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*Alternative food supplies, alternative currencies?
Food deliveries by tenant farmers in the Late Medieval Low Countries*

Alternative food supplies in late medieval cities¹

In 1493 Meester Jan de Herdde leased his farm in Aartselaar to Peter de Schoesitter and his wife Katlinen vanden Loeke for a duration of twelve years. The farm, located about 10km from Antwerp, and named *de Hoeve te Hyselaer*, was comprised of 6.9 hectares (ha.) of land, field, pasture, and orchard. The annual rent was 9 pounds (lb.), one half to pay at the fair of St John in June, the other half at Christmas. But the tenant also had to pay 6 *sister* of rye (roughly 1743 litres), a fat lamb for Easter, and half of a fat castrated ram for the feast of the Assumption, a central holiday in the town of Antwerp. Last but not least, Jan also asked «on top of the rent, 2 *corven* of the best apples grown on the farm, irrespective whether some have grown on the farm or not.» The same year, Marie sMaechs, the widow of Reyners van Ursele (member of the political elite of Antwerp), with Meester Peter vander Voort, lawyer and member of the Council of Brabant, as warden, leased her farm named *tGoet der Houstraten* and her pasture named *den Rijbelaerts beemdt*, both in Herselt (about 40km from Antwerp) to Peteren Gheerts. For 6 years, Marie asked in exchange for the tenure of the farm 3 lb., 13 *sister* and 2 *muddeken* of rye (c. 4645 litres) to be delivered in mid-March. Additionally, the tenant had to bring 300 faggots of fire wood. Finally, again in 1493, Willem son of Aert, a fish seller, leased a farm named *de Hoeve ter Borchstraten* to Baven van Vorspoel and his wife Alijten Jan. This farm possessed 2.6 ha. and was located in Mortsel, 5km outside the city walls, and was leased for a duration of 9 years. The rent included 6 lb. and 20 *sister* of rye, that is 5810 litres of grain, to be delivered at Christmas. In the contract was specified that the owner kept the house with the orchard on the grounds for his own use.²

The arrangements of these fifteenth-century Antwerp leasehold contracts are striking for their combination of rents in cash and in kind. But how should we

¹ The research leading to this article has received funding by the University of Antwerp Research Council TOPBOF Food from Somewhere project. We thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, and dr. Kathleen Pribyl for suggesting several improvements. See also Soens 2019.

² City Archives Antwerp (CAA), SR 103, fol°154r; CAA, SR 103°198r; CAA, SR 103, fol°227r.

understand these deliveries of rye, wood or even apples? Are they some form of alternative currency, and if so all of them? Or should we rather interpret some deliveries as part of a symbolic exchange between landlord or tenant, which complemented the economic exchange of rent? Alternatively, we could hypothesize that the deliveries of food were part of more complex household provisioning systems, where food became in a way isolated from its purely monetary value. Finally, each contract displayed its own specificity. While Marie asked for a wood delivery, Jan seemed rather to look forward to eating apples from his lands beside receiving parts of his rent in kind throughout the year, and Willem was focused on receiving a large quantity of rye. Can we detect a form of agency on behalf of either the urban landlord or the rural tenant in stipulating the arrangements of the lease?

This contribution questions the importance of food deliveries by tenant farmers to urban landlords in the fifteenth-century Low Countries. We aim to understand when, where and for whom food was preferred as alternative currency, and whether this preference for food declined as cities grew and became more integrated in inter-regional food trades. The transition from demesne farming to leasehold is often seen as a powerful driver of monetarization and commercialisation of the rural economy (and hence food production). If the lease was expressed in cash, tenants were forced to market their surplus in order to pay the lease, except if stipulated otherwise. Moreover, the competitive character of short-term leasehold farming, also induced farmers to enhance their productivity, which could be achieved by scale-enlargement and specialisation. In the neo-marxist tradition of Robert Brenner, the emphasis is laid on the forced character of this process: in order to survive in the 'rat race' for leases, farmers were forced to innovate and specialize. In contrast, one could also stress that tenant farmers enjoyed a large degree of freedom in the exploitation of their farms, and hence could respond to market incentives. But the result was the same: leasehold farming is often associated with increased monetarization and commercialization (Soens, Thoen 2008).

At the same time however, the transition from demesne farming to leasehold did not stop direct supplies to the households of landlords in the later Middle Ages. Tenant farmers supplied their landlords with a variable range of foodstuffs and other products and services, ranging from an occasional fattened pig in autumn to substantial deliveries of cereals throughout the year. Sometimes this was stipulated in the leasehold contracts, but sometimes monetary leases were also (partly) paid for through in-kind deliveries. Such exchanges are best known for large farmers, and large landlords, and often framed in the elaboration of reciprocal ties between 'dynasties' of farmers in the countryside and increasingly urban-based landlords (Vervaeke 2012). Rather than stimulating a permanent competition for leases, ecclesiastical institutions and elite families had an evident interest in promoting a sustainable, long-term, relationship with their large tenants, which also acted as their 'agents' in the countryside. Large tenant farmers were often 'middlemen' between absentee landlords and the village community, collecting rents and tithes, mediating in the marketing of the rural surplus or credit transactions (Lambrecht 2003). Alternatively, a select number of tenant farms might be retained as 'food farms'. While most farmers paid their rent in cash, these food farms - often substantial holdings relatively close to the

seat of the household or institution - continued to ensure the provisioning of the household (with food, but also with firewood and transport services).

