instance, where 94% of inventoried couples left financial liabilities.⁴⁷⁵ Short-term, unsecured debt was the most wide-spread, pertaining to almost 85% of the inventoried population, compared to ‘only’ 45% for annuities and 26% for obligations.

Table III.20. The share of households entangled in the diverse types of debt, Aalst.

	1670	1710	1750	1790
Short term debt	90 %	75 %	87 %	87 %
Long & medium term debt	57 %	60 %	52 %	44 %
Any debt	92 %	87 %	93 %	93 %
Negative net worth	10 %	2 %	8 %	10 %
N	124	126	120	133

Sources:

Aalst: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Despite the large prevalence of debt this was probably not a truly problematic issue for the majority of households. Only 7% of all households suffered negative net wealth at the time of death – a small minority of the urban population. Even when excluding real estate from the calculation (in order to make the figures more easily comparable) the proportion of over-indebted households did not exceed

⁴⁷³ Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*.

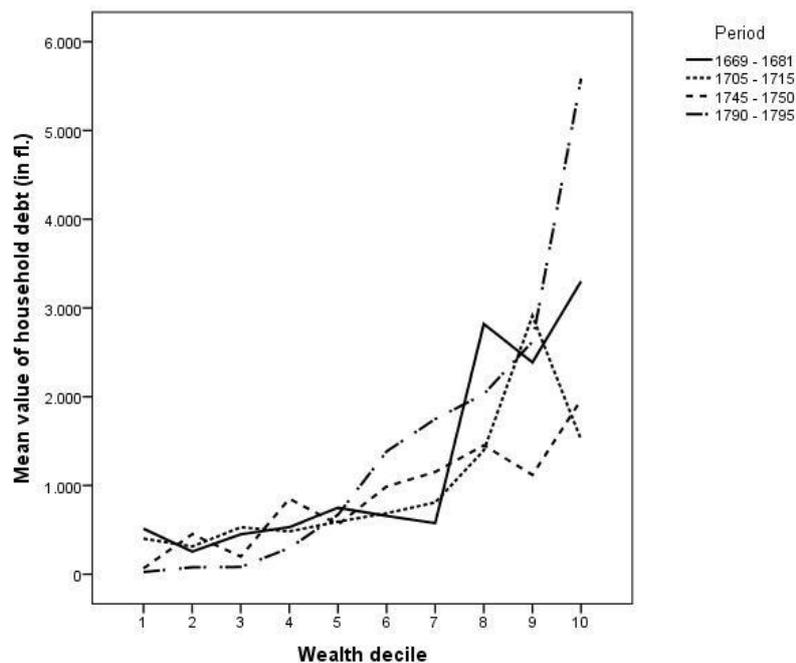
⁴⁷⁴ Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie"; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

⁴⁷⁵ Ogilvie, Küpker, and Maegraith, "Household Debt".

11%. In seventeenth century Wildberg only 5 to 7% of inventoried deceased were in this situation, but in early modern Yorkshire the number of households with over-drawn accounts at death amounted to 16%.⁴⁷⁶ It appears to be the case that in none of these early modern communities over-indebtedness formed a particularly widespread problem, although it was not entirely uncommon either. The majority of households had numerous outstanding debts, but were able to keep bankruptcy well at bay. For the median household in Aalst, the ratio of outstanding debts to total wealth was 0,29. At least half of the town's population thus had a level of indebtedness that was less than 30% of their total assets. Throughout the period studied, most households held their level of indebtedness around this proportion of 30% of their assets: from 31% in the 1670's to 26% in the second half of the eighteenth century. Even in the case of unexpected setbacks, there would still be a wide credit margin available for most households before bankruptcy would come to loom large.

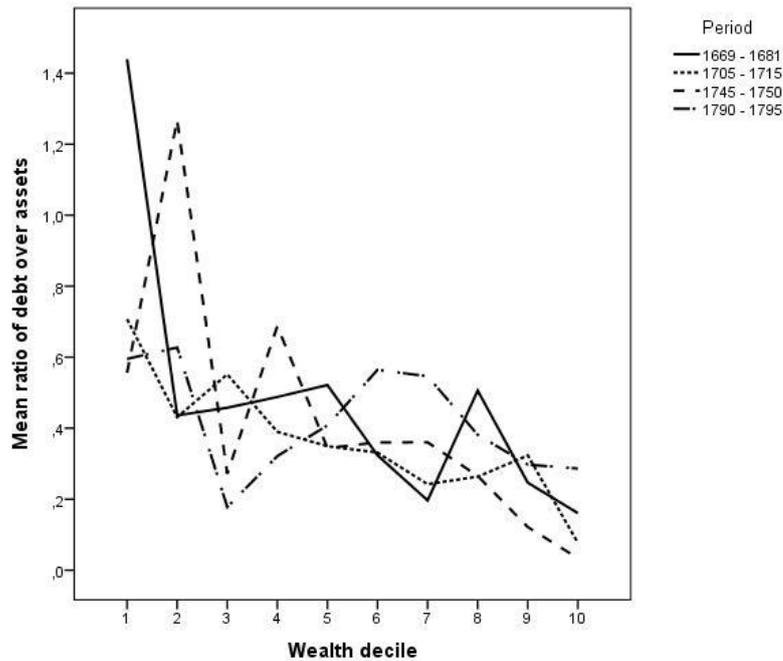
This safety margin was no accident. The majority of households incurred debt more or less proportionally to their wealth. In other words: the wealthier the household, the higher the level of debt. But this proportionality had its social limits. Even though the *absolute* need for credit was highest among the better-off, their *relative* need was the lowest. The ratio of debt over the total value of assets owned demonstrates precisely the reverse social pattern compared to the absolute level of indebtedness (figure III.5 & III.6).

Figure III.5. The average value of household debt per wealth decile.



⁴⁷⁶ See Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness" for Yorkshire and Ogilvie, K pker, and Maegraith, "Household Debt" for the Wildberg case.

Figure III.6. The ratio of the value of debt versus assets per wealth decile.



In order to obtain a more integrated perspective of who took up credit and under what circumstances, a number of parameters can be included in a multivariate regression analysis. The goal is to build a model that can describe which factors influenced household debt in Aalst throughout the period under scrutiny. In this model, the total amount of outstanding household debt at death is the dependent variable that the model tries to predict. Step-by-step, four clusters of explanatory variables will be brought into the analysis. First in order of importance are the variables related to the financial situation of the household. Since real estate ownership and general creditworthiness were important preconditions for the access to credit, such parameters probably exerted a large influence over the ability to take up credit in the first place. One could also wonder whether it were the rich, who enjoyed the best access to the credit market and probably entertained more expensive lifestyles, who sported the heaviest debt burdens, or rather the poorer households who felt the most pressing need for financial relief. In a second cluster, the progression of time is considered as an explanatory factor within the model. Does the choice of sample period influence the determinants of outstanding household debt, or not? The third cluster relates to the occupational activity of the households studied. The question asked here is whether a significant difference can be discerned between the household debt of occupational groups regardless of overall differences in wealth levels.⁴⁷⁷ Did highly commercialized households engaged in mercantile activities make more frequent use of credit, for instance? And what about the levels of indebtedness of such presumably vulnerable economic units as the households involved in proto-industrial textile production? A last cluster of explanatory variables attempts to capture the influence of the structure of the household itself. To what extent can life-cycle effects be found to have increased or decreased the level of household debt? And were such effects dissimilar for the never-married or widowed?

⁴⁷⁷ Since the principal financial characteristics of households are brought into the model during the first step, the rest of the model effectively controls for wealth differences.

A regression on the level of debt held by households confronts the researcher with a statistical problem common especially to the field of consumer expenditure studies. Like the demand for many aspects of consumption, household debt is a censored variable truncated at zero. Regressing the set of available parameters on the censored variable would produce biased results since the relationship between these parameters and the level of outstanding debt in all likelihood takes a different form for those *with* compared to those *without* debt. Lumping these together in one ordinary OLS regression would do justice to neither relation. Several statistical techniques have been developed to deal with this problem, one of which is the tobit regression.⁴⁷⁸ Although in a tobit regression the censored values (i.c. the households with zero debt) are treated separately from the uncensored ones, the model then combines both outcomes into a single regression model. This has the disadvantage of making it impossible to disentangle the two distinct processes at hand: namely the effect of the explanatory variables on the presence of a certain good (i.c. debt) versus the effect of said variables on the amount of debt among those who held it. Statistical research has furthermore shown that tobit models are particularly inapt where non-normally distributed variables – such as wealth – are involved.⁴⁷⁹ The alternative option used here is to employ a two-stage model in which the presence of debt is first explored in a logit regression, and the size of household debt among those with non-zero debt is further regressed by means of a hierarchical OLS regression.⁴⁸⁰ This avoids the problems associated with regressing on censored dependent variables and furthermore allows for a separate assessment of the rules governing *access* to the credit market and those determining the *level* of indebtedness.

The determinants of participation on the credit market are not the same for all types of credit. Short-term, interest-less loans differed from long-and medium term annuities and obligations in both their requirements and purpose. The results from two separate binomial regressions on short and long/medium term debts are summarized in table III.21.

There are clear differences in the influential factors on market participation between short-term and long/medium-term debt. For short term debt, the parameters included in the model seem to hold little predictive power, resulting not only in a lower Nagelkerke's R^2 , but also in a smaller number of significant β coefficients. As is to be expected, the value of cash present in a household reduced the need to take out short term credit. The only other significant determinant of short-term debt is the interaction term relating to female widows. Being a female widow increased the odds of taking out short-term loans with a factor of almost 14. Other than a lack of steady monetary income combined with solid creditworthiness, reasons for this effect seem hard to find.

⁴⁷⁸ The background on tobit regressions in James Tobin, "Estimation of relationships for limited dependent variables," *Econometrica* 26, no. 1 (1958); Takeshi Ameyima, "Tobit models: a survey," *Journal of Econometrics* 24, no. 1-2 (1984). Such a method was applied in Ogilvie, K pker, and Maegraith, "Household Debt".

⁴⁷⁹ C. Feinstein and M. Thomas, *Making History Count* (Cambridge: 2008), 424-27.

⁴⁸⁰ Similar techniques are used in current econometric scholarship; see for instance Ana del Rio and Garry Young, "The determinants of unsecured borrowing: evidence from the British household panel survey", in *Documentos de Tabajo* (2005).

Table III.21. Regression results on the likelihood of participation in the market for (a) short-term credit, and (b) long- & medium-term credit.

	Short term		Long & medium term	
	β	Exp(β)	β	Exp(β)
Log value of household goods	,09	1,09	,01	1,01
Log value of cash	-,25 ***	,78	-,26 ***	,77
Log value of other assets	-,04	,97	,18 **	1,19
No real estate	,07	1,07	-2,55 ***	,08
Real estate rented out	,18	1,20	-,99 ***	,37
1705-1715	-,99	,37	,32	1,38
1740-1745	-,14	,87	,26	1,29
1790-1795	-,30	,74	-,33	,72
Spinning	,28	1,33	,43	1,54
Occupational middling groups	-,21	,81	,66 **	1,93
Professions and higher-status occupations	,09	1,10	-,27	,76
Mercantile activities	,96	2,61	,41	1,51
< 35 yrs. old	,34	1,40	-,26	,77
> 55 yrs. old	,03	1,03	-,40	,67
No dependent children	-,22	,80	-,06	,94
Widowed	-,23	,79	1,37	3,95
Never-married	20,31	,00	,06	1,06
Female x widowed	2,63 **	13,82	-1,51	,22
Female x never-married	-19,68	,00	-1,24	,29
Constant	2,39 ***	10,96	,41	1,50
χ^2	53,72 ***		177,40 ***	
R ² (Nagelkerke)	0,18		0,40	

Note:

Results are from two separate hierarchical binomial logistic regressions.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The proposed model seems much more adequate to predict the participation on the market for long and medium term credit in the second regression ($R^2 = 0,40$). Financial parameters are of crucial importance, with the amount of available cash again showing up as having a negative effect on the demand for credit. This time however, the total value of all buildings, financial assets and other wealth components also exerted a significant effect on the presence of debt. The larger a household's wealth, the higher the odds of taking out long-term or medium-term loans. This effect is probably connected to the very strong influence of real estate: the ownership of any real estate at all depressed the odds of having medium or long-term outstanding loans by a factor of 0,08. In other words: the markets for real estate and for long/medium term credit were closely intertwined. It is interesting to note, on the other hand, that those with capital incomes from real property (either land or buildings) rented out, had less need for long/medium term credit. Real estate ownership apparently had an ambiguous relationship with debt: both having none and having more than the household required for its own needs negatively

influenced the presence of such debt. Not unlike today, the primary function of the early modern capital market seems to have been related to the financing of the household's own, primary home. Both the poorer tenants, unable to obtain their own home, and the richer rentiers were significantly less likely to have outstanding debts upon death. Such seems furthermore confirmed by the effect of belonging to the occupational middling groups of craftsmen and artisans. Belonging to these groups increased the odds of being active on long- and medium term credit market almost twofold. The capital market of Aalst seems to have been essential for the daily functioning of the urban economy. In the context of long since established patterns of neo-locality, it no doubt allowed a large number of households to settle their own family and establish themselves as independent economic units. With respect to participation at least, characteristics relating to the composition and structure of the household do not seem to have exercised particular influence within this model.

The same patterns largely hold when turning to the OLS regression on the *size* of debts held. In order to reduce issues of heteroscedasticity and non-linearity the monetary values have been logarithmically transformed. They have furthermore been expressed in constant prices as to exclude the effect of price inflation. The results of this final regression are listed in table III.22.

Table III.22. Results from an OLS regression on the log of the value of household debt in Aalst (1670-1795).

	B	SE B	β
Log value of household goods	,37 ***	,07	,25
Log value of cash	-,16 ***	,03	-,24
Log value of other assets	,31 ***	,04	,42
No real estate	-,53 **	,22	-,13
Real estate rented out	-,36 **	,16	-,10
1705-1715	-,20	,19	-,05
1740-1745	-,06	,19	-,01
1790-1795	-,13	,19	-,03
Spinning	,26	,23	,04
Occupational middling groups	,37 **	,15	,10
Professions and higher-status occupations	,51 *	,28	,07
Mercantile activities	,69 ***	,25	,11
< 35 yrs. old	-,15	,18	-,03
> 55 yrs. old	-,54 *	,28	-,07
No dependent children	-,13	,19	-,03
Widowed	,12	,39	,02
Never-married	-,13	,42	-,02
Female x widowed	,10	,45	,02
Female x never-married	-,75	,47	-,09
Constant	2,43 ***	0,41	

R² = 0,40 for block 1; Δ R² = 0,00 for block 2; Δ R² = 0,03 for block 3; Δ R² = 0,02 for block 4.
 Model R² = 0,42

Notes:

Results are from a hierarchical OLS regression on the logarithm of the value of all debt held by households, excluding those households with zero debt.

Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The coefficients showing up as significant in the OLS regression differ little from those that proved to be crucial in determining market participation. All wealth components clearly had significant effects on the level of indebtedness, although not necessarily in the same direction. As expected, the value of debts rose with higher values of assets and household goods, but declined with higher levels of cash. The importance of having collateral is again demonstrated by the negative influence exerted by not having any real estate. Both having no real estate and having a surplus of real estate rented out had a negative influence on total debt levels. This again confirms the hypothesis that the credit market was most intensively employed by the middling segment of the market in order to acquire a (first) home.

Although the coefficients of all dummy variables for the three periods after 1670 have negative signs, none of these turn out to be statistically significant. This does not necessarily imply that there was no change in indebtedness over time. In fact, there was: the median value of household debt for instance dropped from 460 in 1750 to 205 in 1790. The regression results indicate however, that time was no autonomous, independent variable in this change. It is more likely that the wealth composition of households changed over time and that this caused the shifting level of aggregate debt.

Of the occupational dummies included in the regression model, the one demonstrating the largest degree of significance is the involvement in mercantile activities. Not only in allowing households to acquire their homes and workshops did the credit market fulfill an important role, but also in facilitating trade relations. Being active as craftsmen or artisans and in the professions or other higher-status occupations also positively affected the level of household debt but to a smaller extent. Also noteworthy is the lack of a significant effect for households involved in spinning activities. When controlling for their level of wealth, these households do not seem to have been significantly more dependent on debt relations than non-spinning households.

The cluster of variables related to household characteristics carries little explanatory power in this regression model ($\Delta R^2 = 0,02$). The presence of minor children in the household, widowhood or marital status seem to have had little influence on the level of debt. Only being 'old' (older than 55 years) turns out to have been borderline significant, reducing the debt burden of households. This finding tentatively confirms the life-cycle hypothesis of Ogilvie et al. They argued that the burden of debt was largest in mid-life when the need for productive investments was the greatest. Both younger and older households tended to be less indebted.⁴⁸¹

The regression models presented here shed some light on the prerequisites to and the functionality of household debt in early modern Aalst. The market for long- and medium term debt proved most significantly related to the acquisition and ownership of real estate. Especially for the purchase of a home or workshop did the credit market perform a vital function. Loans for the purpose of productive investments turned out to be especially important for the occupational middling groups. As a mechanism for overcoming temporary financial constraints and life-cycle bottlenecks, the credit market in Aalst seems to have performed its function relatively unchanged until the end of the eighteenth century. Although the share of over-indebted households rose to 10% of all inventoried households by the end of the eighteenth century, this level was no higher than it had been in the

⁴⁸¹ Ogilvie, K pker, and Maegraith, "Household Debt".

1670's. Even by the end of the ancient régime, the issue of over-indebtedness remained limited to only a relatively small share of the urban population.

6.2. Consumptive credit and monetization

Since the data on the credit economy as a whole are largely dominated by the importance of long- and medium-term debts it might prove worthwhile to consider the everyday use of credit in more detail. The comparatively small and short-term debts incurred when payments for goods or services were postponed, when small sums were lent to family members or when salaries were not immediately enumerated in cash, these are the types of credit which probably best capture the day-to-day functioning of the urban economy of eighteenth century Aalst. Such transactions pertain most directly to Muldrew's economy of obligation and the combined processes of commercialization and establishing of trust he described.⁴⁸² In theory at least, the number and size of outstanding 'commercial' debts of a household speaks of the need for credit employed in market consumption. In this credit served a dual purpose. Craig Muldrew and Bart Willems have principally stressed the importance of small-scale consumer credit in order to overcome the endemic lack of coinage that plagued the early modern economy.⁴⁸³ Others, such as Keith Wrightson and Peter Musgrave, have emphasized how such credit was also important in overcoming the irregularities of income flows. For labourers especially, income proved to be particularly insecure and unreliable and consumptive credit might have enabled them to overcome this.⁴⁸⁴ For precisely this reason, some historians have stressed the role of credit in reconciling rising levels of consumption with simultaneously rising degrees of proletarianisation in eighteenth century Britain.⁴⁸⁵ The prevalence of commercial and consumptive credit then, can be taken to relate more importantly to processes of commercialization and consumerism in an insufficiently monetized economy, than to impoverishment and pauperism.

In assessing the importance of credit relations for the early modern Antwerp middling groups, Bart Willems attested an increasing monetization throughout the eighteenth century.⁴⁸⁶ He found that the amounts of cash left upon death recorded in inventories grew while the number of debts owed to the deceased fell. According to Willems, the expansion of eighteenth century commercialization went hand in hand with monetization, thus effectively outgrowing Muldrew's 'economy of obligation'. Thijs Lambrecht has similarly attested a growing importance of monetary transactions in the Flemish

⁴⁸² Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*.

⁴⁸³ Willems, *Leven op de pof*, 198.

⁴⁸⁴ Peter Musgrave, *The early modern European economy* (London: 1999), 84; Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470-1750* (London: 2002), 315.

⁴⁸⁵ Shammass, *The pre-industrial consumer*.

⁴⁸⁶ Willems, *Leven op de pof*, 91-102, 245. Heidi Deneweth has recently confirmed Willems' findings, also demonstrating that Antwerp households made less use of credit and at the same time owned more cash money – although in a context of increasing polarization and poverty, rather than impeding commercialization: H. Deneweth, "A fine balance. Household finance and financial strategies of Antwerp households, seventeenth-18th century," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* forthcoming (2011).

countryside throughout the eighteenth century – although levels of monetization remained much lower on the countryside than in fully commercialized urban settings.⁴⁸⁷

Table III.23 documents the prevalence of ready money in after-death inventories for a variety of localities. It should be noted that in the figures for Aalst not only the inventories with explicitly stated amounts of cash (*'contante penninghen'*) were included but also those inventories where mention was made of an unknown amount of cash used to arrange for the funeral or to settle small debts. Such a reference was found in approximately 10% of all sampled inventories. Excluding these cases would considerably depress the levels of monetization attested in Aalst. Since comparable data for the other case studies is lacking, it is unsure (but quite likely) whether these figures are in fact such underestimations compared to the adjusted figures for Aalst.

Table III.23. The prevalence of ready money (*'contante penninghen'*) in inventories.

Period	Aalst	Land van Aalst	Ardooie	Gent	Antwerpen
1660					54 %
1670-1680	52 %	23 %	27 %		
1710-1715	64 %	48 %	36 %		
1738-1745	71 %	58 %	49 %	80 %	86 %
1789-1795	78 %	36 %	67 %	71 %	84 %

Sources:

Aalst: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Land van Aalst: Van Isterdael, "Financiële En Fiscale Factoren", 253.

Ardooie: Verfaillie, "Krediet", 80.

Gent: Vanaverbeke, "Peiling", Jacobs, "Peiling Naar De Bezitsstructuur".

Antwerpen: Deneweth, "A Fine Balance", Feyaerts, "Peiling Naar De Bezitstructuur", Vandervorst, "Peiling".

Monetization was considerably higher in towns than on the countryside during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The highest levels of monetization are established in Antwerp, followed closely by Gent and, to a lesser degree, Aalst. Ownership of cash clearly flocked towards the commercial metropolises, leaving secondary towns such as Aalst in an intermediate state between town and country. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, Aalst became increasingly monetized. Whereas around the final quarter of the seventeenth century only slightly more than half of the inventories contained ready money, this had increased to almost 80% by the end of the following century – reaching a level in between that of Ghent and Antwerp. It is unclear whether a similar growth occurred in the latter two towns, although the low figure for 1660 Antwerp suggests that it did.⁴⁸⁸ The rising degree of monetization is certainly in line with the evolution in rural communities such as Ardooie (but also Maldegem, Roeselare, Eksaarde or het Brugse Vrije, as reported by Thijs

⁴⁸⁷ Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie", 82-109; Thijs Lambrecht, "Reciprocal exchange, credit and cash: agricultural labour markets and local economies in the southern Low Countries during the eighteenth century," *Continuity and Change* 18, no. 2 (2003).

⁴⁸⁸ It should be noted, however, that this figure is based on a particularly small sample size compared to the population size of Antwerp: Deneweth, "A fine balance".

Lambrecht).⁴⁸⁹ Remarkably, this general trend towards monetization does not hold for the Land van Aalst, where a growing shortage of cash made itself felt during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁹⁰ The rapid demographic growth in this area probably caused a temporary cash bottleneck.

In the town of Aalst itself the process of monetization nevertheless continued to progress. Between 1670 and 1750 both the average number of outstanding commercial debts per household and their value declined, but only to a small degree. Whereas the average inventoried household had 4,0 outstanding debts in the late seventeenth century, this had dropped to 3,3 by the middle of the eighteenth. During the latter half of the century the average number of debts rose again to 3,9 in the 1790's. Comparative data for these numbers is hard to come by, since debts owed by the deceased were not usually recorded in English probate inventories.⁴⁹¹ This decline in the demand for commercial and consumptive credit seems to reflect the proceeding monetization of the Aalst economy during this period. As in the rural area of Aalst, the temporary reversal of this trend during the second half of the eighteenth century probably relates to a cash bottleneck caused by the rapid demographic growth of this time.

As a crude measure of assessing the monetization of the early modern economy, Muldrew used the ratio of the value of credit over the value of cash available per household.⁴⁹² The ratio of 14 to 1 found by Muldrew for seventeenth-century Darlington is largely comparable to the 13:1 ratio found for Aalst c. 1670. Around the same time the much larger and more commercial Antwerp economy was considerably more monetized, as is evidenced by its 8 to 1 ratio in 1660.⁴⁹³ By the end of the eighteenth century the value of debts in Antwerp households would become almost equal to the level of cash (i.e. a 1:1 ratio). A similarly growing degree of monetization was evident in Aalst, reaching 5:1 in the first half of the seventeenth century, but slightly declining again to 6:1 by the end of the eighteenth century.

Contrary to the ownership of ready money, which was clearly related to a household's social position, the use of consumptive credit was indiscriminately spread among all layers of society. Not only the poor had to put their creditworthiness to work, but so did the rich – all inventoried households had on average four outstanding debts, without any apparent differences emerging between rich or poor households. Regardless of their wealth, social standing or occupation, it seems that all consumers in Aalst made extensive use of consumptive credit. The vast majority of these debts related to the purchase of very basic commodities and services. The largest category of debts related to the purchase of foods and drinks (27%), followed by performed labour (25%), the acquisition of textiles (18%) and

⁴⁸⁹ For more data on cash ownership in rural inventories, see Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie", 94-95.

⁴⁹⁰ Lambrecht, "Krediet en de rurale economie", 96-97 explains this decline by reference to the large demand for cash generated by the Brussels economy.

⁴⁹¹ For this reason debts owed by the deceased were not studied by Overton et al., *Production and consumption*; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*. Some studies use probate accounts instead, but Ken Sneath has convincingly shown that such accounts present a sample biased towards those with more and larger debts (Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"). Comparable material for the Low Countries is equally problematic, since detailed and systematic overviews of debt transactions among discrete populations are scarce. In his study of 18th century credit among the Antwerp middling groups, Bart Willems investigated the debts owed to middling commercial households, which sheds light on the provision of consumptive credit rather than the demand for it, as we attempt here (Willems, *Leven op de pof*).

⁴⁹² Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, 98-103.

⁴⁹³ Deneweth, "A fine balance".

medical expenses (13%).⁴⁹⁴ Within each of these categories, the references to the basic and everyday were again most common. Drink-related debts were dominated by the consumption of beer (70%), while wine declined from 29% in the seventeenth century to 18% at the end of the eighteenth, and spirits rose from 6% around 1670 to 13% by the 1790's.⁴⁹⁵ The consumption of such new commodities as coffee, tea and tobacco was only rarely mentioned explicitly in relation to credit transactions (4% in 1790-1795). In debts incurred for the acquisition of edibles as well, the basic foodstuffs proved the most common: the single largest category of debts (40%) related to the purchase of bread and cereals, while supplementary dietary components such as fish (12%), meat (9%), cheese (5%) or fruits and vegetables (2%) were much less common.⁴⁹⁶ References to durables or semi-durables were altogether rare, so that it seems doubtful whether many of the commodities involved in the eighteenth-century consumer revolution were acquired on consumptive credit.

More fundamental than the direct relation between the use of consumptive credit and the consumer goods purchased, is the character of the consumption which accompanied it. During the seventeenth century the citizens of Aalst, rich and poor alike, relied heavily on the workings of the 'economy of obligation' for their day-to-day transactions on the market.⁴⁹⁷ Such interaction with the market required the existence of a certain degree of interiorized trust between households of diverse social standing. It appears that this system of reciprocal obligation became increasingly strained as the eighteenth century progressed.⁴⁹⁸ From an economic perspective it seems that the reciprocity of the system could no longer be maintained as a growing number of households proved unable to repay their debts. In the 1670's just over 5% of inventoried households in Aalst had been entitled to credit that was deemed 'hard to recover' due to poverty or insolvency.⁴⁹⁹ By the middle of the eighteenth century this had expanded to 8% of households, and by the 1790's almost 20% of all inventories contained debts which were deemed irrecoverable. As the second half of the eighteenth century brought not only strong demographic growth but also a large influx of rural immigrants in the town, it seems likely that the cohesive networks of trust and cohesion on which the economy of obligation was built, came under growing pressure from a social perspective as well.

The expansion of the monetary economy which increasingly replaced the credit economy on the markets and in the shops of Aalst, changed the social nature of market consumption in its wake. Monetary market relations were inevitably more impersonal than often long-standing and reciprocal credit relations had been. It seems likely that the expanding use of cash in consumptive transactions diminished the opportunities for negotiation by those suffering from poverty or cash-flow bottlenecks. Apart from a growing social 'toughness' in market relations, the larger impersonality of consumption can probably be connected to the emergence of specific retail concentrations in shopping streets or districts which were increasingly detached from the personal social relations within their

⁴⁹⁴ Calculated on a total of 1.342 transactions relating to consumptive credit in Aalst, around 1670, 1740 and 1790.

⁴⁹⁵ Based on a total N of 163 references to drink-related debt in which the product involved was mentioned explicitly.

⁴⁹⁶ The remaining debts related to oil and vinegar (12%), salt (9%), butter or lard (8%) and sugar or honey (3%). Based on a total N of 113 food-related debts with explicit reference to the kind of food involved.

⁴⁹⁷ Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*.

⁴⁹⁸ See also Willems, *Leven op de pof*.

⁴⁹⁹ Described as 'quaede' or 'caducque schulden' or 'difficile recouvre' in the inventories.

neighbourhood.⁵⁰⁰ Especially in the area of durables and semi-durables consumption monetary and impersonal consumption in centralized shops were pivotal, and increasingly so, whereas the traditional credit economy was relegated to the domain of basic foodstuffs alone.

7. Conclusions

The disparate evidence gathered in this chapter traces a number of related social and economic processes that fundamentally transformed the urban world of eighteenth-century Aalst. Having long since forgone any large-scale and export-oriented industrial production within the town walls, the economy of Aalst was vitally integrated with that of its linen-producing rural hinterland. The ownership of substantial amounts of rural real estate, as well as large investments in rural annuities, constituted important aspects of the rentier economy which characterized not only the town's elites but which extended to at least the broad middle sorts of the town. These middle sorts were mostly comprised of large numbers of urban craftsmen and retailers servicing the local urban and rural markets, and constituted the backbone of the urban economy during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, and at an accelerated pace during its latter half, both the rentier economy and the urban base of Aalst suffered from decline. As demographic growth and estate fragmentation on the countryside drove the price of rural real estate to unprecedented levels, and a swelling stream of immigrants settled within the town walls, the town's traditional socio-economic structures were not left unscathed. The share of households with income-yielding investments declined drastically as the eighteenth-century progressed, and even the profile of the town's economic elite shifted from an orientation on vast rural estates and annuity holdings towards extensive commercial activities. The experience of this new commercial elite, which thrived on the successes of the town's expanding regional trades, diverged from the middle sorts at large. Many of the latter seem to have suffered declining relative social positions, as well as diminishing shares in total wealth and income levels. In the town as a whole, the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the gradual deepening of income and wealth inequality – a process which would continue until at least the middle of the subsequent century. The tendency towards increasing polarization and growing pauperism seems equally reflected in the dietary changes taking place in Aalst at the same time, as well as in the rising numbers of poor relief distributions and 'pro deo' recorded after-death inventories. The social complex of the credit economy meanwhile screeched under the pressure of a growing number of irrecoverable debts, and was increasingly replaced by the more impersonal – and perhaps more socially exclusive – monetary system.

Under these conditions of social polarization and impoverishment the economy of Aalst took its first steps towards a heightened concentration of low-cost labour in manufactures. When in October 1783 the French traveler Augustin de Gomicourt ('Derival') passed through Aalst during his travels across the Austrian Netherlands, he judged it to be "*generally a pretty city, although it might be more*

⁵⁰⁰ Laura Van Aert, "Buurtwinkels en winkelstraten. De evolutie van het Antwerpse winkelbedrijf in de nieuwe tijd," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 4, no. 1 (2009); C. Lesger, "Patterns of retail location and urban form in Amsterdam in the mid-eighteenth century," *Urban History* 38, no. 1 (2011).

commercial than it currently is.” He imagined that this would change soon enough, as “*a stranger, said to be an Englishman, is currently working on a project to establish a Spanish soap factory here.*”

⁵⁰¹ From at least the 1770’s, manufactures for cotton weaving, and tobacco and salt production emerged in Aalst, and within a couple of decades the spinning, weaving and printing manufactures in town were numerous enough to employ a couple of hundred labourers.⁵⁰² By the turn of the nineteenth century then, the social and economic world of Aalst appeared to be quite different from its state during the second half of the seventeenth century.

⁵⁰¹ Derival, *Le voyageur*: “*En général Alost est une assez jolie ville, elle pourroit être plus commerçante qu'elle ne l'est. Un étranger, qu'on dit être anglois, s'occupe présentement du projet d'y établir une fabrique de savon d'Espagne.*” Upon his visit to the Austrian Netherlands in 1785, the Englishman James Shaw noted that “*The extension of commerce, the industry of the people, and the cheapness of labour in a plentiful country, promise to this country an increase of manufactures.*” (James Shaw, *Sketches of the History of the Austrian Netherlands* (London: 1786), 120)

⁵⁰² Cf. chapter 2; De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*; Faipoult, *Mémoire statistique*, 172.

IV. A CONSUMER REVOLUTION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AALST?

Over the past decades, the occurrence of an early modern consumer revolution has become a central tenet for the dominant interpretations of the industrious revolution and eventual economic modernization.⁵⁰³ The growing market consumption of a widening range of social groups is believed to have induced higher degrees of market involvement and labour intensification, which in their turn deepened proto-industrialization, and stimulated productivity gains in agriculture and industry. As far as the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and eighteenth-century England are concerned, the close association of expanding commercial consumption with economic growth or modernization seems obvious. However, this is far less self-evident for those European regions that were not among the successful economic modernizers of the early modern period. Although there is already a considerable amount of evidence available on eighteenth-century consumer changes in, for instance, France or Germany, the verdict is still out on whether change was nearly as revolutionary there as it has been considered in the case of the North Sea area.⁵⁰⁴ The position of the Southern Netherlands with regards to this issue is particularly unclear. Should we expect this region to have followed the same consumptive and industrious trajectory as its North Sea neighbours, or rather expect the less revolutionary road of most of Central and Southern Europe? The question is not without wider importance, since the former scenario would cast doubts upon the relationship between the consumer revolution and economic development, whereas the latter would call into question the underlying causes that have hitherto been identified for the English and Dutch consumer revolutions themselves.⁵⁰⁵

In her discussion of the institutional impediments to the occurrence of a consumer- or industrious revolution in German Württemberg, Sheilagh Ogilvie drew a dividing line between the North Atlantic seaboard (mostly Holland and England) on the one hand, and the rest of Europe on the

⁵⁰³ The highlights of the argument are summarized in De Vries, *The industrious revolution*; De Vries, "The Industrial Revolution"; De Vries, "Between purchasing power"; R.C. Allen and J.L. Weisdorf, "Was there an 'industrious revolution' before the industrial revolution? An empirical exercise for England, c. 1300-1830," *The Economic History Review* 64, no. 3 (2010); Ogilvie, "Consumption, Social Capital".

⁵⁰⁴ See also the remarks in Ogilvie, "Consumption, Social Capital", 288. For France: Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris*; Roche, *La culture des apparences*; D. Roche, *A history of everyday things: the birth of consumption in France, 1600-1800* (Cambridge: 2000); Pardailhe-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'Intime*; Fairchild, "Determinants". For the German territories: S. Ogilvie, M. Küpker, and J. Maegraith, "Women and the Material Culture of Food in Early Modern Germany," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4 (2009); Medick, *Weben und Überleben*; S. Ogilvie, ed. *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, 1630-1800* (London: 1996).

⁵⁰⁵ See also Wijzenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*; Blondé, "Tableware"; Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes"; Garnot, *Un déclin*.

other.⁵⁰⁶ While the former region was characterized by a high degree of commercialization and the full adoption of the European Marriage Pattern – both of which stimulated the growth of market-oriented consumption – the latter area suffered from various degrees of ‘social capital’ employed by entrenched elites to constrain the full implementation of consumptive desires. Ogilvie seems to consider the Low Countries as a whole to belong to the North Atlantic seaboard region, including the Southern Netherlands. Certainly many of the English and Dutch features associated with the consumer revolution apply no less to the southern low countries: a high level of urbanization and commercialization, the adoption of the European Marriage Pattern, the waning power of craft and merchant guilds, a strong and growing tendency towards proto-industrialization, the rise of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century retail sector and little to no sumptuary legislation.⁵⁰⁷ Yet with equal certainty it can be maintained that the Southern Netherlands did not participate in the economic miracles of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic or eighteenth-century England, and faced economic decline and stagnation rather than growth. In stark contrast to De Vries theories, proto-industrialization in the southern Low Countries is generally taken to have arisen from processes of proletarianization and declining standards of living, rather than from a new-found desire to expand market consumption.⁵⁰⁸ It is also true that Jan De Vries perceives the emergence of the consumer revolution only as a result of the emancipatory ‘new luxury’ consumed in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, and relegates the material culture of 15th- and sixteenth-century urban Flanders and Brabant firmly to the domain of the conspicuous and emulative consumption of ‘old luxury’.⁵⁰⁹

However, recent and on-going research into the material culture of the late medieval and sixteenth-century southern Low Countries increasingly questions this contrast. Far from constituting a revolutionary departure from the ‘old’ material culture of urban Flanders and Brabant, Bruno Blondé argues that the seventeenth-century Dutch consumption model was in fact more likely a qualitative deepening and quantitative expansion of this culture, and remained firmly rooted in it.⁵¹⁰ Of course, this does not resolve the question as to the participation of the southern Low Countries in the ‘Atlantic’ consumer revolution of the eighteenth century. Did the area continue to participate in the tendency towards expanding domestic consumerism, or was its progress halted by a lack of economic

⁵⁰⁶ Ogilvie, "Consumption, Social Capital", 288.

⁵⁰⁷ See in general (and among others): Lis and Soly, "Different paths of development"; Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes"; Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen*; H. Deceulaer, "Second-hand dealers in the early modern Low Countries: institutions, markets and practices," in *Alternative exchanges: second-hand circulations from the sixteenth century to the present*, ed. L. Fontaine (New York: 2008); B. Blondé, "Cities in decline and the dawn of a consumer society: Antwerp in the seventeenth-18th centuries," in *Retailers and consumer changes in early modern Europe: England, France, Italy and the Low Countries*, ed. B. Blondé, et al. (Tours: 2005); Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes"; Ilja Van Damme, "Het vertrek van Mercurius. Historiografische en hypothetische verkenningen van het economisch wedervaren van Antwerpen in de tweede helft van de zeventiende eeuw," *NEHA-Jaarboek* 66 (2003); I. Van Damme, *Verleiden en Verkopen. Antwerpse kleinhandelaars en hun klanten in tijden van crisis (ca. 1648 - ca. 1748)*, Studies Stadsgeschiedenis (Amsterdam: 2007).

⁵⁰⁸ Thoen, "A ‘commercial survival economy’"; Mendels, "Proto-industrialization"; Mendels, *Industrialization and population pressure*.

⁵⁰⁹ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 44-58.

⁵¹⁰ B. Blondé, "Shoppen met Isabella d'Este: de Italiaanse renaissance als bakermat van de consumptiesamenleving," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2 (2007); I. Baetsen et al., "Inleiding. Consumptiecultuur in de stad van de lage landen," (forthcoming). A similar perspective can be found in De Staelen, "Spulletjes en hun betekenis", 375-79.

growth and modernization from the end of the sixteenth century onwards?⁵¹¹ If the former were the case, it would raise questions on the character of this consumer revolution and its apparent detachment from the economic vagaries of the society in which it transpired.⁵¹²

In between Ogilvie's Württemberg and McKendrick's England, the Southern Netherlands – and Aalst in particular – certainly constitutes a mixed bunch. Although many of the preconditions to the early modern consumer revolution were present, some were not. It is precisely from this ambiguity and this position at the fringes of the North-West European core region that some new clues on the causes, effects and timing of the early modern consumer revolution might be gleaned from the material culture of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst. Therefor the extent and shape of consumer change in Aalst shall be explored by means of an exploration of 280 after-death inventories. After a quantitative assessment of the numerical scope of change, the specific contours of consumer change in Aalst will be analyzed along three main conceptual lines. These are comfort and convenience, novelty and display, and self-control and privacy.

1. Measuring consumer change in Aalst

The study of changes in the consumption patterns of households in Aalst throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been based on the share of probate inventories that contained fully detailed lists of all the possession present in a household's home. Since not all probate documents used for the analysis of wealth holding, credit and inequality in the previous chapters contained such lists, not all post-mortem inventories are included in this analysis. In each sample period approximately half of all inventories contained a complete list of possessions – yielding between 55 and 74 inventories per period, or 259 in total. Compared to the complete sample of collected inventories, the first sub-sample is, on average, slightly poorer, and the last sub-sample slightly richer. The average social position of the two intermediate sub-samples corresponds to that of the wider samples of those periods. Although these discrepancies might lead to a slight underestimation of the richness of the material culture found ca. 1670, and an overestimation of that found around 1790, the differences are small.⁵¹³ For the analyses in this chapter, no corrections have been made for the social bias of the larger inventory sample itself. Since the 'raw' inventory data is thought to reflect the changes over time more accurately than any correction based on the available fiscal records would allow for, it seemed the preferable methodology for this chapter (chapter 2).

Due to the many lacunae, omissions and imperfections of early modern after-death inventories, there is no single, generally accepted way of quantifying the 'richness' in consumer goods of inventoried households. Since not all types of objects are consistently referred to by the same denomination and not all objects are quantified in numerical terms, any overall quantification is bound to be marred by inconsistencies. Perhaps the most reliable option of quantification is to count only the number of

⁵¹¹ The case of Brussels suggests that the former was most likely the case: Veerle De Laet, *Brussel binnenskamers. Kunst- en luxebezit in het spanningsveld tussen hof en stad, 1600-1735*, Studies Stadsgeschiedenis (Amsterdam: 2011).

