The transition from early trade-centre to medieval town in Deventer in the light of socio-economic changes 900–1200

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Recent research in the eastern Dutch town of Deventer provided indications of structural changes in building and infrastructure in the 11th, 12th and early 13th century: a period in which the town was at its highlight as an early merchants-centre. In this paper a first, preliminary attempt is made to connect them with models of changes in social and economic structures. The text should be read as first format.

General developments in social structures

In the ruling class of ancient civilisations with an early state development it is possible to distinguish a military element and a religious element. The two elements co-operated as one group, and could be combined in one individual. Apart from the ruling class the population might consist of agrarian food-producers, craftsmen and merchants, which also could combine several functions in one individual. These groups could develop their own ideology, organisations and rules functioning among themselves, but these were always submitted to the rules and organisation managed by the ruling-group, or isolated as foreign element from the rest of society.

This model holds for the Frankish societies in Western Europe up to about 1000 AD. In the 11th century something happened that could be regarded as crucial to the development of what in the twentieth century was called "western civilisation". Having different cultural roots in medival Western Europe (Germanic and Roman), the two elements of the ruling class, the military and the religious, came in conflict with each other: a conflict culminating in the so called investiture controversy in the late 11th and early 12th century. To gain support, both sides provided special rights, among others of autonomy, to the merchants and craftsman. As a consequence, these groups developed into an "independent" "third" class alongside of the first two ruling groups, possessing its own ideology, own jurisdiction, government and defence inside of their own territories: the medieval towns. It is the ideology and mentality of the third class, of which typical elements form the core of twentieth century "westernisation".

The emergence of the medieval town, the settlement in which one can see the identity of the third class to be reflected, in the Germanic regions north-west of the former Roman Empire was preceded by two earlier stages of urban development: the early medieval trade-centre or "port of trade", to use Polanyi's term, followed by the early urban centre.

The ports of trade of the late 7th to the first half of the 9th century in the northern part of the Frankish realms are seen as concentrations of autochthonous and foreign long-distance-traders, together with craftsmen, set up at borders by, and under control of a ruler and not integrated in the internal market.

With the collapse of the Carolingian Empire the "ports of trade" disappeared and in the second half of the 9th century a new type of "early urban centres" emerged. Characterised by a concentration of traders and craftsmen next to a residence of the ruling-class, either secular or clerical, it formed a sort of political centre. Their economic functioning was still

Deventer
10th - 11th century

Legend

1
2
3
4
5

0 50 100 m

dependent on the ruling-class. The merchants and craftsmen were submitted to, or part of the "familia" or social unit of a ruling institution: a monastery, bishop, king or earl. They traded or produced for, or on behalf of their "lord".

The urban centres seem to have functioned at first as nuclei in interregional economic networks (for example of great abbeys) and to a growing extent as link between these networks and emerging local markets. The character of the traded goods shifted from exclusive or prestige goods more and more towards massgoods. The administration was increasingly left to more or less regionally based rulers, like earls or bishops, among others in the framework of the development of the "Reichskirchen"-system in the second half of the 10th and the first half of the 11th century. The 11th century also saw the emergence of associations of "burghers", that would provide the basis of the sociopolitical organisation of autonomous town-communities. Although in some cases these associations already in the late 11th century seem to have

started to fulfil some of their later organisational functions, the formation of the autonomous town-organisation in the Netherlands would last until the early 13th century.

Introduction to the historical development of Deventer

These socio-political changes between the ninth and the 13th century, based on models from the eighties (a.o. Hodges 1982), are reflected in changes in the infrastructure between early medieval trade-centres and medieval towns. These rarely developed uninterruptedly on the same spot. The town of Deventer in the eastern part of the Netherlands shows an uninterrupted development as non-agrarian settlement from the late 8th century onwards. Starting on an uninhabited location as a missionary base in a border area, in the first half of the 9th century it was a seat of an episcopal chapter and a centre in the building of the ecclesiastical network. Between about
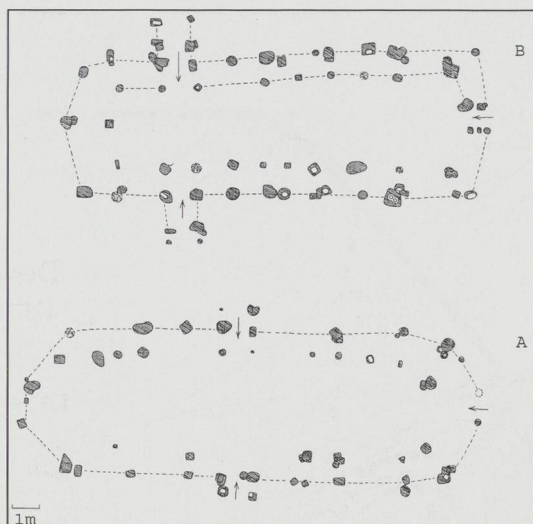
Fig. 2: Deventer, Burseplein 1980–81, preliminary composition of house plans of the type dated to the 9th/10th centuries (drawing: G. van Haaff, R.O.B.).