While the persistence of such in-kind deliveries is well documented, at least for ecclesiastical institutions, their importance as total food supplies is more difficult to assess, and so is their relationship to the market in food. Were such in-kind supplies a residual phenomenon, restricted to the world of elite and institutional households? Were they used as a true alternative currency, or did their value always refer to an intrinsic monetary value? As Matthieu Arnoux recently argued for late medieval Normandy, the persistence of rents and annuities in kind, was not an archaic relic of a cash-poor 'natural' economy, but could foster the commercialization and even the monetarization of the countryside, as the value of the rents was established at the grain market, the grain itself was traded on the market (or replaced market purchases), the counterpart of the rent was a cash loan and/or the rents-in-kind were traded as 'grain market derivatives' (Arnoux 2021).

Additionally, it is possible that not only extremely wealthy individuals sought out direct food supplies. As cities expanded, a variable, but often substantial share of the land in the immediate surroundings of the city was owned by urban-based landlords, both institutions – from churches and abbeys to hospitals and charitable foundations – and private households. The origins and importance of urban landownership on the countryside was highly different from region to region, but it tended to grow over time, in parallel to capital accumulation in towns. Seen primarily as capital investment – coined *La trahison de la Bourgeoisie* by Fernand Braudel (1949) – it has been mostly studied in terms of its monetary return on investment, and its impact on both wealth inequality and agrarian development. Both the extent and function of rural landownership by urban landlords might be very different from region to region, and from social group to social group. Part of the urban landownership might indeed originate as capital investment, but another part might originate from inheritances. Cities saw a constant influx of migrants from the countryside. Part of them might be landless and moving to the city to escape rural poverty, but others might have inherited at least some land from their parents and relatives, especially in regions of partible inheritance, which in the Low Countries remained the standard in the late medieval and early modern period (Van Bavel 2009). In each of these configurations, urban landownership always entailed the 'possibility' of direct food deliveries to urban households.

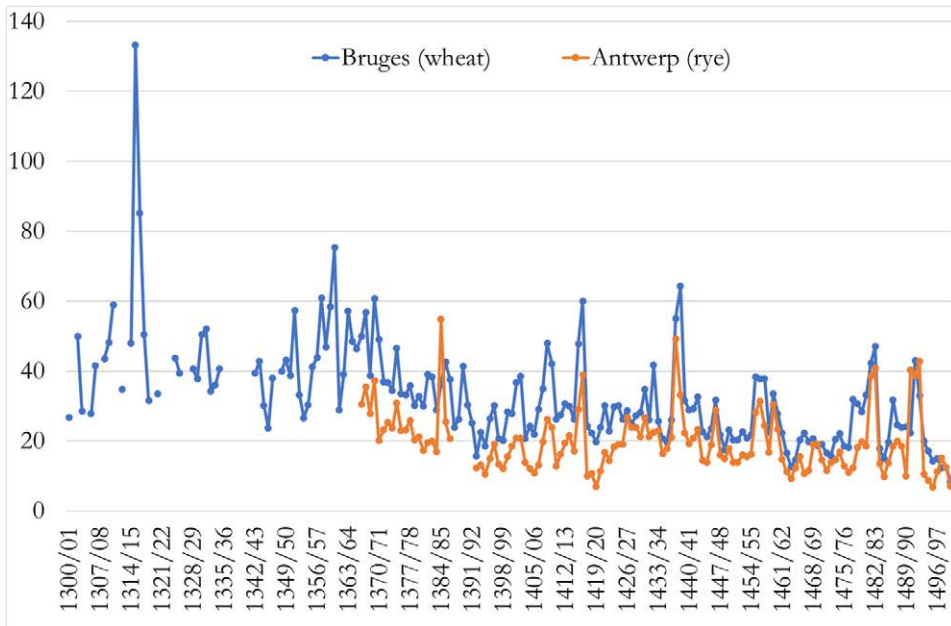
While reconstructing urban landownership is already challenging for the later Middle Ages, it is even more difficult to understand what urban households – like those of Marie, Jan and Willem who have opened this article – did with their land: did they keep this land as part of capital investment, or familial patrimonial strategies? Or was this land actually part of their food provisioning strategies, either on a structural base or in times of food shortage? And if so, did their importance decline with the commercialization of the rural economy and the expansion of (regional and interregional food markets)? Or did these direct food supplies continue to act as a buffer in times of food crises, and if so, for whom? These questions will be central in this article, which focuses on the post-Black Death period, a period which is both associated with a return of more localized, 'alternative' food supplies (Thirsk 2000), but also with a decisive push towards commercialization in the rural economy, and

the expansion of long-distance food trades. But how did food consumption and provisioning actually look like in the post-Black Death period?