⁵¹² See also Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*; Blondé, "Cities in decline".

⁵¹³ The median percentile of the sub-sample in the wealth distribution of all inventories around 1670 was P42 (compared to P50 for the total sample), and P55 for the 1790s subsample (compared to P50 again).

different objects recorded, without considering their respective quantities, and without conflating different records of the same object type. This measure is sometimes referred to as the number of ‘records’. It benefits from the advantage of not necessitating an estimate or omission of vague or missing object quantities (e.g. “*some teacups*”) - yet it also implies an absolute insensitivity to the precise quantity of objects held. Since it has furthermore no regard for duplicates nor precise quantities, it is also prone to be influenced by shifting administrative practices.⁵¹⁴

A second way of dealing with the issue of quantification is to count the number of objects rather than the records. This offers the advantage of clarity, as it provides an indication of the total number of (consumer) goods present in a household, but it requires a way of dealing with the vague or missing object quantifications in the source. For the present analysis the missing quantities per object type have been substituted by the mode of the quantities that were recorded (taking into account a minimum of two for all objects referred to in the plural form).

Table IV.1. Average numbers of records and items recorded per after-death inventory, Aalst (1670-1795).

	# of records			# of items			N inv.
	Median	Mean	C.V.	Median	Mean	C.V.	
1670-1681	69	79	0,60	169	234	0,99	65
1705-1715	81	97	0,73	186	294	1,10	78
1740-1745	97	99	0,43	222	321	1,15	65
1790-1795	100	113	0,70	286	353	0,92	69

Note:

The total differences in the mean number of records between the first and the third period, and between the first and the last period are significant at the 99% level. Those between the first and the second, and between the third and the last period are only significant at the 90% level. Tested with an independent samples t-test.

All items found in ‘shops’ or ‘workshops’ have been excluded from the calculation, as were the quantities of bulk storage goods such as wood or coals.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Even though the quantification of both ‘records’ and ‘items’ are in themselves incomplete measures of the extent of object ownership in inventories, together they provide a fairly reliable picture of the material possessions present in the inventoried households (table IV.1). Indeed, in purely quantitative terms it would be hard to deny that a remarkable expansion in the ownership of household goods occurred in eighteenth-century Aalst. The mean and median number of records and items grew consistently and progressively from one sample period to the other.⁵¹⁵ Compared to the second half of the seventeenth century, the median number of records had increased with 41% by the end of the

⁵¹⁴ Inventories in which the appraisal of goods is organized per type of material the total number of records might appear significantly conflated when compared to inventories where the valuation is organized per room – e.g. whereas the total number of chairs in the house would be counted as a single ‘record’ in the former case, the latter case would count as many ‘records’ as there would be rooms with at least one chair.

⁵¹⁵ The individual differences between the subsequent sample periods are mostly too small to be significant at the 95% level, but the aggregate change between the first and the third or the first and the last period are significant at the 99% level.

period studied. Comparable data for other case studies is surprisingly hard to come by, since many historians did not include all items in their analysis or used divergent ways of counting.⁵¹⁶ The mean number of records found in the Dutch *Krimpenerwaard* (southern Holland) grew with 64% from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries – which would, in crude terms, seem roughly comparable or slightly greater.⁵¹⁷ Although Mark Overton offers no aggregate data on the total number of itemized household goods in early modern England, it can be calculated roughly from his data that the median number of objects of furniture, tableware and linen (taken together) more than doubled in Kent between 1630-1660 and 1720-1749 (a 113% increase).⁵¹⁸ Such growth was not necessarily confined to the era of the eighteenth century consumer revolution, as Gwendolyn Heley found a comparable increase with 106% in the mean number of objects related to the same three categories of household objects in Newcastle between the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century.⁵¹⁹ However not everywhere across the Channel was growth as spectacular – in Cornwall the same group of objects witnessed ‘only’ an 18% increase during the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.⁵²⁰ Among the inventories from English labourers collected by Craig Muldrew there was a similar increase in the mean number of itemized goods of just 17% from the second half of the seventeenth unto the eighteenth century.⁵²¹

As far as the disparate availability of case studies and the divergent ways of measuring allow for any sort of reliable comparison, these figures at least tentatively suggest that the town of Aalst occupied a middling position in the expansion of household goods during the eighteenth century. Although growth in ownership among the inhabitants of Aalst was not quite on par with that of their Kentish counterparts, it seemed nevertheless comparable to that in rural Holland, and easily surpassed the timid expansion in Cornwall or among English labourers.

The mere quantification of inventoried objects offers only a very crude and incomplete measure of the richness in material ownership. Such quantities alone leave the quality and diversity of the domestic world of goods entirely out of the picture. An alternative way of counting inventory items relates to the diversity of object ownership rather than to the actual quantity.⁵²² For the purpose of this study the most important types of household goods were individually coded. Although numerous issues can be raised concerning the precise relationship between the signifiers used by the inventory appraisers and the signified objects they represented, it has nevertheless been attempted to

⁵¹⁶ Lorna Weatherill for instance finds evidence of remarkable growth and change, but it is hard to assess how representative this was for consumerism as a whole since her study was limited to 20 object types, chosen mostly from the new and popular consumer goods of the age (Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour* and L. Weatherill, "The Meaning of Consumer Behavior in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: 1993)).

⁵¹⁷ Johan A. Kamermans, *Materiële cultuur in de Krimpenerwaard in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*, vol. 39, A.A.G. Bijdragen (Wageningen: 1999), 137.

⁵¹⁸ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 91-109.

⁵¹⁹ Heley, *The Material Culture*, 152.

⁵²⁰ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 91-109.

⁵²¹ Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550-1780* (Cambridge: 2011), 193.

⁵²² A brief example might serve to clarify the distinction between the three ways of counting used. An inventory with "1 table, 3 wooden chairs and 2 leather chairs" would count six items, three records and just two object types.

group those objects together of whose different denominations were mutually substitutable.⁵²³ Hence, *'fourchetten'*, *'forquen'* and *'friquetten'* were all united in a single category since they could be used interchangeably to refer to any fork. A total of 547 different object types were thus defined and applied to the inventoried goods. Out of the 23.468 'records' mentioned in the inventories (excluding shops and workshops), 21.935 or 93% could be properly coded and grouped within these categories.⁵²⁴

Table IV.2 shows the mean and median numbers of object types mentioned per inventory for each of the four sample periods. It demonstrates a consistent rise from the second half of the seventeenth until the end of the eighteenth century.⁵²⁵ Even more than the sheer number of household objects, this parameter of diversity suggests that – at least at the level of the average inventoried household – the domestic material world in Aalst became 'richer' throughout the eighteenth century. By the end of the early modern era the average household owned considerably more sorts of household goods – and a larger number of them – than it had a century earlier, which appears to confirm the occurrence of a 'consumer revolution' during this timeframe.

Table IV.2. Diversity in distinct object types per inventory, Aalst (1670-1795).

	Total # of ≠ object types	% of all object types	# of ≠ object types per inventory			N inv.
			Median	Mean	C.V.	
1670-1681	365	67 %	55	65	0,65	65
1705-1715	405	74 %	65	80	0,73	78
1740-1745	376	69 %	83	85	0,44	65
1790-1795	417	76 %	88	104	0,69	69

Note:

A total of 547 object types were defined and applied to the inventory dataset.

The second column indicates what percentage of this total diversity in object types occurred in each sample period.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The eighteenth-century growth in material diversity did not merely constitute a linear diffusion of all sorts of household goods among all inhabitants of Aalst. It no doubt masks a multitude of diverging speeds of adoption and tendencies towards continuity as well as change. Overall, however, it would be hard to deny that the majority of the c. 550 objects studied experienced an increased spread over time. When comparing the inventory sample from the 1790's to that of the 1670's, no less than 52% of all identified objects (297) became more commonly owned among the households of Aalst – compared to just 36% of objects (205) that seemingly went out of fashion. This favourable rate of 'spread' versus

⁵²³ The identification of objects in the sources has been greatly facilitated with the help of Jozef Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen: naam, vorm, geschiedenis, gebruik en volkskundig belang der huiselijke voorwerpen in het Vlaamse land van de Middeleeuwen tot de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 4 vols. (Beerzel: 1974) and the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*.

⁵²⁴ The remaining 7% proved either unidentifiable or was deemed of less importance to the study at hand.

⁵²⁵ Since there is no consistent trend to be found in the total number of object types that surfaced in any particular period (column 1), there is no reason to suppose that a bias in the choice or definition of the object types employed would significantly influence the change in diversity per household over time.

‘decline’ was consistent across the three time spans studied (c. 1670 – c. 1710; c. 1710 – c. 1745; c. 1745 – c. 1790), but was strongest in the first period, and weakest in the last. This suggests that at least in terms of the spread of consumer goods there was certainly no progressive acceleration as the eighteenth century progressed.

Table IV.3. The 25 strongest ‘spreading’ objects between 1670-1681 and 1790-1795, in Aalst.

Rank	Object (<i>trans.</i>)	% 1670-1681	% 1790-1795	Diff. (%)	Category
1	Koffiepot (<i>coffee pot</i>)	0	76	+ 76	Hot drinks
2	Marmitte (<i>marmite; cooking vessel</i>)	14	87	+ 73	Cooking
3	Theekop / -tas (<i>teacup</i>)	0	66	+ 66	Hot drinks
4	Stoof (<i>stove</i>)	3	69	+ 66	Heating
5	Strozak (<i>straw mattress</i>)	3	68	+ 65	Bedding
6	Trempot (<i>teapot</i>)	0	59	+ 59	Hot drinks
7	Bord / taillor (<i>plate</i>)	30	88	+ 59	Tableware
8	Lamp (<i>lamp</i>)	13	66	+ 54	Light
9	Kast (<i>cupboard</i>)	6	59	+ 53	Furniture
10	Wijn (<i>wine</i>)	9	59	+ 49	Drinks
11	Vork (<i>fork</i>)	5	53	+ 48	Tableware
12	Bedgordijnen (<i>bed curtains</i>)	13	59	+ 46	Bedding
13	Theeketel (<i>tea kettle</i>)	0	46	+ 46	Hot drinks
14	Spoelkom (<i>rinsing bowl</i>)	8	53	+ 45	Tableware
15	Gordijnen (<i>curtains</i>)	6	50	+ 44	Textiles
16	Halsdoek (<i>headscarf</i>)	2	44	+ 43	Clothing
17	Kleerkast (<i>wardrobe</i>)	6	47	+ 41	Furniture
18	Kolen (<i>coals</i>)	8	47	+ 39	Heating
19	Mes (<i>knife</i>)	8	47	+ 39	Tableware
20	Mand (<i>basket</i>)	17	56	+ 39	Storage
21	Ledikant (<i>type of bed furniture</i>)	20	59	+ 39	Bedding
22	Karaf (<i>decanter</i>)	0	38	+ 38	Tableware
23	(Vuur)schop (<i>fire shovel</i>)	33	71	+ 38	Heating
24	Kuip (<i>bowl</i>)	16	53	+ 37	Storage
25	Komfoor (<i>brazier</i>)	25	62	+ 37	Heating

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Table IV.3 lists the top 25 objects experiencing an increase in ownership between the 1670’s and the end of the eighteenth century. Although various types of goods were susceptible to a strong spread, the importance of items related to hot drinks is readily apparent. Teacups, teapots, coffeepots and kettles were well represented among the ‘top spreaders’ of the eighteenth century. Whereas by the end of the ancient régime well over half of the inventoried population had acquired at least some of these goods, they had been entirely absent a century earlier. Other items related to the consumption of food and drink also underwent important changes, such as individual plates, forks and knives which all diffused rapidly among the inventoried households. In the kitchen meanwhile the *marmitte*, a large, (usually)

copper cooking vessel rose to prominence. Change was not entirely absent in one of the most basic domestic functions either, as the stove or kitchen range considerably gained in popularity. The spread of closed cupboards and wardrobes perhaps suggests a growing preference for keeping storage space out of sight – a tendency towards privacy also borne out by the rising ownership of bed and window curtains.

Table IV.4. The 25 strongest ‘declining’ objects between 1670 and 1790, in Aalst.

Rank	Object (<i>trans.</i>)	% 1670-1681	% 1790-1795	Diff. (%)	Category
1	Rebbanck (<i>dresser board</i>)	81	1	- 80	Furniture
2	Potlijst (<i>wall list for hanging mugs</i>)	50	0	- 50	Furniture
3	Besem (<i>broom</i>)	53	6	- 47	Tools
4	Kragen (<i>frill; collar</i>)	47	0	- 47	Clothing
5	Ondersten (<i>underclothing</i>)	45	0	- 45	Clothing
6	(Metalen) pot (<i>cooking pot</i>)	83	41	- 42	Cooking
7	Hangijzer / lat (<i>fireplace iron</i>)	44	4	- 39	Heating
8	Ketel (<i>kettle; cooking pot</i>)	55	18	- 37	Cooking
9	Bier (<i>beer</i>)	36	1	- 35	Drinks
10	Bedde (<i>mattress</i>)	98	65	- 34	Bedding
11	Tin (<i>tin; pewter</i>)	56	24	- 33	Tableware
12	Kleed (<i>dress</i>)	36	4	- 32	Clothing
13	Haal (<i>fireplace iron</i>)	36	6	- 30	Heating
14	Cornetten (<i>cornets</i>)	30	1	- 28	Clothing
15	Garderobe (<i>wardrobe</i>)	28	0	- 28	Furniture
16	Ring (<i>ring</i>)	42	16	- 26	Jewelry
17	Kist (<i>chest; trunk</i>)	52	26	- 25	Furniture
18	Bed behangsel (<i>bed hangings</i>)	38	13	- 24	Bedding
19	Graan (<i>cereals</i>)	33	9	- 24	Food
20	Suypepanne (<i>high cooking pot</i>)	23	1	- 22	Cooking
21	Pannen (<i>pans</i>)	45	25	- 20	Cooking
22	Coetse (<i>type of bed furniture</i>)	34	15	- 20	Furniture
23	Oorcussen (<i>side pillow</i>)	47	28	- 19	Bedding
24	Schilderijen (<i>paintings</i>)	61	43	- 18	Decoration
25	Potten (<i>drinking mugs</i>)	81	63	- 18	Tableware

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

A similar list can be compiled for the top 25 items of which the ownership declined during the period studied (table IV.4). No single category of decline stands out here in the same way that the items related to the consumption of hot drinks did among the top spreaders. A superficial comparison between the declining and spreading goods suggests that a de-contextualized study of the ‘success stories’ of the eighteenth century might easily result in misleading conclusions. When studied in more detail, many of the strong spreads relate to more subtle changes in household practices rather than a revolutionary expansion in consumerism. The pronounced rise of the cupboard for instance, is easily matched by the strong decline of the chest, the dresser board and the *potlijst*. Similarly, while the *ledikant* became popular as the principal type of bed furniture, the older *coetse* (a bedframe without

upstanding head) tended to disappear. The rise to kitchen prominence of the *marmitte* was not an independent phenomenon either, since other types of cooking vessels (the metal cooking pot, the traditional ‘ketel’ and the ‘suypepanne’) were progressively abandoned. In some cases, as with the rise of ‘bed curtains’ and the simultaneous decline of ‘bed hangings’, it is unclear whether the perceived change related to more than the appraiser’s vocabulary alone.⁵²⁶

In order to assess change at the aggregate level, it might be more informative to look at changes in spread, quantity and diversity per category of consumer goods. Table IV.5 indicates the diffusion of household goods related to thirteen broad categories of domestic commodities. Whereas the first four columns show the proportion of inventoried households with ownership of at least one item per category, the last three columns attempt to summarize the incidence and direction of change over time. In the case of the spread of ownership this is established by means of a cross-tabulation and χ^2 -test between time and ownership per household. If important changes (positive or negative) occurred in the ownership of these goods, the cross-tabulation would indicate a high degree of association between both. If there were no major change over time, there would be no particular association evident from the cross-tabulation either. These significance levels are indicated in the three right-hand columns of the table.⁵²⁷ The sign ‘+’ or ‘-’ refers to the direction of the change in ownership, while the *’s indicate the level of significance (‘***’ denotes significance at the 99% level, ‘**’ at the 95% level, and ‘*’ at the 90% level). A ‘=’ sign indicates that no significant change was found. For reasons of clarity, these calculations are only reported for the change from the first to the third sample, from the third to the last, and from the first to the last.⁵²⁸

Table IV.5. Percentage of households owning at least one item per category of household goods (‘spread’).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1) - (3)	(3) - (4)	(1) - (4)
Furniture	98	100	100	99	=	=	=
Kitchenware	89	96	97	94	=	=	=
Tableware	98	97	99	99	=	=	=
Bed textiles	97	100	99	97	=	=	=
Hygiene & linen	83	91	89	78	=	=	=
Clothing & accessories	92	95	97	81	=	- ***	- *
Jewelry & adornments	67	59	62	59	=	=	=
Interior decoration	73	87	94	81	+ **	- **	=
Leisure	39	45	52	44	=	=	=
Heating	92	88	97	93	=	=	=
Lighting	59	58	74	83	+ *	=	+ ***
Food storage	47	70	52	61	=	=	=
Drinks storage	61	66	68	65	=	=	=

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

⁵²⁶ To be sure, some beds were mentioned with both ‘bedhangsel’ (*bed hangings*) and ‘bedgordijnen’ (*bed curtains*), suggesting that both words could indeed refer to separate things. See also Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*.

⁵²⁷ In the case of these 2x2 tables with often small numbers of expected values, the formal requirements for a proper χ^2 -test are not always fulfilled. It is therefore preferable to use the Fisher’s Exact test instead.

⁵²⁸ Trends were remarkably similar from the 1670- right through to the 1740 sample, so that the inclusion of these results would add little to the overall picture.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

By employing such broad categories, the general spread of goods as established on the previous pages, all but disappears. The ownership of furniture, cooking equipment, tableware, bedding, household linen and sources of heat was already quasi-ubiquitous in the seventeenth century, and remained that way in the subsequent period. Only in the ownership of goods related to the decoration of the home (such as pictures, religious statues, flower pots or mirrors) there is a significant expansion until the middle of the eighteenth century, followed by a decline in the subsequent fifty years. The ownership of clothes seemingly underwent a pronounced decline during the second half of the eighteenth century, but this is most likely to be attributed to changing administrative practices of the inventory takers. The inclusion of clothing, which had always been subject to various kinds of exemptions, was now increasingly left out of the inventory – either to be buried with the deceased, distributed among the children, kept as personal property of the widowed, or most likely a combination of these. The only category of household goods that did undergo significant change throughout the entire period, relates to the objects that provided light in the home.

This does not of course imply at all that only the candles, lamps and torches possessed by the inhabitants of Aalst were subject to an early modern consumer revolution. The expansion of household goods did not affect these categories as such, but rather transpired within them. For that reason it is important to look at the quantity of items held within each category, as well as at the diversity in distinct object types. A similar methodology is used as before, but this time the median number of items and object types will have to be compared from one sample to the next. In order to compare the averages from two independent samples and prove that they relate to two distinct populations, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney-U test has been applied.⁵²⁹ As with the spread, the asterisks indicate the level of significance with which the test establishes the independence of means of both populations.

Table IV.6. Median number of items per category, per household ('quantity').

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Furniture	14	20	25	24	+ ***	=	+ ***
Kitchenware	6	5	6	5	=	=	=
Tableware	13	19	34	86	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Bed textiles	22	27	30	25	+ *	- *	=
Hygiene & linen	9	7	8	7	=	=	=
Clothing & accessories	38	35	52	45	=	=	=
Jewelry & adornments	4	4	3	4	=	=	=
Interior decoration	4	6	10	5	+ ***	- **	=
Leisure	2	3	2	2	=	=	=
Heating	6	7	9	8	+ *	+ *	+ *
Lighting	3	3	3,5	5	+ *	++ **	+++ ***
Food storage	5,5	2	2	3	+ *	+ *	+ *
Drinks storage	5	5	4	7	=	=	=

⁵²⁹ Most of the distributions were not normally shaped and hence not suited for the conventional student's t-test. The Mann-Whitney-U provides a comparable alternative to the t-test.

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

At the aggregate level there is certainly more change to be found in terms of quantity than in terms of spread. It is remarkable that, when looking at the entire time-span between the 1670's and the 1790's, there is no evidence of overall declining quantities – although many categories of goods remained more or less at the same level. Remarkable growth occurred in the number of furniture per household, which rose from a median of 14 to 24 by the end of the eighteenth century. The spectacular growth in the ownership of tableware can hardly come as a surprise, given the well-established spread of objects related to the consumption of hot drinks, as well as the continued adoption of individual plates, forks and knives. The other categories undergoing quantitative expansion were those related to heating, lighting and the storage of food. The number of bed textiles (such as mattresses, cushions, sheets or blankets) and decorative objects also rose during the 1670-1740 period, but declined again during the half-century thereafter. It is a pattern also established with regards to the numeric expansion of furniture, and one that will return with regards to the diversity of goods as well. Some important exceptions notwithstanding, most growth occurred during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, whereas the subsequent years witnessed mostly decline or status quo.

Table IV.7. Median number of different object types per category, per household ('diversity').

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Furniture	6	6,5	7	6	+ **	=	=
Kitchenware	4	3	4	4	+ *	=	=
Tableware	4	5	8	14	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Bed textiles	6	6	8	7	+ ***	=	+ ***
Hygiene & linen	2	2	2	2	=	=	=
Clothing & accessories	6	6	8	8	=	=	+ *
Jewelry & adornments	2	2	2	2	=	=	=
Interior decoration	2	2,5	3	3	+ ***	=	+ ***
Leisure	1	2	1	1	=	=	=
Heating	5	4	7	7	+ ***	=	+ ***
Lighting	1	2	2	3	+ **	+ ***	+ ***
Food storage	2	2	2	2	=	=	=
Drinks storage	1	1	2	2	+ **	=	+ **

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

To some extent, of course, the measure of 'diversity' presented here (table IV.7) is arbitrary. Since the borders of both the 'object types' and the 'categories' can on occasion appear decidedly fuzzy, the choice of distinct object types is necessarily a more or less subjective undertaking. However, such

arbitrariness seems to be part and parcel of the undertaking, and can only be compensated for by duly advertising the choices made. In broad terms, the diversity of household goods confirms the patterns found in the measurement of quantities, yet with some notable differences. Tableware unsurprisingly resurfaces among the expanding categories, but the diversity in decorative goods, bedding textiles and clothing also increased from the seventeenth up to the end of the eighteenth century. As was the case with the quantities, most growth in diversity overall occurred in the first part of the period studied, with only the exceptional categories of tableware and lighting continuing their multiplication during the second half of the eighteenth century.

In order to better explore these long-term shifts in domestic material culture in Aalst, the remainder of this chapter considers three distinct clusters of change: the improvement of comfort, desire for novelty and the concern for self-control and privacy.

2. Comfort and convenience at home

Jan De Vries' theory on the occurrence of an 'industrious revolution' draws heavily on the difference between 'new' and 'old luxury' in explaining seventeenth- and eighteenth-century consumer change. According to De Vries, the Old Luxury strove for grandeur and exquisite refinement, while the New Luxury was principally aimed at the acquisition of comfort and pleasure.⁵³⁰ This distinction matters not just in terms of consumer motivations alone, but has far-reaching consequences with regards to the effects of consumerism itself. Aimed at distinction and emulation, he sees the Old Luxury as the domain where the social theories of Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu would have been most fittingly applied. Indulgence in Old Luxuries leads only to the reinforcement of social differences in status and class. By contrast, the pursuit of comfort and pleasure in the New Luxury consumption "*lent itself to multiplication and diffusion*", and thus "*served more to communicate meaning, permitting reciprocal relations among participants in consumption.*"⁵³¹ Whereas the Old Luxury had been reserved to the wealthy and the genteel, the New Luxury was available to all who strove to master repertoires of taste. In striking contrast to the Old, the New Luxury was the result of a bottom-up process of innovation and self-improvement.⁵³² The subsequent legitimization and democratization of consumer demand among ever larger social strata naturally engendered not only social, but important economic effects as well. In contrast to the conspicuous consumption of the Old Luxury, this new consumption style increasingly discredited the mercantilist idea that the demand for luxury endangered individual virtue as well as the health of the national balance of trade.

Both consequences of the New Luxury described by the De Vries are no newcomers to the scholarly literature on material culture. The transition from a 'prestige'-based consumption aimed at differentiation to a 'taste'-regulated consumerism aimed at cultural reciprocity and participation among equals, clearly reproduces the central tenets of a long-standing debate on the nature of social interaction between mankind and the material world.⁵³³ Already for the pre-historical era there is

⁵³⁰ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 44.

⁵³¹ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 44-45.

⁵³² De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 122-54.

⁵³³ See also the classical formulation in Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, 1.

evidence of both 'prestige'-motivated use of objects, as well as for the employment of goods for purposes of 'cultural belonging'.⁵³⁴ Today no less, sociologists discuss both the expression of 'social identity' and 'social distinction' through means of consumption without necessarily favouring one over the other. De Vries' interpretation nevertheless projects a significant shift in time from 'prestige'-oriented to 'belonging'-motivated consumption during the eighteenth century. In this, however, he is not alone. Woodruff D. Smith has described a similar transition in the dominant cultural context of consumption, which shifted from a focus on a context of 'gentility' to a culture of 'respectability'. Whereas the former was characterized mainly by status-conform conspicuous consumption, the latter was based on a democratization of 'bourgeois' consumerism: an indulgence in comfort and pleasure, but kept in check and mediated by intricate repertoires of rationality, restraint and taste.⁵³⁵ There are of course also important parallels to be drawn with Werner Sombart's '*courtesan culture*' and Colin Campbell's '*imaginary hedonistic consumption*', both of which supposedly also emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which similarly entailed an abandonment of traditional conspicuous consumption through the democratization of comfort, pleasure and luxury.⁵³⁶

In a sense, these arguments hark back all the way to the luxury debates of the eighteenth century itself. The early modern liberation of consumption from traditional moral constraint, to which De Vries attributes his consumer transformation, echoes the arguments put forward by such contemporary publicists as Bernard Mandeville, Voltaire, David Hume and Adam Smith. They argued fiercely – and often provocatively – against the idea that the pursuit of comfort was necessarily detrimental to public virtue.⁵³⁷ On the one hand the argument was made (most famously by Mandeville) that unintended consequences bolstered industriousness, commerce and economic growth, while on the other hand Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Hume argued that the expansion of refined and tasteful consumerism (the 'New Luxury', so to speak) was in itself the direct result of progress and civilization. Although both lines of argumentation were not necessarily in agreement with one another, they did bring about a new economic and moral justification of expanding consumption in comfort and 'decencies'.⁵³⁸

Evidence from after-death inventories suggests that it was indeed just that: the justification of an existing practice. Whereas inventory documentation indicates significantly rising levels of comfort from at least the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, full-scale philosophical treatises on the legitimization of such luxuries emerged only several decades later.⁵³⁹ It seems that – at least in England and the Dutch Republic – the actual desire for enhanced comfort and pleasure preceded its later moral legitimization. Mark Overton in particular has emphasized the utilitarian nature of early modern consumer change in England. Not a growing susceptibility to the whims of fashion, but

⁵³⁴ An overview in D.L. Smail, M.C. Stiner, and T. Earle, "Goods," in *Deep history: the architecture of the past and present*, ed. A. Shryock, D.L. Smail, and T. Earle (Berkeley: 2011).

⁵³⁵ Smith, *Consumption*.

⁵³⁶ Campbell, *The romantic ethic*; Nenadic, "Romanticism"; Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus*.

⁵³⁷ John Sekora, *Luxury. The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollet* (Baltimore: 1977); Michael Kwass, "Ordering the world of goods: consumer revolution and the classification of objects in eighteenth-century France," *Representations* 82, no. 1 (2003).

⁵³⁸ See for instance the disagreements between Adam Smith and Bernard Mandeville discussed in De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 58-70.

⁵³⁹ Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*; Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*; Overton et al., *Production and consumption*; Nijboer, "De fatsoenering"; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"; Kamermans, *Materiële cultuur*, 39; Earle, *The making*; Blondé, "Tableware"; Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*.

improving levels of domestic comfort in furniture for seating, bedding and storage, as well as in the amount and quality of household linen were the governing principles of the seventeenth- & eighteenth-century consumer revolution he described.⁵⁴⁰ With varying degrees of emphasis, many students of early modern probate inventories noted similar evidence of rising levels of domestic comfort. In his study of the rural Krimpenerwaard in Holland, Johan Kamermans listed 'comfort' among the principle changes in material culture, and Daniel Roche has found a comparable tendency in the '*choses banales*' of Parisian everyday life.⁵⁴¹ Lois Carr and Lorena Walsh have established "*the increasing comfort, attractiveness and even elegance in living quarters and dress*" among the eighteenth-century colonists in the American Chesapeake, while Gloria and Jackson Main discerned similarly rising levels of material living standards in colonial New England.⁵⁴² Closer to home, Schelstraete et al found significant qualitative improvements in sleeping conveniences and a quantitative improvement in domestic seating among the households of rural Nevele, leading them to conclude that a "*greater or lesser improvement in the level of domestic comfort was observable among the richer as well as the poorest social classes.*"⁵⁴³

Despite the apparent consensus on the growing level of early modern domestic comfort, not all authors have agreed on its extent or importance. Carole Shammas for instance, has pointed out that much of the perceived change in the ownership of domestic goods can be attributed to declining relative prices and perhaps even a qualitative deterioration in the domestic environment. According to her argument, the occurrence of an eighteenth-century consumer revolution did not necessarily preclude a simultaneous process of absolute impoverishment.⁵⁴⁴ And although Ken Sneath does not deny the improvements in domestic living standards brought about by the consumer revolution, his English labourer inventories suggest that these ameliorations did not reach all the way to the lower social strata until the very end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁴⁵ Others have raised doubts regarding the utilitarian nature of changing consumer behaviour itself. Hester Dibbits for instance, has argued that many of the goods typical of the New Luxury were not necessarily employed for the purpose of providing comfort in an everyday context. Even highly functional objects could be displayed and used only on special occasions, so that "*the ownership of luxury objects does not imply that everyday life became more 'comfortable'.*"⁵⁴⁶

In making the case for increased levels of comfort in the eighteenth-century home, most authors turn not to the more flexible and fashionable aspects of early modern material culture, but to its 'heaviest' constituents. Gradually transforming shapes of furniture, but also the multiplication of household linen and new opportunities of combatting domestic cold and darkness are generally held to have enhanced convenience, comfort and overall well-being. This process has been particularly well-established for the large urban centres of early modern Europe, the miracle economies of the Dutch

⁵⁴⁰ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 87-111.

⁵⁴¹ Roche, *A history of everyday things*; Kamermans, *Materiële cultuur*, 39, 284.

⁵⁴² Carr and Walsh, "The Standard of Living"; Main and Main, "Economic growth".

⁵⁴³ Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*, 195.

⁵⁴⁴ Shammas, "Changes"; Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer*.

⁵⁴⁵ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

⁵⁴⁶ Dibbits, "*Pronken as practice*", 149-50. A more or less similar position had been taken by Lorna Weatherill, who insisted on the importance of display, and the frontstage/backstage duality in accounting for much of 18th-century consumer change: Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*.

and the English, and for the exceptional frontier societies across the Atlantic. Yet to what extent could the average inhabitant of Aalst around the turn of the eighteenth-century enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle than his or her forefathers did? In order to examine such processes based on the Aalst after-death inventories, the spread, quantity and diversity of household goods related to sleeping, seating, heat and lighting can be examined.

Table IV.8. The ownership of mattresses among inventoried households of Aalst, 1670-1790.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Mattresses							
Spread (in %)	97	99	99	93	=	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	3	3	4	4	+ ***	=	+ ***
Diversity (> 0)	1	1	2	2,5	+ ***	+ **	+ ***
Straw bed (<i>strozak</i>)							
Spread (in %)	3	20	35	67	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	2	2	2	=	=	=
Chaff bed (<i>cafbed</i>)							
Spread (in %)	97	92	99	68	=	- ***	- ***
Quantity (> 0)	3	3	2,5	1	=	- ***	- ***
Feather bed (<i>pluimen bed</i>)							
Spread (in %)	5	12	9	39	=	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	2	1	2	2	=	=	=
Mattress (<i>matras</i>)							
Spread (in %)	3	20	35	67	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	2	2	2	=	=	=

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The quality of a mattress is perhaps the most easily recognizable aspect of comfort in early modern bedding. It has been argued that the softness of the filling closely reflected social standing, whereby down or feather fillings would have been reserved for the better-off, while servants and the poor had to sleep on straw mattresses.⁵⁴⁷ In seventeenth-century Aalst almost all households slept on a chaff bed, which probably occupies a sort of middling position in terms of softness and sleeping quality.⁵⁴⁸ Contrary to what much literature on rural material culture suggests, there seems to have been little need to share beds in Aalst, as a median of 3 mattresses corresponds well with a median of two dependent children within the house.⁵⁴⁹

Over the course of the eighteenth century both the number and diversity of mattresses owned by the inventoried inhabitants of Aalst increased. Other types of fillings became more popular,

⁵⁴⁷ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"; R. Garrard, "English probate inventories and their use in studying the significance of the domestic interior 1570-1700," in *Probate inventories: a new source for the historical study of wealth, material culture and agricultural development*, ed. A. Van Der Woude and A.J. Schuurman (Wageningen: 1980), 58.

⁵⁴⁸ See Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 325-27.

⁵⁴⁹ Compare with Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*, 159-63.

especially after mid-century. Although there was a rather sudden and strong spread of feather beds during this period (similar to the situation in Kent)⁵⁵⁰, there was an even more remarkable growth in the number of straw beds throughout the period. Even if a quality hierarchy between straw, chaff and feather beds can be reasonably assumed, the strong spread of a fourth type, simply described as 'mattress' complicates matters further. Schelstraete *et al* have argued that a 'mattress' was not simply a synonym for the more common '(chaff) bedde' and was in fact a distinct, new type of bed which was first introduced among the peasantry of Nevele near the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁵¹ Indeed, the scarce prices of individually valued beds in nearby years might suggest the existence of such a hierarchy, with a straw bed valued at 80 styvers (in 1711), a bed filled with chaff prized at 150 styvers (in 1712), and a mattress at 160 (in 1711).⁵⁵² It is nevertheless hard to draw any firm conclusions regarding changing levels of comfort from these scattered denominations. Although the growing numbers of households with feather beds and mattresses would indicate the sort of rise in domestic comfort described by De Vries, Overton and others, the concomitant rise in the use of straw beds suggests precisely the opposite.

Although it was probably common in some households to place a mattress directly on the floor, most people slept in specifically designed bed frames. Table IV.9 shows the spread, quantity and diversity of all types of bed furniture found in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories. Until the middle of the eighteenth century there was a strong growth in the presence of such furniture among inventoried households (the odds of finding a household with any type of bed furniture were 14 times higher in the 1740's than in the 1670's). By the middle of the eighteenth century the ownership of beds had become almost universal, and more or less remained that way from that point onwards. Before this time some people probably slept on chests, on trunks or on the floor, but also in beds that were permanently fixed within the walls of the home.⁵⁵³ Since the latter were not considered moveable assets, they were not generally listed in the inventories. To some extent then, the spread of bed frames signifies not merely a growth in comfort, but a gradually changing position taken by the bed within the domestic space. Increasingly the activity of sleeping claimed a place of its own, moving away from the walls, towards free-standing bedframes, and eventually occupying a central position in specifically designated bedchambers. This tendency seems equally reflected in the spread of the different types of bed furniture. By far the most commonly owned type of bed furniture in the late seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries was the 'coetse': a simple, free-standing wooden bed usually without upstanding corner pillars, head or foot end.⁵⁵⁴ It was less elaborate than the 'ledikant' which had been mostly a prerogative of the rich in the seventeenth century, but surpassed the coetse in popularity around the 1740's. Unlike the coetse, the more expensive ledikant had upstanding head- and footboards, and was usually equipped with a canopy. By the end of the eighteenth century, the

⁵⁵⁰ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 109.

⁵⁵¹ Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*, 160. The presence of distinct categories for 'beddes' and 'mattressen' in the inventoried stock of merchant Lucas van de Wiele indicates that they were indeed not the same thing (MAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1824 († Lucas van de Wiele).

⁵⁵² MAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1826 († Barbara Diericx; † Jan Richard) and n° 1827 († Amerentina De Grootte).

⁵⁵³ Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 321-24; Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*.

⁵⁵⁴ Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 338-39.

ledikant became increasingly displaced by the ‘tombeau’ or ‘imperiale’, which most likely had the same basic features.⁵⁵⁵

Table IV.9. The ownership of bed furniture among inventoried households in Aalst, 1670-1795.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Bedframes							
Spread (in %)	45	66	91	83	+ ***	=	+ *
Quantity (> 0)	2	3	3	2	+ ***	- *	=
Diversity (> 0)	1	1	2	2	+ **	=	+ **
Coetse							
Spread (in %)	34	46	55	15	+ **	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	1	1	=	=	=
Ledikant							
Spread (in %)	20	42	72	58	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	2	3	2	2	=	=	=
Tombeau / imperiaal							
Spread (in %)	0	0	8	32	+ *	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	.	.	1	1	.	=	.
Sleeping cupboard / alcoof							
Spread (in %)	0	0	0	10	.	+ **	+ **
Quantity (> 0)	.	.	.	1	.	.	.
Canapé							
Spread (in %)	0	0	0	10	.	+ **	+ **
Quantity (> 0)				1	.	.	.
Sleeping bench							
Spread (in %)	3	1	5	16	=	+ **	+ **
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	1	1	+ *	+ *	+ *

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The spread of the ledikant, with its upstanding features went hand in hand with a growing interest in bed curtains which could be hanged from the canopy. During the second half of the seventeenth century just over half of all inventoried households owned such curtains – a figure highly comparable to the 45% found by Ken Sneath for Huntingdonshire market towns during the same period.⁵⁵⁶ The popularity of bed curtains increased remarkably over the next decades, until around the middle of the eighteenth century almost 90% of inventoried households came to possess them. In both the Huntingdon market towns and in Aalst the craze for bed curtains quickly declined during the second half of the century, although they were still owned by more than half of the inventoried population. The introduction of new types of sleeping furniture such as the canapé, sleeping bench and the alcove, which had no use for bed curtains, might account for this decline.

⁵⁵⁵ See Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 344.

⁵⁵⁶ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness" (table 77).

It is remarkable then how sensitive to fashion this ‘traditional’ part of the early modern home turns out to be. The shifting popularity of different types of bed frames can hardly be attributed to improving levels of physical comfort alone. Despite belonging firmly to the ‘backstage’ world of the domestic interior, it seems hard to imagine that the ownership of particularly elaborate pieces of bed furniture was not in many cases primarily motivated by concerns regarding lifestyle, identity and display. Throughout the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries a *ledikant* was on average valued at three times the cost of a *coetse* (at 3 fl. and 9 fl. respectively), and the only *imperiaal* found in the sample was worth more than five times as much (50 fl.). In nearby Ghent as well, the eighteenth century was characterized by increasing investments in bed furniture, where ever larger and more elaborate canopy beds became commonplace.⁵⁵⁷ That comfort did not always take pride of place in a household’s bedding investments, is furthermore suggested by the example of Laurentius van den Hauwe (†1794) - then the bailiff of nearby Herdersem and Moorsel – who owned an expensive *imperiaal*, but had it nevertheless equipped with no more than a bag of straw to sleep on.⁵⁵⁸

At the same time, a tendency towards the separation between the activity of sleeping and other household activities seems to have been a central driving force behind consumer change in eighteenth-century sleeping comfort. As certain rooms became specifically reserved for sleeping, the bed came to occupy pride of place as a freestanding piece of furniture, yet increasingly enclosed itself by means of head- and footboards, a canopy and bed curtains. The alcove and sleeping cupboard, introduced by the end of the eighteenth century, brought this tendency to new heights, by almost completely enclosing the bed within an elaborate piece of furniture.⁵⁵⁹ Other new bedframes that emerged during this period would break with this pattern however, although by then private, individual bedrooms were probably already firmly established in the majority of urban households. The shifting forms of bed furniture seem to reflect a tendency towards intra-household separation and individualization rather than a progressive amelioration in sleeping comfort.

Two concomitant developments further underline that sleeping became increasingly part of a distinct and private sphere of everyday domestic life. As in nearby Ghent, both bedside tables and specific sleeping clothes appeared for the first time in eighteenth-century Aalst.⁵⁶⁰

Physical ease in sleeping was not only determined by the softness of the mattress but perhaps most of all by the abundance of sheets, blankets and pillows. The generally perceived increase in the number of sheets per household throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has often been interpreted as a clear indication of the rising levels of domestic comfort achieved during this period.⁵⁶¹ Up to the middle of the eighteenth century the median number of sheets found in the Aalst households (12,5) was on a similar level as those in Kent (12) or Huntingdonshire (9), but from that point onwards

⁵⁵⁷ I. Pisters, "Gentse woningsinterieurs uit de 18de eeuw. Bedden, tafels, toilet-, zit- en opbergmeubels," *Oostvlaamse Zanten* 63, no. 2 (1988): 74.

⁵⁵⁸ MAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1911 (Laurentius van den Hauwe, †1794).

⁵⁵⁹ Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 344-47.

⁵⁶⁰ The ownership of sleeping clothes spread to 31% of households by the end of the 18th century, and a bedside table could be found in 18% of all inventoried homes. For the appearance of both types of goods in Ghent, see: Pisters, "Gentse woningsinterieurs", 74; J. Van Ryckeghem, "Eenvoud en raffinement. Kleding en sieraden te Gent," *Oostvlaamse Zanten* 63, no. 1 (1988): 38; 42-43.