850 and 880 merchants from the Carolingian main port-of-trade Dorestad settled next to the ecclesiastical seat, taking with them their special royal rights. After a devastating Viking-attack in 882 the complete, hitherto undefended, trading settlement was surrounded with an earthwall by lotharingian kings (fig. 1; Groothedde 1998), making it to their focal point in Lower Lotharingia. After a clear economic boom in the late 9th and first half of the 10th century, it seems to have suffered a temporary set-back in the second half of the 10th century. By the end of that century however, it formed one of the two centres of a royal initiative to a revival of coinage in Lower Lotharingia, one and half centuries after the collapse of Dorestad (Albrecht 1959). In 1046
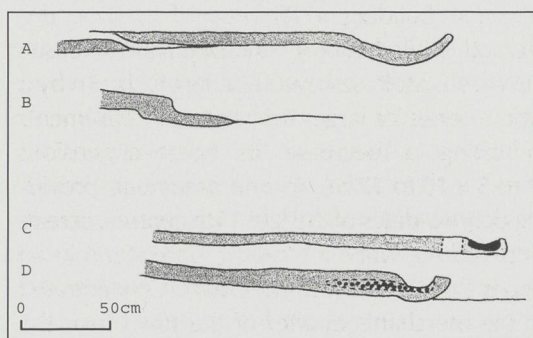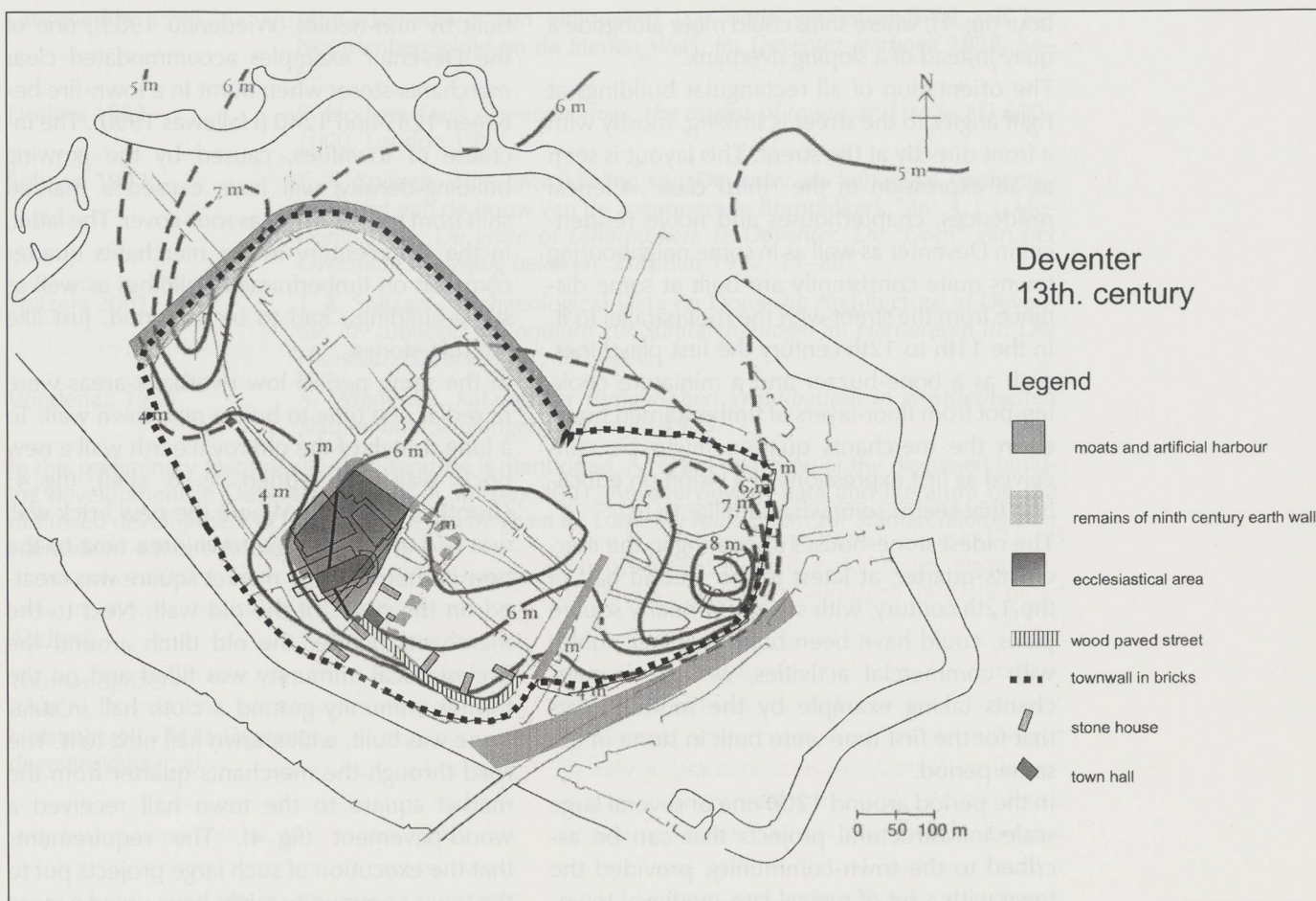