Urban food provisioning after the Black Death

As European population declined in the wake of the Black Death and its recurrent 'echo-epidemics', the theoretical balance between population and food supplies was structurally altered, and on average, the price for basic foodstuffs did decline. However, this was not a universal nor a straightforward process. To begin with, cereals became cheaper, but not immediately after 1349, but rather in the 1370s. Only by the last quarter of the fourteenth centuries, cereals were indeed cheaper than before the Black Death.

Fig. 1. The price for cereals in Bruges and Antwerp, 1300-1499 (grammes of silver per hectolitres)³



Secondly, the spectre of famine did not disappear: the fifteenth century saw violent price shocks on the food market. As figure 1 shows, the Low Countries saw

³ Source: fourteenth-century data for Bruges based on S. ESPEEL, *Prices and crises: the grain economy in fourteenth-century Flanders*, Antwerp 2021 (PhD thesis University of Antwerp). fifteenth-century data based on A. VERHULST, *Prijzen van granen, boter en kaas te Brugge volgens de 'slag' van het Sint-Donatianskapittel (1348-1801)*, in *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant*, ed. C. VERLINDEN AND

repeated grain crises in 1415-17, 1437-39, 1481-83 and 1490-93. None of these crises matched the violence of the Great Famine of 1315-17, but the price for grain on the market doubled or even tripled, during a longer period of time, which was undoubtedly challenging for all households depending on the market for their grain (or bread or beer) provisioning. In part these fifteenth century grain crises were the result of climate-induced harvest failures, but they also interfered with warfare, plague and disruptions in interregional trade (Van den Broeck, Soens 2017).

Thirdly, food consumption did not remain unaltered. While the improvement of material living conditions associated with the 'post-Black Death' 'Golden Age of Labour' was far from universal, meat (and dairy and fish) did increase in importance, at the expense of cereals, which however remained the basic foodstuff for most of the population, with declining consumption of boiled cereals and bread compensated to a certain extent by increased beer consumption (Soens, Thoen 2010).

Fourthly, the post-Black Death decline in urban population densities, might have resulted in a drop in the aggregate demand for food, and hence hampered the commercialization of agriculture (as argued by Bruce Campbell (2016, 364-70) for England). This did not mean that food was no longer allocated via the market. In the many small towns and market boroughs of fifteenth century England food provisioning remained market based, with a surprising variety of bakers, butchers, fishmongers and brewers all competing for customers, in what James Davis (2011, 456-457) has called a 'pragmatic moral economy'. Buyers and sellers knew and trusted one another, and profit making was expected to remain within certain limits, with a common understanding of the 'public good'.

Fifthly, long-distance food trades did not simply collapse in the fifteenth century, in response to a decline in demand. Certainly, as Blanchard (1986) has argued for the cattle trade, well into the 1470s the rising urban demand for meat « was satisfied through the intermediary of regional market centres » with minimal and declining importance of 'international' networks, with the exception of the cattle trade linking the Hungarian plains to Frankfurt and Venice. By the end of the fifteenth century this was changing again, and a continental European cattle trade started to expand, linking Denmark and Eastern Europe with the cities of West and Central Europe. The same pattern is true for grain exports from the Baltic. Before 1500, the Baltic grain exports to both Amsterdam (and Holland) and the southern Low Countries, remained overall limited, but at the end of the fifteenth century the onset of the spectacular sixteenth-century expansion was already visible (Unger 1999; Tielhof 2001). Nevertheless, other long-distance food trades already witnessed expansion in the fifteenth century: in continental Northwestern Europe this was certainly the case for the herring trade (and North Sea fisheries in general), the wine trade along the Rhine and the trade in (hopped) beers.

Considering this changing foodscape of the fifteenth century, what place could there be for direct deliveries from tenant farmers to urban households? In what follows, the preliminary results of a broader enquiry into 'alternative' food supplies in late medieval cities, will be presented, concentrating on two cities at the top of the

E. SCHOLLIERS, Brugge 1965, pp. 3-70; Antwerp data based on H. VAN DER WEE, *Prices and Wages in Antwerp & Belgium, 1366-1913*, online via <<http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/allen.rar>>.

urban hierarchy in the Southern Low Countries, but with opposite demographic trends in the fifteenth century: Ghent in Flanders, and Antwerp in Brabant.