⁵⁶¹ Spufford, *The Great Reclothing*, 115.

a clear decline was evident in Aalst.⁵⁶² Seen over the longer term, and contrary to Schelstraete's findings for rural Nevele, there is certainly no evidence of a rise in the number of sheets in Aalst.⁵⁶³ Similar tendencies can be established with regards to the ownership of blankets and pillows. Both increased in spread and in quantity during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, but declined again from mid-century onwards. Despite the absence of overall change in bed linen during the 1670-1790 period, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of sleeping comfort or a domestic world of scarcity. Ownership of pillows, sheets and blankets was nearly universal throughout the entire period, and with a median household owning three blankets, eight sheets, four pillows and eight coverlets for just three beds, the majority of households did probably not feel particularly deprived in terms of sleeping convenience.

There are few indications of quality among the different blankets and sheets found in the inventories. All sheets seem to have been made of linen, and the appraisers did not distinguish between fine or coarse types of bed sheets. Blankets on the other hand were generally made of wool, and only in one case was a blanket made of lacework found, on the bed of the (moderately) wealthy surgeon Jacques Oudburge († 1679).⁵⁶⁴ More striking were the differences in colour, with yellow (37%), green (28%) and white (17%) representing the most popular taste in bed textiles. At least as far as bedding was concerned darker colours were the exception rather than the rule during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁶⁵

Table IV.10. The ownership of bed linen among inventoried households in Aalst, 1670-1795.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Bed linen							
Spread (in %)	97	100	99	97	=	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	22	27	30	25	+ **	- **	=
Diversity (> 0)	6	6	8	7	+ ***	- ***	=
Blankets							
Spread (in %)	83	78	97	75	+ **	- ***	=
Quantity (> 0)	3	3	4	3	+ **	=	+ *
Sheets							
Spread (in %)	86	92	91	93	=	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	10	12	12,5	8	=	- **	=
Pillows							
Spread (in %)	69	59	88	82	+ **	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	3	4	5	3,5	+ ***	- **	=
Bed & pillow covers							
Spread (in %)	69	70	78	74	=	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	8,5	7	8	8	=	=	=

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

⁵⁶² Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"; Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 109-10.

⁵⁶³ Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*, 162-63.

⁵⁶⁴ MAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1799 (Adriana Voets, † 1679).

⁵⁶⁵ Black, red, grey and brown together represented 17% of all bedding textiles of which the colour was mentioned in the inventory.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Although it was certainly not the domain of an *histoire immobile*, there is little support to be found for a history of improving levels of comfort and domestic convenience in the eighteenth-century material culture of sleeping. Although there are some indications of more comfortable (feather) mattresses becoming more widespread, there was certainly no increase in the quantity of sheets, pillows and blankets present in the eighteenth-century houses of Aalst. Gradual changes in the material culture related to sleeping seems to have been influenced more by shifting notions of privacy and fashion, rather than to comfort.

Perhaps there is more evidence to be found for improving standards of domestic comfort in the sphere of seating. The way of being seated, and the appearance, quality and position of the related furniture are generally held to have reflected and expressed some degree of social status. Heads of household could usually claim the single armchair in the house as well as a prominent position near to the fireplace, or at the head of the table.⁵⁶⁶ For most other household members during the Middle Ages, sitting furniture consisted mostly of benches, coffers and sitting cushions. As the early modern period progressed however, the number of chairs expanded, while at the same time taking several different shapes and forms. Mark Overton has argued that the general rise in the number of chairs owned, and the expansion of upholstered chairs in particular, significantly improved seating comfort in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.⁵⁶⁷ Although Schelstraete *et al* did not discern a qualitative improvement in sitting furniture in Nevele, they did note a remarkable quantitative growth in the number of chairs in the Flemish rural home.⁵⁶⁸ Based on a disparate collection of after-death inventories from the Southern Netherlands, Jozed Weyns remarked that whereas the most common number of chairs per home had amounted to half a dozen in the seventeenth century, this grew to a full dozen in the subsequent century.⁵⁶⁹

The same tendency is clear among the inventoried population of Aalst: the number of chairs owned grew quite spectacularly from a median of seven to seventeen per inventoried household with at least one chair. The growth in the number of chairs per household is surprisingly similar to that established for England. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the total inventoried population of Aalst owned a median of six chairs, which is the same as in Kent at the time. Households in the Huntingdonshire market towns owned only a median of four chairs, whereas in remote Cornwall half of all households had to make do with just two chairs. Around the middle of the eighteenth century the median number had risen to 14 in Aalst, 13 in Kent and the Huntingdonshire market towns, and just 6 in Cornwall. In quantitative terms at least the ownership of chairs in Aalst was quite on par with that in its counterparts across the Channel. To some extent this growth in the number of chairs most likely reflects improved standards of domestic convenience. However, part of the expansion can also be attributed to a changing use of the domestic space, as the bench lost its importance during the

⁵⁶⁶ See for instance Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 219; C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: 2007), 137.

⁵⁶⁷ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 95.

⁵⁶⁸ Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*.

⁵⁶⁹ Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 205.

seventeenth century, and the number of rooms per house multiplied during the eighteenth. Both processes symbolize the growing importance of an individualized rather than a communal lifestyle within the household.

Table IV.11. The ownership of seating furniture among inventoried households in Aalst, 1670-1795.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Seating furniture							
Spread (in %)	88	88	100	90	+ ***	- **	=
Quantity (> 0)	8	14	14	16,5	+ ***	=	+ ***
Diversity (> 0)	1	1	1	1	- **	=	- ***
Bench (bank)							
Spread (in %)	34	16	17	12	- **	=	- ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	2	1	1	=	=	=
Chair (stoel)							
Spread (in %)	88	88	99	90	+ **	- *	=
Quantity (> 0)	6,5	12	14	16,5	+ ***	=	+ ***
Armchair (setel)							
Spread (in %)	16	18	15	7	=	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	1	1,5	1	1	=	=	=
Cushion (siccussen)							
Spread (in %)	31	20	19	58	=	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	2	2	3	3	=	=	=

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

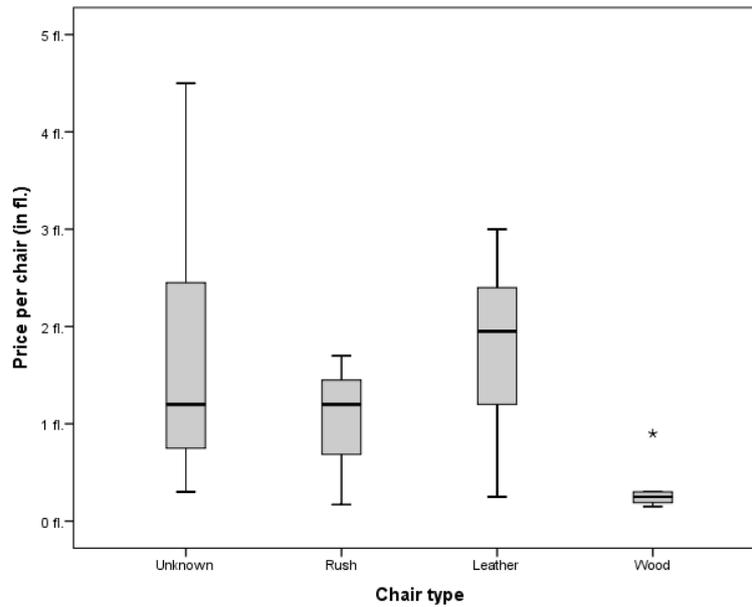
MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Qualitative improvements in sitting comfort, as in the case of the English upholstered chair, or conspicuously prestigious types of furniture such as the cane chair (which was particularly popular among the London middle classes) seem hard to find in early modern Aalst.⁵⁷⁰ The distinct type of chair was not always mentioned in the inventories, but the most common sorts were the *Spanish leather chair* (29% of households c. 1710) and the *rush-seated chair* (36% of households c. 1710). Both disappeared during the second half of the eighteenth century, although it is not entirely clear whether this could be attributed to changing recording practices of the appraisers or to an actual decline of such chair types.⁵⁷¹ A comparison of prices suggests that the leather chair represented the slightly more expensive sort, especially in contrast to the extraordinarily cheap wooden chairs.

⁵⁷⁰ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*; Earle, *The making*, 293-94.

⁵⁷¹ Here the trend in Aalst differs from that in Antwerp, where the prevalence of rush-bottomed chairs continued to increase during the 18th century: Blondé, "Tableware"; Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes".

Figure IV.1. Boxplot of chair prices, per type (1670-1681; 1705-1715).



Sources:

MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst, Staten van Goed*, n° 1790-1801; 1820-1830; 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

It is remarkable that what were in all likelihood the most comfortable chairs of the time – the leather and rush-seated chair – all but disappeared during the second half of the eighteenth century. The armchair or ‘zetel’ did not manage to spread any further during the eighteenth century either, and usually remained limited to just a single instance per household. From mid-century onwards its popularity in Aalst declined as well. Perhaps this suggests a growing trade-off between quantity and quality with regards to seating during the eighteenth century. Although the number of chairs per household rose rather spectacularly, the more comfortable and expensive arm-, leather- and rush-seated chairs were increasingly abandoned in favour of simpler types of seating furniture. This would explain why despite the growing prevalence of chairs per household, there was apparently also a concomitantly rising demand for sitting cushions to provide additional seating comfort (table IV.12).

Table IV.12. Ownership of Spanish leather chairs and rush-bottomed chairs among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Spanish leather chair							
Spread (in %)	20	29	20	0	=	- ***	- ***
Quantity (> 0)	8	12	6	.	=	.	.
Rush-seated chair							
Spread (in %)	16	36	20	3	=	- **	- ***
Quantity (> 0)	1,5	6	7	14	.	=	.

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

A third aspect of the increasing levels of domestic comfort often ascribed to the eighteenth-century consumer revolution, relates to the incessant battle against cold and darkness. In light of the revolutionary changes in terms of domestic heat and light provision which would beset nineteenth- and twentieth-century society, the changes that occurred before the industrial revolution seem decidedly modest. The hearth remained the focal point for cooking and providing warmth, and its associated material culture changed little throughout the period under scrutiny. The diffusion of fire irons (iron bars which enabled air circulation within the fireplace) and bellows probably facilitated the making and sustaining of a fire, especially when turf was burned instead of wood.⁵⁷² The introduction of sulphur sticks near the end of the eighteenth century further aided the process⁵⁷³, but the use and central function of the hearth seems to have gone largely uncontested throughout the entire period. Continuity seems to have prevailed in the use of the hearth for cooking as well, with both the '*haal*' (from which pots and cauldrons could be hanged), and the '*hangijzer*' (on which saucepans could be placed above the fire) largely retaining their use.⁵⁷⁴ Only the spit seems to have all but disappeared during this period.

Table IV.13. The ownership of hearth equipment among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Hearth equipment							
Spread (in %)	83	63	88	87	=	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	5	5,5	7	5,5	=	- *	=
Diversity (> 0)	4	4	5	4	+ **	- *	=
Andiron (<i>brandijzer</i>)							
Spread (in %)	48	45	69	57	+ **	=	=
Bellows (<i>blaasbalg</i>)							
Spread (in %)	9	21	35	35	+ ***	=	+ ***
Spit							
Spread (in %)	17	21	19	1	=	- ***	- ***
Haal							
Spread (in %)	58	45	53	41	=	=	- *
Hanging iron (<i>hangijzer</i>)							
Spread (in %)	30	5	28	38	=	=	=
Sulfur sticks (<i>solferstekskes</i>)							
Spread (in %)	0	0	0	7	.	+ *	+ *

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

However, this apparent continuity belies a fundamental shift in the everyday use of the kitchen that was slowly taking shape from at least the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. What changed

⁵⁷² Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 49.

⁵⁷³ See also Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*.

⁵⁷⁴ By and large this pattern of continuity seems to confirm the image conjured by Peter Earle, who described the London kitchen as the room which saw the least change in the 18th century: Earle, *The making*, 296-97.

more than the use of the hearth, were the fuels burnt in it. Although wood remained the dominant source of heat during the period under scrutiny, by the middle of the eighteenth century 15% of inventoried households contained peat in their fuel storage. The ascent of coals would prove even more remarkable, rising from a presence in just 8% of households in the 1670's, over 15% around 1710, to 45% in the 1790's. This can probably be related to the rise of the brazier as the principal cooking facility in the house. Although braziers were not an unfamiliar sight in seventeenth-century Aalst, they only began to be commonly used for cooking during the subsequent century, and towards the latter half of the century in particular (table IV.14). The more luxurious types of braziers used for keeping dishes warm on the table, or for warming the bed in wintertime, did not experience the same kind of growth as the iron cooking brazier did.⁵⁷⁵

Table IV.14. The ownership of braziers ('komforen') among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
All braziers (in %)	33	38	61	85	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Cooking braziers (in %)	17	12	27	74	=	+ ***	+ ***
Table braziers (in %)	5	9	13	6	=	=	=
Bed braziers (in %)	2	1	14	3	+ **	- **	=

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Note:

Since the function of most braziers was not made clear in the inventories, in some cases they have been inferred from the material of which they were made. Copper, silver and tin braziers were presumably for use on the table, whereas iron braziers could be used for cooking. If no material was recorded, they were included in the total amount of braziers, but excluded from both the table- and cooking categories.

This early form of the later kitchen range was perhaps adopted in response to the continuously rising relative prices of wood, as it presented a radically more efficient use of energy compared to the hearth. Preparing food on a brazier or kitchen range required flat-bottomed pots and pans rather than the traditional kettles and cauldrons, and most likely stimulated the transition from cookery focused on boiling and stewing, towards frying and baking. Far from being a more comfortable or convenient way of preparing food, it represented perhaps most of all a more labour-intensive, focused and skill-heavy task than it had been before.⁵⁷⁶

In his monograph on the making of the middle class in eighteenth-century London, Peter Earle singled out the emphasis on lightness as one of the main distinctive features of improving domestic comfort among the metropolitan well-to-do. He referred to the growing prevalence of window glass, candles and lamps, but also the supportive effect of mirrors, and the general preference for lighter

⁵⁷⁵ On the different types of braziers, see Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 59-62.

⁵⁷⁶ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 100-01. See in general S. Pennel, "'Pots and Pans History': The Material Culture of the Kitchen in Early Modern England," *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 3 (1998).

colours and textiles.⁵⁷⁷ Jan De Vries, Daniel Roche and Anton Schuurman have similarly noted the increased importance placed on the illumination of the early modern domestic interior.⁵⁷⁸

Table IV.15. The ownership of objects related to lighting among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Lighting objects							
Spread (in %)	59	58	74	83	+ *	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	3	3	3,5	5	=	+ **	+ ***
Diversity (> 0)	1	2	2	3	+ **	+ ***	+ ***
Candlestick (<i>kandelaar</i>)							
Spread (in %)	55	50	56	72	=	+ *	+ **
Quantity (> 0)	2	2,5	2	3	=	=	=
Candle pan (<i>blaker</i>)							
Spread (in %)	13	12	27	44	+ *	+ **	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	2	1	+ ***	- **	+ **
Lamp (<i>lamp</i>)							
Spread (in %)	13	13	39	66	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	2	2	1	=	- *	=
Lantern (<i>lantaarn</i>)							
Spread (in %)	9	17	19	12	=	+ *	+ *
Quantity (> 0)	1,5	1	1	1	=	=	=
Candle sniffer (<i>snuiter</i>)							
Spread (in %)	2	11	6	25	=	+ ***	+ ***

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

This tendency was also felt in Aalst, where both the spread and quantity of items related to the illumination of the home rose throughout the eighteenth century. The diversity in objects grew as well, thereby reflecting the concomitant spread of several different types of objects with which light could be cast. Although the age-old candlestick and the lantern (which offered added protection for the flame) experienced some growth, the most important expansion occurred in the ownership of the sparsest, simplest types of lighting. The candle pan for instance, which constituted a less prestigious and more utilitarian counterpart to the candlestick, could be used more efficiently for carrying light around, placing it nearby or hanging it from the ceiling.⁵⁷⁹ However, an even more remarkable growth was achieved in the diffusion of the lamp, rising from 13% of inventoried households in the seventeenth century to 66% by the 1790's. As with the changes in domestic heating, this growth was probably influenced by the more efficient use of energy which the burning of oil represented compared to candle wax. Although the light cast by candles was brighter than the shimmering of a

⁵⁷⁷ Earle, *The making*, 292-93.

⁵⁷⁸ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 128; Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris*; Roche, *A history of everyday things*; Schuurman, *Materiële cultuur en levensstijl*.

⁵⁷⁹ Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 737.

lamp, the former were rather expensive, whereas lamp oil was more easy to come by. Especially in a town like Aalst, situated at the heart of a flax processing region, linseed oil without a doubt presented the cheaper alternative for domestic lighting.⁵⁸⁰ Although the spread of the oil lamp allowed many households to make more frequent use of cost-efficient lighting, it did not diminish the use of candles, which were probably reserved for occasions where more pleasant and abundant light was preferable – such as at the table. The profusion of lighting in the eighteenth-century inventories can thus not only be reduced to the introduction of new cost-saving techniques, but seems to indicate a growing pre-occupation with increasing domestic comfort in terms of lighting.⁵⁸¹ Perhaps this trend can be related to the wider process of ‘nocturnalization’, the expansion of values and uses to which the night was put in early modern daily life.⁵⁸² As the domestic equivalent of nightly street lighting, the growing numbers of candles and lamps might suggest a changing attitude towards the use of time during the hours of darkness.

The more conspicuous types of lighting such as luxurious chandeliers were rare in Aalst, and seem to have been the preserve of inns and taverns with greater need to lit large spaces.⁵⁸³ Yet there was plenty of opportunity for distinction in the acquisition and display of more traditional objects of lighting as well. Whereas the most common copper candlesticks could be valued at anything between 0,5 to 10 fl., the cheapest silver candlestick came in at 22 fl., the most expensive at 114 fl. Among the better-off households the silver candlestick no doubt embodied symbolic capital that the lamp could not – and it is striking that only a single silver candle pan and no silver lamps were found. Yet despite the clear aesthetic and symbolic function of the candlestick, the majority of candlesticks was nevertheless primarily functional, and manufactured out of copper or iron. That candle burning retained its utilitarian function even after the widespread acceptance of the oil lamp is confirmed by the rapid growth of simple wooden candlesticks during the second half of the eighteenth century. Whereas there had been none of those in the 1670’s, they took up 10% of all candles (of which the medium was recorded) by the middle of the eighteenth century, and almost 20% in the 1790’s. The rising quantities of candlesticks in the eighteenth-century home thus reflected a choice for cheaper but more abundant lighting instruments, rather than an elevated standard of living and material lavishness.

Peter Earle, Mark Overton and others have also argued that the light provided by candlesticks, lamps and lanterns could be reflected and dispersed by means of mirrors and looking glasses.⁵⁸⁴ Sure enough such cases can be found in the Aalst inventories, such as in the kitchen of innkeeper Joannes van Belle, where two candlesticks were placed in front of the mirror.⁵⁸⁵ As far as a cursory analysis of the inventories is able to reveal, however, the vast majority of mirrors were used without the supporting light of candles or lamps: only 12% of all mirrors were recorded within a five items reach from a light source. Although the rapid diffusion of mirrors in households all over Europe, including

⁵⁸⁰ During the 18th century there were a number of oil mills present in Aalst: see for instance MAA, OAA, n° 264; 269-270; 273; 277-279.

⁵⁸¹ A detailed treatment of light as an aspect of growing early modern comfort, in: John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort* (Baltimore: 2001), 171-200.

⁵⁸² Craig Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire. A history of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 2011), 2-3.

⁵⁸³ See for instance the inventories of MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1907 (Joannes Geeraerts, †1790) and MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1911 (Pieter de Clercq, †1794).

⁵⁸⁴ Earle, *The making*, 295; Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 112; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

⁵⁸⁵ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1909 (Joannes van Belle, †1792).

Aalst, might have contributed to the general lightness of the home, it nevertheless seems unlikely that this was its primary function – especially since many looking glasses were not of the same clarity which one expects from such items today.

Table IV.16. Ownership of mirrors among inventoried households in Aalst.

Mirrors	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Spread (in %)	45	61	89	79	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	2	2	+ *	+ *	+ ***

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Of course mirrors had many meanings and functions other than the creation of an illusionary illumination. Considered as a typical example of genteel taste by some, and as an emanation of the bourgeois culture of respectability by others, looking glasses certainly carried symbolic power with regards to status, prestige and social identity.⁵⁸⁶ In popular culture it is generally held to have been strongly associated with negative moral connotations, related to vanity and the supposed ability to project the future.⁵⁸⁷ The popularity of looking glasses in Aalst was quite up to par with that in comparable localities across the Channel. In the second half of the seventeenth century only 8% of inventoried households in the Huntingdonshire market towns studied by Ken Sneath owned a looking glass, compared to 45% in Aalst.⁵⁸⁸ By the middle of the eighteenth century ownership in these market towns had expanded to roughly half of all inventoried households, but was easily surpassed by the 89% found in Aalst. When the three first sample periods are taken together to encompass the 1670-1715 period, the average ownership in Aalst (53%) is considerably lower than the 77% found for 1675-1725 metropolitan London, but greater than in Kent, Cornwall or Yorkshire.⁵⁸⁹

The value of inventoried mirrors could vary greatly, depending on the size and quality of the objects concerned. The least valuable mirror was appraised at 12 styvers, whereas the most expensive one in our sample cost 72 fl. However, the median price of mirrors remained unchanged throughout the entire period under scrutiny, indicating that shifting relative prices themselves did not cause their remarkable spread throughout the eighteenth century. Whether the popularity of mirrors should be interpreted in light of growing levels of domestic comfort and illumination or rather something else entirely – such as, perhaps, increasing levels of personal *discomfort* – nevertheless remains a matter for debate.

Few arguments have been found on the previous pages which would support the thesis of rising levels of domestic comfort in eighteenth-century Aalst. Although significant improvements in the provision of heat and light can be identified, they reflected first and foremost an increasingly cost-efficient use of available energy sources, rather than evidence of better convenience in cooking food,

⁵⁸⁶ Smith, *Consumption*; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, 115; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*.

⁵⁸⁷ Margaret Ezell, "Looking glass histories," *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 3 (2004). Similar references for the Southern Netherlands in Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*, 1017-19.

⁵⁸⁸ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

⁵⁸⁹ Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*, 80.

warming the body or illuminating the home. Most long-term shifts in furniture related to seating and sleeping principally suggested lifestyle preferences that could be associated with rising concerns for privacy, cleanliness and the functional specialization of domestic space. Where comparison with other regions was feasible, Aalst did not seem to be particularly lagging behind the early modern 'miracle economies' of England and the Dutch Republic in terms of the domestic comfort suggested by its material culture. *Pace De Vries* and *Overton*, these figures suggest that there is little reason to assume the radical transformation of eighteenth-century standards of comfort by the emergence of a 'New Luxury' that would have distinguished Dutch and English households from the economically stagnant and growth-averse regions in the rest of Europe.

3. Indulgence: novelty, fashion and display

Even though 'revolutionary' interpretations of early modern consumer change might be increasingly prone to historiographical revisionism, there is one domain of consumer behaviour where change was undeniably profound, rapid and perhaps even revolutionary.⁵⁹⁰ That domain is formed by the exotic commodities, of which the well-known colonial groceries (tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar and tobacco) take pride of place, but to which also a number of less perishable consumer goods belong, such as chinaware, silk, chintz and calicoes. The great popularity and rapid spread of these goods across seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe has been widely acknowledged, and its consequences have weighed heavily not only on histories of the consumer, but in almost equal measure on the historiographies of globalization, gender-differentiation, the first industrial revolution, bourgeois class formation and the emergence of a modern public sphere.⁵⁹¹ Ironically, given its generally accepted persuasiveness in demonstrating the occurrence of a consumer revolution, the spread of exotic commodities in early modern Europe has been remarkably difficult to account for with the theoretical approaches usually unfolded in economic history.⁵⁹² The traditional economic models of classical theory see consumer behaviour as a result of the utility maximization of the consumer (or in the Marxist version the 'use value' of a commodity), so that consumer change must follow from declining relative prices, or aggregate shifts in either demand or supply.⁵⁹³ How such consumer utility should be defined, and whether it is a universal property, are issues that often remain encapsulated within a black box that is often left unopened. By assuming the existence of innate categories of utility, such as

⁵⁹⁰ Brian Cowan, "Refiguring Revisionisms," *History of European Ideas* 29, no. 4 (2003); Cowan, *The social life of coffee*.

⁵⁹¹ A very incomplete list would include the following: on early modern consumption and global history: Maxine Berg, "In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 182 (2004); McCants, "Exotic Goods", on gender-differences: L. Weatherill, "A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behavior in England, 1660-1740," *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 2 (1986); Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, "Women, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 2 (1995); Margot Finn, "Men's things: Masculine possession in the consumer revolution," *Social History* 25, no. 2 (2000); Amanda Vickery, "His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Household Accounting in Eighteenth-Century England," *Past & Present* Supplement 1 (2006), on the direct connection with industrialization: Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, bourgeois class formation and the emergence of a modern public sphere: Smith, *Consumption*; Cowan, *The social life of coffee*; Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*.

⁵⁹² Extensive criticisms in Cowan, *The social life of coffee*; Smith, *Consumption*.

⁵⁹³ A general introduction in Fine, *The World of Consumption*.

‘comfort’, ‘convenience’ or ‘pleasure’, this issue can be partly circumvented – or at least reduced to a non-problem outside the scope of the historic discipline.

However, the problem becomes more pressing where entirely novel commodities and seemingly new forms of consumer culture are concerned. Shifting relative prices or changing supply conditions are unable to explain why demand for goods such as tea, coffee or chocolate – which are by all means acquired tastes – would emerge in the first place.⁵⁹⁴ Approaching the issue from the perspective of Marx’s ‘commodity fetishism’ and derived theories of value such as emulation or trickle-down, adds but little understanding of why some commodities were endowed with socially constructed ‘fetishist value’ and hence spread rapidly through society (such as tobacco), while others were not (for instance marihuana, which was discovered around the same time).⁵⁹⁵ The response from both cultural historians and anthropologists has been to bring the *materiality* of the commodities themselves back into view.⁵⁹⁶ This call has been heeded with regards to the eighteenth-century consumer revolution in a number of divergent traditions. Werner Sombart ascribed the emerging desire for the sensual and the pleasurable among European elites to the influence of the early modern court(esan) culture. Exotic commodities such as coffee, tea and silk offered the dual qualities of stemming from the exotic East and providing a particularly recognizable sensual experience.⁵⁹⁷ Their distinct material properties, in a sense, matched the cultural values of the European elites, and thus explain their initial adoption.

Later scholars have similarly referred to the material qualities of the novel consumer goods, but have taken their adoption out of an elite context and relegated it to the nascent middling groups of early modern society. Maxine Berg for instance, has emphasized the importance of the introduction of a ‘middle range’ of commodities: goods that were, as a result of their material dispositions, easily susceptible to comparatively cheap substitution. These goods allowed a desire for luxury and pleasure to spread out over ever larger segments of pre-industrial society, stimulating consumer demand and product innovation before the industrial revolution.⁵⁹⁸ From a more cultural perspective Woodruff D. Smith, and in his footsteps Johan Poukens and Nele Provoost, have argued that the very nature of the newly introduced exotic commodities signaled values related to restraint, self-control and a concern for health.⁵⁹⁹ Since these materially manifested characteristics (present in ‘sobering’ coffee, as opposed to ‘irrational’ beer, for instance) corresponded well with the values that constituted the cultural identity of the rising middle classes, the ‘fit’ of the material and cultural realm likewise resulted in a growing middle class demand for colonial groceries. Drawing on Weber-like social ideal-

⁵⁹⁴ See for particular criticisms Smith, *Consumption*; Cowan, *The social life of coffee*; S. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: 1985).

⁵⁹⁵ Cowan, *The social life of coffee*, 9; Campbell, "The meaning of objects".

⁵⁹⁶ A good introduction in Hans P. Hahn, "Words and things: reflections on people's interaction with the material world," in *Materiality and social practice. Transformative capacities of intercultural encounters*, ed. Joseph Maran and Philipp W. Stockhammer (Oxford: 2012). Similar conclusions have been reached from the perspectives of actor-network theory (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1993)) and anthropology (Webb Keane, "Signs are not the garb of meaning: on the social analysis of material things," in *Materiality*, ed. D. Miller (Durham: 2006)).

⁵⁹⁷ Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus*; Smith, *Consumption*, 65-66.

⁵⁹⁸ Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*; Berg, "New commodities".

⁵⁹⁹ Smith, *Consumption*; Poukens and Provoost, "Respectability". It is of note that the social referents are not the same in both studies. Whereas Smith speaks mostly of the English, Dutch and American bourgeois elites – the ‘middle class’ in Marxist sense, Poukens and Provoost have the fiscal middling groups in a provincial town in mind.

types in his history of the seventeenth-century ‘coffee culture’ in England, Brian Cowan meanwhile maintains that the adoption of coffee was the result of a ‘virtuoso culture’ among a specific social group of cosmopolitan and gentlemanly elites. Their cultivated curiosity and insatiable appetite for the new and exotic led these virtuosi to adopt new consumer goods, but within a distinctly *early* modern context.⁶⁰⁰

It seems hard to imagine the emergence of courtesan, virtuosi or even bourgeois middle class cultures in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst. None of the exotic goods mentioned above were nevertheless absent from the inventories of the deceased. Nor was their ownership confined to a small group of supra-local elites who strove to keep abreast with fashions in nearby Brussels, Ghent or Antwerp. The introduction of many of these novel, exotic, and generally ‘pleasurable’ commodities became part and parcel of provincial town life in Aalst. By the end of the eighteenth century, more than 90% of all inventoried households owned items that were directly associated with the consumption of hot drinks (table IV.17). A little more than a century earlier, only one inventoried household contained such items. Already during the first half of the eighteenth century the consumption of coffee and tea had spread beyond the boundaries of any particular social group within town, and became almost ubiquitous by mid-century. During the decades that followed, the quantity of consumer goods involved expanded spectacularly – from a median of seven items per household to twenty-one by the 1790’s. Furthermore, the diversity in item types (drink-specific cups, saucers, kettles, pots, spoons and tables) clearly increased over the course of the eighteenth century as well.

The spread of tea consumption proved to be extraordinarily fast from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards, rising from 7% to over 60% between 1710 and 1740, and reaching almost 90% of households by the 1790’s. Although the domestic consumption coffee experienced a slower start, it caught up rapidly during the second half of the eighteenth century. Although the use of sugar is harder to demonstrate from the specific items present in after-death inventories, the figures nevertheless suggest that it became a common additive to tea and coffee only during the second half of the century. Since such use of sugar did not necessarily require the ownership of specific utensils or vessels such as sugar spoons or pots, actual consumption levels might have been much higher than can be established with the help of inventories. A similar issue complicates the figures for the use of tobacco, which generally needed few and cheap as well as little valuable items in order to be consumed.

⁶⁰⁰ Cowan, *The social life of coffee*.

Table IV.17. Ownership of items related to hot drinks among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Hot drink related objects							
Spread (in %)	2	12	81	93	+ ***	+ *	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	7	7	21	=	+ ***	+ **
Diversity (> 0)	1	1	2	4	=	+ ***	+ *
Coffee							
Spread (in %)	0	1	22	84	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	.	7	1	4	.	+ ***	.
Diversity (> 0)	.	1	1	2	.	+ ***	.
Tea							
Spread (in %)	0	7	64	88	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	.	7	3	10	.	+ ***	.
Diversity (> 0)	.	2	1	2	.	+ ***	.
Chocolate							
Spread (in %)	0	3	14	7	+ ***	=	+ *
Quantity (> 0)	.	1	1	7	.	+ ***	.
Diversity (> 0)	.	1	1	1	.	=	.
Sugar							
Spread (in %)	2	3	3	41	=	+ ***	+ ***
Tobacco							
Spread (in %)	0	5	22	17	+ ***	=	+ ***

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The odd one out in the story of the spectacularly successful introduction of colonial groceries in Aalst, is chocolate. Although it was introduced around the same time as tea and coffee, in the beginning of the eighteenth century, its diffusion was much slower than that of its counterparts. After mid-century decline in the spread of ownership set in, although the happy few that did own chocolate-related consumer goods further expanded the quantity of their possessions. Compared to tea and coffee, it shared similar connotations to medicinal use, but probably lacked in relative cheapness.⁶⁰¹ In any case, the consumption of hot chocolate would remain confined to the happy few until the very end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁰²

⁶⁰¹ Import prices for tea in K. Degryse, "De Oostendse Chinahandel (1718-1735)," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 52, no. 2 (1974), on discourses relating the consumption of tea, coffee and chocolate with health: Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*, 151-55; Smith, *Consumption*.

⁶⁰² M. Libert, "De chocoladeconsumptie in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden," in *Chocolade. Van drank voor edelman tot reep voor alleman 16de-20ste eeuw* (Brussel: 1996).

Table IV.18. Comparing the diffusion of hot drinks in England, the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands.

		Tea	Coffee	Tea / Coffee	Chocolate
England					
London	c. 1725			60 %	
England	c. 1725			15 %	
Huntingdons. towns					
	1690-1719			5 %	
	1720-1749			18 %	
	1749-1800			41 %	
Dutch Republic					
Amsterdam (orphanage)					
	1740-1759	50 %	54 %	61 %	3 %
	1760-1782	42 %	52 %	55 %	3 %
Weesp					
	c. 1710	76 %	50 %		
	c. 1740	90 %	77 %		
	c. 1780	100 %	100 %		
Krimpenerwaard					
	1700-1729	43 %	23 %		5 %
	1730-1764	88 %	55 %		10 %
	1765-1795	95 %	85 %		10 %
Southern Netherlands					
Antwerp					
	c. 1730	73 %	36 %		44 %
Lier					
	1710-1719	6 %	18 %		3 %
	1740-1749	82 %	21 %		10 %
	1790-1795	100 %	67 %		0 %
Aalst					
	1710-1715	7 %	1 %	12 %	3 %
	1740-1745	64 %	22 %	81 %	14 %
	1790-1795	88 %	84 %	93 %	7 %

Sources:

McCants, "Exotic Goods", 448, Weatherill, "Consumer Behaviour", 157-58, Poukens and Provoost, "Respectability", 172, Van Koolbergen, "De Materiële Cultuur Van Weesp En Weesperkarspel in De Zeventiende En Achttiende Eeuw", 145, Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail Growth and Consumer Changes", Sneath, "Consumption, Wealth, Indebtedness", Kamermans, "Materiële Cultuur", 121.

When comparing the spread of tea and coffee throughout a number of case studies in England, the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands, the similarities abound (table IV.18). Although the large, cosmopolitan centers such as London and Antwerp obviously led the way, it is nevertheless striking how quickly these commodities became commonplace in the secondary towns and on the countryside as well. However, in comparison to Brabantine Lier and Weesp in Holland – two towns of comparable size – Aalst seems to have experienced a somewhat slower adoption of tea and coffee. It is likely that the closer proximity to larger urban centres (Amsterdam near Weesp, and Antwerp and

Mechelen near Lier) facilitated both lower transport costs and the faster transmission of habits related to an urban way of life. The fact that the general economic decline of the Southern Netherlands did not inhibit the rapid adoption of tea and coffee drinking among the majority of the population, indicates a relative detachment from the larger socio-economic processes of the time.⁶⁰³ At the level of comparable unit sizes, the differences between England, the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands were small: consumption in Antwerp and London was situated at a comparable level, while the habit of consuming hot drinks became common in Weesp, Lier and Aalst well before it was fully adopted in the English market towns of Huntingdonshire.

In their case study of shifting consumption patterns in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Antwerp, Bruno Blondé and Ilja van Damme have claimed that the rapid adoption of hot drinks consumption during an era of urban de-industrialization and economic decline, indicated a growing "*desire for the new*."⁶⁰⁴ Nevertheless, this novelty of hot drinks consumption soon became a part of already existing daily routines and presented little more than a quantitative transformation of early modern European material culture rather than a profound, qualitative one.⁶⁰⁵ The accommodation of exotic goods in early modern daily life, which apparently made itself felt in provincial Aalst as well as in Antwerp, was not limited to the adoption of new drinking habits and the occasional sniffing or smoking. Whereas spices had been largely uncommon in seventeenth-century kitchens, their presence in the Aalst after-death inventories increased from 6% in the 1740's to 26% around the end of the eighteenth century. Most of the times these were limited to salt and pepper, but the occasional references to bay leaves, oregano, cinnamon, (rock) candy, cumin, aniseed, cloves, nutmeg and ginger suggest that the more exotic spices were not an entirely unfamiliar sight in the kitchens of Aalst.

Cotton textiles as well, seem to have easily found their way onto the Aalst markets during the eighteenth century. In the 1670's, only 3% of all inventories recorded cotton textiles (including *chintz* and *neteldoek*), a proportion which rose to 13% by the beginning of the eighteenth century, 20% in the 1740's and finally 27% in the 1790's. Surely this proportion represents an underestimation of the actual figure, as the majority of textiles and clothes were recorded without mention of the material.⁶⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the surge in popularity of cottons is clear both around the home as in clothing. Its growing popularity came not primarily at the expense of woolens or silk, since both categories of luxury cloth remained equally well represented among Aalst households throughout the eighteenth century. In the domestic context cottons mostly seem to have displaced linen textiles – for instance in tablecloths, napkins, handkerchiefs, mantelpiece cloths or bed curtains.⁶⁰⁷

This substitution process is all the more remarkable since it occurred during a time of rising, rather than falling cotton prices, and regardless of the fact that the new textiles were between 1.5 and 2.5 times as costly as linen.⁶⁰⁸ In fact, eighteenth-century cotton textiles seem to fit particularly well

⁶⁰³ Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes"; Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*.

⁶⁰⁴ Campbell, "The desire for the new"; Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes".

⁶⁰⁵ B. Blondé, "Think local, act global? Hot drinks and the consumer culture of 18th-century Antwerp" (forthcoming).

⁶⁰⁶ See Emmanuel Meersschaut, "Textielaanbod in het achttiende-eeuwse Gent," *Handelingen der Maatschappij van Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 51 (1997) for a critical comment on methodology.

⁶⁰⁷ Similar findings for Antwerp: Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes", 651.

⁶⁰⁸ Estimations based on 41 prized pieces of cotton and linen found in the Aalst inventories, together with the figures for Ghent listed in Meersschaut, "Textielaanbod". In Ghent, prices of chints rose from 30 gr/el in 1720-

into Maxine Berg's 'middle range' category of commodities.⁶⁰⁹ Cotton and chintz were cheaper than both wool and silk, but more expensive, newer and more versatile than linen. Since cotton printing techniques moreover allowed the addition of more elaborate designs, it probably represented a welcome new consumption option for considerable groups in society – even in times of economic hardship.

Yet there was still more novelty to be found in the homes of the eighteenth-century inhabitants of Aalst. Although porcelain had been imported in Europe since at least the seventeenth century, it only appeared in the Aalst inventories from the beginning of the 1700's (table IV.19). Despite the surge in demand for tea kettles, coffee pots, cups, saucers and all sorts of hot drinks related crockery, china never seems to have become a widespread commodity in Aalst. In the second half of the eighteenth-century growth halted, or even reversed. Even though porcelain was imported to Europe in enormous quantities, it remained preferable for most consumers to resort to the cheaper substitutes that were rapidly appearing and constantly improving.⁶¹⁰ Rather than being direct imitations of the porcelain production process, most of these substitutes in fact derived from a long tradition of tin-glazed pottery making – including traditional forms of lustreware and majolica. Such European, tin-glazed *gleiswerk* could increasingly be made to resemble actual porcelain, even though it remained cheaper and considerably easier to come by. Such *gleiswerk* was already quite common in Aalst during the second half of the seventeenth century, but became nearly ubiquitous by the end of the *ancien régime*. During the latter half of the eighteenth century a sudden increase is evident in the number of items described as 'stoneware', which seems to have been especially common for drinking pots and pints.⁶¹¹ This probably refers to the simple and mass-produced, unglazed ceramics of which England became the principal producer and exporter during this period.⁶¹²

The increased use of all types of crockery, from regular earthenware to tin-glazed majolica and porcelain, seems exemplary for a common undercurrent in many of the shifts in the early modern domestic material culture. The novelty of china and the shininess of tin-glazed pottery came at an important cost: they were considerably less durable than the pewter or wooden objects that had previously performed their respective functions. Combined with the growing presence of glass, it is clear that the early modern kitchen and dining room increasingly became the preserve of all that is breakable. In fact, this process of substitution, which unremittingly favoured the cheap, the breakable and the non-durable, reached further still. The preference for more, but less durable chairs demonstrated above, and the adoption of cottons and mixed fabrics, both suggest that a similar process was at hand in the area of furniture and textiles.⁶¹³ Yet the mere fact that this process is evident from the after-death inventories of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst, as well as from practically all other probate inventories from this time period, does not necessarily imply that it was a phenomenon

1729, to 35,5 gr/el in 1770-1779, and for regular cotton from 24 gr/el to 28 gr/el. The price of linen meanwhile, declined from 19 gr/el in 1720-1729 to 17,5 gr/el in 1770-1779.

⁶⁰⁹ Berg, "In Pursuit of Luxury".

⁶¹⁰ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*; Charles Wyllys Elliott, *Pottery and Porcelain* (Whitefish: 2003).

⁶¹¹ Also in Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 102.

⁶¹² The most important merchant-entrepreneur-manufacturer in this respect is of course Josiah Wedgwood: McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society*.