Fig. 3: Deventer, Kleine Overstraat 57 (1988), Part of a profile with a sequence of edges of clay floors with beam impressions, 12th century. A. Floor with a second/reconstruction phase. C. Floor with charred sill beam and vertical post hole. D. Floor consolidated with iron-slag grit (drawing: T. Spitzers).

the town was given to the bishop of Utrecht. As an expression of the new, secular, lordly status of the bishop, in the second half of the 11th century the ecclesiastical centre was transformed into an impressive complex of stone-buildings with a large church and a bishops palace, together forming an 85 m wide front to the river (Spitzers 1992). When in 1123 the inhabitants supported the emperor against the bishop, they received from him freedom of some taxes due to the chapter. The inhabitants apparently already disposed of most of the other privileges, usually obtained by urban communities. Probably the exceptional rights that the royal traders brought with them from Dorestad in the 9th century evolved into the fully developed "Deventer town-rights" that served in 1230 as an example for several newly raised towns. In the 16th century the town-community still regarded itself as "free, imperial city" with exceptional sovereignty. The construction of a 20 m wide, defensive, dry moat by the bishop around his yard, dated to the 12th century (Groothedde 1996), might be seen as his reaction to the split between the bishop and the town-community.

Archaeological Data

The merchants of the 9th and early 10th century built their houses just as they had done in Dorestad, using the same building techniques and traditions as in rural settlements. The construction of the roofs was supported by earthfast posts, dug into the ground, showing house-plans with a remarkable resemblance to those known from Dorestad (fig. 2; Spitzers 2001). With dimensions of about 6 x 17 m the houses were of about the same size as a small farmhouse. In Dorestad, which was divided into narrow strips of land at right angles to the river, the houses as a consequence were set with their axis transversily to the river (Van Es 1980). In Deventer the houses stood at right angles to the wall or the preceding boundary-ditch, thus forming the basis to the late medieval lay out with houses transversily to the streets. Roofsupports and entrances outside of both of the long side walls indicate the existence of a space more than a few meters wide between successive houses. Somewhere in the 11th century a rather rigor-

Deventer 13th. century

Legend

▨ moats and artificial harbour

▧ remains of ninth century earth wall

■ ecclesiastical area

▥ wood paved street

▪▪▪ townwall in bricks

□ stone house

▫ town hall

0   50 100 m

N

ous shift can be noticed towards another building techniques: timber-framing. Without any foundation in the ground, timberframes were set directly with their sill beams on clay floors, often showing beam impressions at their edges, where some were consolidated with gravel, slag- or tufa-grit (fig. 3). Earthfast post constructions became very rare and confined to backyard-areas.