Two cities, three agro-systems

The urban network in the fifteenth century Low Countries was polynuclear, with a few larger cities exceeding 20,000 inhabitants and many small towns (populations below 2000 inhabitants) and medium-sized ones (between 2000 and 10,000) (Stabel 1997; Blondé, Boone and Van Bruaene 2018). With a population slightly declining from above 60,000 inhabitants in the fourteenth century to c. 40,000 or 50,000 inhabitants in the fifteenth century, Ghent remained the largest city of the Low Countries and, with Paris and London, one of the largest cities north of the Alps. For its grain supplies, fifteenth-century Ghent could rely on the Scheldt (and Leie) trade bringing in cereals from grain exporting regions in Southern Flanders, Cambrésis, Hainaut and Artois. In the single city of Douai around 723,000 hl of bread grain were traded every year around 1400, enough to feed around 200,000 adults on a year-round base (Van Bavel 2010, 337). Ghent was the single most important consumer of this grain (though certainly not the only one), and via the Scarpe and the Scheldt, the grain ships could reach the city.

At the start of the fifteenth century, Antwerp was still much smaller than Ghent. Between 1330 and 1350 the city had witnessed demographic and economic expansion, and its population for the first time reached about 10,000 inhabitants. The second half of the fourteenth century was more difficult. Apart from the general upheaval caused by the plague, the Brabantine city was annexed by the count of Flanders in 1357, and would remain politically separated from its Brabantine hinterland until 1405. Nevertheless, in 1400, the city already counted 2805 houses (including 155 *hofsteden* or farms), which indicated a population of around 12-13,000 people, and hence a growth compared to the pre-Black Death situation (Van Gerven 1998; Van Damme et al. 2022). Throughout the fifteenth century Antwerp would be one of the very few Northwestern Europe that witnessed sustained growth. This was reflected in a new, eastward expansion of the urban territory in the early fifteenth century. While the countryside, and the small cities of Brabant went into a severe industrial and agricultural crisis from c. 1430 to c. 1490, Antwerp saw an influx of migrants, and an expansion of commercial and shipping activities. By 1437 the city's population had reached about 20,000 inhabitants, and by 1480 33,000 (Van der Wee 1963; Limberger 2008, 62).

However, no city is an island: while both Flanders and Brabant were densely urbanized, the majority of the population was still living on the countryside. Three major agricultural regions can be distinguished in the hinterland of Ghent and Antwerp. They differed in their physical environment, but most of all also in the social organization of economic production and both elements are adequately captured in the idea of 'social agro-systems' as developed by Erik Thoen and first tested on this part of the Low Countries (Thoen 2004). The region known as Inland Flanders, is the largest and best known of the three. Here, is the birthplace of the so-called Flemish or Dutch Husbandry, a region dominated by peasant smallholdings, interlaced by

some larger (tenant) farms. The region covers the southern and eastern part of the former county of Flanders, including the region of Lille (today in Northern France), but also the western part of the former Duchy of Brabant, south of Antwerp. The peasant smallholders of Inland Flanders enjoyed secure property rights to their land, but their holdings were prone to fragmentation, and only proto-industrial activities, and services for the few larger farms made them viable. Population densities were high, and they remained relatively high after the Black Death. Each village knew a few larger farms, which had a pivotal role in the economic (and often also political) life of the peasant community. Some of these larger tenant farms were the remnants of former demesne farms, owned by noble or ecclesiastical landlords, but many were also constituted by urban landlords in the course of the later Middle Ages, taking over demesnes from impoverished rural nobility, merging individual plots into larger holdings. In this regard, Thoen speaks of a « first offensive of the bourgeoisie as landlords » in the later Middle Ages, followed by a second one in the 17th century (Thoen 2001, 130-32). As rural population density in Inland Flanders increased, and proto-industry became more important, the region exported less and less food. When the harvest failed, villages in inland Flanders became net-importers of grain, as demonstrated by Van Onacker (2019, 105) for the hunger year 1556. In the latter year, the Ghent aldermen restricted the grain which could be sold to villagers to 1 *meuken* (2.2 litres) per day, indicating an inverted grain flow from town to countryside.

Compared to Inland Flanders, the coastal marshes of the North Sea evolved in a completely different direction and remained net exporters of both cereals and cattle. Of course, the physical environment was different, with elaborate water management infrastructures needed to allow (intensive) exploitation of the area. Around 1300, the coastal marshes had been densely populated as well, but from the fourteenth century onwards, the political (and military) power of the coastal communities was broken, and property rights to land shifted to absentee landlords, with a major role for urban capital. Leasehold became very prominent in the coastal marshes, and in the second half of the fifteenth century, the concentration of landed property was followed by scale enlargement of holdings as well. The coastal marshes of Flanders and the North of Brabant turned into a cradle of ‘polder capitalism’ (Thoen, Soens 2015). The tenant farms of the coastal marshes increasingly specialized in a few products, sometimes more oriented in cattle or dairy farming, sometimes more towards cereal products.