⁶¹³ The issue of breakability has been most cogently described in Blondé, "Tableware" and De Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

restricted to, or even particularly characteristic of this specific timeframe.⁶¹⁴ The substitution of more expensive and heavier textiles with ever lighter and less durable materials at least, seems characteristic of any history of clothing, extending back to at least the High Middle Ages, and running up until modern times.⁶¹⁵ In a sense, this diminished durability presents itself as the necessary trade-off for the manifestation of (socially) widespread consumer change in an era of little to no economic growth.⁶¹⁶

Table IV.19. Ownership of porcelain, earthenware and glass among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Porcelain							
Spread (in %)	0	9	25	15	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	.	2	1	10	.	+ ***	.
Gleiswerk							
Spread (in %)	38	53	42	84	=	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	4	1,5	2	14	=	+ ***	+ ***
Earthenware ('regular')							
Spread (in %)	9	20	36	12	+ ***	- ***	=
Quantity (> 0)	2	1	1	1,5	- **	+ **	=
Stoneware							
Spread (in %)	3	7	3	37	=	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	2,5	1	1,5	2	=	=	=
Glass							
Spread (in %)	31	42	61	62	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	2	6	6	10	+ *	+ ***	+ ***

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The growing desire for the new, exotic and luxurious found in the ownership of porcelain and cotton textiles, and the consumption of tea and coffee, raises important questions on the changing attitudes towards the materiality of the time. After-death inventories can, to a limited extent, be used beyond the mere establishment of ownership to explore (however tentatively) underlying issues of consumer perceptions, values and motivations.⁶¹⁷ Such exploration can start from the use appraisers made of 'modifiers' (usually adjectives) to the object descriptions in the inventories, and infer from them general tendencies regarding the meaning and value attributed to appraised objects. Based on these adjectives, Mark Overton has argued that the novelty, material and functionality of an object became

⁶¹⁴ See in particular Richard Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the demand for art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: 1993); Richard Goldthwaite, "The economic and social world of Italian Renaissance Maiolica," *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1989).

⁶¹⁵ David Jenkins, *The Cambridge history of western textiles*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: 2003).

⁶¹⁶ See also Shammass, *The pre-industrial consumer*; Shammass, "Changes"; Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes"; Van Damme, *Verleiden en Verkopen*.

⁶¹⁷ Methodologically pioneered in M.C. Beaudry, "Words for things: the linguistic analysis of probate inventories," in *Documentary archaeology in the New World*, ed. M.C. Beaudry (Cambridge: 1988) and concisely applied in Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 114-16; Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 200.

more important differentiators [of value] in Kent during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whereas the use of modifiers related to aesthetic qualities remained unchanged. This finding confirmed Overton's general argument that comfort rather than display fuelled the early modern consumer revolution. Even among the much poorer labourer inventories studied by Craig Muldrew, the incidence of the adjective 'old' (by far the commonest of modifiers) dropped considerably over time. Muldrew tentatively concluded a *qualitative* improvement in the items owned during the eighteenth century from this.⁶¹⁸

The evidence for Aalst appears far less conclusive. The first thing to note is that the share of objects described with an adjective declined considerably throughout the entire period under scrutiny. In the 1670 sample 5.0% of all studied objects were designated with a modifier – a proportion that declined to 4.6% in the beginning of the eighteenth century, to 3.0% around mid-century and to just 1.1% by the 1790's. Contrary to the pragmatic motivation for using modifiers in inventories suggested by Overton, the growing number of inventoried items did not lead the appraisers in Aalst to differentiate more individual objects from one another by means of adjectives.⁶¹⁹

It is important to take this shrinking usage of modifiers into account when considering the evolutions of any particular modifier in particular. The importance of certain adjectives relative to the total number of adjectives per sample period nevertheless offers a potentially interesting perspective on the changing allocation of value by the inventory appraisers. For this purpose, the words have been grouped into four categories. The first group relates to items designated as 'new' or 'novel', while the second category includes all adjectives designating an old, broken or worn-out condition.⁶²⁰ The third category relates mostly to the aesthetic qualities of an object, such as its decoration or design, as well as its finesse.⁶²¹ The final group of adjectives describes the general shape or construction of an item.⁶²²

Table IV.20. The use of four categories of adjectives in the Aalst after-death inventories.

	New	Old, broken or worn-out	Design & decoration	Shape & construction	Total	N
1670-1681	3 %	30 %	7 %	61 %	100 %	203
1705-1715	7 %	26 %	15 %	53 %	100 %	278
1740-1745	6 %	24 %	28 %	41 %	100 %	161
1790-1795	5 %	23 %	42 %	30 %	100 %	76

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The decline in the use of modifiers related to old or worn-out objects noted by Muldrew can be confirmed for Aalst. When considering the number of these modifiers *per inventory* (rather than

⁶¹⁸ Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*.

⁶¹⁹ Compare with Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 115-16

⁶²⁰ These include the adjectives 'geschonden' (damaged); 'gebroken' (broken); 'vervallen', 'versleten' and 'aftands' (worn-out); 'kwaad' and 'slecht' (bad); and 'oud' (old).

⁶²¹ Including such adjectives as 'fijn' (fine), 'grof' (coarse), 'effen' (plain); 'gestreept' (striped), 'gebloemd' (flowered), 'geblokt' or 'gedamd' (checkered).

⁶²² Including 'klein' (small), 'groot' (large), 'hoog' (tall), 'hangend' (hanging), 'vierkant' (square), 'rond' (round), 'ovaal' (oval), 'achthoekig' (eight-sided), 'lang' (long), 'uittrekkend' (extendable), 'kort' (short), 'hoek-' (corner-) or 'draaiend' (turning).

relative to the total number of adjectives used), the decline becomes even more pronounced: from 34% in the 1670's to 14% in the 1790's. Among Muldrew's labourers the incidence of 'old' objects declined from 66% to 49% over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶²³ Perhaps this relative and absolute decline does indeed pertain to a qualitative improvement in the stock of early modern household goods, as Muldrew would have it – but not necessarily so. The speeding up of consumption cycles and the decreasing durability of many household goods might equally well have resulted in a shorter lifespan of many objects, thereby stimulating the more frequent and timely disposal of older, increasingly useless goods.⁶²⁴ If such were the case, the declining use of modifiers related to 'old' objects did not necessarily imply a qualitative improvement in the material standard of living at home. There seems, in either case, to be little connection between this phenomenon and the share of objects referred to as 'new'. Contrary to Overton's findings for Kent, there is no evidence of a concomitant rise in the importance of novel goods to be found in Aalst. In general then, the age of an item became less important in differentiating and attributing value to objects as the eighteenth century progressed.

Also in stark contrast to the evidence for Kent is the relative importance of the other two groups of modifiers. In relative terms at least, the only category of adjectives that gained ground – and spectacularly so – were those related to the design and decoration of objects (from 7% to 42%). A remarkably similar tendency to increasingly allocate value in design and decoration, rather than in qualities such as durability or 'intrinsic' material value, has been established time and again with regards to general consumer change across eighteenth-century western Europe.⁶²⁵ Perhaps the changing use of modifiers by the inventory appraisers in Aalst reflects this process. Adjectives referring to shape, on the other hand, went through a reverse evolution. This is (again) contrary to the pattern discerned for Kent, where according to Overton comfort and utility increasingly trumped design and aesthetics. Certainly the choice of adjectives by inventory appraisers constitutes a decidedly shaky foundation to draw any firm and comparative conclusions from – especially in a context where the differentiation of objects with the help of such modifiers itself became less common practice. Yet, combined with the evidence on textiles and crockery, it does not seem particularly unreasonable to discern among the eighteenth-century inhabitants of Aalst a tendency to opt for more fashionable and aesthetically pleasing commodities at the expense of a generally reduced durability and shortened life-cycle of household commodities.

Although the taste for the new and fashionable came at the cost of diminished durability, it had some important properties to speak for it. When put on display for others to see, novelty could convey taste like no other. Consider for instance porcelain, which despite being imported by the hundreds of thousands⁶²⁶, was nevertheless carefully put on display by many inhabitants of Aalst. Well over 15% of all porcelain mentioned in the Aalst inventories was specifically recorded as standing "*on*

⁶²³ Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 200.

⁶²⁴ On the stock-flow product and the speed of early modern consumption cycles: De Vries, "Between purchasing power"; Shammas, "Changes".

⁶²⁵ See Helen Clifford, "A commerce with things: the value of precious metalwork in early modern England," in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester: 1999); Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes"; Nijboer, "De fatsoenering".

⁶²⁶ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

the fireplace mantle", usually on top of the mantelpiece cloth.⁶²⁷ Cheaper types of crockery were also occasionally put on display, although less frequently so. On at least nine occasions tin-glazed *gleiswerk* took the place of porcelain on the mantle, in four households glass was on display, and in one case 'regular', unglazed earthenware was used instead.⁶²⁸ Clearly these objects with a high and undisputed use value could serve the non-trivial function of participating in a semiotic system that conveyed aesthetic and fashionable taste within the household. Value hierarchies reigned in crockery no less than in any area of the conspicuous Old Luxury, as preference was systematically given to the 'finest' porcelain, and resort was made to the *gleiswerk* or *earthenware* alternatives only when china proved out of reach.

Of course the decoration of the domestic environment was not new or unique to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although some scholars have argued that a growing tendency to withdraw activities of socialization to the private sphere led to a greater importance of the display of taste within the home.⁶²⁹ This process has often been linked to the debate on the emergence of the ideology of 'separate spheres', which would come to govern gender relations, consumption regimes and the distinction between private and public life in the nineteenth century. Although frequently revised and nuanced, some degree of consensus remains on the gradual emergence of a culture that associated public life, politics and rationality with masculinity on the one hand, and private life, domesticity and affectionate consumption with the feminine on the other.⁶³⁰ In Georgian England for instance, Amanda Vickery has discerned a developing language of taste in the domestic context through which early modern women could claim personal autonomy in a public world where their hands were increasingly tied.⁶³¹ The interior decoration of the home was not a frivolous pursuit then, as it was important in asserting social standing both inside and outside the house. The proper display of the home symbolized the health and social standing of a household, and its management seems to have been perceived as a principally feminine obligation.

At least two focal points have received much attention in this respect. In her study of the eighteenth-century domestic culture among the Edinburgh 'middle ranks', Stana Nenadic has emphasized the importance of the dining room as the principle stage where domestic taste and refinement were performed towards the outside world.⁶³² Woodruff D. Smith on the other hand, has stressed the proliferating and expanding ritual of preparing and drinking tea in the parlour as the

⁶²⁷ Since the mention of such manner of display depended on the particular inventory taker, this figure is almost certainly an underestimation.

⁶²⁸ These represent 3% of all *gleiswerk* mentioned, 1,8% of all glasswork and just 0,6% of all earthenware in the sampled Aalst inventories.

⁶²⁹ An overview in Smith, *Consumption*, 171-88. Also Soly, "Social aspects"; Smail, *The origins*; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750-1850* (London: 1987).

⁶³⁰ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*; Tiersten, "Redefining Consumer Culture"; Stana Nenadic, "Middle-Rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow 1720-1840," *Past & Present* 145 (1994); Vickery, "His and Hers"; Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: 2010). On the emergence of a private sphere: Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée, 2: De l'Europe féodale à la Renaissance* (Paris: 1985); and a public sphere: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: 1989).

⁶³¹ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*; Amanda Vickery, "An Englishman's home is his castle? Thresholds, boundaries and privacies in the eighteenth-century London house," *Past and Present* 199 (2008).

⁶³² Nenadic, "Middle-Rank Consumers".

prototypical performance of female domesticity.⁶³³ Both the proliferating practice of demonstrating domestic hospitality through the organization of extensive dinners and the development of tea gatherings at home, resulted in the growth of related consumption. According to Smith and Nenadic, the (feminine) domesticity and respectability which were conveyed in these events of socialization were at least partially embodied and symbolized in the material possessions that accompanied them. Such domestic display of hospitality might help to explain the remarkable growth in the number of tables described as 'large' in the Aalst inventories. In the second half of the seventeenth century only 55% of households owned such a large (presumable dining) table – a proportion which rose to 71% by the beginning of the following century, to 86% in the 1740's and finally 91% at the end of the period studied. Nenadic' assertion that "if [...] the early modern period was the 'age of the bed', then the second half of the eighteenth century was surely the age of the dining-table" seems to apply to eighteenth-century Aalst no less than to Edinburgh in the same period.⁶³⁴ The dining room (*eetplaetse*) of Peter Frans Mollaert, a local retailer in dairy products who lived just across from the Saint-Anna bridge in Aalst, and his wife, exemplifies this domestic culture of hospitality.⁶³⁵ Around the time of Mollaert's death in 1791, the contents of their dining room were valued at no less than 110 guilders, although this excluded the silver cutlery which was estimated at another 260 guilders. The dining room was obviously suited for receiving guests at dinner, as it was equipped with a table and nine chairs. Decorations were elaborate, including three prints hanging on the wall, as well as a statuette of Christ on the mantelpiece, a small chapel and a statue of the virgin Mary. A standing clock, a bird cage, a small organ and two glass cupboards completed the room's ornamentations. The table itself was no less elaborately equipped, as it included two milk jugs, two crystal salt pinchers, two salad bowls, two gravy boats, a pepper and a mustard pot. A collection of twenty-two table knives, twenty forks and a whole array of spoons, plates, dishes and bowls, completed the set of tableware. With seventy-two bottles of wine in the cellar, it is unlikely that any guests left Mollaert's dining table thirsty.

Peter Mollaert's elaborate material culture related to the ritual of hospitable dining was no exception during the second half of the eighteenth century. Increasingly specialized and refined tableware such as salad bowls and gravy boats appeared for the first time at tables in Aalst, and the ownership of pepper mills, salt pinchers, mustard pots and lard containers expanded significantly between the 1740's and the 1790's. A similar growth in the material culture related to the domestic ritual of serving tea can be found in the inventories as well. Specific tea tables were found in only two occasions (both in the 1740's) in Aalst, but the introduction of tea trays and tea spoons certainly attest to the same tendency towards specialization. Refinement was also evident in the introduction, at the end of the eighteenth century, of such tea ritual specifics as sugar scissors or tongs (seven households), sugar trays (four households) and milk jugs (fourty-four households). Despite the evidence of a proliferating material culture of domestic hospitality centered around dining and tea drinking, the process probably remained largely restricted to a comparatively small social layer of society. Compared to the rapid and almost universal adoption of tea drinking itself, the relatively small

⁶³³ Smith, *Consumption*.

⁶³⁴ Nenadic, "Middle-Rank Consumers", 146, with reference to Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer*, 169 for the 'age of the bed.'

⁶³⁵ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1908 (Peter Frans Mollaert, † 1791).

numbers of households owning specialized vessels and utensils for further refinement seems telling enough in this respect.

The display of taste and respectability through domestic sociability did not stop at the tea- or dining table. Around the end of the eighteenth century, musical instruments began to surface in the Aalst inventories, although they remained decidedly limited in number.⁶³⁶ The variety of interior decorations used in the houses of Aalst is shown in table IV.21. Although already in the second half of the seventeenth century the vast majority of households had at least some decorative objects among their possessions, this proportion steadily increased until the middle of the following century. After that, a general stagnation or decline set in in almost all categories of decoration. Whether this decline should be attributed to a falling standard of living, a shift in consumption priorities or a change in aesthetic appreciation, remains a matter for debate. At least in the case of pictures and paintings the latter scenario seems most likely to account for the sudden decrease of spread from 85% of inventoried households to 44%. A similar decline in the ownership of paintings during the second half of the eighteenth century was established for Delft, 's Hertogenbosch, Doesburg, Maassluis and Antwerp as well.⁶³⁷ The adoption of a more sober style of interior decoration in which walls were perhaps painted or covered with wallpaper (decorative aspects on which the inventories offer no clues) increasingly displaced paintings in the late eighteenth-century home.⁶³⁸ If the swift disappearance of paintings from the inventories can serve as a negative indication of sorts, a great number of households in Aalst appear remarkably responsive to this changing fashion.

Hester Dibbits has pointed out that the eighteenth-century discarding of images and paintings in Doesburg and Maassluis was compensated for by the display of more tactile, and often functional, objects.⁶³⁹ Mirrors, clocks and bird cages are the typical sorts of newly decorative objects that rose to prominence almost anywhere in England or the Dutch Republic during the eighteenth century and are commonly associated with the formation of a distinctive middle class material culture.⁶⁴⁰ In this respect as well, Aalst does not seem to have missed the boat. Considering that England was the principal clock manufacture of Europe, it is not particularly surprising to learn that clock ownership in Aalst around mid-century resembled that of Cornwall and the Huntingdonshire market towns, while ownership in Kent was many times larger.⁶⁴¹ Mirrors, on the other hand, were much more common in Aalst than in either of these English regions.

⁶³⁶ Just 7% of households owned an instrument in the 1790's, the majority of which were small organs.

⁶³⁷ Veerle De Laet, "Schilderijenconsumptie in de marge van de republiek," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 3, no. 4 (2006); B. Blondé, "Art and Economy in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Antwerp: a view from the Demand Side" (paper presented at the *Economia e arte secc. XIII-XVIII*, Prato, 2002); A. Van Der Woude, "The volume and value of paintings in Holland at the Time of the Dutch Republic," in *Art in History / History in Art. Studies in seventeenth-century Dutch Culture*, ed. D. Freedberg and J. De Vries (Santa Monica: 1991); Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*.

⁶³⁸ Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*, 284; De Laet, "Schilderijenconsumptie", 60-61.

⁶³⁹ Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*, 281-99; Dibbits, "Pronken as practice".

⁶⁴⁰ Smith, *Consumption*.

⁶⁴¹ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 111-12; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

Table IV.21. Ownership of items related to display and interior decoration among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Interior decoration							
Spread (in %)	73	87	94	81	+ ***	- **	=
Quantity (> 0)	4	6	10	5	+ ***	- ***	=
Diversity (> 0)	2	2,5	3	3	+ ***	=	+ ***
Mantelpiece decoration							
Spread (in %)	3	4	14	10	+ *	=	=
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	2	1	=	=	=
Profane decoration							
Spread (in %)	11	47	71	44	+ ***	- ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1,5	2	1	=	=	=
Religious decoration							
Spread (in %)	11	17	34	33	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	1	1	=	=	=
Gold-leather & tapestry							
Spread (in %)	6	17	9	1	=	- *	=
Quantity (> 0)	1	2	1,5	1	=	=	=
Paintings & pictures							
Spread (in %)	59	68	85	44	+ ***	- ***	- *
Quantity (> 0)	3	5	6	3,5	+ **	- ***	=
Mirrors							
Spread (in %)	45	61	88	78	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	2	2	+ *	+ *	+ ***
Birds & flowers							
Spread (in %)	3	13	17	25	+ **	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1,5	2	2	2	=	=	=
Clocks							
Spread (in %)	0	5	9	32	+ **	+ ***	+ ***

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Even though the inhabitants of Aalst did not precisely constitute the vanguard of early modern fashion and novelty, the majority of households showed a remarkable desire for the novel and the exotic, and proved considerably responsive to European-wide shifts in fashion. The habit of consuming hot drinks spread rapidly among the town's population, and with it came newly elaborate rituals of domestic sociability. Both at the dining table and during teatime a new and expanding material world of specialized tableware and crockery emerged. Not only their function, shape and form proved subject to the lure of novelty, but their medium as well. Porcelain, tin-glazed pottery and stonework became increasingly prevalent in the eighteenth-century homes, and were obviously valued not only for their functional use, but also for the aesthetic and perhaps symbolic meanings which they carried.⁶⁴² The

⁶⁴² See also Dibbitts, "Pronken as practice".

newly available cottons and mixed fabrics meanwhile gained a prominent place in the wardrobes and linen cupboards of many households. The price paid for these indulgences, was evident from the greater breakability and reduced durability of the material culture that thus took shape.

4. Restraint: self-control and privacy

The early modern 'consumer revolution', or at least its particular manifestation in Aalst, was not as straightforward as the growing popularity of novel and fashionable commodities might suggest. It was far from characterized solely by an immoderate indulgence in material pleasures, exotic luxuries and the conspicuous flaunting of novelty, design and fashion. The expanding consumerism that took hold in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst was considerably constrained by corresponding repertoires of self-control, privacy and restraint. Far from constituting the mere 'traditional' remnants of soon-to-be defunct moral sentiments, these moderations were as essential to changing consumer behavior as the desire for the new, sociable and fashionable itself. It is from the confrontation of luxury with moderation, and of public sociability with domestic privacy, that individual taste and consumer choice could gain its social, symbolic and cultural power, and assume its role in the establishment of a different cultural and social framing of the material world.

It is striking how far theories that interpret the eighteenth-century consumer revolution in terms of greater domestic comfort and a romantic indulgence in pleasure, novelty and luxury, have become removed from what was possibly the dominant branch of material culture historiography two or three decades ago. Many studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century material culture, especially in France and the Netherlands, were concerned with the *civilization*, or even the *disziplinierung* of society in practically all aspects of everyday life. Inspired by Norbert Elias' historical sociology, they searched for clues on the refinement of manners and the behavioural self-control that seemingly pervaded from courts all the way into the developing bourgeois society.⁶⁴³ However, the more recent idea of a bottom-up revolution in 'new luxuries' that empowered their consumers and reflected liberated individual choice, is not so easily reconciled with Elias' top-down process of behavioural adaptation along hierarchical networks of dependence and power, or, for instance, with Muchembled's descriptions of increasing socio-cultural polarization in early modern Europe.⁶⁴⁴ Whereas the *civilization* theory subjects the eighteenth-century consumer to processes of distinction and emulation, the consumer revolution grants him or her the power to express free will and to look forward.⁶⁴⁵ For this reason perhaps, both aspects of early modern consumer change are not usually considered together.⁶⁴⁶ As the evidence from the Aalst inventories demonstrates, it is nevertheless hard not to

⁶⁴³ Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: the development of manners: changes in the code of conduct and feeling in early modern times*, trans. Edmond Jephcott (Oxford: 1978).

⁶⁴⁴ R. Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne (XVe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: 1991).

⁶⁴⁵ Although Elias does not use the term 'distinction', there are of course important resemblances in the way Elias and Bourdieu describe the interrelationship between habitus and power (Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mss.: 1984)).

⁶⁴⁶ Notable exceptions are B. Blondé, "Botsende consumptiemodellen? De symbolische betekenis van goederenbezit en verbruik bij de Antwerpse adel (ca. 1780)," in *Adel en macht: politiek, cultuur, economie*, ed. Guido Marnef and René Vermeir (Maastricht: 2004); Soly, "Social aspects"; Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power:*

discern patterns of a growing concern for restraint, refinement and politeness – or in other words: self-control – in the eighteenth-century domestic material culture of Aalst.

The most obvious, and most frequently acknowledged, area where self-control manifested itself in the early modern home, was at table. The history of individual plates, forks, knives, tablecloths and napkins all appear to fit surprisingly well in a narrative of growing discipline and self-control in the face of sociable dining.⁶⁴⁷ The impact of prescriptive manuals of etiquette, which invariably stress bodily comportment and individual restraint, upon the material culture of tableware can easily be traced throughout the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century after-death inventories.⁶⁴⁸ The spread of individual plates – instead of eating from communal bowls, the table or wooden plates – in Aalst is quite spectacular: from 30% in the 1670's to 88% of inventoried households by the end of the eighteenth-century. Knives and forks, which inhibited diners from using their fingers and simultaneously imposed certain requirements of finesse and skill on them, also became increasingly popular, although at a much slower pace. The nearby cities of Ghent and Antwerp underwent similar processes, and so in fact did virtually all of England and the Dutch Republic.⁶⁴⁹ Although the diffusion of plates, knives and forks was somewhat slower in Aalst than in Ghent or Antwerp, it was considerably more pronounced than in most of the rural case studies available. Regardless of the precise timing and pace of the process, it is clear that around the end of the eighteenth century 'polite' and 'refined' dining was quite common almost everywhere in urban Western Europe, although it had been restricted to a small elite only a century earlier.⁶⁵⁰

The incidence of tablecloths and napkins in Aalst did not grow during the period under scrutiny, and even seems to have declined during the second half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps the greater adoption of knives and forks at the table rendered napkins and tablecloths largely obsolete.⁶⁵¹ Aalst was in any case not alone in this, as a similar decline manifested itself in Ghent.⁶⁵² It is nevertheless clear that an overwhelmingly large part of the early modern urban society demonstrated an undeniable and growing concern for self-control at table. Of course such pre-occupation with

Furnishing Modern France (Berkeley: 1996); Michael Kwass, "Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption In Eighteenth-Century France," *American Historical Review* 111 (2006) and in a way also Smith, *Consumption*.

⁶⁴⁷ C. Terryn, "Tafelen en tafelgerei in Gent," *Oostvlaamse Zanten* 63, no. 1 (1988); Blondé, "Tableware".

⁶⁴⁸ The most famous examples are no doubt those by Desiderius Erasmus and Antoine Courtin.

⁶⁴⁹ See Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 99; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour for England*; Hans Van Koolbergen, "De materiële cultuur van Weesp en Weesperkarspel in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw," in *Aards Geluk. De Nederlanders en hun Spullen van 1550 tot 1850*, ed. A.J. Schuurman, J. De Vries, and A. Van Der Woude (Amsterdam: 1997); Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*; Kamermans, *Materiële cultuur*, 39; Wijzenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft* for the Dutch Republic. On the Southern Netherlands: Blondé, "Tableware"; Terryn, "Tafelen en tafelgerei"; Poukens and Provoost, "Respectability" and in general: R. Sarti, *Europe at home: family and material culture 1500-1800* (New Haven: 2002), 150-52.

⁶⁵⁰ See in general also Lawrence E. Klein, "Politeness and the interpretation of the British eighteenth century," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002).

⁶⁵¹ This is suggested at least by this contemporary passage in Courtin: "*Je dis avec la fourchette; car il est très indécent de toucher à quelque chose de gras, à quelque fauce, à quelque syrop, etc. avec les doigts; outre que cela vous oblige à deux ou trois autres indécentes. L'une est d'essuyer fréquemment vos mains à votre serviette, et de la salir comme un torchon de cuisine, ensorte qu'elle fait mal au coeur à ceux qui la voient porter à la bouche, pour vous essuyer.*" (Antoine Courtin, *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnestes gens* (Paris: 1676), 173).

⁶⁵² Terryn, "Tafelen en tafelgerei".

mannered and polite behaviour could go hand in hand with ostentation and immodesty, of which the numerous silver forks and china plates in the inventories bear ample testimony.

Table IV.22. The ownership of selected tableware among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Individual plate (<i>tailloor</i>)							
Spread (in %)	30	36	70	88	+ ***	+ **	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	12	12	12	24	=	+ ***	+ ***
Spoon (<i>lepel</i>)							
Spread (in %)	47	34	41	65	=	+ ***	+ *
Quantity (> 0)	5	5	5	8,5	=	+ ***	+ ***
Table knife (<i>tafelmes</i>)							
Spread (in %)	8	12	17	49	=	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	6	6	6	6	=	=	=
Fork (<i>vork</i>)							
Spread (in %)	5	22	17	53	+ **	+ ***	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	8	8	8	8	=	=	=
Tablecloth (<i>ammelaken</i>)							
Spread (in %)	59	67	73	56	=	- **	=
Quantity (> 0)	4	6	5	3	=	=	=
Napkin (<i>servet</i>)							
Spread (in %)	81	90	83	69	=	- *	=
Quantity (> 0)	16	15	15	17	=	=	=

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The practice of eating and drinking was certainly not the only everyday performance that was increasingly beset by rules of propriety, manners and respectability. Perhaps the rapid disappearance of almost all sorts of weaponry – ranging from hunting guns to rapiers – in the Aalst inventories, similarly reflects an abandonment of a genteel culture of (symbolic) violence, and a growing concern for politeness and civility. Whereas almost 20% of households possessed some sort of weaponry during the second half of the seventeenth century, this fell to 12% by the middle of the eighteenth century, and just 3% during the 1790's.⁶⁵³

Polite behaviour also manifested itself in the way domestic space was lived and organized. The growing need to separate the private from the public, as identified by Philippe Ariès for instance, reflects a desire for self-control in a literal sense: it implies the need to acquire control over the way one presents and behaves in public, as distinct from the 'natural' behaviour or comportment of the

⁶⁵³ See also the decline of paintings with hunting scenes among 18th-century Antwerp households: Blondé, "Botsende consumptiemodellen?".

'true' and 'private self'.⁶⁵⁴ This delineation of the private is clear first and foremost in the gradually changing forms of vernacular architecture. The growing number of rooms and increasing specialization in room use has formed a central tenet of much literature on the shifting early modern consumption patterns. Many students of the late medieval and early modern home have repeatedly pointed out significant changes in the layout, use and conceptualization of domestic space occurring concomitant to or even preceding the so-called consumer revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁵⁵ Whereas medieval domestic space is typically taken to reflect a sparse but communal materiality and lifestyle, the early modern home seems increasingly prone to tendencies of budding individualism, familial segregation and a complex, multi-layered materiality.⁶⁵⁶ Already in the 1950's W.G. Hoskins famously described a 'great rebuilding' of rural houses in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rural England, as a result of which the large, medieval *hall* was 'closed' and replaced by separate stories and several separate rooms.⁶⁵⁷ Although many authors have challenged various aspects of the timing, extent and scope of this rebuilding process, the main theme has largely gone unscathed.⁶⁵⁸ As dwellings became progressively less medieval and more (early) modern, the number of rooms proliferated, thereby marking a need for more private and secluded space within the home. This growing differentiation of private space as well as the relegation of specialized activities to specific rooms, seem to have paved the way for an emerging repertoire of domesticity and newly emerging forms of homely material culture.

To be sure, such tendencies towards the proliferation and functional specialization of rooms were already evident from the renaissance, but they would only come to impact upon broad layers of European society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁵⁹ There is overwhelming evidence from probate inventory research of both rural and urban case studies in England, the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands, that a gradual process of functional specialization in the presence and use of rooms occurred from the sixteenth century onwards.⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵⁴ See in general Pardailhe-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'Intime*; Ariès and Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée*; Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: 1986), and in a much more nuanced manner Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*.

⁶⁵⁵ A particularly eloquent example in Sarti, *Europe at home*.

⁶⁵⁶ For introductions see Ariès and Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée*; Rybczynski, *Home*; Pardailhe-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'Intime*; M. Kowaleski and P. Goldberg, eds., *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge: 2011).

⁶⁵⁷ Hoskins, "The Rebuilding", 44-45.

⁶⁵⁸ See for critical appraisals of the English evidence: Shamma, *The pre-industrial consumer*, 159; R. Machin, "The great rebuilding: a reassessment," *Past and Present* 77 (1977); Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 121-36; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness"; Heley, *The Material Culture*, 117-26; Vickery, "An Englishman's home is his castle?".

⁶⁵⁹ M. Ajmar-Wollheim, F. Dennis, and E. Miller, eds., *At home in Renaissance Italy* (London: 2006); Sarti, *Europe at home* for renaissance Italy, and De Staelen, "Spulletjes en hun betekenis", 87-137 for 16th-century Antwerp.

⁶⁶⁰ See C.W. Fock, "Wonen aan het Leidse Rapenburg door de eeuwen heen," in *Wonen in het verleden, 17e-20e eeuw. Economie, politiek, volkshuisvesting, cultuur en bibliografie*, ed. P.M.M. Klep, et al. (Amsterdam: 1987); Van Koolbergen, "De materiële cultuur van Weesp en Weesperkarspel in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw", 136-37; Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*; Anton Schuurman, "Het gebruik van vertrekken in de 19e-eeuwse Zaanse woningen," in *Wonen in het verleden. 17e-20e eeuw. Economie, politiek, volkshuisvesting, cultuur en bibliografie*, ed. P.M.M. Klep, et al. (Amsterdam: 1987); Dibbits, *Vertrouwd bezit*; Pisters, "Gentse woningsinterieurs", 73; I. Pisters, "Eenvoud en luxe binnenshuis. Studie van Gentse interieurs uit de 18de eeuw" (MA Thesis, UGent, 1983); Schelstraete, Kintaert, and De Ruyck, *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid*, 142-44; Zeischka, "Strukturen en leefpatronen", 309-11.

However, due caution seems to be in order if one wishes to infer the presence and number of rooms from their mention in after-death inventories alone.⁶⁶¹ Usually not all inventories recorded room names, and often incompletely so – mentioning them only insofar as they facilitated the inventory taking process. It seems reasonable to assume that richer households with a larger number of rooms and more households goods were more likely to have their inventories ordered by room name than poorer households. The same principle probably applies over time: as households presumably acquired ever larger numbers of commodities, the inventorying process was more likely to have been organized room by room rather than all at once. The absence of room names in an after-death inventory does not then, necessarily coincide with the actual absence of rooms in the inventoried house. The mentioning of rooms by the inventory takers was neither a consistent representation of the physical layout of the house, nor was it entirely detached from it.

An example might throw some light on this case. The house occupied by Romijn van Boutem and Josephina Schampaert in the early 1670's serves as a case in point. Upon the death of Josephina in June 1675, the inventory takers recorded a total of 190 different objects, but the majority of those were not ascribed to specific rooms.⁶⁶² As in the case of almost all other seventeenth-century inventories from Aalst, no room was mentioned for the first 110 items, including a variety of objects related to sleeping, but also tableware and cooking utensils, equipment for use at a fireplace, wall pictures and some household linen. Following this enumeration, two small rooms are mentioned explicitly: the 'botterije' (*buttery*) and 'het soldatencamerken' (soldier's room). Both rooms seem to have been used for storage, harbouring additional cooking equipment, tons, bottles and lanterns. Apart from the small garden ('hof') and a cellar, no other rooms are specifically named in the inventory. Most inventories from seventeenth century Aalst entertain a similar structure, in which the main living room(s) is not named, and only occasional references to specific storage spaces such as cellars, attics or butteries, and sometimes the kitchen are mentioned. But does this necessarily imply that these houses consisted of just one communal living room (the medieval 'hall' or 'large chamber') where sleeping, cooking, eating and receiving guests coincided?

In the 1672 cadastral survey undertaken in Aalst, Romijn van Boutem's house in the Nieuwstraat quarter was valued at slightly above median value (at percentile 53), despite the fact that it measured almost twice as large as the median house.⁶⁶³ The cadastral surveyors counted only four rooms: a 'vloer' (*floor*), 'keuken' (*kitchen*), 'kamer' (*chamber*) and 'kelder' (*cellar*). Apparently there was no first floor, which confirms the impression conjured by the inventory taken three years later. The 'kamer' mentioned by the fiscal surveyors might correspond to the soldier's room in the inventory, and the cellar is recorded in both documents. The buttery from the inventory was probably taken for a kitchen by the cadastral appraisers. That leaves the 'vloer' as the main room of the house, used for many functions of the daily and nightly life of the household – as had already been suggested by the structure of the inventory. In this sense, Romijn van Boutem's house seems to conform quite neatly to the supposedly medieval prototype of a communal domestic lifestyle in which household members and activities were scarcely segregated.⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶¹ See the discussion in Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 122-24; Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness" and Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 178.

⁶⁶² MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1795 (Josijne Schampaert, † June 25 1675).

⁶⁶³ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 264 (prijsijje 1672). Romijn's house was 35 ft. long and 21 ft. wide.

⁶⁶⁴ Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 135; Ariès and Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée*.

When the fiscal administrators of Aalst collected their housing taxes each year, they largely followed the same route from year to year. Occasionally some stretches were adjusted and some orders reversed, but it is nevertheless possible to trace the fate of Romijn van Boutem's house through time, right up to the end of the eighteenth century. On August eighteenth 1792 Joannes van Belle died in the very same dwelling, triggering the probate process once again and offering us a second opportunity to peek inside.⁶⁶⁵ The inventory takers began their enumeration by listing all the items in the kitchen, followed by the 'achterkamer' (*backroom*), a 'middelkamerken' (*small middle room*) and 'voorkamerken' (*small front room*). Instead of the large 'vloer', small buttry and soldier's room, there were now four proper rooms on the ground floor. Moreover, there was now another floor with a hallway ('*op den alé*'), a front- and a backroom. An attic had also been added to the house, while the cellar and courtyard seemingly remained unaltered.

In many ways the evolution of this particular house over the 'long eighteenth century' exemplifies the process of domestic 'closure', by creating a greater number of smaller rooms and adding more storeys. From four rooms and one floor around 1672 the house had expanded to accommodate no less than nine chambers, all spread over two floors. The communal 'floor' or 'hall' became increasingly subdivided and lost many of its traditional functions, as sleeping activities were relegated to the upstairs chambers and cooking became the exclusive providence of the kitchen. This closure of the early modern home can be discerned not only in this single house, but within a much wider range of sampled inventories from seventeenth and eighteenth century Aalst. Table IV.23 demonstrates the spectacular rise of references to upstairs chambers, small and 'other rooms', and front-, back- or middle rooms. The presence of upstairs rooms serves as a clear testimony to the presence of multiple stories, whereas the increasing prevalence of front-, back- and middle rooms suggests a growing compartmentalization of the available domestic space at a horizontal level. A similar tendency towards spatial fragmentation is suggested by the growing number of spaces referred to as 'the adjacent chamber' or 'another small room'. In each of these cases the share of inventories referring to such rooms was below 10 % in the second half of the seventeenth century, but rose to between 37 and 69% by the end of the early modern period.

The fact that this rise is evident not only when considering the proportion of inventories referring to these rooms, but also when looking at these specific room denominations relative to the total number of rooms, lends further credibility to the idea that many houses were undergoing a physical process of closure, as was the case in the example explored above. By the end of the eighteenth century the internal differentiation of homes in Aalst also emerges from the general proliferation of new types of rooms that were specifically named after the domestic functions they performed. Kitchens, cellars and attics consistently gained headway throughout the period under scrutiny, and by the second half of the eighteenth century functionally named spaces such as bed- and dining rooms begin to emerge. Such explicit references nevertheless remained rare.

⁶⁶⁵ The house was particularly easy to identify and follow in the tax records over time as it was the first house on the cattle market. The match between the inventory of Joannes van Belle (MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, n° 1909, Joannes van Belle) and the house in the tax list is based on his own name and those of both neighbours (which correspond in both the inventory and the tax roll).

Table IV.23. Room denominations in inventoried households in Aalst.

	1670-1681	1705-1715	1740-1745	1790-1795
Upstairs rooms				
% of inventories	6	22	44	60
% of rooms	4	9	11	14
Front-, back- or middle rooms				
% of inventories	13	29	56	69
% of rooms	6	14	16	21
Small, adjacent & 'other' rooms				
% of inventories	8	18	27	37
% of rooms	5	7	7	8

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Table IV.24. Room denominations in inventoried households in Aalst.

	1670-1681	1705-1715	1740-1745	1790-1795
Kitchen	31	46	72	82
Cellar	19	28	56	52
Attic	25	24	48	56
Room (non-specific)	13	9	36	24
Salet	2	13	6	2
Bedroom ('slaapkamer')	0	3	6	6
Dining room ('eetkamer')	0	0	8	6
Servants' room	3	5	3	6
Office ('comptoir')	0	8	3	3
Children's room	0	4	2	3
(Work)shop	44	44	50	52
Courtyard / garden	5	7	16	32
Outhouse ('Hof van Plaisantie')	2	3	2	0

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

To what extent these (perceived) changes resulted from an actual, tangible rebuilding process, or rather from changing perceptions of domesticity among the inventory appraisers, remains hard to tell. Certainly the low number of room occurrences in the seventeenth-century inventories should largely be attributed to a disinterest from the part of the appraisers, rather than to an almost complete absence of room differentiation at the time. Yet for the issue at hand, this is perhaps of secondary interest, as both processes (the physical and the mental) point towards a growing importance of spatial delineation, and a concern for privacy.

The mere presence of rooms – or their descriptive inclusion in after-death inventories – has of course little to say on the actual use households made of the domestic space they inhabited. In order to grasp some of the functionality performed by different types of domestic space it is more revealing to combine these with the objects contained therein. Table IV.25 shows the share of rooms containing

objects related to specific domestic functions. Of course the mere presence of such items does not necessarily imply that the associated activities were carried out in the same room, nor does the absence of such objects ascertain that these activities were not performed.⁶⁶⁶

The following activity matrix suggests that the kitchen was not only the most frequently denominated domestic space, but also the principal neural node in the domestic system. Its main activity obviously involved cooking, which remained at a more or less stable level throughout. Since it was also usually the best heated and lighted room in the house, it is quite understandable that many other activities were carried out there. As far as the presence of tableware allows for a credible interpretation, eating in the kitchen was rather common, and in terms of providing seating as well, the huge majority of kitchens was well equipped. Commodities related to the consumption of hot drinks were also more likely to be found in the kitchen than anywhere else, and when clocks became increasingly widespread from the middle of the eighteenth-century onwards, it was also there that they appeared most frequently.⁶⁶⁷ Despite this bustling activity the kitchen shed one important function during the entire period: sleeping. Whereas in the second half of the seventeenth century almost half of all kitchens contained a bed or mattress, this was reduced to less than 20% by the end of the following century. A similar tendency is clear in the other rooms located at the ground floor (where the proportion dwindled from 79% to just 52%), as most sleeping activity was now relegated to the upstairs rooms.⁶⁶⁸

The downstairs quarters potentially served a variety of functions, incarnating as dining rooms, parlours, storage areas, drawing rooms or studies. Although wall decorations such as mirrors and paintings could be found in any room type, they were predominantly encountered within these probably most 'representative' downstairs quarters. Items related to writing, reading or studying were also most likely to be found in these rooms, and so were the scarce games and musical instruments owned by the inhabitants of Aalst. In the second half of the eighteenth-century many of these rooms also began to be used as the principal dining rooms, since more than half now contained tableware.