In Deventer ascertained from the second half of the 11th century, the use of timberframing in this period is here regarded as a sign of urbanisation and a change towards a market-economy with a growth of specialisation. It is not known from contemporary rural sites and in earlier times only from the Roman civilisation with its urbanised culture. It implicates an increase in the volume of wood and loam being used as building materials, as well as an increase in skill and specialised labour necessary to prepare and set up the frame-constructions, made of squared beams. This again implicates a growth of building-costs, invested by individual merchants in their private infrastructure,

and a growth of work for specialised craftsmen in the building branch.

The new techniques also facilitated a more efficient use of the limited space inside the earth wall, enabling multi-storeyed building as well as reducing the distance between the buildings, both being traceable. Lateral roofsupports and entrance-constructions disappeared and the common building-width seemed to have decreased, while building- and population-density increased. Multi-storeyed building is shown by a whole series of large, timberframed basements indicating a decrease in house-dimensions (4 to 5 x 10 to 12 m). In one basement, providing dendro-dates of the late 11th century, cereals were stored, while a weaving loom stood in an upper floor when it burnt down. Concentrated in the merchants quarter of the town near the riverside, the basements indicate a growth of individual storing capacity in the houses of the merchants themselves, possibly related to the growth of bulk trade. Such a growth of bulk trade might be reflected as well in the construction (around or before 1200) of a new, artificial har-

Fig. 4: Town centre of Deventer with a reconstruction of the 13th century lay out and 8th century relief (drawing: T. Spitzers, BAAC).

bour (fig. 1), where ships could moor alongside a quay instead of a sloping riverbank.

The orientation of all rectangular buildings at right angles to the street is striking, mostly with a front directly at the street. This layout is seen as an expression of the "third class". Clerical residences, chapterhouses and noble residences in Deventer as well as in some neighbouring towns quite consistently are built at some distance from the street with the roof parallel to it. In the 11th to 12th century the first playthings, such as a bone-buzzer and a miniature cooking-pot from floor-layers of timberframed houses in the merchants quarter, might be conceived as first expressions of a vision on education that seems somewhat familiar to us.

The oldest stone-houses appearing in the merchants-quarter, at latest in the second half of the 12th century, with square or nearly square plans, could have been built by lower nobles with commercial activities, as well as merchants taking example by the motte-towers that for the first time were built in stone in the same period.

In the period around 1200 one or several large scale infrastructural projects that can be ascribed to the town-community, provided the town with a set of typical late-medieval town-commodities, while in the same time a clear increase can be recognised in the costs invested in private building.

Rectangular stone houses appeared before 1230 in the merchants quarter, with their gable-ends onto the street, probably of the type of "Saalgeschoß"-house. In Cologne, known to be built by non-nobles (Wiedenau 1983), one of the Deventer examples accommodated clear merchants-stores when burnt in a town-fire between 1235 and 1240 (Hallewas 1990). The increase of townfires, caused by the growing building-density, will have caused a marked shift from reed to slates as roof-cover. The latter, in the 13th century in the merchants quarter common on timberframed buildings as well as stone-buildings, had to be imported, just like the tufa-stones.

In the same period low riverbank-areas were raised at one time to built a new town wall. To a long stretch of the old royal earth wall a new brick wall was added as a shell (fig. 4; Groothedde 1998). Where the new brick wall was laid around a new town-area next to the new harbour, a large market square was created on the place of the old wall. Next to the merchants quarter the old ditch around the ecclesiastical immunity was filled and on the former immunity-ground a cloth hall in tufa-stone was built, with a town hall next to it. The road through the merchants quarter from the market square to the town hall received a wood-pavement (fig. 4). The requirements that the execution of such large projects put to the town-community might have urged a more elaborate organisational-structure with a town-government and a town hall, rather than the informal gatherings of the merchants guild. Thus the transformation-process from early urban centre to medieval town, that started somewhere in the 11th century, was completed in the early 13th century.

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In this preliminary text not all used literature is mentioned. A recent overview of the discussed building development in Deventer is given in Spitzers 2001. An overview of data and literature on the discussed development of infrastructure will be given in: *Lübecker Kolloquium zur Stadtarchäologie im Hanseraum 4* (Lübeck 2003).

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