East of Antwerp a third ‘social agro-system’ can be found: the Campine area was characterized by its extensive heathlands, which in the later Middle Ages were owned and managed collectively by peasant communities. Campine villagers were smallholders with secure property rights to land, like in Inland Flanders, but in contrast to the latter region, they enjoyed access to the heathland commons as an additional source of income alongside private holdings. On these sandy grounds, the fertility of a small infield could be guaranteed by using nutrients from the large heathland-outfield. This was a communally organized, and ‘inclusive’ peasant society, with limited space for capital accumulation. Campine villages were, however, far from autarkic: with their (many) horses they provided labour services on the roads from the Rhine to Antwerp. Moreover, as land was limited in the area, there was a constant migration –

partly seasonal, partly permanent- from the Campine Area to the city (Van Onacker 2017; De Keyser 2018).

Urban landownership on the countryside

For both Ghent and Antwerp urban landownership is well studied, although the data are incomplete, especially for the fifteenth century. Francine De Nave (1978) studied the landed properties of Antwerp citizens around 1400. Antwerp citizens owned land and farms on the one hand, and annuities on the other, most of them situated to the north (in the polder area) and the south (in the inland area) of the city. More than 83% of the properties were situated within 13km from the town. As more than 60% of the dues were payable in kind, and money rents almost solely limited to the immediate periphery, Limberger (2008, 42-45) concluded from these data that «this underlines the importance of landed property in the countryside as a means of immediate supply - mainly food, but also raw materials - which was not subject to price shifts». Fast-forwarding to the mid-sixteenth century, the relative share of Antwerp citizens in the landed property in the surroundings of the city, becomes clearer due to the registration of landed property for fiscal purposes. Limberger analysed the data for four villages in the ‘inland’ hinterland of Antwerp:

Tab. 1. **Distribution of land in four villages south and east of Antwerp in 1570**

<i>% of land by social group</i>	Schoten	Edegem	Boechout	Duffel-ter-Elst
Peasants	14	16	9	23
Nobility	0	14	10	11
Townsmen	22	29	33	0
Clergy	52	26	31	44
Unknown	12	15	17	22
<i>Distance from Antwerp</i>	c. 10 km	c. 10 km.	c. 10 km.	c. 20 km.

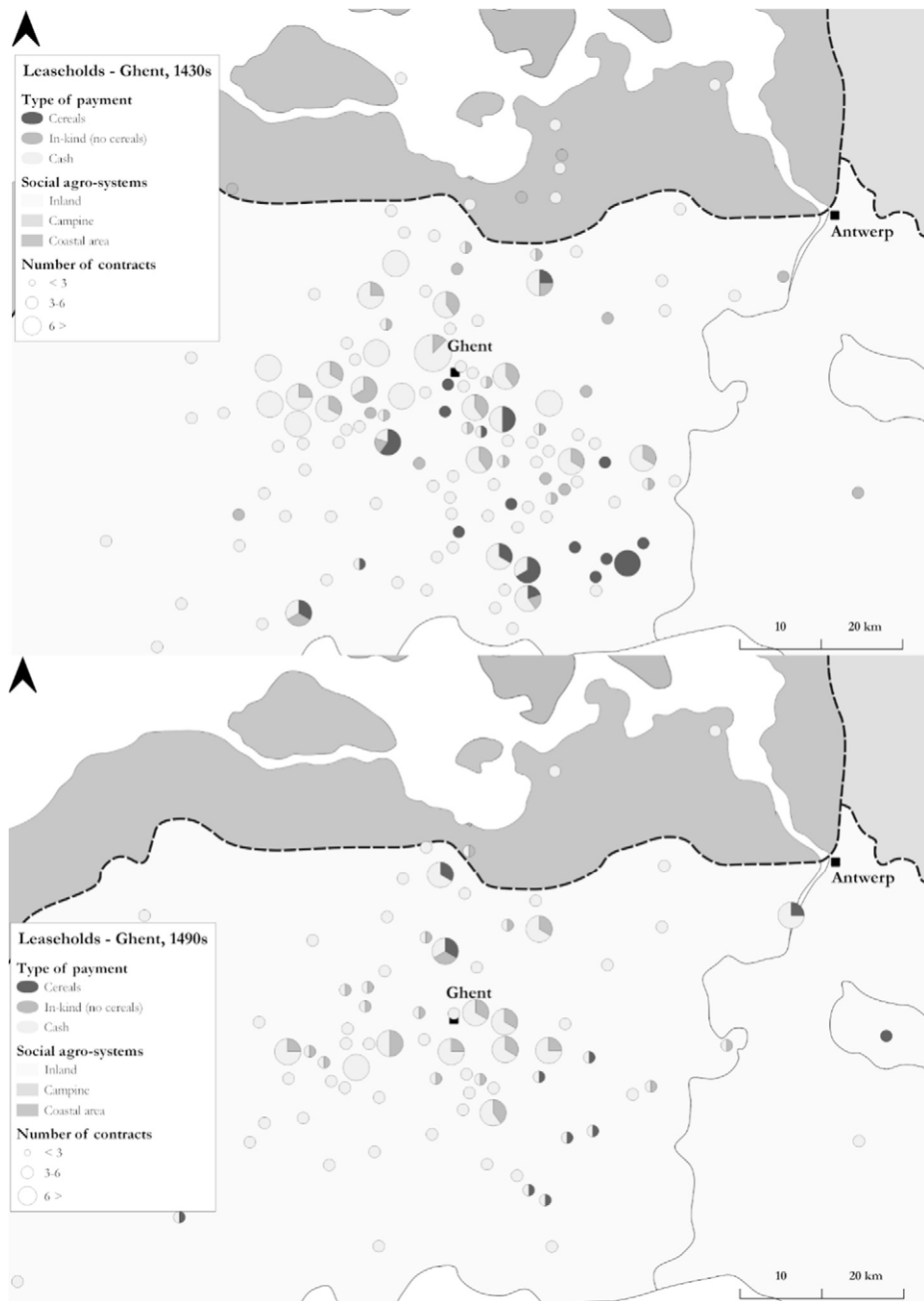
With the exception of Duffel – which was both further away from the city, and had turned into a proto-industrial centre in the sixteenth century (still remembered in the name ‘duffle coat’), townsmen were very visible as landowners in each of these villages. They owned about 22 to 33 % of the land. This is more than for instance in mid-sixteenth-century Holland, where Van Bavel (2009) observed between 13% (in North-Holland) and 25% (in Central Holland) of rural land being in the hands of urban landlords. At the same time, we have to take into account that the remainder of the land was owned primarily by ecclesiastical institutions and noble families, most of them Antwerp-based: the Collegiate Church of our Lady; the abbeys of St. Michael and St. Bernards (in Hemiksem near Antwerp) owned huge estates in the Antwerp periphery, and so did the multitude of charitable institutions, convents and churches