⁶⁶⁶ A comparable approach in Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 126-27.

⁶⁶⁷ The same was true in early modern Kent, where clocks were also most likely to be found in kitchens (Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 135).

⁶⁶⁸ The rapid disappearance of bedding apparel from the kitchen in the 18th century nevertheless appears as a somewhat belated process in comparison with the English situation. In Overton's after-death inventories from Kent consistently less than 2% of kitchens showed signs of sleeping activity between 1600 and 1749 (Overton et al., *Production and consumption*, 126). Even in Muldrew's labourer inventories from the seventeenth and 18th centuries only 16% of all kitchens contained items related to bedding (Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 180).

Table IV.25. Room use according to after-death inventories of Aalst: the percentage of rooms containing items related to specific domestic functions.

	1670-1681	1705-1715	1745-1750	1790-1795
Kitchen				
Heat source	57	63	60	85
Light source	43	41	51	73
Sleeping	48	37	57	19
Cooking	65	72	64	75
Eating	48	33	49	85
Sitting	65	63	75	86
Hot drinks	17	26	68	92
Pictures & mirrors	30	37	58	56
Clocks	0	0	2	14
Study	4	9	9	14
Games & music	0	2	2	0
Ground floor rooms & hall				
Heating	43	15	20	32
Lighting	0	0	11	19
Sleeping	79	77	65	52
Cooking	7	15	8	21
Eating	7	8	3	52
Sitting	50	58	68	79
Hot drinks	0	4	32	48
Pictures & mirrors	43	69	71	62
Clocks	0	0	0	4
Study	0	12	26	21
Games & music	0	8	12	4
Upstairs chambers				
Heating	50	17	6	15
Lighting	25	6	10	14
Sleeping	88	97	79	95
Cooking	13	6	4	11
Eating	13	6	4	17
Sitting	38	69	46	71
Hot drinks	13	0	6	42
Pictures & mirrors	38	58	54	42
Clocks	0	0	0	0
Study	13	8	15	20
Games & music	0	3	0	0

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Although the functional differentiation between the kitchen used for cooking and conducting vital household chores, the upstairs rooms for sleeping and the remaining ground floor rooms for socialization, study and dining, can already be discerned in the second half of the seventeenth century, it certainly considerably deepened during the century-and-a-half that followed. The proliferation of

function-specific kitchens, dining rooms and upstairs bedrooms clearly preceded the widespread use of these denominations in the inventories. By the end of the early modern period the reshaping of the physical domestic space, the uses to which it was put and the way it was perceived, all conspired to create a new domestic environment which increasingly separated the public from the private.

This tendency to separate the communal from the private and intimate was not limited to the architectural use of domestic space. The rapid spread of window curtains suggests that the home itself was also increasingly subject to a delineation between private and public space. Window curtains granted their owner the privilege of being able to control when his home was deemed private or public territory. Unsurprisingly, its ownership in Aalst increased from just 5% of inventoried households during the 1670's, to 30% around the beginning of the eighteenth century, and 53% at the end of the century.⁶⁶⁹ Yet on a smaller scale as well, the same tendency towards increased control over private and public space can be equally discerned. Whereas the incidence of open shelves and racks for storing household goods declined spectacularly (from 84% around 1670 to 22% circa 1790), closed cupboards and cabinets increasingly became the principal means of storage.⁶⁷⁰

Table IV.26. Ownership of selected commodities related to privacy among inventoried households in Aalst.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)-(3)	(3)-(4)	(1)-(4)
Window curtains							
Spread (in %)	5	30	27	53	+ ***	+ ***	+ ***
Shelves & racks							
Spread (in %)	84	72	43	22	- ***	- ***	- ***
Quantity (> 0)	2	2	2	1	=	- *	- **
Cupboards & cabinets							
Spread (in %)	69	93	94	88	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	2	3	2	+ ***	=	+ ***
Mirrors							
Spread (in %)	45	61	88	78	+ ***	=	+ ***
Quantity (> 0)	1	1	2	2	+ *	+ *	+ ***

Note:

(1) is 1670-1681; (2) is 1705-1715; (3) is 1740-1745; (4) is 1790-1795.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The concern for propriety, comportment and self-control is perhaps best exemplified by the strong spread of mirrors in the households of Aalst. Specifically designed not just to reflect light, but also oneself, situated within the (growing) privacy of the domestic environment, in order to fashion one's own appearance and comportment. Far from being necessarily conceived of as a luxury or a sign of rising levels of domestic comfort, the mirror in the eighteenth-century home symbolizes a clear concern for respectability and self-control. Confronted with their own reflections, the early modern

⁶⁶⁹ Also Soly, "Materiële cultuur".

⁶⁷⁰ The growing popularity of the glass cupboard, which surfaced in Aalst from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, seems to run counter to this trend. Its use and prevalence nevertheless remained limited.

inhabitants of Aalst could hope to shape their own outward appearance and properly conform to the ruling repertoires of taste and fashion. In doing so, they seem to have confessed a firm belief in the ability of early modern material culture to confer social meaning as much as to reflect it.⁶⁷¹

5. The cost of the consumer revolution

Many of the changes in the early modern material culture of the home sketched in this chapter confirm the principal features of a 'consumer revolution' of sorts. In the context of eighteenth-century Aalst consumer change was focused on a desire for the new and exotic, paired with a growing pre-occupation with the inconspicuous display of restraint, privacy and self-control. In quantitative terms, change was widespread and profound. The average number of consumer goods per household increased impressively between the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. Yet for all the weight this consumer revolution carries in economic history, its cost has often been ignored.⁶⁷² The effects of changing consumer patterns on the allocation of household wealth and aggregate demand in general, are much harder to establish from after-death inventories than the changing material culture itself. Stock-flow issues complicate the straightforward inference of (flows of) consumer expenses made from the (stock of) goods present at the time of death. Moreover, valuations of inventoried objects are often recorded in groups ('six chairs and a table') which vary in composition, consistency and completeness. Even more problematic in this respect, is that inventoried item valuations refer to the resale prices which these items might fetch on the second-hand market, rather than the price originally paid by the consuming household.⁶⁷³

Not only do these methodological problems complicate any straightforward reading of consumer change in post-mortem inventories in terms of changing consumer demand, but the picture is particularly confounded when both issues are subject to change over time in the period studied. It has been repeatedly argued, for instance, that the relation between the flow generated by household consumption and the stocks in which it left its archival traces, altered significantly during the early modern consumer revolution as goods become more regularly replaced and substituted.⁶⁷⁴ Nor does it seem at all unlikely that second-hand prices were seriously affected by the growth of a material culture which increasingly valued novelty and fashion over durability.⁶⁷⁵ The very processes inherent to the early modern consumer changes itself thus significantly complicate the measurement of its direct economic consequences from probate inventories.

⁶⁷¹ See also M. Howell, *Commerce before capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge: 2010).

⁶⁷² The issues was explicitly taken up in Shamma, *The pre-industrial consumer*; Shamma, "Changes"; C. Shamma, "The decline of textile prices in England and British America prior to industrialization," *Economic History Review* 47, no. 3 (1994).

⁶⁷³ See in more detail B. Blondé and I. Van Damme, "Fashioning old and new or moulding the material culture of Europe (late seventeenth-early nineteenth centuries)," in *Fashioning old and new: changing consumer preferences in Europe (seventeenth-nineteenth centuries)*, ed. B. Blondé, et al. (Turnhout: 2008).

⁶⁷⁴ De Vries, "Between purchasing power"; Shamma, "Changes"; Shamma, *The pre-industrial consumer*; De Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

⁶⁷⁵ I. Van Damme and R. Vermoesen, "Second-hand consumption as a way of life: public auctions in the surroundings of Alost in the late eighteenth century," *Continuity and Change* 24, no. 2 (2009); B. Blondé et al., eds., *Fashioning old and new. Changing consumer patterns in Europe (1650-1900)*, Studies in European Urban History (1100-1800) (Turnhout: 2009).

On an very general level, the aggregate changes in the value of ‘consumer goods’ among the households of Aalst confirm the general patterns established by scholars of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-Saxon world.⁶⁷⁶ In absolute terms, there was an increase in the total value of household items owned by the inventoried households of Aalst (table IV.27). However, this increase was more or less undone again a century later, between 1745 and 1795. Since the number of households goods expanded considerably throughout the entire period under scrutiny, it is no surprise that the average value per inventoried ‘record’ of consumer goods dropped during this latter period. The coefficient of variation of both the absolute value of household goods and of the average value per record increased considerably by the end of the eighteenth century as well – a phenomenon which seems to indicate a greater variability in the value of household goods held.

Table IV.27. The total value of consumer goods in Aalst households, 1670-1795.

	Value of hh. goods (in fl.)			Value per record of hh. goods (in fl.)			Hh. goods as % of total assets			N
	Media n	Mean	C.V.	Median	Mean	C.V.	Median	Mean	C.V.	
1669-1681	273	545	1,2	5	8	1,65	15 %	24 %	0,94	124
1705-1715	378	693	1,2	6	9	1,43	21 %	26 %	0,80	128
1740-1745	386	691	1,2	5	8	0,93	20 %	30 %	1,00	119
1790-1795	240	485	1,5	3	5	2,68	13 %	29 %	1,16	136

Note:

Since the emphasis is here on the pattern of changes over time, the unweighted inventory data are used here (see chapter 1).

Values are expressed in constant 1670-1681 prices, deflated with the adjusted Antwerp CPI (as in chapter 2).

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

In relative terms the pattern is equally unequivocal: there was a slight rise in both the mean and median proportion of household wealth taken up by consumer goods between 1670 and 1745, followed by a decline (at least as far as the median is concerned) in the subsequent half century. Both the upward and downward movements appear all the more striking since they were accompanied, as demonstrated in chapter 2, by similar movements in total household wealth. Moreover, the decline in the proportion of wealth comprised in household goods is all the more striking given the fact that the spread of many of the consumer goods described in this chapter nevertheless continued. Even though the median inventoried household in Aalst possessed approximately 100 different household goods (measured in terms of inventoried ‘records’) by the 1790s compared to 69 around 1670, these goods did not comprise a larger share in total household wealth. Since neither the absolute value of household goods nor the total level of household wealth had increased over the same time-span, the consumer goods owned seem to have become not only more numerous, but also cheaper.

Perhaps this decline should not be particularly surprising when considering the value of these household goods in somewhat more detail. Take, for instance, the home of Cornelis Schaeppdryver (†

⁶⁷⁶ In particular Carr and Walsh, "The Standard of Living"; Main and Main, "Economic growth"; Shammass, "Changes".

1749), who lived in Aalst together with his wife Anna Vander Maelen and their two children.⁶⁷⁷ They belonged to the middle 20% of tax payers in the housing tax of 1745, and 29% of their wealth was comprised in household goods (the median was 30% in this sample). The household was relatively well provisioned with respect to the 'new consumer goods', owning two sets of tea cups, three paintings, a mirror, a cotton hearth cloth and a modest dining room. Nevertheless, by far the most expensive category of household goods in the inventory was comprised entirely of linen. The bed sheets, tablecloth, napkins and shirts together cost 63 lb., or 28% of the total value of consumer goods. The bedframe and mattress accounted for 14%, pewter and copper tableware and cooking apparel accounted for 12%. Clothing comprised 11% of the inventory, and another 4% were taken up by the storage of wood and peat in the cellar. All in all these categories were relatively stable throughout the period under scrutiny, and they did not comprise the core areas of early modern consumer change. In terms of sheer cost these new or diffused consumer goods were of relatively marginal importance. Cornelis' modest dining room was comprised of a cupboard, two tables, six chairs and a wide variety of earthenwares – but was nevertheless valued at 21 fl. (9% of the total value), considerably less than his bedroom. The household's six tea cups were appraised together with two rinsing bowls, a painting and the mantelpiece cloth. Together they were worth no more than 4 fl., or 2% of the total value in household goods. The glass cupboard, tea pots and two paintings with a mirror in the adjacent room cost scarcely more: 6 lb, or 3% of the total. For all the attention the historiography on early modern consumption has attributed to paintings, mirrors, and tea- or coffee wares, their stock value is remarkably small. However, there is one notable exception to be found among Cornelis and Anna's silverwares. Together their silver was valued at 35 fl. (16% of the total value), and it was comprised not only of four silver buckles, a cross with crucifix and a sniffing box. Of all the 'new' consumer goods mentioned in the inventory, the latter was the only one to weigh significantly on the total level of household wealth taken up by consumer goods. However, its expensiveness had little to do with the consumption of tobacco as such, but by the couple's (conspicuous) preference for silver rather than, say, a much cheaper earthenware sniffing box.⁶⁷⁸

Of course, the relative unimportance in terms of wealth of those commodities which were at the core of the 'consumer revolution' tells only part of the story. The ownership of a sniffing box and a set of tea cups suggests the (more or less) regular consumption of colonial groceries. Their importance in generating economic demand clearly surpasses the mere stock value of the commodities used in preparing or consuming them at home. And, as has been mentioned with regards to the growing popularity of glass, earthenware and lighter textiles, the diminished durability of these new commodities might have caused higher levels of expenditure than their stock value at death would suggest.

Following the price of individual commodities through time is not a straightforward task in the case of the Aalst inventories. Only a small minority of items in the inventories was individually listed, and progressively less so in the final two sample periods. In order to gain a relatively reliable measure of change over time, table IV.28 charts the evolution of four indices of consumer goods of which a

⁶⁷⁷ MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1865 (Cornelis Schaepdryver, † 1749).

⁶⁷⁸ Such a box is mentioned for instance in MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1909 (Anna Joanna Picquese, † 1791). On the material and prices of snuffboxes in Antwerp: B. Blondé, "Zilver in Antwerpen: drie eeuwen particulier zilverbezit in context," in *Zilver in Antwerpen: de handel, het ambacht en de klant*, ed. Leo De Ren (Leuven: 2011).

substantial number of individual valuations could be traced throughout the four periods under scrutiny. Given the relatively small number of price indications for the last two sample periods, the established trends are far from certain. All the more so since many of the individually valuated items are necessarily representative of all goods of their type.⁶⁷⁹

Table IV.28. The evolution of item valuations in the Aalst inventories (1670-1681 = 100).

	Tin		Textiles		Furniture		Mirrors	
	Median	N	Median	N	Median	N	Median	N
1670-1681	100	8	100	273	100	53	100	10
1705-1715	109	16	135	366	165	82	111	17
1740-1745	97	35	111	33	57	10	153	4
1790-1795	109	25	186	43	117	13	111	2

Note:

‘Textiles’ are: bed sheets, napkins, coverlets, table cloth, towels, shirts, aprons and handkerchiefs.

‘Furniture’ are: chairs, tables, cupboards (*‘schapraai’* and *‘kast’*).

The components of both indices are weighted according to the number of valuations found.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Contrary to the declining relative prices suggested by Carole Shammas, the inventoried price indices for Aalst end at a higher level than they started with around the second half of the seventeenth century.⁶⁸⁰ If the declining value per consumer goods, which is evident in the inventories from the eighteenth century, cannot be attributed to the declining value of individual commodities, it seems likely that a changing composition of household goods lies at the core of this trend instead. This suggests that household goods were increasingly comprised of cheaper types of objects, rather than of the same object types at lower prices. The consumer revolution, it appears, considerably expanded the quantity of commodities present in the eighteenth-century household, but at least in part this was caused by a greater reliance on cheaper and less durable types of consumer goods.

6. Conclusions

The changes and processes which beset the domestic material culture of the inhabitants of Aalst during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are by no means unfamiliar to the existing historiography. They have been similarly described for the European core economies of England and the Dutch Republic, and for the large metropolises of the time as well as for rural regions as remote as Cornwall or Friesland. Despite going through a prolonged process of urban de-industrialization and subsequent urban impoverishment, consumer change in the secondary town of Aalst did not appear radically

⁶⁷⁹ In the case of furniture, for instance, it seems likely that as the eighteenth-century progressed and more items were appraised together with the room in which they stood, those pieces of furniture that were individually valuated were, for one reason or another, more exceptional.

⁶⁸⁰ Compare to Shammas, "Changes"; Shammas, "The decline of textile prices". The absence of a decline in textile prices is confirmed by the case of Ghent: Meersschaut, "Textielaanbod".

divergent. The principal sweeping changes in eighteenth-century consumer habits, such as the adoption and almost ubiquitous consumption of tea and coffee, the introduction of cotton textiles, and the display of porcelain and its cheaper derivatives, but also the spread of forks, knives and individual plates, the growing number of chairs, mirrors and clocks, and changing shapes of interior architecture – all these processes do not seem to have been inhibited by a lack of economic growth, nor by the apparent ‘provincial’ character of a town like Aalst.

During the first period under scrutiny, roughly running from the second half of the seventeenth century until the middle of the eighteenth, this expansion is perhaps not particularly surprising. Even though demographic growth, and industrial or commercial activities were stuck in a prolonged phase of stagnation, the town enjoyed a stable form of prosperity, reflected in a slowly rising aggregate level of household wealth. Notwithstanding the highly traditional character of the urban economy – based mostly on rentier incomes from the countryside and the town’s function as a central place – new consumer goods spread with relative ease. When, from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, the town’s economy started to change, this did not reverse the main trends in household consumption. Even though aggregate household wealth fell and inequality deepened, the spread of many novel, fashionable and privacy-related commodities continued. To some extent then, this suggests that the social and socio-cultural transformations in consumer behaviour transpired relatively autonomously from their economic context.⁶⁸¹

In contrast to the arguments of Mark Overton, Craig Muldrew and Jan De Vries, it has been suggested that the bulk of these consumer changes did not pertain to a qualitative amelioration of the standard of living, or the improvement of domestic comfort and convenience. Whether this was a general feature of the early modern consumer revolution or due to the specific economic situation of Aalst, remains the subject of more specifically comparative research. The inventories from Aalst nevertheless suggest that consumer change can be most usefully interpreted by reference to two broadly defined processes: a tendency to value the novel, exotic and ‘luxurious’ on the one hand, and a growing concern over self-control in the face of social, economic and cultural abundance on the other.

Both processes do not appear separate from, or in mutual contradiction to, each other, as they were both part and parcel of a broad and long-term transformation in the allocation of value in the material world. The indulgence of the early modern consumer in commodities that were valued for their novelty, design and fashionability both reflects, and itself instigated, a growing pre-occupation with the temporary and the fleeting, rather than with resale value, durability or intrinsic material worth.⁶⁸² Exceedingly breakable glass, porcelain and tin-glazed pottery displaced pewter and wood at the table, while durable leather chairs were replaced by larger quantities of wooden seating, and gold leather hangings and pictures were replaced by wallpaper, as light cottons and mixed fabrics took the place formerly occupied by silk, wool or linen, and even silver and gold objects became increasingly valued for the design, skill and taste they exemplified rather than for the sheer wealth they incorporated. Ever cheaper substitutes and imitations brought former luxuries within the reach of broader layers of society, reduced luxuries to decencies, and decencies to necessities. In the process they ceased to function as the firm and stable markers of social status and identity that, for instance, gold, silver or silk had hitherto so conspicuously performed. Seemingly, the consumption of these

⁶⁸¹ See Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*, 332-35.

⁶⁸² Clifford, "A commerce with things"; Nijboer, "De fatsoenering"; Blondé, "Tableware".

'new luxuries' was indeed severed from the social strictures and constraints which had formerly governed their realm. This process intensified during the second half of the eighteenth century, when the average value per commodity declined, and a wider variety of (new) consumer goods was preferred at the expense of larger quantities of the basic household goods of the early modern period: textiles. While tableware, hot drinks apparel, mirrors and clocks gained both in spread and in quantity, the number of bed linens and beds available per household declined.⁶⁸³

It is in this context that the growing concern for self-control may have acquired its crucial meaning. Refinement, privacy and restraint in the face of a growing diversity of (less costly) material abundance shaped new ways of distinction in a world where imitation and simulation increasingly prevailed. The bourgeois culture of self-control and respectability conferred social meanings to a semiotic system which had become increasingly unreliable. As commodities appeared progressively more flexible, versatile and skilled at imitation, they appeared no longer as representative of social status as such, but established their own aesthetic, social and ideological illusions.⁶⁸⁴ The commodity 'fetishism' which was attached to the porcelain plates, the cotton tablecloths and private bedrooms found in the homes of Aalst households, reflected not primarily their use or exchange value, nor the comfort or convenience they provided or the wealth they incorporated. Mediated through a thickening veil of self-control, politeness and respectability, the increasingly flexible system of objects seems to have provided ever new means of social distinction, while at the same time hiding from view the economic decline and social polarization that occurred throughout eighteenth-century Aalst.

⁶⁸³ The median number of household members meanwhile remained unchanged.

⁶⁸⁴ Compare with Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets* (Paris: 1970); Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*.

V. SOCIAL ROOTS AND EFFECTS OF EARLY MODERN CONSUMER CHANGE

The historiography on the early modern ‘consumer revolution’ has played an important role in dispelling the image of a pre-industrial Europe shrouded in Malthusian poverty, polarization and misery. In stark contrast to the evidence of declining real wages, deepening levels of social inequality and rising poverty purported by traditional narratives of economic history, the literature on the demand side of the pre-industrial economy has re-directed attention to an expanding world of material riches that came increasingly within the reach of growing segments of society. Hence, the question remains how it is that the relatively rapid spread of consumer goods in Aalst can be reconciled with the historiography on declining real wages, rising levels of poverty, and creeping processes of proletarianisation and widening socio-economic polarization throughout the seventeenth- and eighteenth century Southern Netherlands.⁶⁸⁵ Most scholarly work on the early modern consumer revolution has ascribed it with social prerequisites and social consequences that seem decidedly at odds with these pessimistic accounts of eighteenth-century socio-economic circumstances in the Southern Netherlands. McKendrick saw the birth of the consumer society as rooted in the ‘*narrowing of social distance*’ in English society. According to him, these ‘*closely packed layers*’ increasingly ‘*bred social competition*’ and caused a drive for emulation upon which shrewd commercial middlemen like Josiah Wedgewood could act.⁶⁸⁶ Peter Borsay perceived a similar change in social structure, as growing numbers of people with surplus wealth resulted in larger parts of society engaging in the ‘*pursuit of status*’.⁶⁸⁷ These arguments of course closely mimic those put forward by Thorstein Veblen, who wrote in 1899 that “*In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient, and wherever this happens the norm of reputability imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence with but slight hindrance down through the social structure to the lowest strata.*”⁶⁸⁸

The application of such ideas to the ‘consumer revolution’ debate generally reflect the impression of an early modern society that was gradually abandoning its rigid and static hierarchy of *estates* and transforming into a more dynamic and egalitarian society of *sorts*.⁶⁸⁹ The development of a

⁶⁸⁵ See for instance Lis, *Social change*; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*; Soly, "Social aspects"; Lottin and Soly, "Aspects de l'histoire des villes"; Bonenfant, *Le problème du pauperisme*.

⁶⁸⁶ McKendrick, "The consumer revolution", 20.

⁶⁸⁷ Peter Borsay, "The English Urban Renaissance: The Development of Provincial Urban Culture c. 1680-c. 1760," *Social History* 2, no. 5 (1977): 593.

⁶⁸⁸ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

⁶⁸⁹ Lawrence Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700," *Past and Present* 33 (1966); Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities*.

versatile consumer culture manifested itself both as an effect of, and an instrument in, achieving the society of 'socially closer rungs.'

The social *sort* that has been most commonly associated with the occurrence of significant consumer change in early modern Europe, is the loosely defined 'middling sort of people'. Stretching from tradesmen and the professions to entrepreneurs, retailers and ordinary artisans, the growth of these 'middling sorts' is generally perceived as the principal driving force behind rising consumer demand.⁶⁹⁰ Wolfgang Schivelbush for instance described how the urban bourgeoisie occupied a central position in developing new attitudes towards the consumption of coffee, which, together with tea and tobacco, arguably became the first truly democratized consumer good.⁶⁹¹ Closely related to Jürgen Habermas' concept of the emerging bourgeois 'public sphere', the cultural rise of the 'middling sort' during the eighteenth century clearly pre-figures its later dominance in the 'age of revolutions'.⁶⁹² Along similar lines, Woodruff D. Smith has attributed the most fundamental changes in consumer mentality to a gradual transition from a cultural context of 'gentility' – rooted in a social structure of estates – to the culture of 'respectability' – featuring such bourgeois values as rationality, hygiene and self-control.⁶⁹³ Somewhat reminiscent of the arguments made by Simon Gunn on the political rise of the urban middle class, Smith suggests that the cultural formation of a distinct middle-class culture might have preceded the actual social and economic formation of the later bourgeoisie.⁶⁹⁴

For the Southern Netherlands, Johan Poukens and Nele Provoost have proposed a similar argument for the case of Lier, near Antwerp. They too attributed the driving force of the consumer revolution to the specific dynamics of the urban middling groups, even though the urban society they studied was characterized by rising economic inequality and social polarization rather than the narrowing of social distances that McKendrick had in mind.⁶⁹⁵ Although the evidence for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is generally thin on the ground, most indications for the Southern Netherlands point towards declining and impoverishing urban middling groups rather than the formation of a proto-capitalist middle class with a distinct consumer culture.⁶⁹⁶ The contrast between a

⁶⁹⁰ For instance Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*; Earle, *The making*. By contrast, John Smail sees changing consumption patterns emerge from the development of a distinct class consciousness among specific fractions of the heterogeneous 'middling groups': Smail, *The origins*.

⁶⁹¹ Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*.

⁶⁹² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*.

⁶⁹³ Smith, *Consumption*.

⁶⁹⁴ Gunn, "Class, identity and the urban" and Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois dignity: why economics can't explain the modern world* (Chicago: 2010), but see also Smith's nuanced reflections in Smith, *Consumption*, 243-44. Incidentally, this is precisely the reverse of the argument made by many older studies of (middle class) material culture where the transition from a nineteenth-century 'Klasse in Sich' to a 'Klasse für Sich' was traced – for instance Gall, *Bürgertum*; Palle Ove Christiansen, "Peasant adaption to bourgeois culture? Class formation and cultural redefinition to the Danish countryside," *Ethnologica Scaninavica* (1978).

⁶⁹⁵ Poukens and Provoost, "Respectability". Despite the evidence of rising Gini and Wolfson indices, they maintain that the middle class grew in number during this period based on the number of households between the median tax level of a journeyman and the 90th percentile. Since the upper bound (P90) is fixed relative to the total number of households, the growth in the 'middling sort' they establish reflects merely the (relative) impoverishment of (the median) journeymen.

⁶⁹⁶ See Ryckbosch, "Vroegmoderne economische ontwikkeling"; Soly, "Social aspects", and also indirectly Hanus, "Affluence and inequality"; Blondé and Hanus, "Beyond building craftsmen"; De Munck, "One counter"; B. De Munck, "Skills, Trust, and Changing Consumer Preferences: The Decline of Antwerp's Craft Guilds from the Perspective of the Product Market, c.1500-c.1800," *International Review of Social History* 53 (2008). In this

consumer revolution carried by the social and cultural awakening of a nascent middle class and a traditional view of polarization and relative impoverishment thus poses a particularly intriguing conundrum in the social history of the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands.⁶⁹⁷

The paradox applies a fortiori to the lower social strata of the early modern society. Even though McKendrick envisioned the consumer revolution as being “*unprecedented in the depth to which it penetrated the lower reaches of society*”, the empirical support for this claim remains largely contested territory.⁶⁹⁸ Sara Horrell’s study of English household budgets from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries seems to offer little support, concluding that such “*hypotheses that have given a central role to working-class demand for manufactured goods over industrialization have not been upheld.*” Instead, she argued that working-class demand remained largely directed towards the agriculture-based sector until well into the nineteenth century.⁶⁹⁹ Such an argument seems to be particularly consistent with the evidence of falling real wages that persisted throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe. Nevertheless, Jan de Vries has attempted to reconcile these declining real wages with the evidence of expanding consumerism among the lower social strata by hypothesizing a simultaneously growing input and intensification of labour.⁷⁰⁰ By working more, longer, harder and more efficiently as well as market oriented, even the (increasingly) less well-to-do could now participate in the expanding world of goods.⁷⁰¹ Nonetheless, in the labour inventories from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Huntingdonshire, Ken Sneath found almost no evidence of spreading consumer goods such as forks, curtains, pictures or items associated with hot drinks. Only by the second half of the eighteenth century did the ‘consumer revolution’ seem to carefully make its way to these English lower social strata – that is, only after the industrial revolution had begun.⁷⁰²

The question of the social reach of the consumer revolution remains largely untouched as far as continental Europe is concerned. As one contemporary put it, “*it is but equity [...] that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged*” – yet we can hardly tell whether these were mere utopian dreams or reflections upon eighteenth-century social reality.⁷⁰³ It is nevertheless clear that these are questions any demand-side perspective to explaining the industrial revolution, and each social historian assessing the early roots of the ‘standard of living’ debate will

respect there is quite some similarity with the processes of urban social polarization in Southern Germany: McIntosh, *Urban decline*; Friedrichs, *Urban society*; Friedrichs, “Capitalism”.

⁶⁹⁷ Part of the problem certainly lies in the multiple definitions of the middle class or the middling sort. Even though Poukens and Provoost use ‘middling groups’ and ‘middle class’ interchangeably, it is clear that the ‘middle classes’ referred to by for instance Peter Earle, Woodruff Smith, Simon Gunn or Peter Borsay constituted a group that falls largely above their 90th percentile cut-off point.

⁶⁹⁸ McKendrick, “The consumer revolution”, 11.

⁶⁹⁹ Horrell, “Home Demand”, 597.

⁷⁰⁰ De Vries, “Between purchasing power”.

⁷⁰¹ In the context of early modern rural cottage industries the explanation seems plausible enough, but perhaps less so for urban societies where female involvement in the labour market had already been high for centuries. Even though urban society is generally held to have led the way in terms of consumer change, it is precisely for the urban context that empirical evidence in support of drastically increasing labour intensification seems to be particularly lacking.

⁷⁰² Sneath, “Consumption, wealth, indebtedness”. A similar position was taken by Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village, Terling 1525-1700* (New York: 1979).

⁷⁰³ The citation is from Adam Smith (Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 97).

have to confront sooner or later. And the question is of no less importance, of course, for any social historian wishing to gauge the importance of early modern consumer change for social history as a whole. As long as both perspectives remain disentangled, the eighteenth century can be alternately referred to as the age of proto-industrial exploitation, urban polarization and rising poverty, but no less so as that of the ascending middle class, narrowing social distances and the growing diffusion of luxury to the masses.

1. The consumer revolution's lower reaches: the poor

Given the evidence on the undiminished levels of inequality and poverty in eighteenth-century Aalst, the precise impact of early modern consumer change on the material culture of the lower social strata in Aalst is of particular interest. Just how far did the consumer revolution stretch its tentacles down the social stratifications of early modern Aalst? Since most studies of early modern consumption patterns heavily rely on evidence from probate inventories, the well-known bias of these sources tends to steer most attention towards the better-off. The interpretation of the scarce and untypical inventories from the lower social strata included in typical inventory studies, has often led to widely diverging conclusions.⁷⁰⁴ Whereas Lorna Weatherill maintained that English consumer change between 1660-1760 was limited to the middling groups and above, and that no real 'mass consumption economy' thus came about, John Styles, on the other hand, argued that the plebeian working classes did participate in the growing market for new household goods.⁷⁰⁵ Especially the diffusion of hot drinks and looking glasses among the lower social strata is well established within the confines of the probate inventories' social scope.⁷⁰⁶

However, only a handful of studies has been concerned specifically with the material culture of the poor (or at least the broad social strata 'beneath' the middling groups). In exploring the spread of so-called '*populuxe*' goods among the 'lower middle- and lower class' of eighteenth-century Paris, Cissie Fairchilds forcibly argued that at least in France a true democratization of new commodities occurred. According to Fairchilds, the disappearance of traditional sumptuary laws and a gradual refusal and discrediting of the rigidly hierarchic social order awakened new desires "*to ape the aristocracy.*"⁷⁰⁷ By means of inexpensive imitations of aristocratic luxuries, such as fans, umbrellas or snuff boxes, even the Parisian lower class could (and did) now participate in this social arena. Yet, since the majority of her sampled inventories pertained to shopkeepers and master artisans, it is doubtful whether these findings are truly representative of the poor masses that inhabited eighteenth-century Paris. Without any external means of appreciating how representative these inevitably biased inventories were, the issue remains largely unresolved. A similar problem was encountered by Ken Sneath and Craig Muldrew, both of whom recently unearthed large quantities of probate inventories of

⁷⁰⁴ De Vries, *The industrious revolution*, 146-53 provides an overview.

⁷⁰⁵ Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*, 211; John Styles, "Manufacturing, consumption and design in eighteenth-century England," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: 1993).

⁷⁰⁶ See for instance Blondé, "Tableware"; Blondé and Van Damme, "Retail growth and consumer changes"; McCants, "Poor consumers"; Carr and Walsh, "The Standard of Living"; Wijsenbeek, *Achter de gevels van Delft*.

⁷⁰⁷ Fairchilds, "The production and marketing".

English 'labourers'. Although it is quite clear that such labourer households were decidedly poorer than the average probated household, it is far from obvious how typical their experience was for the labouring poor as a whole.⁷⁰⁸ Of Muldrew's 1,000 inventoried labourers 68% possessed farm animals and over half of them grew agricultural crops – implying that the majority of these households was certainly not fully proletarianized.⁷⁰⁹ A comparison with the seventeenth-century hearth tax furthermore demonstrates that only 37% of the (matched) labourer inventories was exempt from the tax, compared to 32% in the total population.⁷¹⁰ In other words: the labourer inventory sample does not seem to have been drawn disproportionately from the poorest quarter of the total population, but rather from the lower middling groups just above them.

Likewise, although the after-death inventories from the Amsterdam *burgher* orphanage collected by Anne McCants unquestionably represent a group of sub-average means, it is doubtful whether the majority of them were destitute or poor households.⁷¹¹ To what extent the diffusion of colonial 'luxury' commodities evident in these inventories can be considered as indicative of a budding society of popular and mass consumption thus remains open to debate.⁷¹² Probably the most cautious study of lower-class inventories so far has been undertaken by Peter King, who studied a sample of 50 English inventories of pauper households receiving relief from the parish.⁷¹³ He demonstrated that Weatherill's reservations with regards to the social penetration of consumer change ceased to be applicable during the second half of the eighteenth century. A broad range of new commodities found their way into these pauper households, even though their total wealth did not increase. Moreover, King far from portrayed an optimistic picture of these households, since the scattered evidence suggests that although these new commodities entered the material culture of the lower classes, their relative position compared to the middling groups and upper classes almost certainly deteriorated.⁷¹⁴

Unfortunately, no specific pauper inventories are available for Aalst, so that the inevitably biased sample of probate inventories constitutes the only inroad to uncovering the material culture of the lower social strata. The systematic comparison of the inventories to the town's fiscal records has demonstrated that the lowest two to three deciles of the fiscal hierarchy only rarely produced an inventory. The odd pauper inventory is of course not absent from the sample, but their representativeness poses serious problems.

Jan de Pachter for instance, a young cobbler whose wife Joanna died in 1669, belonged to the bottom 20% of the fiscal hierarchy according to the 1672 cadastral survey. His home, which provided

⁷⁰⁸ Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness".

⁷⁰⁹ Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 166.

⁷¹⁰ The 1-hearth households were clearly overrepresented in the labourers' inventories sample: 44% in the sample compared to 24% of the total population, whereas those with at least two hearths comprised only 19% of the labourers and 44% of the taxed households. Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 188.

⁷¹¹ For a comparison between these inventories and broader socio-economic stratification criteria, see: McCants, "Inequality Among the Poor".

⁷¹² See McCants, "Exotic Goods"; McCants, "Poor consumers".

⁷¹³ Peter King, "Pauper inventories and the material lives of the poor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries," in *Chronicling poverty. The voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640-1840*, ed. Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (London: 1997).

⁷¹⁴ King, "Pauper inventories", 183.

shelter to his family of four comprised only a single room with a hearth. There were two beds with precisely two sheets, but only one pillow and one blanket. The furniture consisted of a dresser (*regbank*) and a wardrobe (*garderobe*). Food was prepared in iron pots above the hearth, and served with only a handful of pewter dishes and spoons. The inventory mentioned neither a table nor chairs. Nor were there plates, cutlery or tablecloth in the house, although two napkins were available to wipe hands and mouth at table. Four beer pints, a wooden cradle and some sparse clothes further encompassed all the material belongings of the family.⁷¹⁵ Some of the poor inventories sampled mention even less belongings, others more – but the essentials as listed above were usually present. More than a hundred years later, around the end of the eighteenth century, there were still households that were not necessarily better off than Jan de Pachter had been. Joanne Stock had her possessions inventoried ‘*pro deo*’ upon the death of her husband Franciscus in 1793. Like Jan de Pachter, she then had two small children to care of, and like him, her home consisted of a single room with an attic. There was no dresser or wardrobe present, but she did have a small cupboard (*kasken*). Contrary to Jan, there were a table, six chairs and earthenware plates, but no napkins, tablecloth or cutlery. Sleeping comfort was probably slightly better provided in, as there was one feather mattress and a bedstead. The presence of just one pair of sheets and two blankets suggests that the (expensive) household linen was limited to the bare essentials. In most areas the household goods owned by Joanne seem roughly similar to those of Jan de Pachter more than a century earlier, except for the addition of one crucial type of *populuxe* commodities: a tinsplate coffee pot, a tea kettle and a pair of drinking cups.⁷¹⁶

As suggestive as such a comparison appears to be, it remains all but impossible to assess the representativeness of such poor households. Even when they can be traced to their relative position in the fiscal hierarchy, the extraordinary small number of probated pauper inventories render the sample particularly unreliable with regards to the ‘typical’ material culture of the poor. Take for instance the example of widow Joanna Giets († 1791), whose house was taxed among the bottom 5% of the town, whose inventory was recorded ‘*pro deo*’, and whose estate was the poorest in the whole inventory sample. Nevertheless, her material living standards were clearly more comfortable than those of the two young families mentioned before (including an elaborate set of teaware, complete with milk jugs, a mirror, paintings, and a mantelpiece cloth).⁷¹⁷ With three grown-up and married children she could probably count on financial support from her kin, and as an elderly widow of modest means she certainly belonged to the main target group for parish relief. Moreover, the consumer goods she possessed could have been remnants of the more affluent lifestyle she had enjoyed during previous stages of her life. Even though her financial stock was close to non-existent, making her the poorest inventoried estate in this study, she was nevertheless able to support a domestic lifestyle that was quite out of the reach of the majority of labouring poor.

For these reasons, it would be unwise to employ the small number of poor inventories as a *pars pro toto* for the material culture of all deprived and destitute households in Aalst. The few inventories cursively considered here can suggest no more than that at least for some households the situation by the end of the eighteenth-century was not better off than it had been for the poor more

⁷¹⁵ MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790 (Joanna Gaspar, †1669).

⁷¹⁶ MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1913 (Franciscus Michiels, †1793).

⁷¹⁷ MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1909 (Joanna Giets, †1791).

than a century earlier – save for the introduction of hot drinks related commodities.⁷¹⁸ The temptation to draw any firm conclusions on the material living standards of the poor based on these inventories should be resisted, as the answer is most likely better served by archaeology or the cautious use of specific pauper inventories. However, what the after-death inventories from Aalst do permit, is an assessment of consumer change from the lower middling groups on – that is, from the third ‘decile’ upwards. From that point onwards, the number of inventories matched to their respective position in the town’s fiscal hierarchy becomes large enough to yield largely reliable data. At least for the remaining 80% of the urban population, it is possible then to assess the extent to which the consumer revolution altered their material way of living.

2. An index of amenities: growth and emulation

In attempting to appreciate the aggregate change in domestic material culture over time and across different social strata, the method of constructing an ‘index of ownership’ has proven particularly influential in historiography. Louis Green Carr and Lorena Walsh developed a 12-item ‘index of amenities’ to indicate the entry of households into the market for certain (semi-)luxury goods: a score of zero denotes a total absence of any of the included amenities, while a score of 12 indicates the presence of all of them.⁷¹⁹ The mean of such an index can be easily compared across time, space and various social categories, making it an attractive tool for the analysis of luxury good ownership. Carr and Walsh applied their *amenities index* to the probate inventories of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tobacco planting region of the American Chesapeake, and the method was soon adopted by Gloria and Jackson Main in analyzing the material standard of living in colonial Southern New England as well.⁷²⁰ More recently, adapted versions of the amenities index have been successfully employed to study the changing material cultures of the Dutch Cape Colony and colonial South Carolina during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷²¹ Although to differing degrees and with various timings, these studies almost invariably demonstrated the rising numbers of amenities among a widening range of households in the European off-shoots.

In order to summarize the changes in domestic material culture across time and over the diverse social layers of early modern Aalst, a similar index of consumer goods has been compiled. The index used in the present study incorporates most of the commodities included in the studies of Carr and Walsh, Weatherill, Sneath and Fourie and Uys, and counts a total of 19 different commodities whose presence was scored. Table 4 lists the various components of the index, along with the median

⁷¹⁸ Compare with E.P. Thompson’s well-known judgement on the standard of living of labourers during the English industrial revolution: “[The “average” working man’s] own share in the “benefits of economic progress” consisted of more potatoes, a few articles of cotton clothing for his family, soap and candles, some tea and sugar, and a great many articles in the *Economic History Review*.” (E.P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (New York: 1963), 318).

⁷¹⁹ Carr and Walsh, “The Standard of Living”.

⁷²⁰ Main and Main, “Economic growth”.