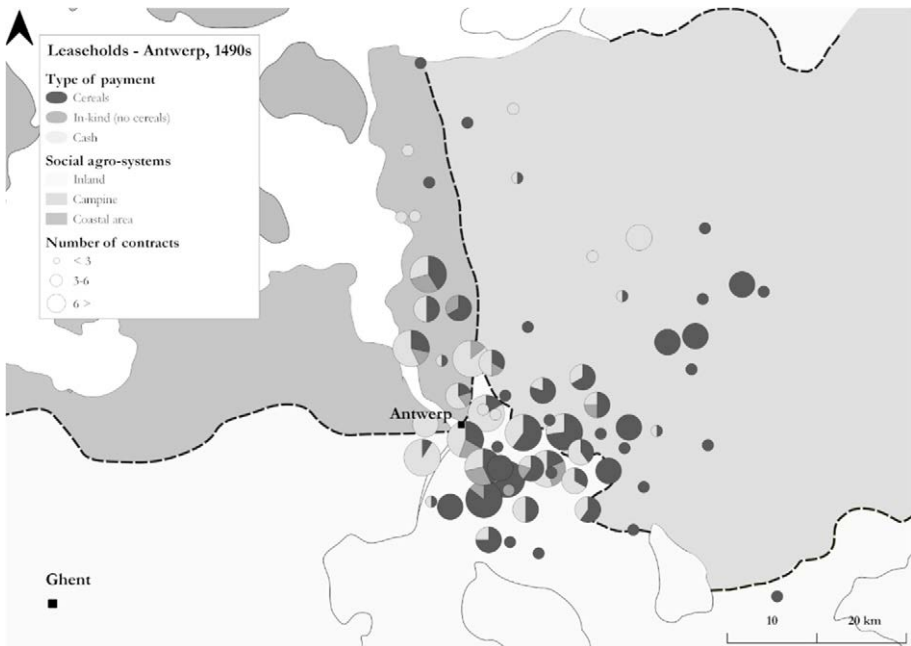
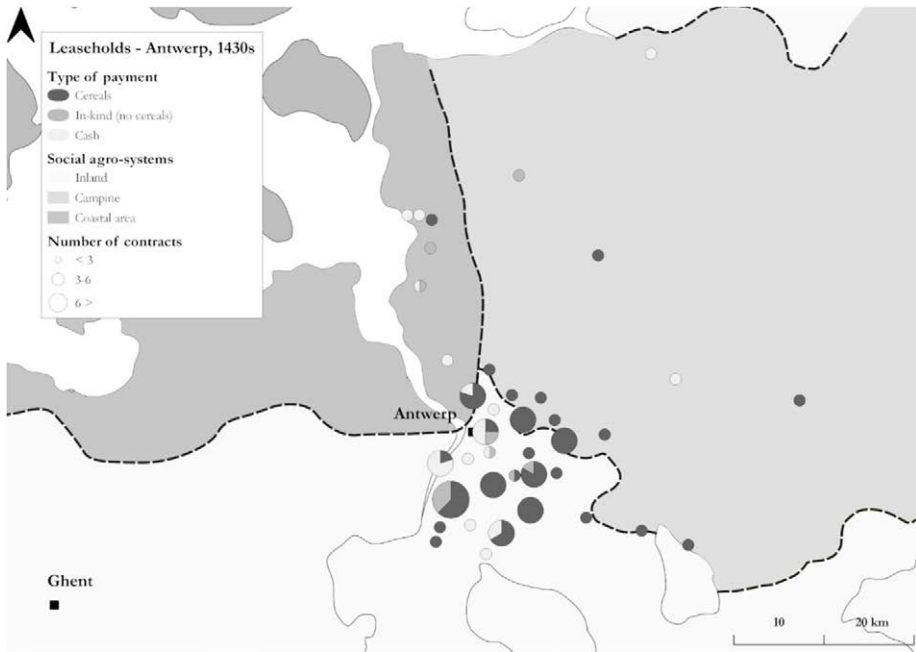
in Antwerp which massively expanded their landed properties in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