⁷²¹ R.C. Nash, “Domestic material culture and consumer demand in the British-Atlantic world: colonial South Carolina, 1670-1770”, in *Manchester Papers in Economic and Social History* (Manchester: 2007); Johan Fourie and Jolandi Uys, “A survey and comparison of luxury item ownership in the eighteenth century Dutch Cape Colony”, in *Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers* (Stellenbosch: 2011).

percentile of inventoried net wealth of all households possessing that particular item (throughout the entire period studied). This measure grants some insight into the relative social position of a commodity's owners, indicating its more or less socially exclusive character: the closer it is to the median percentile of wealth for all inventories (P50), the more its presence among households will be spread over all social ranks of the inventoried population.

Table V.1. Composition of the 'index of amenities', with relative social position of owners and spread per quintile.

Commodity	Median P	'Poor'	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Whig	97	0	0	0	0	9
Porcelain	85	0	0	3	5	29
Clock	82	0	9	6	15	20
Hot drinks refinement	79	0	9	15	18	23
Chocolate	77	0	0	6	0	9
Window curtains	72	0	9	27	28	54
Fork	72	0	18	27	23	40
Book	72	0	9	15	15	34
Coffee	67	11	27	38	21	40
Table linen	61	22	27	68	72	91
Picture	59	44	46	56	67	89
Silver	59	0	47	44	51	60
Bedstead	58	50	53	68	77	94
Tea	58	25	41	44	26	46
Mirror	57	44	73	74	62	89
Table	53	67	82	91	95	100
Tin-glazed earthenware	52	56	64	68	54	49
Chair	52	78	91	91	90	97
Gold	49	33	27	35	41	40

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

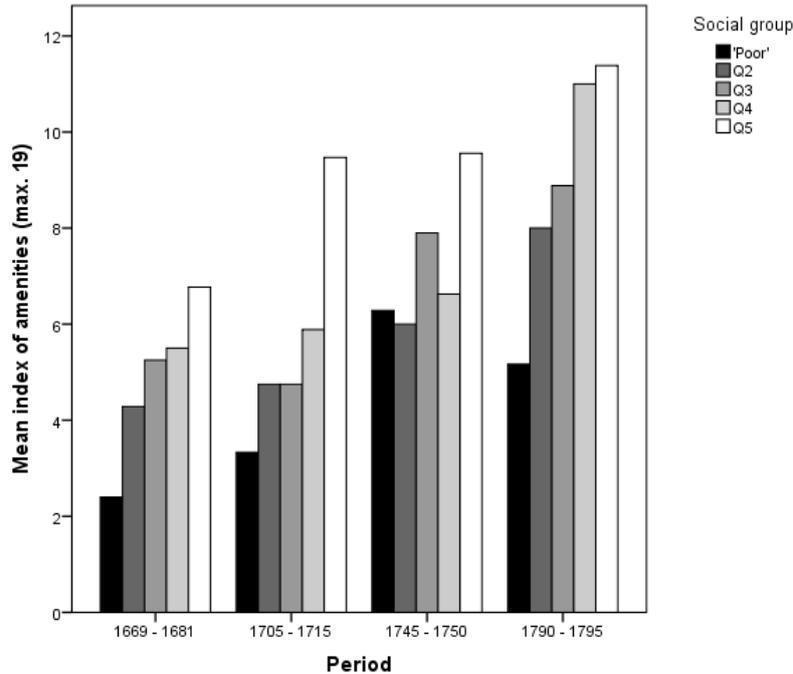
The remaining columns indicate the proportion of ownership within each socio-economic layer of the town – aggregated across the four time periods. The first group represents the few poor inventories which presumably belonged to the poorest 20% of the town's population, but whose representativeness can be called into question (as argued above). The remaining four groups each embody a layer of 20% of urban households (a 'quintile'), ranked from poor to rich, based on the housing taxes of nearby years (1672, 1705-1710, 1742-1745, 1790-1792).⁷²² Only those inventories that could be identified with certainty in these tax lists have been included in the analysis.

It is clear that the components of the amenities index were not all luxury items – chairs, tables and mirrors for instance were owned by the majority of poor households as well. Yet almost all these commodities were more likely to be encountered among the possessions of the rich than among the poor. However, these figures disguise a pronounced evolution through time. The mean number of these amenities present among the inventoried households grew from five (out of nineteen) in the

⁷²² MAA, OAA, n° 264, 269, 273, 277.

1670's to six at the beginning of the eighteenth century, seven around mid-century and eventually nine by the 1790's.⁷²³ Not unlike the situation in colonial America, and as would be expected from the figures presented in the previous chapter, there was thus a continuous growth in the average number of these amenities owned. More interesting in this respect are the differences between the various socio-economic layers present in Aalst (figure V.1).

Figure V.1. Average score on the 'amenities index' per social group.



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Two patterns are immediately clear from this overview. First of all, the growth in amenities ownership occurred across the board, was not specifically limited to the middling groups alone, and did not leave the poorer layers of society entirely unaffected. Secondly, the presence of the nineteen amenities studied was clearly unequally distributed – and remained as such throughout the entire period studied. Whereas the ratio of the mean index between the top quintile and the group of poor inventories was 7:2 (2.8) in the second half of the seventeenth century, the numbers were higher at the end of the subsequent century (11:5) but not much more equal (2.2).⁷²⁴ If this amenities index can be taken as a proxy for the consumption of an even wider range of consumer goods, it suggests that there was no significant leveling of the playing field across time. Nevertheless, the average number of amenities

⁷²³ Calculated on the unweighted inventory data (as to better reflect the changes through time). Consequently, these figures are overestimations of the average number of amenities among the total population (see fig 2***).

⁷²⁴ The ratio's for the top quintile over the second quintile (instead of the 'poor') are 1,6 for the 1670's and 1,4 for the 1790's.

present in a household from the lower middling groups (Q2) circa 1790 surpassed that of the top quintile a century earlier.

Carr and Walsh' comparable findings for the colonial Chesapeake led them to discern a pattern of *Veblenesque* emulation similar to that conjectured by Neil McKendrick for England.⁷²⁵ In this gradual growth and social diffusion of amenity ownership they perceived the adoption of a '*genteel*' culture, whereby rich planters copied the fashionable and metropolitan lifestyle of their English counterparts. These colonial 'Joneses' were imitated in their turn by the local middling groups who aspired to achieve prestige and higher social status. In the case of Aalst as well, the adoption and subsequent diffusion of a growing array of new amenities appears to conform rather closely to the patterns usually associated with such a '*trickle down*'-effect. Veblen's original proposition that emulation constitutes the most significant driving force of consumer behaviour was in large part a reaction against the utilitarian approach of "*those economists who adhere with least faltering to the body of modernized classical doctrines.*"⁷²⁶ By arguing that not subsistence or accumulation, but *waste* was the sole end of production and consumption, he turned the neoclassical principle of '*utility maximization*' upside down.⁷²⁷ Later economists have nevertheless gone to considerable lengths to *economicize* Veblen's ideas by incorporating the social value of *positional goods* into the economic concept of utility.⁷²⁸ Most influential in this respect has been James Duesenberry's macroeconomic 'relative income hypothesis', which argued that an individual's consumption function depends on his or her relative position in the income distribution, rather than on any measure of absolute income.⁷²⁹ In order to consider whether positional concerns were in play, and how they were affected in actual practices, it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at the *trickling down* of some of these commodities in more detail.

The consumption of hot drinks, for instance, can be observed in Aalst for the first time around the last quarter of the seventeenth century – but only among the top 40% of the population (figure V.2). Over the following years the involvement of these upper social strata deepened, but it was only during the first half of the eighteenth century that the bulk of the urban population became included in

⁷²⁵ Carr and Walsh, "The Standard of Living"; McKendrick, "The consumer revolution".

⁷²⁶ The quotation is from Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*. See also Sassatelli, *Consumer culture*; Smail, Stiner, and Earle, "Goods".

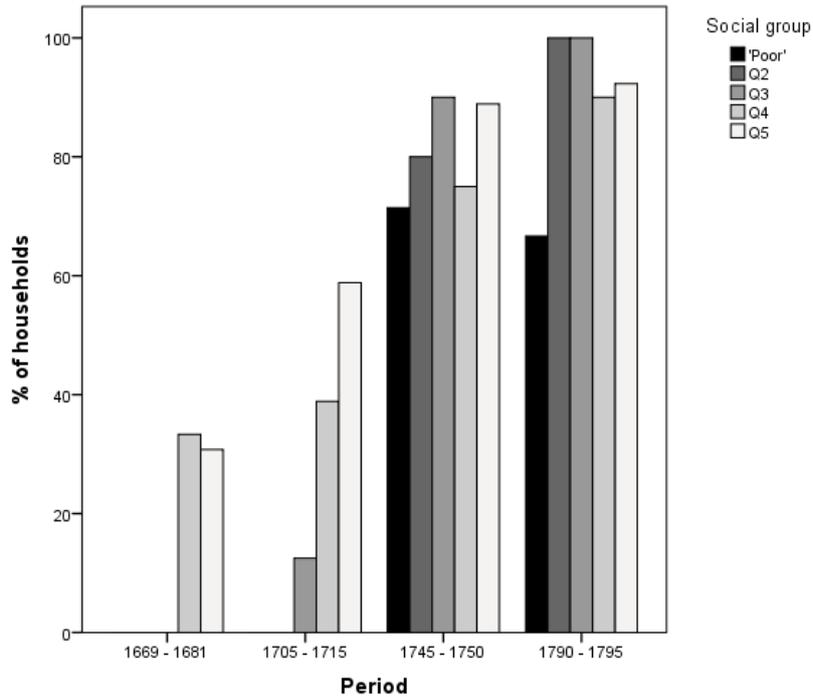
⁷²⁷ "*The basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing pecuniary strength, and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods. [...] It appears that the utility of both alike for the purposes of reputability lies in the element of waste that is common to both.*" (Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*). In the way that he perceived reputation to originate in the distancing from practical necessity (through leisure instead of labour, and conspicuous consumption instead of productive accumulation), his ideas are reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's framework of distinction. There as well, the working classes are characterized by a habitus of necessity, whereas distinction is acquired by the choices, tastes and lifestyles acquired by those who possess sufficient cultural and/or economic capital to distinguish themselves from the world of necessity (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 372-97)

⁷²⁸ See in general Sassatelli, *Consumer culture*, 59-60.

⁷²⁹ J.S. Duesenberry, *Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behaviour* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1949). Similar arguments were made by H. Liebenstein, "Bandwagon, snob and Veblen effects in the theory of consumers' demand," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 64 (1950) and operationalized in Fred Hirsch's famous theories on the status seeking 'rat race' of modern capitalist societies (F. Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1976)). In recent years attempts have been made to combine Duesenberry's relative income model with Friedman's permanent income hypothesis (F. Alvarez-Cuadrado and N. Van Long, "The relative income hypothesis," *Journal of Economic Dynamics & Control* 35 (2011)).

this new drinking culture. Apart perhaps for the really poor, for whom our data is particularly unreliable, by the end of the eighteenth century the remaining 80% of households in Aalst was equally enmeshed in the habit of drinking tea and coffee at home. This eventual popularity of tea drinking was probably stimulated by a significant drop in the level of tea prices from the 1730's onwards, although the available price data is patchy at best.⁷³⁰ Yet by the time the process of rapid democratization had set in, a small group of rich households had already been accustomed to the domestic consumption of hot drinks for at least half a century.

Figure V.2. The social distribution of hot drinks in Aalst.



Note:

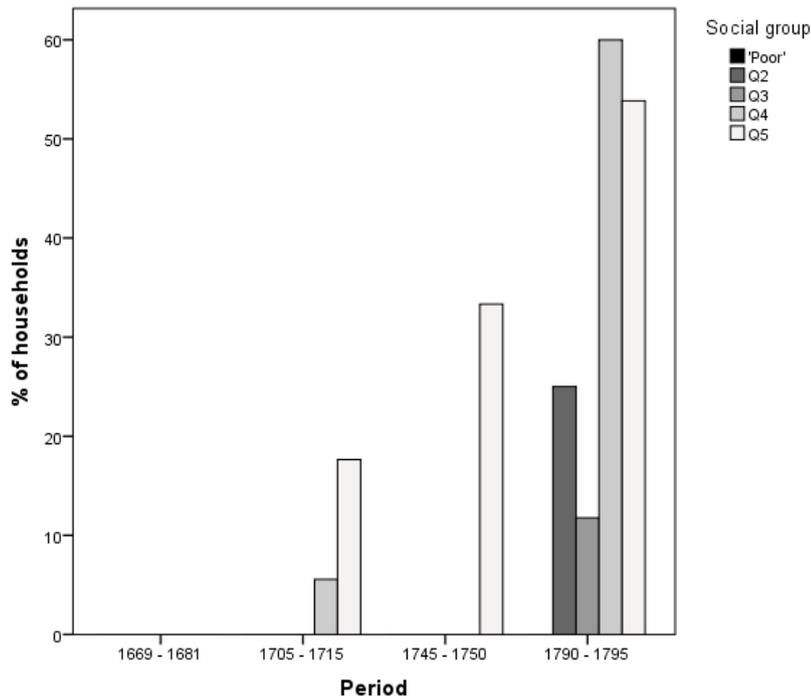
1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

⁷³⁰ According to the figures published by Degryse, "De Oostendse Chinahandel" the mean price of imported tea in Ostend declined from 198 st./lb. in the 1720's, to 123 st./lb. around 1735 (converted from Ostend pounds and styvers exchange). For 1758 a wholesale price of 78 st./lb. was recorded by Verlinden and Scholliers, *Dokumenten*, 775.

Figure V.3. The social distribution of clocks & timepieces in Aalst.



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

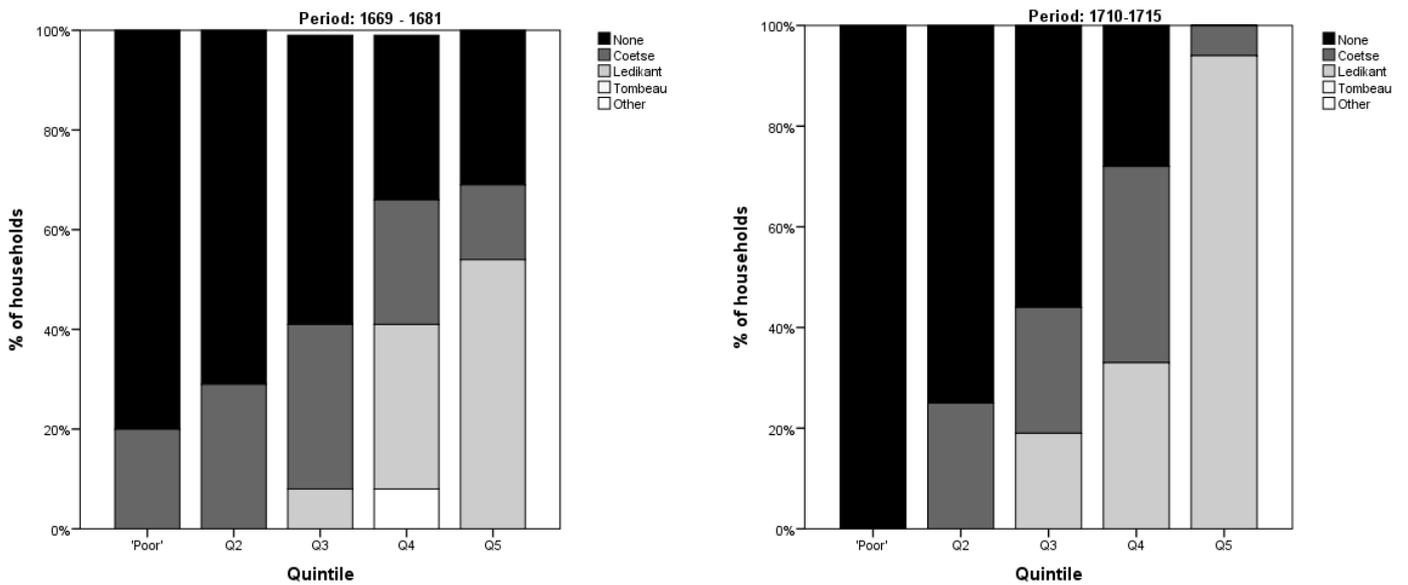
The diffusion of timepieces and standing clocks in eighteenth-century Aalst transpired much more hesitantly than that of the consumption of hot drinks, yet the same general pattern is evident (figure V.3). The first watches were to be found exclusively among the town's richest social strata, and only by the end of the century the middling layers of society entered the fray. Since the average price of inventoried timepieces slightly rose between the beginning and the end of the eighteenth century, the trickle-down pattern cannot easily be explained from shifting relative prices alone.⁷³¹

An explanation based on declining relative prices seems equally inapplicable to the diffusion of bedsteads which occurred during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century in Aalst (figure V.4). Nevertheless, a similar gradual diffusion across widening layers of society is evident. In the 1670's the majority of the 'bottom 60%' of households did not own a bedstead, whereas among the top two quintiles approximately 70% owned one. The gap grew even wider by the beginning of the eighteenth century, as all households in the top quintile now owned a *coetse* or *ledicant*, but still only a small percentage of the lower social strata did so. During the first half of the eighteenth century these social discrepancies disappeared, as apart from the poor almost everyone now preferred a bedstead to sleep on. Yet the trickle-down effect is not only apparent from the spread of bedsteads itself, but also from the different types and designs (figure V.4). In the 1670's the bedframe of choice for most households was clearly the low, unelaborate *coetse*. Only in the upper

⁷³¹ The average price of a timepiece in the inventories of 1710-1715 was 27 st. (N = 3) and in the 1790's 29 st. (N = 6). Ken Sneath also found rising absolute clock prices in seventeenth- and 18th-century Yorkshire (Sneath, "Consumption, wealth, indebtedness").

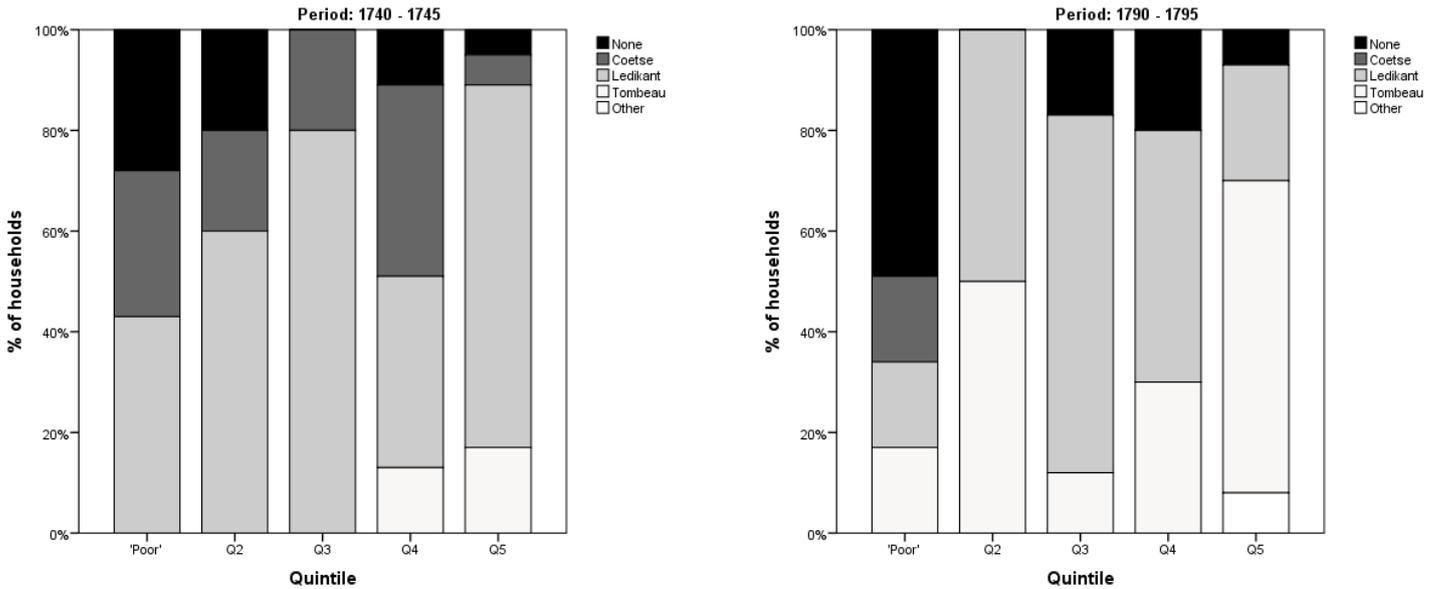
socio-economic quintile the up-standing *ledikant* was a more common sight. During the following decades the *ledikant* would further trickle down across the socio-economic strata, until by the middle of the eighteenth century more than half of all households in all but the poorest social group owned one. At this point however, altogether new variations of the *ledikant* started to appear among the richest two quintiles: the *tombeau* and *imperiaal*.⁷³² Almost fifty years later these new types had become the most common bedsteads among the richest quintiles, and gained some ground among the lower social groups as well. Whereas the original *coetse* was now relegated to the poorest inventoried households, the very rich began to introduce ever new types of bedsteads, such as the *alcoof* and *sleeping cupboard*.

Figure V.4. The evolution of bedsteads in Aalst



⁷³² Weyns, *Volkshuisraad in Vlaanderen*.

Social Roots and Effects of Early Modern Consumer Change



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

The pattern described by the ownership of bedsteads closely resembles that of a typical emulative model such as envisioned by Carr and Walsh or McKendrick. New fashions (successively the *coetse*, *ledikant*, *tombeau* and *alcoof*) were invariably introduced at the top of the social hierarchy and spread downwards from there. Conversely, those items that became out-of-fashion lingered among the lowest social groups the longest. Equally supportive of an emulative interpretation is the observation that each of these newly introduced bedsteads was significantly more costly than the previous ones, and thus ideal for positional or conspicuous consumption (the average *coetse* in the inventories database cost 3 fl., the average *ledikant* 9 fl., and the only *tombeau* that was individually appraised came in at more than 50 fl.). Yet, the idea of emulation as it was first described by Thorstein Veblen was exclusively motivated by the ostentatious display of waste – either through leisure (as in the case of the bourgeois lady, noble derogation, or propriety) or through the public display of expensive consumption.⁷³³ Since the bed belonged firmly – and increasingly – to the so-called backstage area of everyday life, at least a naïve ostentation of wealth seems improbable.⁷³⁴

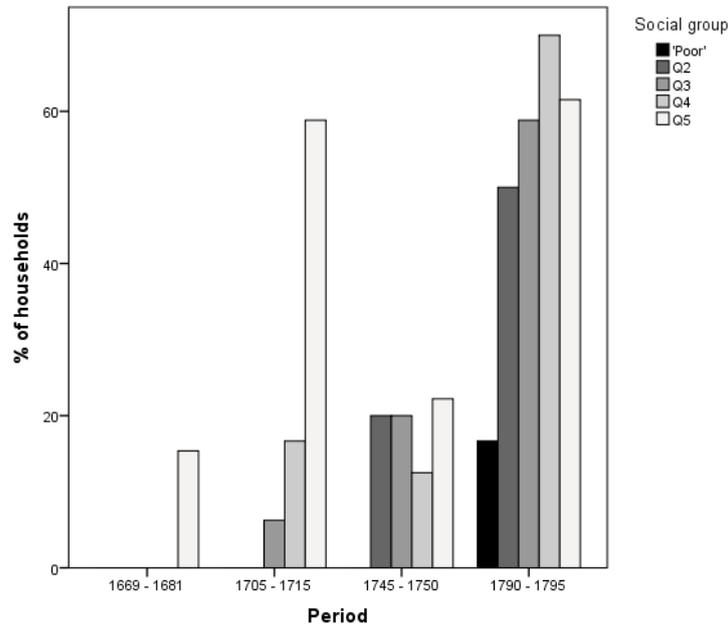
The case for conspicuous consumption is weaker still when considering the example of the fork. Superficially its diffusion again confirms the general pattern, as it was first introduced by the town's upper social strata, and spread only gradually to the lower social layers (figure 9). Yet, the eventual democratization of the fork by the end of the eighteenth century came hand in hand with a simultaneous shift in its material form (table 5). During the second half of the seventeenth century the majority of inventoried forks was made out of silver. Apart from signaling new repertoires of restraint and civility in dining, such expensive forks (4 fl. per fork on average) clearly presented an opportunity

⁷³³ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

⁷³⁴ The distinction between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' areas of everyday life was developed by Erving Goffman (Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: 1959)) and in this context applied in Weatherill's study of early modern material culture in England (Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*).

for conspicuous consumption to those who could afford it. Throughout the eighteenth century the share of forks made of silver declined, while the material of the majority of remaining forks was no longer recorded. Since these were substantially cheaper (6 st. per fork, on average) it seems likely that they were made of pewter or iron.

Figure V.5. The social distribution of the fork in Aalst.



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Table V.2. Material medium of forks, by percentage of households with ownership.

	Unknown	Silver	Pewter	Iron	Total
1669-1681	33	67	0	0	100
1705-1715	35	65	0	0	100
1745-1750	55	27	0	18	100
1790-1795	81	3	8	8	100
Total	25	5	8	63	100

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Even though the practice of (occasionally) dining with forks might have been imitated through emulation from the higher to the lower social strata, the consumption of forks itself largely lost its conspicuous character along the way. It was not the waste of wealth, nor the waste of time that granted

prestige and was progressively emulated, but rather the ability to display restraint and refinement with regards to the food brought on to the table.⁷³⁵

The four examples considered indicate that no single, uniform explanation fits the social spread of these commodities over time. The rapid democratization of hot drinks consumption seems more likely to be attributable to declining relative prices rather than to straightforward positional concerns of conspicuous consumption. Conversely, the growing spread of clocks and timepieces can certainly not be similarly accounted for, as prices rose throughout the period of its diffusion. Likewise, the sequential adoption of new fashions in bedsteads reflects a concern for the conspicuous which clearly trickled down from top to bottom – yet the acquisition of more elaborate and expensive beds can hardly be attributed to ostentatious motivations, since it belonged firmly (and increasingly) to the back stage world of private life. The fork presents yet another variant of the pattern of diffusion, indicating the mutability with which the original materiality of commodities could be confronted in their diffusion across the social hierarchy. Regardless of the many variations in trajectories, shapes and consumer motivations particular to each commodity, the repeated pattern of a gradual, downward diffusion from the socio-economic top of the urban society to an eventual acceptance by the lower social strata throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems to hold not only for the mean index of amenities as a whole, but also for most of the individual amenities as well.

3. Beyond emulation: reflections

The deceptively straightforward interpretations of consumer change based on emulation can be criticized well beyond the point of the overtly conspicuous nature of consumerism. Both empirical concerns and more fundamental challenges relating to issues of power and agency have been leveled against the emulative interpretations such as those of McKendrick and Carr & Walsh.⁷³⁶ Given the broad contours of consumer change sketched in the previous chapter, the enterprise of selecting a small number of commodities to reflect the changing amenity of past living standards, potentially carries a strong teleological undercurrent.⁷³⁷ The growth in chairs, for instance, was matched by a simultaneous decline in the number of benches and stools, and can thus only problematically serve to indicate rising levels of amenity – let alone economic growth.⁷³⁸ The selection of goods included in the index is obviously biased towards those commodities which are known to have gained in popularity during the eighteenth century, or are associated with ‘typical’ middle-class consumption patterns. As an index representing amenities as such, there seems to be no inherent reason why the consumption of tea should be included while that of good wine is not, or why a looking glass is considered an amenity and a gilded *agnus dei* is not.

⁷³⁵ It should be noted that Veblen attributed the prestigious power of manners and polite behaviour to the (waste of time) needed to acquire them – an argument which seems less convincingly applicable to the case of the fork (Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*).

⁷³⁶ Pennell, "Consumption and consumerism"; Campbell, "Understanding traditional and modern patterns".

⁷³⁷ The same critique can be leveled against Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour*.

⁷³⁸ This is especially problematic in the cases of Nash, "Domestic material culture"; Fourie and Uys, "A survey" which forward claims on economic living standards based on indices of amenities.

The issue is particularly pressing there where the after-death inventories have their blind spots. A comparison between the content of probate inventories and excavated remains has led John Bedell to argue that especially in the cheaper range of commodities such indices based on inventories are unreliable.⁷³⁹ Although ceramics were nearly ubiquitous in excavated households in eighteenth-century Delaware, the inventories failed to list them on many occasions. Bedell submits that changes in the sources might (in some cases) more accurately reflect the shifting interests and attitudes of the inventory takers than actual changes in domestic materiality. Especially since expensive items were less likely to be omitted from the inventories, the ownership of more common but inexpensive equivalents might have been overlooked. Simple pewter or wooden plates were certainly more likely to be lumped into a rest category or with ‘all pewter’ (*alle het tinwerck*) than the silver plates or elaborately decorated tableware sets of the rich. Spoons, forks and knives were not necessarily expensive objects either, and were more likely to be recorded separately when they were numerous, or when fabricated from expensive materials.⁷⁴⁰ The single pair of unelaborate pewter forks owned by a modest shopkeeper might not have found its way into the inventories, and thus into the index of amenities.

Both the progress and the recurrent pattern of emulation evident from the mean index of amenities in Aalst could thus, at least to some extent, turn out to be a figment of *selection* – both on the part of the modern historian, and of the contemporary inventory taker. Where the former enjoys the privilege of hindsight, the latter was influenced by the specific judicial and social context in which he functioned. To be sure, the inventory appraisers in Aalst were no ‘ordinary’ citizens of the town: the ones that could be traced back to the tax lists invariably stemmed from the upper quartile of the fiscal hierarchy.⁷⁴¹ When the sworn appraiser Michiel Hense’s wife died in april 1750, the inventory of their belongings listed a sizeable number of amenities, including extensive coffee- and teawares, curtains, mirrors and paintings.⁷⁴² In appraising the belongings of those households at a social level far inferior to his, Hense’s aim was not so much to uncover the specific meaning or cultural significance of the material culture there encountered, but to assess its monetary value at the secondary market. It seems not unreasonable to assume that his conjecture of what was desired on the market and what was not, was predominantly guided by his perception of the preferences and dispositions of the consumers on the secondary market as a whole, rather than that of the inventoried household itself. Even when disregarding the social position of the appraiser and postulating the objectivity of the estimated secondary market values, the issue of meaning persists. Whereas the economic value of an object might be adequately reflected in market valuations, the social and personal meaning usually is not. Within a society of highly unequally distributed financial means, it is likely that monetary market valuations constitute a particularly poor reflection of the social and cultural identities of those at the lower end of the social hierarchy.⁷⁴³

⁷³⁹ John Bedell, "Archaeology and probate inventories in the study of eighteenth-century life," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 2 (2000).

⁷⁴⁰ Bedell, "Archaeology and probate inventories", 240-41.

⁷⁴¹ Michiel Hense (Percentile 83), Petrus Eeman (P 76), Josephus vanden Bossche (P 84), Josephus Kieckens (P 81), Francois J. Van Wambeke (P 76).

⁷⁴² MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1081 (Catharina Spanoghe, †1750).

⁷⁴³ A similar, if less specific, critique of inventory data in Richard Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 4 (2005).

The danger in inferring emulation from the probate inventory evidence as presented in any selection or index of amenities is thus that the double selection on the part of the appraiser and the historian both, tends to reproduce the systems of meaning of an apparent, dominant ideology. Although motivations related to conspicuous consumption and emulation can certainly account for much of the consumer behaviour of eighteenth-century households in Aalst, such a 'dominant ideology model' critically fails to acknowledge the polysemic nature of artifacts. As Mary Beadry et al have it, "*there is no reason to assume that [artifacts] are capable of serving only one symbolic function, and a good deal of reason to assume that they can mediate a variety of meanings, often simultaneously.*"⁷⁴⁴ Likewise, it should not be too hastily assumed that the cultural expression of social identity could only occur within the constraints of emulation and imitation – not even for the context of pre-industrial hierarchic societies. In archaeological material culture analysis, the various and wide-ranging criticisms that have been leveled against such problematic 'dominant ideology' approaches since at least the 1980's, have since resulted in the gradual advance of research methodologies that attempt to reconcile the analysis of 'objective' materialities and structural classes with the semiotics of culture and social identity.⁷⁴⁵

In recent years, such attempts appear to spill over to historical research of material culture in the past. Alastair Owens et al have, for instance, called for an archaeological study of "*lived experience and practice*" in Victorian London, thereby opening the perspective to reevaluating the "*negotiation of power and identity in the ebb and flow of everyday metropolitan life.*"⁷⁴⁶ Mary Beadry has similarly combined historical evidence with excavated materials in order to reconstruct deviant identities and mediated ideologies among dominated social groups of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.⁷⁴⁷ Sally V. Smith employed an analysis of excavated metal dress accessories to argue that, through this particular aspect of material culture, English medieval peasants were capable of producing "*an identity at odds with that fashioned for the peasantry and communicated to them.*"⁷⁴⁸ These items were, in other words, "*constitutive of resistant identities.*"⁷⁴⁹ Whether drawing on Giddens' notion of structuration, Bourdieu's habitus or Gramsci's cultural hegemony, students of material culture have increasingly attempted to reconcile the acknowledgement

⁷⁴⁴ M.C. Beadry, Lauren J. Cook, and Stephen A. Mrozowski, "Artifacts and Active Voices: Material Culture as Social Discourse," in *The archaeology of Inequality*, ed. Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter (Oxford: 1991), 278-79.

⁷⁴⁵ The most influential critiques of the dominant ideology model are Nicholas Abercrombie and Bryan S. Turner, "The dominant ideology thesis," *British Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 2 (1978); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: 1990). Cultural and literary history, on their part, have since long worked under the influence of the challenges put forward by M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: 1984) and Michel Foucault, *The order of things. An archaeology of the human sciences* (New York: 1994 (orig. 1966)).

⁷⁴⁶ Alastair Owens et al., "Fragments of the Modern City: Material Culture and the Rhythms of Everyday Life in Victorian London," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15, no. 2 (2010): 212-14. Compare to the more Bourdieu-inspired study by Diana di Zerega Wall, "Sacred dinners and secular teas: constructing domesticity in mid-nineteenth-century New York," *Historical Archaeology* 25, no. 4 (1991).

⁷⁴⁷ Beadry, Cook, and Mrozowski, "Artifacts and Active Voices". A similar perspective was applied to an altogether different social group in M.C. Beadry, "Privy to the Feast: Eighty to Supper Tonight," in *Table settings: The material culture and social context of dining in the Old and New Worlds AD 1700-1900*, ed. James Symonds (Oxford: 2010).

⁷⁴⁸ Sally V. Smith, "Materializing resistant identities among the medieval peasantry: an examination of dress accessories from English rural settlement sites," *Journal of Material Culture* 14, no. 3 (2009): 326.

⁷⁴⁹ Smith, "Materializing resistant identities", 328.

of objective unequal power relations with the subjective construction of identity and meaning, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of economic determinism on the one hand and cultural universalism on the other.⁷⁵⁰

The historiography of early modern consumer change has not usually been framed in such a dialectic perspective; although there are notable exceptions.⁷⁵¹ On the one hand, cultural historians occupied with the semiotic meaning of early modern material cultures have paid but little attention to the issues of power and inequality that intersect and structure them.⁷⁵² Moreover, by relying heavily on ego-documents sources such as letters or diaries and prescriptive guidebooks produced by the (under-defined) middle class, many culturally framed accounts of changing consumer patterns in early modern society as a whole implicitly subscribe to a 'dominant ideology' model. Economic history, on the other hand, has generally demonstrated little opportunity to accommodate the notion that artifacts can carry multiple meanings – a notion which requires a more fundamental measure than a mere reinterpretation of the concept of 'utility'. In a 1993 review article, Cissie Fairchild's remarked that a "concentration on either the economic or the semiotic aspects" of the study of the early modern consumption "can lead to determinism," and indicated that a blend of both approaches should constitute the direction for future work on consumption.⁷⁵³ A dialectic approach incorporating a semiotic perspective's ability to cope with the polysemic nature of artifacts and a structuralist's attention to objective economic constraints and inequalities of power, might go some way in establishing this blend.⁷⁵⁴

Perhaps the reason why archeologists have in general been more lenient in accommodating issues of resistance and 'lived experience' in the social analysis of domestic material culture than historians, has to do with the object of study itself. In his comparison of probate inventories with excavated artifacts, John Bedell has judged the former unable to communicate the many ways in which eighteenth-century households "were trying to beautify their lives in the ways they could afford" and inadequate in conveying the manners in which, for instance, "poor people seem to have changed the meaning of tea."⁷⁵⁵ Nevertheless, by treating the after-death inventories of Aalst not as complete lists of commodities whose meanings have been objectively fixed, but rather as the happenstance remains of past identities, distinctions and utilities, they can (much like archaeological artifacts) be reconstructed from "the inside out."⁷⁵⁶ Although deciphering acts of appropriation from

⁷⁵⁰ Or as Grassby, "Material Culture" phrases the perspective: "People are culturally influenced but not culturally constructed. The social history of culture continuously interacts with the cultural history of society." On these divergent approaches: Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (Chicago: 1992); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: 1984); William H. Jr. Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, And Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992); Jackson T. Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985); Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski, "Artifacts and Active Voices".

⁷⁵¹ See for instance (albeit mostly implicitly) Kwass, "Big Hair"; Blondé, "Botsende consumptiemodellen?"; De Laet, *Brussel binnenskamers*, 159; Dibbits, "Pronken as practice". Explicitly rooted in Bourdieu's social praxeology is Smail, *The origins*.

⁷⁵² Also Grassby, "Material Culture", and infra.

⁷⁵³ Cissie Fairchild's, "Consumption in Early Modern Europe. A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 4 (1993): 857-58.

⁷⁵⁴ See also D. Slater, *Consumer culture and modernity* (Cambridge: 1997); Sassatelli, *Consumer culture*.

⁷⁵⁵ Bedell, "Archaeology and probate inventories".

⁷⁵⁶ The phrase has been adapted from Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History in an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: 1982), 85-86 (cited in Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski, "Artifacts and

such matter-of-fact historical sources as inventories is both heuristically and epistemologically disputable, any attempt might reasonably wish to start there where people felt most articulate: in the domestic rituals of the everyday. In order to allow for a more complex and nuanced exploration of how material cultures were appropriated, diffused, re-defined and imitated among diverse social layers of eighteenth-century Aalst, two consumption clusters will be considered in a more detailed and explorative fashion. The first cluster concerns the material culture of hot drinks, and the second relates to dress and jewelry.

4. Tea and coffee among rich and poor

As has been remarked almost to the point of tedious repetition, the consumption of hot drinks had become an integral feature of life for almost all households in Aalst by the end of the eighteenth century. Not only did this caffeinated consumerism spread swiftly and widely among the town's inhabitants, it also began to figure ever more prominently in the material culture of the wealthy and powerful. Take for instance the house of Laurentius van den Hauwe, the bailiff of the nearby parishes of Herdersem and Moorsel, who passed away in april 1793.⁷⁵⁷ Without question, the man had belonged to the outright wealthiest and most powerful men in Aalst, showing up among the top 3% of taxed households in town.⁷⁵⁸ He belonged to the breed of well-to-do that attempted to retain their ownership of rural real estate during the second half of the eighteenth century, by owning a (modest) estate in Herdersem. A similar pretense at the symbols of traditional and noble power is evident from Van Den Hauwe's expensive, silver-plated rapier – a traditional marker of aristocratic claims on the admonition of justice, violence and family honour.⁷⁵⁹ Nevertheless, such hallmarks of conservative consumerism did not prevent him from being *au courant* with the fashions of the time. In fact, both repertoires were most easily combined, for instance in the form of the household's set of six silver coffee spoons, or Van den Hauwe's expensive gold pocket watch. By expressing their taste for fashion and novelty through the time-honoured medium of silver and gold, distinction manifested itself in their economic and cultural capital simultaneously.⁷⁶⁰

A closer examination of Van Den Hauwe's hot drinks apparel reveals that the apparent emulation and democratization of tea and coffee drinking did not particularly diminish the

Active Voices", 284): "*The way to study people is not from the top down or the bottom up, but from the inside out, from the place where people are articulate to the place where they are not, from the place where they are in control of their destinies to the place where they are not.*" This approach has often been linked to the study of the 'biographies of things', starting from the artifacts themselves, and tracing their changing meanings through time and social space. See Appadurai, "Commodities and the politics of value", and Goldthwaite, "The economic and social world"; Karin Dannehl, "A life cycle study of eighteenth-century metal cooking vessels. A reflexive approach" (University of Wolverhampton, 2004).

⁷⁵⁷ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1911 (Laurentius vanden Hauwe, 1793).

⁷⁵⁸ His inventoried net wealth stood at the 98th percentile (of inventoried households), and his house value at the 97th percentile (of taxed households).

⁷⁵⁹ Koen De Vlioger-De Wilde, "Adellijke consumptie en levensstijl. Een terreinverkenning aan de hand van de huishoudjournalen van Livina de Beer, gravin van Bergeyck (ca. 1685-1740)," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 1, no. 3 (2004): 36; 51. Despite his apparent pretenses, Van den Hauwe was not designated as noble in neither the tax list or the probate inventory.