For Ghent, probate inventories offer a solid base to reconstruct the expansion of urban landownership from 1349 onwards. These probate inventories concern the inheritance of orphans, after the death of one or both of the parents. Probably around 10% of all adult deaths in the city resulted in a probate inventory, with a clear social bias towards the middle class and the urban elite, but nevertheless also including many examples of ordinary members of the craft guilds, and even poor citizens with few or no possessions. In their contribution to the 2019 Datini study week, Stef Espeel and Sam Geens reanalysed the fourteenth-century probate inventories, showing how Ghent citizens expanded their landed property in the countryside, although in a rather unequal way: in the poorest quintile of probate inventories, land possession declined from 36.4 % of the probate inventories in 1349-55 to 23.9 % in 1395-1400. In the third, fourth and fifth quintile it expanded significantly (to 70.4%; 77.6% and 88.9% of all inventories in 1395-1400 respectively). The geographic area of the landed possessions also expanded, primarily to the south of Ghent in the Inland Flanders area, but also in the 'polder' areas north and northeast of the city. The geographic radius of urban land acquisition exceeded 25km, which is higher than for many other late medieval cities. So, by the late fourteenth century, many members of the Ghent middle classes owned some land in the countryside (Espeel, Geens 2020, 419, 428). With median values of 3.3 hectares for the third and 7.69 for the fourth quintile, these were not huge estates, but nevertheless might have entitled them to a steady source of cash ... or food.

In what follows, we will use leasehold contracts to analyse the importance of rents-in-kind as a form of alternative currency. The serial registration of the leasehold contracts in both cities, provides a representative overview of urban landownership. In the fifteenth century, the contrast between both cities is still striking: the Antwerp leases remain confined to the immediate hinterland of the city, whereas Ghent-based owners also own land and farms 20 or 30km away from the city (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Lease contracts for rural properties registered by the Ghent (this page) and Antwerp (next page) aldermen: 1430s (above) and 1490s (below), indicating whether the lease involves payments in-kind, in cereals or in cash only





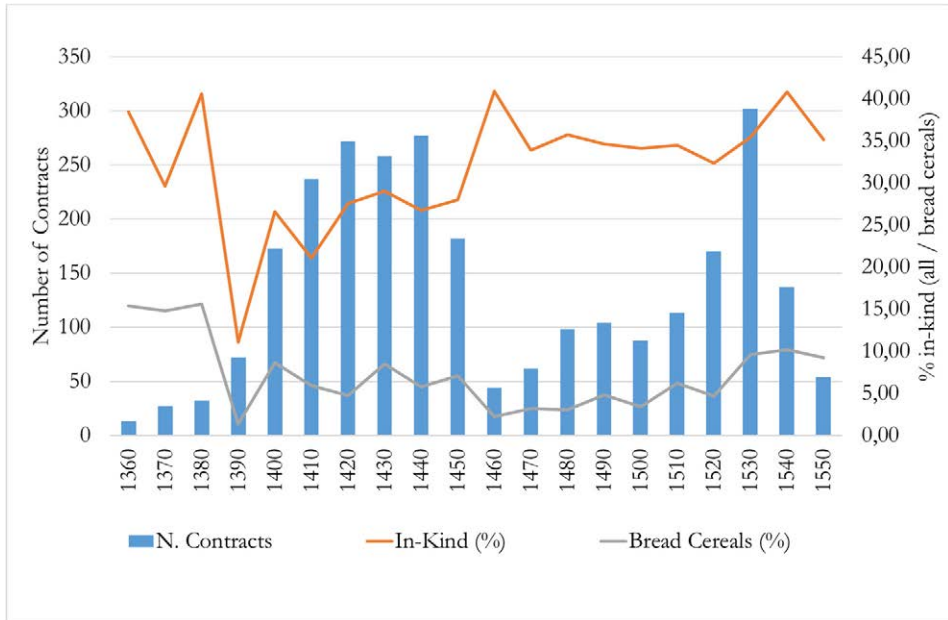
Leases in-kind: food from the farm to the city?