⁷⁶⁰ Bourdieu, *Distinction*. See also Blondé, "Botsende consumptiemodellen?"; De Vlioger-De Wilde, "Adellijke consumptie en levensstijl".

opportunities for elite distinction. At Van Den Hauwe's home coffee could not only be served with silver coffee spoons, but could also come in cups of expensive porcelain. Moreover, apparel was geared specifically to a variety of particular occasions: there were distinct cups for drinking tea, others for coffee and a third variety for drinking hot chocolate. There were no less than six separate sets of twenty-four, twelve or six cups, and they could be found both in the large chamber at the front of the house and in the back room. For those well versed in the refined consumption of hot drinks, there were five sugar pots and two milk jugs at their disposal, and the presence of three coffee pots, two teapots, a kettle and a chocolate pot indicates that a shortage of opportunities for drink preparation in large or small quantities probably presented itself only rarely. This profusion of apparel allowed the household to store their copper and tin coffee- and teapots in the kitchen, whereas the more aesthetically pleasing varieties in glazed earthenware were kept in the main room. Although the frequency with which the domestic ritual of preparing, presenting and consuming all three types of hot drinks in an elaborate and refined fashion was fully performed remains elusive, the capacity to do so, for oneself as well as others, seems important enough in itself. This capacity to accommodate the whole range of individual choices and tastes, and to provide in every whim and spur of the moment, set the domestic ritual of consuming hot drinks in the home of Laurens Van Den Hauwe firmly apart from that of the poorer citizens of Aalst.

Tobias van Belle, an impoverished baker whose wife Josina died in 1791, was certainly one of them. Living together with his two daughters in a rented house, his humble bearings did little to impress the town officials, as his inventory was recorded free of charge. The numerous outstanding debts suggest that the couple used to operate a small shop selling cottons, linens, bread and groceries, but – perhaps due to his wife's illness – no substantial shop contents or infrastructure remained at the time of her death.⁷⁶¹ In terms of net wealth, the household firmly belonged to the poorest 10% of the 1790's inventory sample. Despite this relatively precarious financial situation, the consumption of hot drinks was not regarded as an unaffordable luxury. Among the items found in their kitchen were eight teacups and saucers, a teakettle and two coffeepots – one made out of copper and the other of stoneware. Such ownership seems largely representative for the majority of poorer households in late eighteenth-century Aalst, where tea and coffee were not poured out of glazed pots, nor stirred with silver spoons or drunk from porcelain cups. Perhaps sugar or milk were occasionally added, but no pots, jugs, spoons or tongs had been specifically assigned supporting duties therein. At Van Belle's house chocolate was not to be had, and instead of the six different sets of cups owned by Van Den Hauwe, there was only the single one for every occasion. Had the family occupied a *salet*, *front room* or *great chamber*, they might have preferred to serve their hot drinks there, but since they had no such thing, the drinking of tea and coffee occurred in the kitchen.

There seems to have been a great discrepancy in the way hot drinks were consumed among the rich and the poor of eighteenth-century Aalst. What appears, perhaps, as a ritualized celebration of taste, choice and refinement in a sociable context among the rich, takes the guise of an everyday activity of which the recorded material artefacts show little attempts at mimicking the sophistications of the higher social strata. A wide gulf of differences in quantity, quality, diversity and refinement

⁷⁶¹ A sum of 27 fl. was still owed to "Doktor Schellekens" for making visits to her. One of the few outstanding sums of credit, on the other hand, suggests that the Tobias himself may have worked for a wage. MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1910 (Josina Hoebake, † 1791).

divided the experience of consuming hot drinks at the houses of Laurentius van den Hauwe and Tobias Van Belle. Yet, this is not to say that this material culture can (or should) be meaningfully differentiated between coherent ‘plebeian’ and ‘aristocratic’ forms of expression, as a wide range of intermediate forms characterized the diversity of socio-economic experiences between both polar ends. Unlike Van Belle, the independent weaver and twister Jan Frans Luyckx (situated near the 30th percentile of the inventoried net wealth distribution) was able to provide in both tea and coffee, by means of two kettles, a copper coffee pot and an earthenware teapot.⁷⁶² Instead of the multitude of tea sets available to Van Den Hauwe, Luyckx had only one arrangement of ‘*damaged teacups*’, which were presumably used for drinking coffee as well. In contrast to the fourteen glass *roomers* (stemware wine glasses) and two decanters which took pride of place in the main room of the house, the teacups were kept backstage in the kitchen. Ignatius Eli, a wagoner living around the middle of the eighteenth century and occupying the median position in the town’s housing tax, and his wife, seem to have taken more care in the presentation of their tea.⁷⁶³ It could be poured either in one of the ‘*coarse cups*’ kept in the small room behind the kitchen, or in one of the six ‘*fine teacups*’ that were kept in the large front room adorned with six paintings and a mirror. The variety of possible assortments for preparing, presenting and consuming hot drinks was large, and the multitude of individual experiences in between the elaborately ritualized hot drinks culture of the very rich and the sparse everydayness of the poor was great.

Nevertheless, the tendency holds that the higher one climbed the socio-economic hierarchy, the greater variety and choice became. Despite the apparent democratization of tea and coffee by the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, opportunities for distinction nevertheless soared during the following decades. This is demonstrated by the average number of sets of tea- and coffeecups owned per household (fig. V.6) as well as by the average values of an index of apparel relating to the tea and coffee ‘ritual’ (fig. V.7). The index is comprised of seven categories of hot drinks equipment: cups and saucers; pots; kettles; utensils such as specific spoons or tongs; sugar pots; milk jugs; and finally specific items for the storage of tea or coffee, such as boxes and cans. If all these categories were present in a household, the index attains a maximum score of seven, whereas a low score indicates the presence of the most basic items of hot drinks apparel such as cups or pots. Both the diversity in hot drinks related items and the sheer quantity of the number of cup sets were highly skewed towards the rich, and continued to increase through time. As illustrated by the cases of Laurentius Van Den Hauwe and Tobias Van Belle, the trickling down of tea and coffee consumption opened plenty of new inroads for patterns of distinction. Such opportunities can be observed from the material medium of coffee- and tea pots as well: all pots of porcelain, glazed ceramics and silver could be found exclusively among the top two quintiles of Aalst’s socio-economic distribution, whereas the sturdy and durable copper pots were mostly limited to the poorer strata of the town.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁶² MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1907 (Francisca van Biesen, † 1791).

⁷⁶³ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1862 (Marie Theresia Sterck, † 1745).

⁷⁶⁴ Stoneware and tin could be found equally among all social groups, whereas pewter pots were predominantly found in Quintile 4.

Figure V.7. The social distribution of multiple sets of cups

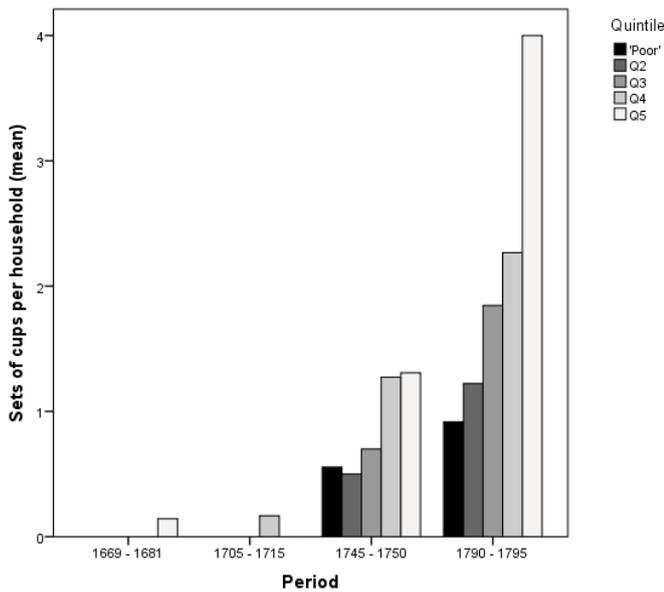
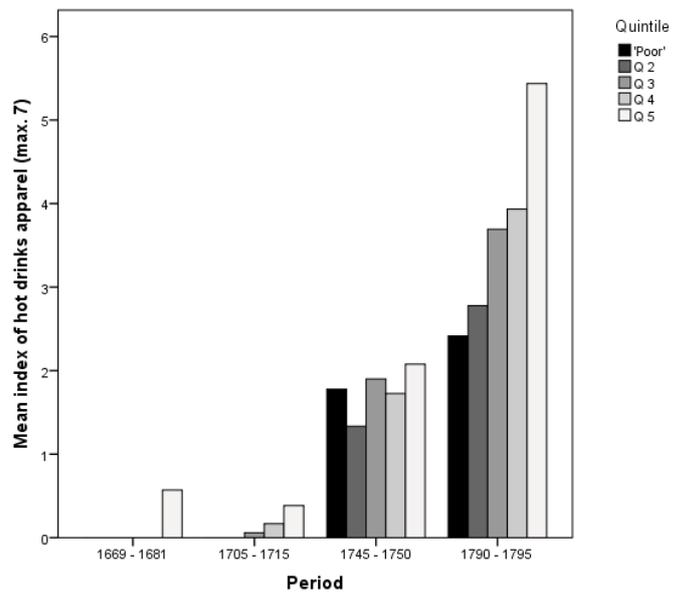


Figure V.6. The social distribution of the average score on the 'hot drinks apparel' index



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Nevertheless, within this hierarchically structured world of hot drinks consumption, consumer appropriation was always just around the corner. When examining the few households who, at the very beginning of the eighteenth century, were the first to leave evidence of tea or coffee consumption in their post-mortem inventories, it is striking that almost all of them owned teaspoons, and coffee or sugar pots made out of silver.⁷⁶⁵ John Styles has drawn specific attention to the ways in which innovations, such as the new early modern colonial groceries, were “*rendered comprehensible and attractive*” before they could be fully accommodated within the consumption patterns of European households.⁷⁶⁶ The development of silver teapots constitutes a prime example of how exotic innovations such as tea were appropriated within a culture where silver signaled wealth and social status – despite the fact that silver was neither in terms of functionality nor in origin particularly predestined to be put to use in the preparation of tea. Just like Laurentius Van Den Hauwe’s ‘aristocratic’ rapier sat happily next to his ‘bourgeois’ pocket watch, so the novelty of tea, coffee and chocolate in Aalst was, from the very start, imbued with traditional repertoires of status through the acquisition of silver spoons, sugar, coffee and chocolate pots.⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁶⁵ It is no coincidence of course, that all of them belonged to the richest decile of the tax distribution of that time: MAA, *Oud Archief Aalst*, Staten van Goed, n° 1823 († 1707, Petronella de Backere); n° 1826 († 1710, Barbara Petronella Diericx); n° 1826 († 1711, Benedictus de Grave); n° 1828 († 1712, Isabella Carvin); n° 1830 († 1714, Jan Francois Vander Laen); n° 1830 († 1715, Marie Fillet).

⁷⁶⁶ John Styles, “Product innovation in early modern London,” *Past & Present* 168 (2000).

⁷⁶⁷ A similar case for the fusion of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ patterns of consumption for the case of the Count of Bergeyck: De Vlioger-De Wilde, “Adellijke consumptie en levensstijl”.

Appropriation of consumer meaning could occur not only as a means of distinction at the top, but also in strategies of 'resistance' by those subordinated within a system of cultural hegemony. Compared to the decorum attached to the early adopters' consumption of hot drinks, the meanings it had acquired among the lower social strata almost a century later seem decidedly different. There the consumption of tea and coffee had become a mundane part of everyday life which was not necessarily bestowed with ideas of conspicuous consumption or refined ritual. Although sugar pots, teaspoons and milk jugs were not always costly affairs, they did not constitute crucial elements of the tea- or coffee drinking habits among the lower social classes. In a sense, the consumption of tea and coffee had been re-appropriated as an everyday activity, drifting away from the context of ritualized 'polite' behaviour in 'respectable' company.⁷⁶⁸ Between the 1740's and the 1790's the share of tea- and coffee cups found in 'front stage' rooms declined from 49% to 32%, while the proportion of cups in upstairs- or backrooms rose from 11% to 22%.⁷⁶⁹ Instead of descending the social hierarchy of eighteenth-century Aalst in an indiscriminate process of relentless emulation, the domestic consumption of hot drinks clearly shed some of its original values and meanings (for instance related to sociability, politeness, refinement, decorum), but at the same time undoubtedly acquired new ones (such as comfort, health, everydayness).⁷⁷⁰

The broad contours of the social distribution of hot drinks related material culture in Aalst confirms the general tendency towards rapid democratization and emulation, while at the same time the opportunities for distinction increased. However, when examined more closely, it is clear that at all social layers of society the consumption of hot drinks was nevertheless being re-appropriated and re-defined. The introduction of tea, coffee and sugar in early modern Aalst was never just an independent, 'etic' process that was adopted solely along the lines of imitation and emulation.⁷⁷¹ It was appropriated and accommodated by rich and poor alike, it was bestowed and imbued with new meanings, while older connotations were discarded. These processes nevertheless occurred within a rigidly hierarchic context, where 'emic' values of meaning and appropriation were consistently structured by households' relative socio-economic position within the town. The eighteenth-century material culture of hot drinks revealed dual tendencies towards both differentiation (in quantity, quality and diversity) and belonging (in imitation, democratization and ritualized sociability).⁷⁷² While the latter tendency allowed the introduction of colonial groceries to be adopted by a veritable 'mass

⁷⁶⁸ Compare with Smith, *Consumption*; Cowan, *The social life of coffee*; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; McCants, "Poor consumers".

⁷⁶⁹ The kitchen also saw its share of cups increase, from 40% to 46%. These figures are calculated from the total number of cups of which the location in the house was known. Since the ownership of cups increased between both periods, the trend is less clear when expressed in terms of the proportion of rooms containing tea or coffee cups, yet growth was strongest in the kitchen and back- & upstairs rooms, and weakest in the front rooms (ratios of 2.4, 2 and 1.8 respectively).

⁷⁷⁰ See particularly Blondé, "Think local, act global?"; B. Blondé, "Toe-eigening en de taal der dingen. Vraag- en uitroeptekens bij een stimulerend cultuurhistorisch concept in het onderzoek naar de materiële cultuur," *Volkskunde* 103, no. 1 (2003), to which this argument is greatly indebted, and more generally on the relation between emulation and appropriation: McCracken, *Culture & Consumption*, 103; W. Frijhoff, "Toe-eigening als vorm van culturele dynamiek," *Volkskunde. Driemaandelijks tijdschrift voor de studie van de volkscultuur* 104, no. 1 (2003).

⁷⁷¹ On the emic/etic dichotomy (originally coined by Kenneth Pike), see Marvin Harris, "History and the significance of the Emic/Etic distinction," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976). The etic perspective refers to social concepts, categories and meanings which are external to the members of a society, whereas the emic perspective is concerned with the subjective distinctions, values and concepts intrinsic to the society itself.

⁷⁷² Those are the two constituent parts of Georg Simmel's theory of fashion: Simmel, "Fashion". Cf. *infra*.

market', the former induced various processes of product innovation in the area of crockery and metalwork, and stimulated the proliferation of the consumption of semi-durables among an expanding range of households. Given their origin in Asian and Central American regions, it has been tempting to describe the introduction of hot drinks as an external process, worked upon through mechanisms of (re-)appropriation and familiarization. It might nevertheless be more useful to think of the introduction of tea and coffee drinking as factors integral to the fashion system of early modern European society. The meanings attributed to the drinking of tea and coffee were neither intrinsic to the goods themselves, nor immediately apparent from their exotic origin. They were defined and re-defined by the social structures in which they were introduced, and their attractive qualities to European traders, colonists and consumers were never entirely determined by either use or labour value.

In other words: since the meaning of tea and coffee were socially ascribed, their very introduction on European markets was never a happenstance occurrence or an independent process, but itself an essential part of the social structure which governed the production of value in early modern Europe. This social structure, so I have argued, related to a dual tendency towards equalization (or emulation) and individualization (or distinction) and therefor needed for its sustainment the recurrent commoditization of novel, yet 'flexible' goods. Far from constituting an external process which had to be rendered recognizable or familiar by European consumers and producers, the very introduction of colonial groceries was inherent to the European fashion system and its social dynamics itself.⁷⁷³ Such dynamics were not restricted to the area of novel commodities, but also made inroads in more traditional areas of consumption, such as clothing and jewelry.

5. Seeming, being and belonging: dress and jewelry

The history of early modern clothing and clothing accessories can usefully be invoked as a metaphor for the manifold ways in which the relation between material culture and the social world were redefined between the late medieval and the modern era. On the one hand, sumptuary legislation amply demonstrated the extraordinary pre-occupation of late medieval and early modern mentalities with the ways in which social identities and positions ought to find their appropriate reflection in dress.⁷⁷⁴ The material culture of clothing was supposed to be *readable* and was expected to visually reproduce a God-ordained social order. Dress, jewelry and its accessories served as 'signposts', as it were, in the hierarchic but increasingly complex societies of early modern Europe: they distinguished the rich from the poor, the labourer from the artisan, and the deserving from the undeserving.⁷⁷⁵ In

⁷⁷³ The argument is drawn largely from comparison with Colin Renfrew's argument related to the 'prime value' attributed to prestige goods in prehistoric societies: Colin Renfrew, "Varna and the emergence of wealth in prehistoric Europe," in *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: 1986). The argument is largely sympathetic to the one in Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.

⁷⁷⁴ Diane Owen Hughes, "Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy," in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. John Bossy (Cambridge: 1986); Howell, *Commerce before capitalism*; Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions. A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: 1996).

⁷⁷⁵ The term 'signposting' has been borrowed from behavioural economics (in contexts of uncertainty), see Richard J. Zeckhauser and David V.P. Marks, "Sign Posting: The Selective Revelation of Product Information," in *Wise Choices: Games, Decisions, and Negotiations*, ed. Richard J. Zeckhauser, Ralph L. Kenney, and James

modern times, by contrast, dress is often taken as a prime example of the flexible nature of consumer appropriation and the locus of resistant group identities. Subcultures frequently identify and differentiate themselves by dress and self-consciously manipulate appearances in order to actively confer new social meanings, both individually and collectively.⁷⁷⁶

Unsurprisingly then, many of the issues at stake in the debate on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century consumer change have been reflected in the historical study of early modern dress. Daniel Roche saw the changing patterns of clothing in eighteenth-century Paris as a mirror for the transition from a stationary and aristocratic society to a more flexible and liberated social order: “*the hierarchical society, encased in the heavy and durable broadcloths and costly silks which were the mark of court elegance and its urban imitators, was succeeded by a more open, less stiff and more frivolous world.*”⁷⁷⁷ According to him, the ideologies of the French Revolution were already forcefully pre-figured in the changes during the century preceding its occurrence.⁷⁷⁸ Cissie Fairchilds perceived in eighteenth-century France a strong growth in the demand of ‘*populuxe*’ goods – cheap imitations of aristocratic commodities. Traditional, constrained patterns of consumption where dress appropriately reflected social status were replaced by a desire for novelty, whereby Parisians “*spent what they could afford on goods that expressed their social aspirations.*”⁷⁷⁹ The ways in which taste leaders described the wig – a commodity which never became quite as widespread as the real *populuxe* goods, but which nevertheless gained currency among the broad middling layers of eighteenth-century France – likewise reflects a growing rejection of a traditional material culture in which goods directly signaled social rank. Yet, contrary to Roche, Kwass interpreted this change more as “*inequality transformed*” than as any form of emergent egalitarianism: “*taste leasers implicitly constructed a new model of distinction in which the status meanings of consumption would be mediated by principles of utility, authenticity, individuality, and, one could add, cleanliness, taste, and health.*”⁷⁸⁰ A similar sentiment was arrived at by John Styles with regards to ‘plebeian’ dress in eighteenth-century England. According to him, the uses to which new fashions were put by ordinary people, and the ways they were understood, were not merely emulative. Different assemblages were joined in unusual manners, clothing styles were redefined to fit new and different circumstances, and in the process they were ascribed with altered meanings.⁷⁸¹ From the recurrent lamentations on the ‘*appropriateness*’ of dress expressed in court

K. Sebenius (Boston: 1996). I believe it to be preferable to ‘reflecting’ since it allows for the manipulation through selective display and concealment – practices of which contemporaries were presumably well aware (hence the frequent re-promulgations of sumptuary laws).

⁷⁷⁶ The most classic account is probably Dick Hebdige, *Subculture. The meaning of style* (London: 1979); a more recent overview in Elizabeth Wilson and Amy De La Haye, “Introduction,” in *Defining dress. Dress as object, meaning and identity*, ed. Amy De La Haye and Elizabeth Wilson (Manchester: 1999).

⁷⁷⁷ Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing. Dress and Fashion in the ‘Ancien Regime’*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: 1996 (orig. 1990)), 504.

⁷⁷⁸ Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 148-50.

⁷⁷⁹ The citation is from Fairchilds, “Determinants”, 60. On ‘*populuxe*’ consumption in Paris, see: Fairchilds, “The production and marketing”.

⁷⁸⁰ Kwass, “Big Hair”, 658. A parallel is drawn with the literature on Enlightenment sociability – see Antoine Lilti, “Sociabilité et mondanité: les hommes de lettres dans les salons parisiens au XVIIIe siècle,” *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005): 444-45: “*Dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle, la mondanité est assez largement ouverte aux pratiques culturelles comme aux innovations intellectuelles des Lumières, sans pour autant cesser d’exercer les effets de distinction sociale qui lui sont propres.*”

⁷⁸¹ John Styles, *The Dress of the People. Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: 2007), 195-211; 321-26.

cases, iconography and social commentaries, it is nevertheless clear that such meaning remained predominantly structured within a discourse of hierarchy.⁷⁸²

Much like the history of the material culture of hot drinks in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Aalst outlined above, a cursory exploration of the changes in dress suggests that the rejection of a 'traditional' mentality whereby social status was straightforwardly signposted by outward appearance, did not necessarily imply the onset of egalitarianism and liberated self-expression. However, despite its potential interest for historical research on consumer mentalities and social change, fashion in dress does not lend itself easily to be studied from after-death inventory evidence.⁷⁸³ Customary law allowed large parts of the early modern wardrobe to be habitually exempted from appraisal in inventories: clothing of the deceased was often buried along with him or her, some items were directly transmitted to the children, and the surviving spouse as well was entitled to his or her 'mourning robes'. Despite the inconsistencies caused by these customs, approximately 76% of all inventories appear to have listed the complete wardrobe of at least one of both spouses.⁷⁸⁴ The study of dress in probate inventories is further hampered by the incompleteness of the information these sources provide. Since the appearance and meaning of dress is greatly influenced by fabric quality, colour and form – aspects on which the inventories are rarely instructive – and even more by issues of combination and fitness, which are wholly inscrutable from these sources, the present exploration can thus only tentatively, and cautiously, attempt to suggest whether the relation between dress and social structures confirms the general patterns established for domestic material culture more generally.

To this end, it might be useful to briefly peek into the wardrobes and jewelry boxes of some exemplary members of upper, middling and lower social strata of Aalst throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁸⁵ The clothes owned by Gillis Vereecken († 1676) and his wife Barbara De Smet provide as good a starting point as any.⁷⁸⁶ The household was among the poorest 10% of inventoried households, but nevertheless occupied a house in the fourth decile of the town's tax distribution. Vereecken tried to make ends meet as a woolen cloth weaver, but the household's many outstanding debts indicate that this proved to be a challenging task.⁷⁸⁷ Gillis and Barbara together owned 10 fl. worth of linen shirts, one white and one bad (*quaet*) undershirt and some female undergarments, for underclothes. It is uncertain whether Barbara's clothes were fully listed, yet if they were, they seem to have been decidedly sparse. She owned just two skirts (*rock, roccken*), each worth less than 1 fl. and two black mantles (*mantel*), valued at 6 fl. A more colourful touch was added by her possession of two blue and one green aprons. Gillis was similarly provided for as he also owned two complete outfits: a robe, *casack* (a simple coat with wide sleeves) and pants – together worth 3 fl., and

⁷⁸² Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 181-93, and the splendid collection of iconographic material throughout the book.

⁷⁸³ See also Van Ryckeghem, "Eenvoud en raffinement"; Roche, *La culture des apparences*.

⁷⁸⁴ It is nevertheless possible that some clothing articles were missing. There was no apparent bias in this proportion over the four sample periods, nor over the five socio-economic quintiles.

⁷⁸⁵ The main inventories used in this overview have been selected on the basis of being situated around the median position in terms of the value and number of household goods of their respective social groups (i.e. the bottom 20% and top 10% of inventoried households, and the middle 20% of taxed households).

⁷⁸⁶ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1795 (Gillis Vereecken, †1676).

⁷⁸⁷ Many debts were incurred as advance payments on his own weaving labour, but he still owed a downpayment on his weaving loom, as well as a number of petty debts to a baker, various shops and – not coincidentally – to a doctor.

an additional linen *casack* and bad pair of linen trousers, valued together at 1 fl. 12 st. None of the clothes owned by Gillis or Barbara were made of expensive fabrics and most were probably made of linen. Disregarding their undergarments, Barbara's clothes were worth slightly more than Gillis': 8 fl. 14 st. for the former as opposed to 5 fl. 7 st. for the latter. A significant touch of decorum seems to have been added to their sparse and simple dress by a pair of silver shoe buckles (worth 1 fl. 12 st.). Together with a silver children's rattle, these were the only pieces of precious metal present in the household. The relative simplicity of dress which characterized the wardrobes of Gillis and Barbara seems largely representative of the experience of a large layer of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century urban society in Aalst.

Certainly there were those, such as Jan de Pachter and his wife Joanna (†1669) even further down the socio-economic hierarchy, who possessed only one complete outfit of upper clothes each (a robe and mantle for him; a *tabbaert* and skirt for her), and owned no jewelry whatsoever.⁷⁸⁸ However, Joanna's only skirt was made from relatively expensive woolen kersey ('*carseyen*') and worth more than all Barbara's clothing combined.⁷⁸⁹ It is hard to find households in Aalst where no single piece of exceptional clothing or dress accessory was to be found that could potentially set apart or distinguish its wearer. Around the middle of the eighteenth century, Anna Spitaels, who belonged to the poorest 30% of taxed households nevertheless possessed an expensive '*kalamander*' woolen skirt.⁷⁹⁰ The relatively poor shoemaker Gilliam D'Hane spiced up the single set of upper clothes he owned with a pair of silver buttons and a golden ring.⁷⁹¹ And notwithstanding Geeraert de Schryver's obvious poverty (his inventory was recorded 'pro deo', he had numerous and large outstanding debts with family members and his landlord, and his wife worked the spinning wheel), he was sufficiently concerned with his appearance to adopt the latest fashion of his time and enhance his appearance by means of a cane walking stick.⁷⁹² Likewise, Josephus Vander Spiegel, poor and indebted, nevertheless owned a hat to enliven his dress.⁷⁹³

In fact, at least 66% of all households in the bottom 40% of the town's socio-economic hierarchy possessed at least one item that belonged in the categories of jewelry or dress-related populuxe accessories.⁷⁹⁴ The majority of those were simple forms of metal dress accessories, such as silver or gold rings, buttons, pins, buckles or earrings. Although the more expensive versions of such accessories, such as diamond stone rings, bracelets or beads and pearls were entirely absent among the lower social strata, it is nevertheless remarkable that a wide range of diverse investments in appearances was available, and not at all uncommon. Certain types of non-metal dress accessories also proved relatively popular – chiefly cravats, handkerchiefs, canes and hats. The more exclusive types, such as muffs, gloves or *faillie*'s were limited to a few exceptions only, while wigs proved entirely absent among the poorer sorts.

⁷⁸⁸ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1790 (Joanna Gaspar, †1669).

⁷⁸⁹ According to the prices collected by Emmanuel Meersschaut, kersey cloth was among the cheaper of woolen cloth varieties: Meersschaut, "Textielaanbod".

⁷⁹⁰ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1862 (Christiaen Vander Maele, †1744).

⁷⁹¹ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1821 (Anna Hoorst, †1706).

⁷⁹² MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1862 (Maria Clara Claes, †1744). Although his particular stick was not prized, the median inventoried cane stick was valued at a little over 3 fl.

⁷⁹³ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 474 (Joanna Catharina Verstuyft, †1790). The median price of a hat was 2 fl. 8 st.

⁷⁹⁴ This includes all hats, gloves, cane sticks, muffs or wigs, and all items of jewelry (but excluding 'domestic' items of silver or gold).

Despite these poorer households' attempts at "*beautifying their dress in the ways they could afford*", the contrast with the opportunities available among the wealthy are (rather predictably) striking. Frans Callebaut († 1710), whose family was situated among the top 10% richest households of his time and who lived of his substantial real estate revenues, provides a suitable point of comparison around the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁷⁹⁵ The most impressive aspect of his or his wife's dress was perhaps the wide variety of gold hangers in the shape of a cupid, a deer, two agnus dei, a spirit, and a sinister skull with diamond eyes. Unfortunately it is impossible to know when and how this peculiar collection of jewelry was worn and displayed, but it no doubt provided ample opportunities for ostentation and distinction. Callebaut's collection of silver buttons for his upper clothes no doubt proved a more familiar sight, although the fact that he owned no less than 83 of them, indicates that the sight was quite different from the meager pair of buttons owned by many of the poorer town inhabitants. Unlike the uniform and re-usable buttons of the latter group, Callebaut's sets were specifically designed to fit his outfit: he had buttons for his *justaucorps* as well as for his robe. Not quite coincidentally, Callebaut was also one of the first owners of a pocket watch in Aalst – a typical bourgeois commodity which would remain out of reach of the lower social strata in Aalst for at least another century. A hat, a rapier and a set of silver pistols completed his collection of dress accessories. Clearly, apart from expressing a number of highly individual or even idiosyncratic tastes, Callebaut's outward appearance abundantly signaled his position as a wealthy and powerful man, and did so not only through the conspicuous ostentation of intrinsically valued materials, but also through a variety of semiotic repertoires related to novelty (such as the watch), refinement (like the fitting buttons) and power (his weaponry and perhaps also the gold hangers).

Likewise, a poor man's garments presented no match for Frans Callebaut's wardrobe either – and not solely because the latter did in fact own a wardrobe closet whereas the majority of the former did not. Like the poor Gillis Vereecken, most of Callebaut's upper clothes were comprised of *casacken* (a coat with wide sleeves) and trousers, although he also owned a robe (*jupon*) and a red mantle. If all of these were worn separately, he owned six full sets of outfits rather than the one or two usually possessed by the poorer sorts. However, none of these types of garments were unknown among the lower social strata. Throughout the entire period under scrutiny, there is no conclusive evidence to be found that certain upper garments were exclusively confined to any social group in particular: although the rich were always more likely to own multiple types of clothing, a *casack*, *frak*, *justaucorps*, *jupon* or *mantel* could be found among rich, poor and middling groups alike.⁷⁹⁶ The only type of men's upper clothing that seemed somewhat socially exclusive during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, the *tabberd*, suddenly became widespread among broad layers of society – especially among the middling groups (fig V.8). It is possible, as Van Ryckeghem suggests, that during the previous periods the *tabberd* had only been worn in private, as a morning robe.⁷⁹⁷ During that time, its ownership had been limited to the rich only, but as soon as it became fashionable as a proper type of upper clothing, it immediately became adopted by broad layers

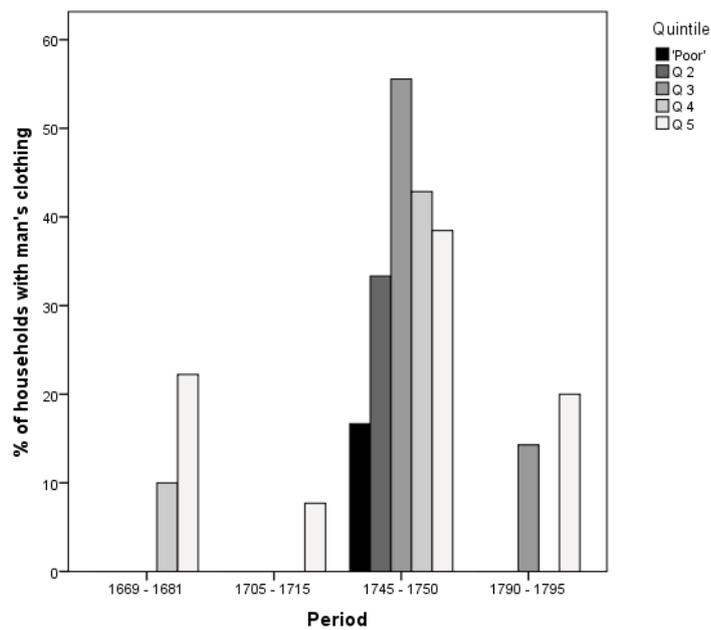
⁷⁹⁵ MAA, OAA, *Staten van Goed*, n° 1826 (Frans Callebaut, †1710).

⁷⁹⁶ See also Van Ryckeghem, "Eenvoud en raffinement" and similar findings in Styles, *The Dress of the People*; Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*.

⁷⁹⁷ J. Van Ryckeghem, "Eenvoud en raffinement. Een studie van de Gentse 18de eeuwse kleding in sociaal-economisch perspectief" (MA Thesis, UGent, 1985).

of society. Likewise, as soon as the *frak* –a type of tight-fitting informal upper clothing originally inspired by English hunting attires – became introduced in Aalst, it could immediately be found among the rich and poor alike (fig V.9). This holds the other way round as well. Over the course of the early modern period, the apron transformed from a typical working (wo)men’s accessory to an integral component of fashionable dress.⁷⁹⁸ Aprons of all colours and fabrics were added to skirts and robes, and were popular among all strata of urban society in Aalst. If it had ever been an exclusive dress component of the lower classes, it was certainly no longer so during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Figure V.8. The social distribution of the ‘tabbaert’ in Aalst.



Note:

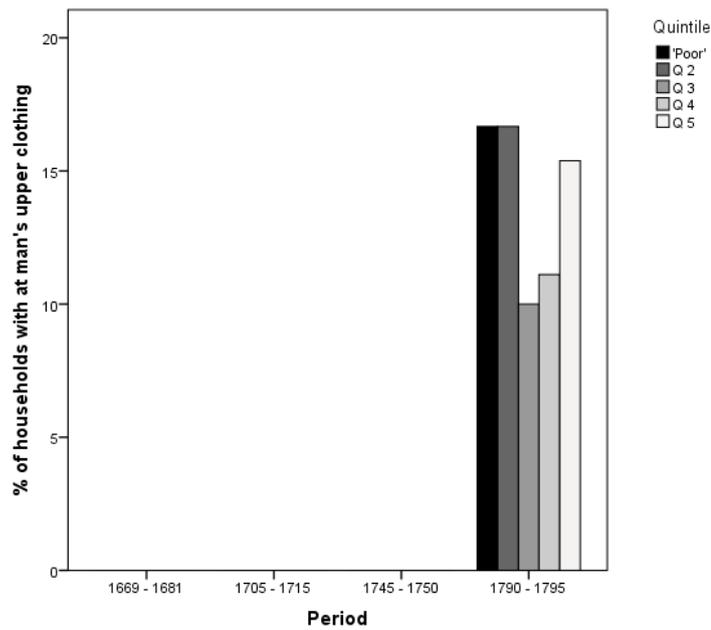
1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

⁷⁹⁸ Styles, *The Dress of the People*.

Figure V.9. The social distribution of the 'frak' in Aalst.



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

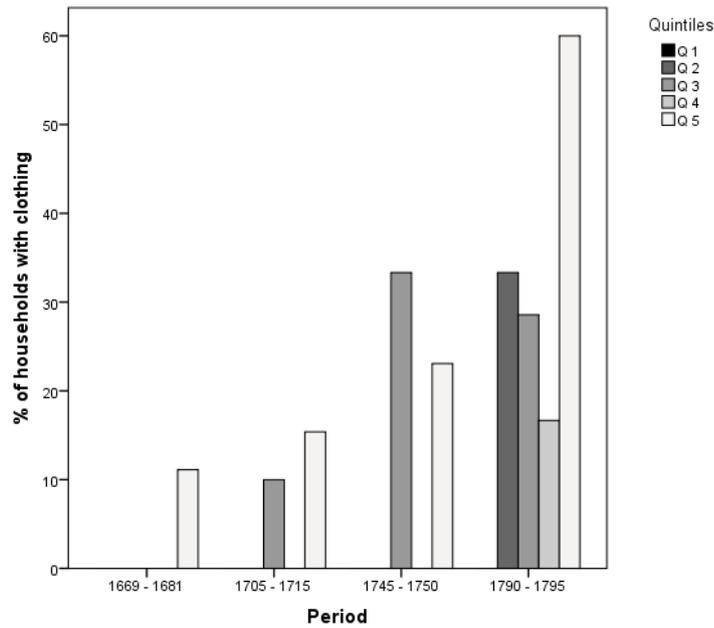
Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Differences in the general shape of dress were few. New fashions and styles were easily copied and quickly adopted, without any indication of persistent social discrepancies. As far as the types of clothing are concerned, there is little indication that plebeian dress in Aalst differed consistently or significantly from the dress of elites or middling groups.

As in jewelry and accessories, social distinctions nevertheless made themselves acutely felt in the area of upper clothing as well. Obvious differences in quantity allowed the better-off to dress themselves cleaner and more appropriate to each particular situation. Gradations in fabric and quality, on the other hand, served as prime markers of wealth, style, hygiene and comfort – regardless of the type of clothing in which they were tailored. Frans Callebaut, for instance, owned twenty *neteldoek* cravats, at a time when such cotton fabric was still a socially exclusive affair in Aalst. Until at least the middle of the eighteenth century cotton fabrics remained a clear indicator of social status – and only by the end of the century did it become more widespread among broader layers of urban society in Aalst (fig. V.10). Silk served a similar function of distinction, and continued to do so until the end of the period under scrutiny, perhaps even increasingly so (fig. V.11).

Figure V.10. The ownership of cotton fabrics in inventories with clothing recorded.



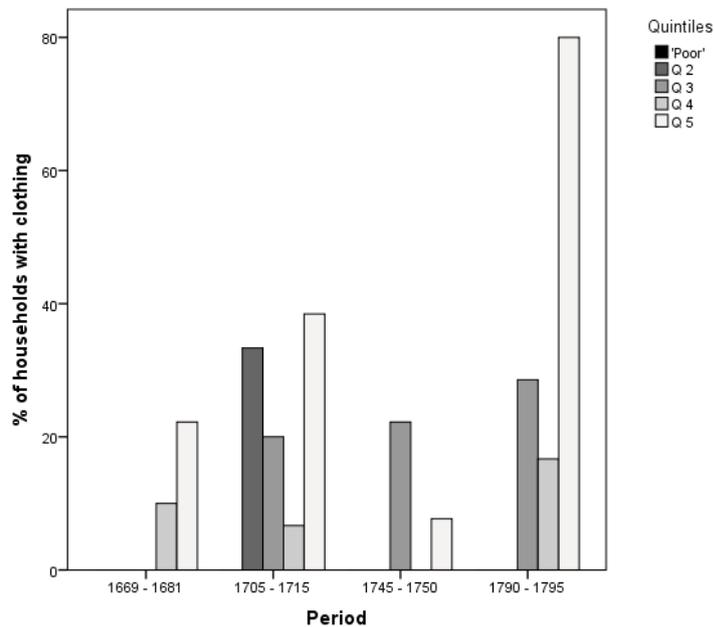
Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Figure V.11. The ownership of silk fabrics in inventories with clothing recorded.



Note:

1669-1681: N = 49; 1705-1715: N = 58; 1745-1750: N = 48; 1790-1795: N = 50.

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

Differences in quality could be evident even when the fabric was not specifically recorded. Callebaut's red mantle was priced at 42 fl. – almost double the value of all clothes of Gillis Vereecken and his wife combined. Even in the area of linen shirts – the practically universal type of underclothing at the time, such social inequalities loomed large. The value of Frans Callebaut's twenty-four *'fine shirts'* was larger than that of all Gillis Vereecken's movable possessions combined.⁷⁹⁹ Such discrepancies in both quality and quantity of underclothes are evident on a wider scale as well, although the differences among the large middling groups (Q2 to Q4) were relatively small in this area (table V.3).

Table V.3. Social differences in quantity and value of shirts in Aalst (1670-1795).

	'Poor'	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5
Median # of shirts	10	10	8	17	18
Mean # of shirts	10	11	12	16	23
Median value of shirts (in st.)	19	24	23	21	30
Mean value of shirts (in st.)	19	26	25	22	34
% of households with shirts	62 %	75 %	80 %	73 %	71 %
N	21	20	55	48	61

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

As suggested by the contrast between Gillis Vereecken and Frans Callebaut, social inequalities were even more striking in the domain of jewelry and dress accessories. Unsurprisingly, almost all sorts of accessories, whether made from precious metals or not, were more likely to be found among the better-off than among the lower social strata (table V.4). Notwithstanding the fashionable, elegant and refined values these ornaments no doubt sought to convey, most of their social exclusivity seems to be attributable to wealth discrepancies rather than divergent preferences or tastes.⁸⁰⁰ While rings were relatively well-spread among even the lower social strata, it is clear that they were not able to afford the more expensive diamond-stone rings, whose median price was almost sevenfold that of a median 'regular' ring.⁸⁰¹ The most exclusive types of accessories, such as the *faille* (a fine piece of silk worn around the neck) or the wig, did not lend themselves easily to cheaper imitations. The commodities that did, such as handkerchiefs, cravats or canes, became relatively widely adopted by households of almost all social layers of town – these largely represented the 'populuxe' goods identified by Fairchilds.⁸⁰² As was the case with the upper garments described earlier, such widespread adoption did not preclude further possibilities of social distinction: linen cravats could be further adorned with expensive lacework or cotton, muffs could be manufactured from exclusive animal pelts, and one particularly wealthy doctor in medicine owned a cane stick with a silver apple on top.⁸⁰³

⁷⁹⁹ Callebaut's shirts were worth 72 fl., Vereecken's household goods, furniture and cloth were valued at 67 fl.

⁸⁰⁰ Although both are not necessarily distinguishable from one another, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

⁸⁰¹ The median price for a stone ring was 23 fl. (N = 10), that of a regular ring 3 fl. 10 st. (N = 13).

⁸⁰² Fairchilds, "The production and marketing".

⁸⁰³ MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1826 (Frans Vanden Neste, †1711). Such canes with silver apples were apparently not unknown in 18th-century France either: Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*.

Table V.4. Ownership of dress accessories among social layers of Aalst (1670-1795).

	'Poor'	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Metal dress accessories					
Ring (silver or gold)	10	20	16	21	20
Small ring (silver or gold)	0	10	2	8	3
Wedding ring (gold)	14	10	11	8	5
Diamond ring	0	0	6	6	18
Buttons (silver or gold)	0	20	6	15	13
Pins (silver, gold or copper)	10	5	7	10	13
Buckle (silver)	19	15	13	23	13
Bracelet	0	0	0	2	13
Rattle (silver)	5	10	4	2	8
Earrings (silver, gold or diamond)	10	15	6	15	16
Beads & pearls	0	0	2	6	20
Dress accessories					
Cuffs	0	5	4	10	15
Faille	5	5	15	19	25
Cravat	24	20	18	23	36
Wig	0	0	2	0	7
Muff	0	10	4	8	10
Gloves	5	10	11	6	20
Handkerchief	19	40	49	48	53
Hat	5	25	15	13	21
Cane stick	10	5	4	8	8

Sources:

MAA, OAA, Staten van Goed, n° 1790-1801; n° 1820-1830; n° 1861-1866; 1906-1915.

As was the case in the example of hot drinks, the material culture of dress and dress accessories equally suggests a tendency towards emulation and democratization on the one hand, and distinction and appropriation on the other. This combined process of superficial similarity within which nevertheless emerges great opportunity for distinction, generated a proliferation of consumer goods along the lines of both novelty (and thus commoditization), and self-restraint (as demonstrated in choice and taste).⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰⁴ With regards to the latter aspect, see also the ways in which Bourdieu described restraint as a characteristic of a higher-level distinction: Bourdieu, *Distinction*. With regards to the former, see Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things"; Douglas and Isherwood, *The World of Goods*, and also Bourdieu's 'objectification' of use value through habitus (Bourdieu, *Distinction*), Baudrillard's 'personalization' of objects (Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*) and Marx's 'commodity fetishism' (Marx 1867).

6. Fashion between structure and agency

The case-studies of the material culture related to bed frames, hot drinks, clothing, jewelry and dress accessories briefly examined on the previous pages suggest a number of recurrent patterns. Few general trends of novelty or fashion remained limited to the social upper layers of urban society in Aalst alone. The consumption of tea and coffee, fashions in bedsteads, styles of upper clothing, the craze for cottons, hats or handkerchiefs: the adoption by large social groups well beyond the local elites occurred swiftly and widely. Only when a lack of cheaper imitations precluded widespread adoption (such as in the case of silks or chocolate), or when symbolic meanings were closely tied to traditional repertoires of aristocratic power (in the case of weaponry or dove-keeping), did specific commodity clusters remain clearly confined to social and economic elites alone.

This superficial impression of uniformity in material culture, whereby the rapid emulation of new fashions stands in stark contrast to the supposed medieval immobility dictated by sumptuary legislation, bears little resemblance to any sort of egalitarian or liberating processes.⁸⁰⁵ Notwithstanding the similarity in consumer commodities, opportunities for distinction abounded in the areas of quantity, quality, diversity, design and utility in everyday practice. The nearly universal drinking of tea and the widespread wearing of the *casack* did not necessarily bring the acts of consumption of rich and poor any closer together. Given the sheer range of distinctive opportunities available and the insurmountable character of the social divide, it seems unlikely that the consumption of middling and lower social strata was primarily motivated by concerns of imitation and emulation.⁸⁰⁶ In fact, it would not be entirely unreasonable to assume that the increased opportunities for distinction offered by the expanding early modern material world themselves progressively diminished the need for sumptuary legislation. Hence, the adoption of formally similar material cultures among large and socially diverse segments of the early modern urban population did not necessarily imply a homogeneity of associated values and meanings. The consumption of tea and coffee was redefined from a ritualized and taste-defining activity of domestic sociability to an everyday practice of private comfort and relief, moving from the front to the back stage of daily life.⁸⁰⁷ It gained currency in patterns of conviviality and sociability that had been rooted in European urban mentalities for centuries. Despite representing the same material object, one man's *casack* could be his Sunday's set of 'best clothes', while functioning as the other's informal wear.⁸⁰⁸ It seems likely that the changing material culture of early modern Aalst acquired more meaning from its embedded nature in everyday practices among social peers, than through conspicuous ostentation and blind emulation from upper to lower social classes.

Scholars working in the tradition of semiotic approaches to the history of material culture have similarly argued that a wide variety of cultural contexts, values and meanings informed eighteenth-century consumption practices. Colin Campbell sought cultural motivations in a romantic spirit of

⁸⁰⁵ Compare to McKendrick, "The consumer revolution"; Roche, *La culture des apparences*.

⁸⁰⁶ Paula Hohti, "'Conspicuous' consumption and popular consumers: material culture and social status in sixteenth-century Siena," *Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 5 (2010): 670. Compare with Fairchild, "The production and marketing".

⁸⁰⁷ See Blondé, "Think local, act global?", and indirectly Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski, "Artifacts and Active Voices"; Owens et al., "Fragments of the Modern City"; Wall, "Sacred dinners".

⁸⁰⁸ On 'best' and Sunday's clothes, see Styles, *The Dress of the People*.

hedonism, Brian Cowan referred to the taste for novelty cultivated among a social class of 'virtuosi', Woodruff Smith perceived the convergence of values related to comfort, health, rationality and domesticity, John Crowley described major shifts in consumer behaviour as motivated by the invention of comfort, just like Georges Vigarello attributed comparable transformations to the increased importance of the concept of cleanliness.⁸⁰⁹ With regards to the culture of dress, John Styles discerned repertoires of value related to politeness and sensibility, whereas Michael Kwass described the rhetorics of utility, authenticity and naturalness evident in taste leaders' attitude to wigs.⁸¹⁰ Many of these interpretations suggest that the transformations of eighteenth-century material culture were informed by a multitude of aspirations other than pure emulation.⁸¹¹ However, accepting the influence of such semiotic schemes seemingly sits uneasily with the persistent inequalities and inherently hierarchic structures that nevertheless shaped the patterns of distinction evident in the probate inventories of early modern Aalst. Although the cultural contexts of hygiene, respectability, politeness, novelty and self-expression, carried significant structuring power in molding the specific expressions of consumer behaviour, they reveal only a limited aspect of the picture. The emphasis placed on the simplicity and naturalness of the wig by eighteenth-century advertisers and taste leaders, for example, and their conspicuous silence on ostentation or emulation, do not preclude the fact that such items remained costly, inconvenient in practices of everyday labour, and the overwhelming prerogative of the well-to-do.⁸¹²

The consistent evidence of *trickle-down* effects in many 'amenities' and fashionable distinctions evident in eighteenth-century Aalst, indicates that socio-economic inequalities continued to structure patterns of material culture – despite the ostensible detachment of the cultural contexts in which they came about. The present approach therefore diverges from the purely semiotic tradition, which seeks to explain early modern consumer behaviour entirely from 'cultural contexts' and to read bygone material cultures as texts. Historians of dress in particular have been tempted to liken the symbolic communication of material goods to the semiotic system of language as a metaphor for the structure of fashion.⁸¹³ However, one does not need to adopt Pierre Bourdieu's 'social critique of the judgement of taste' in all its stringency (or perhaps even quasi-determinism) to acknowledge that issues of power are far more pervasively comprised in the material culture of fashion than in the structures of language. William Sewell's suggestion that the linguistic metaphor provides a particularly poor guideline when trying to make sense of arenas of life more permeated by power relations than that of linguistics seems expressly apt in attempting to account for consumer behaviour.⁸¹⁴

The changing allocation of value, evident in the cultural discourses surrounding advertising, retailing, social commentary and ego-documents related to consumer change in seventeenth- and

⁸⁰⁹ Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort*; Campbell, *The romantic ethic*; Cowan, *The social life of coffee*; Smith, *Consumption*; Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of cleanliness: changing attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: 1988).

⁸¹⁰ Styles, *The Dress of the People*; Kwass, "Big Hair".

⁸¹¹ See also Agnew, "Coming up for air"; Pennell, "Consumption and consumerism"; Campbell, "Understanding traditional and modern patterns".

⁸¹² Kwass, "Big Hair".

⁸¹³ For instance Susan Vincent, *Dressing the elite. Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford: 2003), 189-93; Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 399-434.

⁸¹⁴ Sewell, "A Theory of Structure", 23-24 and also William H. Jr. Sewell, *Logics of history: social theory and social transformation* (Chicago: 2005).

eighteenth-century Europe cannot be seen separately from the resource effects which it produced and by which it was shaped. The emerging socio-cultural structure of fashion, whether dominated by emulation, distinction, or both, can hardly be seen separately from the power relations, the resources and the actual materiality of the society in which it functioned. Even if an act of consumption was motivated entirely by values of identity and self-expression, or – alternatively – by a desire to belong and to imitate, these *ideally* motivated acts were structured by *actual* circumstances such as availability, cost, capital and distribution – circumstances which were firmly rooted in the power structures of their time. And, perhaps somewhat less trivially, these acts of consumption simultaneously and dialectically helped to shape and structure the social and economic relations of power in their turn.

The idea of a single, dynamic material culture characterized by emulation and distinction governing the realm of consumption and encompassing all layers of society is one that is usually reserved for the modern era of mass consumption. When situated in Jean Baudrillard's dichotomy between pre-industrial and modern object systems, the widespread processes of commoditization, diffusion and distinction that played out in eighteenth-century Aalst appear much closer to the latter than to the former. According to Baudrillard the pre-industrial object system was characterized by an impenetrable divide between '*model*' objects – at least partially platonic and valued for their style – and '*serial*' objects, which are exclusively prized for their use value. Whereas models were reserved for the happy few, the aristocratic elites, the masses had to content themselves with the practical series. Contrary to the situation of modern societies, this distinction was not relative but absolute:

“There was a much tighter segregation between the class of objects that could lay claim to ‘style’ and the class of locally produced objects that had use value only. [...] In the eighteenth century there was simply no relationship between a ‘Louis XV’ table and a peasant’s table: there was an unbridgeable gulf between the two types of object, just as there was between the two corresponding social classes. No single cultural system embraced them both. [...] The social order was what gave objects their standing. A person was noble or not: nobility was not the ultimate – privileged – term in a series but rather, a grace that bestowed absolute distinction. In the realm of objects the equivalent of this transcendent idea of nobility is what we call the ‘style’ of a period.”⁸¹⁵

However, in the previous pages, I have argued that in eighteenth-century Aalst models were emulated and adapted, and acquired meaning over and beyond mere use value across broad layers of society. The probate inventory evidence from Aalst has suggested tendencies towards both emulation and distinction that do not map altogether closely to any form of strict socio-judicial distinction between social classes. As in Baudrillard's modern system of objects, this does not mean that 'models' had become the domain of all social classes or had become universally available. Rather, the existence of 'psychological circulation', and of a single fashion system, unifies culturally what is segregated in the socio-economic sphere. Although broad layers of society might find themselves excluded from the consumption of 'model' objects because of a lack of financial means, they also feel that *“this exclusion is no longer underwritten by any class-based legal statute, by any transcending social*

⁸¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: 1996 (orig. 1968)), 147-48.

rationale buttressed by laws. [...] Despite the material impossibility of acceding to the model object, the use of serial objects invariably embodies an implicit or explicit reference to models."⁸¹⁶

The socio-legal distinctions coercively imposed by older sumptuary laws were perhaps not entirely done away with in the eighteenth-century consumer revolution, but internalized in the all-encompassing culture of fashion. Evaluative discourses on the 'appropriateness' and 'fitness' of consumers, as well as those of 'taste' and 'lifestyle' serve as articulate clues that the socio-legal liberation of the consumer did not necessarily bring about a field of egalitarian actors. The recurrent probate inventory evidence of how fashionable distinction and diffusion were structured along the lines of socio-economic stratification in early modern Aalst, suggests that this persistent relation of fashion to structures of power was not a mere remnant of the past, but an integral aspect of the fashion system itself. Through the wide social diffusion of serial objects which were characterized by inferior quality and decreased durability – from the glazed crockery of tea and coffeepots to upholstered chairs and cotton mantelpiece cloths – signaled at once social inferiority *and* the inevitable inclusion within a single, hierarchic, culture of consumption. In adapting Baudrillard's system of objects to the world of eighteenth-century Aalst, one could say that "*the shoddiness of objects [replaced] the scarcity of objects as the expression of poverty.*"⁸¹⁷

The pre-industrial material culture of eighteenth-century Aalst certainly leans closer to Baudrillard's modern system of objects than to his conception of a pre-industrial world where objects reliably reflected social status (in all its immobility). Likewise, evidence for a 'communal' plebeian culture, which operated parallel to, and separate from, the dominant pre-industrial culture, seems particularly hard to find in the material culture of early modern Aalst.⁸¹⁸ Perhaps the greater prevalence of wedding rings among the poor, and the general tendency to invest in precious metals that typically served as family heirlooms (such as buttons or rings), as opposed to the investment in silver and gold commodities that served in front stage activities of sociability, such as tea- and tableware, suggests such divergent allocations of value. Examples like this are nevertheless rare in the eighteenth-century probate inventory evidence, and at any rate indicate differences in degree rather than in kind. If any sort of 'communal' and customary plebeian material culture ever existed, and if it was subsumed in a unified, market-driven consumerism, it is a transition that had occurred long before industrial capitalism would find its way to nineteenth-century Aalst. By the late seventeenth-century the broad contours of material culture conformed to a unifying structure of fashion, which further accelerated with the introduction of hot drinks, porcelain and cotton in the eighteenth-century.

This dual culture of emulation and distinction did not preclude the persistence of highly unequal socio-economic structures, and the continued influence of differences in socio-economic position on the opportunities for consumption. Contemporary discourses of politeness, respectability, comfort and sensibility can hardly conceal the undiminished inequalities of quantity, quality and style in consumption that nevertheless loomed large and were persistently shaped by the social and economic structures of the time. In this sense, the liberty propounded by the 'consumer revolution' was not unlike the 'liberté' of the French revolutionaries: a freedom from traditional judicial

⁸¹⁶ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 149.

⁸¹⁷ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 157.

⁸¹⁸ See also Styles, *The Dress of the People*, commenting on E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?," *Social History* 2 (1978); E.P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974).

categories, but not necessarily from pervasive inequalities and bourgeois utilitarianism. The ‘consumer revolution’ of eighteenth-century Aalst seems most remarkable not for how revolutionary it was, but for how nothing really changed.

Perhaps then, the material culture which took shape in early modern European society bears less resemblance to McKendrick’s take-off towards a more egalitarian and prosperous society, than to Mikhail Bakhtin’s portrayal of renaissance carnival:

“This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. [...] This [carnival laughter] is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.”⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1968), 10-12. The similarity is inspired by Sam Binkley, "The perilous freedoms of consumption: toward a theory of the conduct of consumer conduct," *Journal for Cultural Research* 10, no. 4 (2006).

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this dissertation was to confront the ‘optimistic’ historiography on the eighteenth-century ‘consumer revolution’ with the more pessimistic accounts of structural economic decline and social polarization in the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands. It aimed to do so by studying consumer change, economic decline and social inequality in the town of Aalst between 1670 and 1795. The example of Frans Soetens’ domestic interior, presented in the introduction, suggested that significant changes took place in the consumption habits of the town’s inhabitants during this period. Indeed, he was not alone. Between the second half of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth, the domestic material culture of the large majority of households in Aalst changed profoundly. The adoption and widespread consumption of new types of commodities, most obviously those associated with the consummation of hot drinks and new forms of comportment at table, was largely comparable to that of other urban localities throughout North-Western Europe. In this respect, the differences within regional economies –between large commercial metropolises and provincial towns, or between town and countryside – appeared more influential in determining the adoption of new patterns of consumer behaviour than did the macro-economic growth or decline of the regional economies of England, Holland, France or the Southern Netherlands at large.

In the economic historiography of the Southern Netherlands, the period between 1650 and 1750 is largely synonymous with stagnation and decline. While the rural population of Inland Flanders became intensively engaged in proto-industrial linen production, the town of Aalst was primarily occupied with the commercialization of the agricultural and industrial produce of its hinterland. As rural immigration largely halted during this period and the majority of households enjoyed a surplus income from investments in rural real estate or annuities, average levels of household wealth in Aalst were high, and continued to be so until the middle of the eighteenth century. Despite the ‘passive’ and ‘traditional’ nature of its economy, consumer change was much more rapid and widespread in Aalst than on the economically dynamic countryside of Flanders. There, the ‘golden age’ of proto-industrial production did not alter the fact that in terms of shifting consumer practices it was the socio-cultural world of the town that dictated the norms.

When, during the second half of the eighteenth century, the face of the Aalst economy changed profoundly, the expansion and spread of new consumer habits continued. The strong demographic growth in rural Flanders increasingly spilled over into the town, furthering the number of poorer immigrants and urban demographic growth in general. Meanwhile, the urban economy largely shifted from a rentier to a commercial society. A growing share of urban households lost their income-yielding investments in rural real estate and annuities, and the town’s political and economic elite was no longer predominantly composed of large landowners and rentiers, but of merchants and professionals. Although the commercial activities on Aalst’s markets, roads and waterways grew

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spectacularly during this period, not everyone participated in this success. Economic inequality began its upwards ascent towards the nineteenth century, and average household wealth declined considerably. It is during this period of declining average living standards that the industrial dynamism of the town resurfaced, with the emergence of a number of textile manufactures during the final decades of the eighteenth century as its most striking aspect. Mounting social and economic pressures on the credit economy, meanwhile, resulted in a growing monetization and 'impersonalization' of retail transactions.

The decline in average household wealth and the deepening of social and economic inequality during this period did not preclude the unprecedented social reach of clocks and mirrors, forks and plates, window curtains and cabinets, lamps and candles, and a wide variety of apparel related to the consumption of tea and coffee among ever growing strata of the urban society. These widespread changes in consumer behaviour seem to have been relatively detached from the social and economic base of the society in which they occurred. Notwithstanding the town's lack of urban dynamism in the economic sphere and the declining level of household wealth and growing socio-economic inequality, the expansion of new sorts of consumerism in Aalst closely followed the general Western European pattern of change. The paradox is probably smaller than it appears. Many of the newly introduced commodities were fairly inexpensive compared to the cost of more traditional household goods, such as beds or linens. This explains why the clear expansion in the number of household goods owned did not significantly alter the proportion of wealth invested in them. As the eighteenth century progressed, households increasingly resorted to cheaper substitutes and imitations, and the average value per item dropped considerably. The inventory sample from the 1790s, which includes a higher number of poorer households than the previous samples, suggests that under circumstances of economic stress the ownership of new consumer goods continued to expand, while the quantities of the more expensive beds and linens declined.

All this suggests that the remarkable occurrence of an early modern 'consumer revolution' in the provincial town of Aalst does less to ascribe the town's economic development with the optimism of the 'revolt of the early modernists', than to qualify the socio-economic significance of eighteenth-century consumer change itself. The contours of this change do not lend themselves easily to an interpretation in terms of the greater opportunity of Aalst households to maximize their consumer utility as a consequence of pre-industrial economic development. There are few indications that the principal transformations in the domestic material culture of households in Aalst were primarily driven by a greater desire for comfort and convenience or by a greater availability of commodities to provide in either of those. Rather, the patterns of consumer change in Aalst suggest a growing value attached to novel, exotic and fashionable goods on the one hand, and an increased concern for self-control, privacy and restraint on the other.

The preference for novelty and the exotic is most clear with regards to the spread in the consumption of tobacco, coffee, tea, sugar, and to a lesser extent chocolate. Whereas during the second half of the seventeenth century almost no-one in Aalst possessed the necessary equipment to prepare and consume these colonial groceries, they were nearly universally owned by the end of the eighteenth century. Not only was their adoption rapid and widespread, but the impact of these commodities on everyday domestic life and its accompanying material culture seems profound. By the end of the eighteenth century many households owned multiple sets of drinking cups, plenty of tea and

coffeepots, and a variety of tea boxes, sugar spoons and tongs, milk jugs and snuff boxes. It goes without saying that the cultural significance of the development of the coffeehouse or the tea-time went far beyond the changing material culture of the home alone.⁸²⁰ With the adoption of hot drinks came the introduction of porcelain and a whole series of new and diversifying forms of glazed earthenware, the best pieces of which ended up on many households' mantelpieces for all to see. There it could, on occasion, be accompanied by the presence of a mantelpiece cloth made out of cotton – another exotic commodity that made substantial inroads into the material culture of eighteenth-century homes in Aalst.

The continuous commoditization, adoption and spread of novel consumer goods provided for many early modern households a new means of social distinction. This desire for the new, the urge to be '*au courant*' and '*à la mode*', affected the allocation of value in consumer goods. The adjectives employed by the inventory appraisers in Aalst suggest a growing importance of commodity properties related to design and decoration, while the age and durability of inventoried items became less commonly recorded. This seems to confirm the wider tendency of early modern consumers and producers to progressively attach greater value to the design and fashionability of products, and less to intrinsic material (or 'prime') value and durability.⁸²¹ In the context of a material culture which was increasingly pre-occupied with novel and fashionable goods which were not necessarily expensive nor durable, this suggests the growing importance of a consumer model in which other repertoires of commodity value than wealth and the patina of age became pivotal in creating social distinction.⁸²²

One of those new consumer repertoires belonged to the sphere of restraint, self-control and privacy. The expansion of a culture of bodily comportment, behavioural etiquette and refined taste, allowed those who mastered its rules the opportunity to distinguish themselves seemingly inconspicuously. With the strong spread of individual dining plates, eating forks and knives, and tablecloths and napkins, eating in company increasingly developed into an exercise in discipline and polite behaviour. Meanwhile, the layout and use of domestic space became the site of a growing separation between the public and the private. The large, communal hall or floor was divided into smaller, functionally-specific rooms, curtains increasingly adorned the windows and open racks and shelves were replaced by closed cupboards and wardrobes. The rise of the mirror, and to a lesser extent the clock, further suggest a growing concern of their owners to adjust their comportment, behaviour and time use in accordance to public expectations.

Together, the swelling desire for the new and fashionable, and the increased importance attached to the control over one's appearance and behaviour in the company of others, reflected a broad cultural shift towards the expression of social status and distinction in a realm seemingly detached from the traditional conspicuous ostentation of wealth and aristocratic decorum. Both the adherence to fashion and the culture of politeness imbued a wide variety of new commodities with a high degree of socially, culturally and discursively constructed 'fetish' value. It is striking, in this respect, how many eighteenth-century fashions increasingly preferred such inconspicuous tastes as

⁸²⁰ Cowan, *The social life of coffee*; Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*; Blondé, "Toe-eigening en de taal der dingen"; Blondé, "Think local, act global?"; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Smith, *Consumption*.

⁸²¹ Clifford, "A commerce with things"; Blondé, "Tableware"; Nijboer, "De fatsoenering"; De Munck, "Skills, Trust, and Changing Consumer Preferences"; Blondé, "Zilver in Antwerpen: drie eeuwen particulier zilverbezit in context".

⁸²² See, on patina in particular, McCracken, *Culture & Consumption*.

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simplicity, modesty and naturalness over the baroque extravagance of previous times.⁸²³ To recognize this gradual shift in the flexibility of the early modern material culture and the changing way in which it reflected social positions, is not to say that it constituted an autonomous and independent realm unrelated to the configuration of society at large. Like gold leather hangings, expensive tapestries, dove-breeding, and gold or silver had done in previous times, the desire for novelty and the pre-occupation with polite behaviour served to create and re-create social distinctions – albeit of a different nature. It is noteworthy, in this context, that all of the commodities that were part of the ‘consumer revolution’ in eighteenth-century Aalst were first adopted among the socio-economic upper classes, and only gradually spread downwards from there.

This gradual downwards spread or ‘trickle down’ indicates that the expanding material culture, endlessly imitated, emulated, and re-appropriated, offered opportunities to convey status or identity, and to aspire distinction, at all levels of the social hierarchy. Only in rare cases did the consumption of a particular commodity remain confined to a particular social category or class. Family coats of arms and portraits, hunting attire and idiosyncratic gold or pearl heirlooms, for instance, continued to be the preserve of the noble and aristocratic, and were not readily imitated or emulated in any sort of fashion.⁸²⁴ However, this was not the case with the vast majority of the new consumer practices, whose distinguishing characteristic was precisely their capacity to communicate value in a *relative* rather than in an *absolute* way.⁸²⁵ For this reason, tin-glazed earthenware, even though clearly imitating Chinese porcelain in surface and design, might still carry enough communicative value to be displayed on a common artisan’s mantelpiece in Aalst. The drinking of tea, even when not poured out of silver pots, nor accompanied by teaspoons, milk jugs or sugar tongs, nevertheless retained sufficient meaning to become rapidly and widely adopted by almost all inhabitants of Aalst. This openness to imitation, substitution and appropriation allowed the system of fashion to spread far beyond the social scope that previous structures of value based on wealth or birth had allowed for. It increasingly created a single, dominant material culture which encompassed (almost) all layers of society within a *relative* hierarchy of status competition and consumption.

In this heightened malleability of early modern material cultures, Neil McKendrick read a broader shift in the stratification and configuration of the social order. He saw the competition for social status in an increasingly dynamic and flexible material world as the result of a narrowing of the distance between social groups. However, the ‘relative’ nature of status expression in material culture, does not necessarily imply a more democratic, less unequal or more transparent social order than before. The growing social reach of fashion in eighteenth-century Aalst, in which ultimately everyone would come to drink tea and coffee, and would eat with knives and forks, certainly improved the material living standards of numerous households in absolute terms. More people than before were now able to ‘*beautify their lives*’ in various ways, to smoke tobacco and see themselves reflected in a looking glass. Yet, in relative terms, things had not necessarily changed for the better. By the time the drinking of tea had been spread to the poorer strata of urban society, a multitude of new distinctions in refinement, quality and quantity reinforced pre-existing social boundaries. Socio-economic

⁸²³ Kwass, "Big Hair"; Harald Deceulaer, "De glans van de eenvoud. Kleding, mode en textiel in de eeuw van de Verlichting," in *Jaarboek 2000 - 2001* (Antwerpen: 2001).

⁸²⁴ Blondé, "Botsende consumptiemodellen?"

⁸²⁵ In Baudrillard’s terminology they were ‘serial’ objects’ rather than ‘models’: Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*.

inequalities meanwhile remained forcefully in place and would deepen throughout most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In this context, I have suggested that eighteenth-century consumerism can be thought of as resembling the carnivalesque. In becoming progressively cheaper, more fleeting and increasingly sensitive to fashion, the material culture of home and body in early modern Aalst allowed the emergence of a culture of consumption from which no-one was excluded and in which all seemingly participated on equal footing. For all cultural discourses related to consumerism as the expression of inner sensibilities, nature and respectability, it did not serve any less as a vehicle for distinction and hierarchic legitimation than the conspicuous consumption of the 'old luxury' had done.

The pessimistic interpretation of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century consumer changes arrived at here, can perhaps be attributed (at least in part) to the methodological approach taken. In trying to build bridges between economic history and the cultural, semiotic and anthropological perspectives on consumerism, the current dissertation has predominantly stayed on the side of the former. The approach taken, has started from the economic and social structures of life in an early modern town, and has worked downwards – or inwards – from there. Many of the important issues related to the individual motivations for consumption, the subjective values attached to material goods, and the agency of the material itself, have only cursively been touched upon throughout the previous chapters. The way in which individual household members negotiated not just with the economic and social structures of their time, but also with the physical materiality of the goods they owned, with the memories and meanings these inevitably acquired and with the difficulties in reconciling old and new, has gone largely unexplored. In this respect, the current dissertation might be well served by meeting its mirror image: a study that would start from the agency of the consuming household and of the material consumer goods themselves, and works upwards (or outwards) from there.

Nevertheless, when seen from a predominantly structural lens, as has been the case here, the most lasting impact of early modern consumerism on socio-economic life in the town of Aalst was not brought about by the colonial groceries, cottons and earthenware it bestowed upon the town's consumers, but by the linen sold on its markets. When during the eighteenth century a growing concern for hygiene and neatness became fashionable all over Europe and its colonies, the demand for cheaply produced linen shirts and underwear expanded. Linens were changed more often, and fashions in upper clothes became increasingly open to expose the underclothes as testimony to their cleanliness.⁸²⁶ The rising 'global' demand for linen provided the most important economic lifeline for the peasant population of the countryside around Aalst, as well as indirectly for many of the town's inhabitants. It was the falling demand for rurally woven linens, and their gradual replacement by factory-produced cottons, that would further determine the town's fate in the first half of the nineteenth century, when diminishing returns in the proto-industry and the culmination of a creeping process of proletarianization pushed large numbers of impoverished rural immigrants towards Aalst. The rapid and broad spread of new consumption habits in eighteenth-century Aalst did nothing to diminish the fact that for the majority of households economic life remained overwhelmingly precarious, and social polarization would soon reach new heights.

⁸²⁶ Smith, *Consumption*; Van Ryckeghem, "Eenvoud en raffinement"; Deceulaer, *Pluriforme patronen*.

APPENDIX A. ESTIMATING THE VALUE OF REAL ESTATE FROM THE INVENTORIES.

Contrary to England and its colonial offshoots, real estate is usually included in the post-mortem inventories on the Continent. Unfortunately land holdings are most often enumerated with their acreage (expressed in *roeden*) rather than their monetary value. In only 32% of the inventories the value of all land holdings has been appraised and recorded. In order to obtain an approximation of total wealth holdings, including real estate, the total value of land holdings has been estimated based on their acreage. For this purpose, I have assembled a dataset of approximately 700 land valuations, together covering an area of 420 ha (or 4,2 km²). In reality the value of any particular piece of land was no doubt determined by a variety of variables on which the sources remain largely silent, such as the condition of the soil, its location and any feudal or other charges attached to the parcel. Land prices per acre could thus differ greatly within each type of land holding (*land*, forest, *meers*, farmstead, etc.) hence the price variation within each sample period. I have nevertheless used the mean price of each land type in each period to calculate the total value of real estate for each probated household.

Table A. Land prices in *styvers* per *roede*.

	Median	Mean	C.V.	N
Arable				
1669-1681	20	26	0,60	160
1705-1715	18	19	0,40	119
1745-1750	37	38	0,40	92
1790-1795	100	105	0,30	88
Pasture				
1669-1681	26	31	0,59	46
1705-1715	22	21	0,53	10
1745-1750	40	41	0,72	11
1790-1795	147	139	0,62	10
Farmstead				
1669-1681	62	70	0,46	10
1705-1715	26	29	0,42	11
1745-1750	71	71	0,59	2
1790-1795	140	163	0,27	7
Forest				
1669-1681	20	19	0,24	10
1705-1715	20	23	0,46	15
1745-1750	40	40		1
1790-1795	110	104	0,30	5

APPENDIX B. NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING (DUTCH SUMMARY)

Centraal in deze verhandeling stond de manier waarop de inwoners van het zeventiende- en achttiende-eeuwse Aalst anders gingen consumeren. Sedert het verschijnen, in 1982, van Neil McKendrick's stelling over het plaats vinden van een waarachtige 'consumptierevolutie' tijdens de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw in Engeland, heeft deze problematiek reeds heel wat economisch, sociaal en cultureel historici beroerd. McKendrick zag in de toegenomen consumptieactiviteit van Engelse huishoudens een reflectie van de ontluikende industriële revolutie, van een toegenomen financiële welvaart en een groeiende drang tot het 'emuleren' van de sociale elites. Tijdens de voorbije decennia werden heel wat aspecten van McKendrick's oorspronkelijke these grondig bijgesteld. Uitgebreid onderzoek naar vroegmoderne staten van goed en boedelbeschrijvingen in heel wat Noord-West Europese gebieden, wees uit dat er zich aan het eind van de vroegmoderne periode inderdaad belangwekkende verschuivingen in de huiselijke materiële cultuur en kledij voordeden, maar dat deze anderzijds duidelijk afweken van het oorspronkelijke beeld van een 'consumer revolution.' Deze veranderingen bleken niet zozeer geconcentreerd te zijn tijdens de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw, zoals McKendrick dacht, maar minstens tot het midden van de zeventiende eeuw op te klimmen. Bovendien werd al snel duidelijk dat deze niet beperkt bleven tot het vroeg industrialiserende Engeland. Niettemin heeft de idee van een 'consumer revolution' een belangrijke plaats verworven in de historiografie van de vroegmoderne periode. Die consumptieverandering is daarbij een steeds meer autonome rol gaan vervullen, als aandrijver van economische modernisering (in plaats van als gevolg ervan). In dit opzicht vond ze al snel aansluiting bij de historiografische traditie van de zogenaamde 'revolt of the early modernists'.

Ondanks haar verscheidenheid in verschijningsvormen wordt de vroegmoderne 'consumptierevolutie' doorgaans geassocieerd met overwegend 'optimistische' sociaal-economische oorzaken en gevolgen. In deze verhandeling werd de relatie geproblematiseerd tussen het voltrekken van een 'consumptierevolutie' enerzijds en het plaats vinden van economische groei, welvaartsverbetering en sociale vooruitgang anderzijds. In het geval van het zeventiende- en achttiende-eeuwse Aalst, een secundaire stad in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, is deze verhouding immers allesbehalve vanzelfsprekend. Vanaf de tweede helft van de zeventiende eeuw werd de stad geplaagd door een langgerekt proces van de-industrialisering en stedelijk verval, terwijl het omliggende platteland tot een belangrijke en dynamische producent van exportlinnen uitgroeide. Deze stad wel als testcase genomen voor het bestuderen van de driedelige verhouding tussen consumptieverandering, economische achteruitgang en sociale ongelijkheid binnen een stedelijke context.

Deze studie is hoofdzakelijk gebaseerd op een verzameling staten van goed en boedelbeschrijvingen uit Aalst, verspreid over vier steekproefperiodes: 1670-1681; 1705-1715; 1740-1745 en 1790-1795. De representativiteit van deze bronnen ten opzichte van de totale populatie aan

Aalsterse huishoudens werd geschat door deze huishoudens waar mogelijk *nominatim* te traceren in de fiscale bronnen van omliggende jaren (hoofdstuk I). Daarbij bleek duidelijk dat vooral de armste 20% huishoudens sterk ondervertegenwoordigd waren onder de populatie die staten van goed naliet, maar dat deze verhouding wel relatief constant bleef doorheen de tijd. Aan de hand van een weging op basis van de decielen in de fiscale verdeling werd een methode voorgesteld om, indien gewenst, de representativiteit van de steekproeven te vergroten.

In het tweede hoofdstuk werden de contouren geschetst van de stedelijke economie van Aalst gedurende de late zeventiende en de achttiende eeuw. Niettegenstaande het volledig verdwijnen van de export-georiënteerde nijverheid in de stad, en een relatieve ontvolking ten opzichte van het proto-industrialiserende platteland, bleek het vermogen van de meeste Aalsterse huishoudens tot aan het midden van de achttiende eeuw daar allesbehalve onder te lijden. Het gemiddelde en mediane vermogen hield een hoog niveau aan, en werd daarbij ongetwijfeld sterk gevoed door de aanzienlijke instroom van inkomen uit eerdere investeringen in land en annuïteiten op het platteland. Tijdens de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw veranderde deze situatie aanzienlijk. Een sterke demografische groei, vooral ten gevolge van de aanzwellende rurale emigratie, resulteerde in een toename van het aantal armere huishoudens in de stad. Tegelijkertijd werd de Aalsterse samenleving in toenemende mate gecommercialiseerd. Haar sociaal-economische elite bestond niet langer uit grootgrondbezitters en renteniers maar steeds vaker uit beoefenaars van vrije beroepen en regionale handelaars. De activiteit op de stedelijke markten en (water)wegen groeide aan een uitzonderlijk tempo. De renteniersinkomsten, zowel uit annuïteiten als uit ruraal grondbezit, namen daarentegen over de gehele lijn af. Dit veranderend karakter van de stedelijke economie bracht een geleidelijke, opwaartse tendens in economische ongelijkheid met zich mee die diep in de negentiende eeuw zijn hoogtepunt zou bereiken (hoofdstuk III). In tegenstelling tot de voorgaande periode, nam tijdens de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw ook het gemiddelde vermogen per huishouden sterk af. Het aantal arme huishoudens nam toe, en de krediet economie kwam steeds meer onder druk te staan. Onder deze weinig fortuinlijke omstandigheden ontstonden ondertussen de eerste manufacturen in Aalst, waar arbeid en kapitaal in toenemende mate geconcentreerd werden.

Niettegenstaande het gebrek aan economische en industriële dynamiek tot het midden van de achttiende eeuw, en de terugval in economische levensstandaard en verdieping van de sociale verschillen in de daaropvolgende periode, vonden gedurende deze tijdsspanne ingrijpende wijzigingen in de huiselijke materiële cultuur plaats. Klokken en spiegels, borden en vorken, gordijnen en kasten, lampen en kandelaars, en een uitgebreid assortiment aan servies voor het bereiden en consumeren van koffie en thee, kenden een ongeziene sociale verspreiding in deze periode (hoofdstuk IV). Schijnbaar onafhankelijk van de heersende sociaal-economische omstandigheden in de achttiende-eeuwse stad, volgde Aalst een algemeen patroon van veranderende consumptie mentaliteit dat zich doorheen West-Europa verspreidde. Deze paradox is wellicht kleiner dan ze lijkt: veel van de nieuw geïntroduceerde consumptiegoederen waren relatief goedkoop in vergelijking met de meer traditionele onderdelen van de huiselijke materiële cultuur, zoals het bed en huishoudlinnen. Bovendien ging de grote verspreiding van nieuwe consumptiepatronen gepaard met een substitutieproces waarbij huishoudens in toenemende mate hun toevlucht namen tot goedkopere, maar tegelijkertijd ook minder duurzame consumptiegoederen. De boedelsteekproef uit het einde van de achttiende eeuw, waarin meer relatief arme huishoudens vertegenwoordigd waren, suggereert bovendien dat in tijden van economische druk

de verspreiding van nieuwe consumptiegoederen aanhield, terwijl het bezit van het dure bed- en huishoudlinnen er op achteruit ging.

Dit alles wijst erop dat het opvallend plaats grijpen van een ‘consumptierevolutie’ in het vroegmoderne Aalst minder aanleiding geeft tot het herinterpreteren van het karakter van de achttiende-eeuwse stedelijke economie, dan van het belang van die consumptierevolutie zelf. De contouren van die consumptierevolutie laten zich evenmin eenvoudig herleiden tot een uiting van de nieuwe mogelijkheden tot nutsmaximalisatie die de vroegmoderne economie aan de consument bood. De voornaamste consumptieveranderingen vertoonden slechts weinig overeenkomst met een toegenomen hang naar comfort of gerieflijkheid, maar situeren zich daarentegen voornamelijk in het domein van nieuwe, exotische en modegevoelige objecten enerzijds, en een toegenomen belang van privacy en etiquette anderzijds. Samen reflecteerden beide tendensen een bredere culturele verschuiving naar de expressie van sociale status en distinctie in een tekensysteem dat schijnbaar ontkoppeld werd van de meer traditionele repertoires van aristocratisch decorum en ‘conspicuous consumption.’ Zowel de toegenomen modegevoeligheid als de opkomende cultuur van beleefdheid schreven aan consumptiegoederen een grote mate van sociaal, cultureel en discursief geconstrueerde ‘fetish-waarde’ toe.

Desalniettemin creëerde en bestendigde ook deze nieuwe consumptiecultuur in belangrijke mate sociale distincties en verschillen, net zoals de materiële cultuur van de ‘old luxuries’ dat gedaan had (hoofdstuk V). Het is opvallend, in dat opzicht, dat zo goed als alle nieuwe consumptiegoederen die in de loop van de achttiende eeuw hun intrede deden, dit voor het eerst deden bij de sociaal-economische bovenlaag in Aalst, en slechts geleidelijk aan doorsijpelden tot de lagere sociale groepen. Ondanks de grote aandacht voor goedkope en betaalbare producten, en een voorliefde voor ‘natuurlijke’, ‘eenvoudige’ en ‘bescheiden’ modes, betekende dit geenszins dat sociaal-economische klasse irrelevant was geworden in het bepalen en ordenen van consumptiepatronen. Het is opvallend dat slechts weinig consumptiegoederen beperkt bleven tot een specifieke sociale groep en niet via steeds herhaalde processen van imitatie, emulatie en toeëigening breed verspreid raakten. De grote meerderheid aan nieuwe consumptiepraktijken onderscheidde zich echter door het vermogen om waarde en status op een relatieve, in plaats van een absolute, manier over te brengen. Dit werkte een openheid voor imitatie en substitutie in de hand die in toenemende mate resulteerde in een brede aanvaarding van een modesysteem waarin zo goed als alle sociale klassen deelnamen aan statuscompetitie binnen een hiërarchie van relatieve standsverschillen.

De achttiende-eeuwse ‘consumptierevolutie’ in Aalst behoudt daarmee haar grotendeels ambigu karakter. De sterke en brede verspreiding van thee, koffie, tabak, messen, vorken, spiegels, katoenen stoffen en een handvol andere nieuwe consumptiegoederen, bracht ongetwijfeld voor heel wat huishoudens een verbetering van de materiële levensstandaard met zich mee. Tegelijkertijd, echter, bleven de relatieve verschillen onverminderd groot. In deze context werd gesuggereerd dat de zich ontwikkelende consumptiecultuur in achttiende-eeuws Aalst gelijkenissen vertoonde met het carnavaleske.

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