In both Ghent and Antwerp transactions involving real estate were often registered by the cities' aldermen. The so-called '*wettelijke passeringen*' or 'voluntary condemnations' developed into a separate branch of the municipal law (next to the civil and criminal law), resulting in a voluminous series of deeds/registers dating back to 1339 in Ghent and 1394 in Antwerp.⁴ These registers contain sales and gifts of real estates, credit operations involving real estate (including annuities), testaments or bequests, and a wide variety of contracts which often – but not always – involved real estate. Lease contracts were registered as well, typically for owners living in the city, although a minority of leases involves owners and tenants without an obvious link to the city. There was, however, no obligation to register leases outside the municipal jurisdictions, so the contracts registered always represented but a fraction of the total number of lease contracts involving urban landlords. After all, there were several competing administrations – and notaries – who also were willing to register a lease. As most lease contracts involved land and farms outside the direct territorial jurisdiction of the aldermen, part of them might have been registered by other – rural – courts. Leaseholds did not even require registration to be binding. Especially for small plots of land, we assume that many leases were still based on an informal agreement, which might – or might not be – supported by a written document. As leases expired after a short period of time, their preservation for eternity was not imperative.

Nonetheless, in both Ghent and Antwerp, it became quite common to ask the aldermen to sanction a lease. The number of leases registered by the Ghent aldermen suggests that the willingness to do so depended on the political influence of the City of Ghent: the number of leaseholds registered perfectly mirrors the turbulent political history of the city, which suffered military defeats after its open revolt against its Burgundian-Habsburg rulers in 1453 and 1540. After these events, the urban privileges were partly revoked, and this was followed by an implosion of the number of lease contracts registered by the aldermen (Fig. 3).

⁴ City Archives Ghent, Series 301, Jaarregisters Schepenen van de Keure; CAA, SR 1 and following.

Fig 3. Leaseholds registered by the Ghent Aldermen (*Schepenbank van de Keure*) before 1559 with share of leases involving payment in kind and share of leases involving payment in cereals⁵



This overview for Ghent is based on a systematic survey by Achiel De Vos (1958-1960, 8-9), which includes a brief synopsis of the conditions stipulated in the contract. De Vos did not include houses and holdings below 3 *bunder* (c. 4 hectare) in this survey, as he did not consider these smallholdings ‘independent agricultural exploitations’. For Antwerp, a similar overview of lease contracts is not available, but *all* acts registered by the aldermen are currently being indexed.⁶ The number of contracts increases from c. 500 per year in the late fourteenth century, to c. 2000 in the 1420s and c. 4000 in the 1520s. Only a fraction of these were leases of land or farms: about 20 per year in the late fourteenth century, and about 70 to 100 in the 1420s as well as in the 1520s (although with considerable annual variations). These numbers were significantly higher than in Ghent, even in the early fifteenth century. This is remarkable as fifteenth-century Antwerp had only a third of Ghent’s population, and the rural landownership of its citizens and ecclesiastical institutions was certainly less impressive. For now, we ignore the reasons for this difference, and only observe that registration of leases was more frequent in Antwerp than in Ghent. For this chapter, we sampled lease contracts for both Antwerp and Ghent in the 1430s and 1490s.

⁵ Based on survey by A. DE VOS, *Inventaris der landbouwpachten in de Gentse jaarregisters van de keure*, Gent 1958-60.

⁶ Indexes made by Ad van Oeffelen, Rob Roctus, Linda De Keuster, Willem Verhaeghe and Koen Verweken and available via <www.felixarchief.be>.

Only leases for land (arable land, gardens, orchards, and/or pastures) and farms were retained. Other leases concerned both houses and parts of houses in the city, tithes, mills and taxes (fishing rights for instance), but these were excluded from the analysis.

Tab. 2. **Sample of lease contracts, indicating relative share of contracts mentioning in-kind deliveries (% in-kind) and cereals (% cereals)**

Sample	Years	Leases (N)	Leases per year	% In Kind	% Cereals?
Antwerp 1430	1437-38	111	55	53.2	43.2
Antwerp 1490	1490-94	237	47	58.5	49.6
Ghent 1430	1430-39	253	28	28.9	10.7
Ghent 1490	1490-99	104	12	34.6	10.6

In Antwerp, more than half of the lease contracts stipulated at least some deliveries in kind. In Ghent, this was only about a third (Tab. 2). Of course, lease contracts remain normative sources, and the actual settlement of the lease might diverge from the stipulations in the contract. In practice, leases in cash might be partly settled in kind (through deliveries or labour services), and vice versa. Nevertheless, the choice for cash or kind in the contracts is not random, and many of the additional conditions inserted, suggest that landlord and tenant had indeed the intention to settle the lease in the ways recorded in the contract. One final example might illustrate this. Negotiating the lease of the Wommelgem hoeve in Wommelgem in 1490, owners Sir Peter van Bremen and Willemynne van der Molen and tenant Wouter Delyen Gheysseles stipulated that the fruit on the trees in the orchard would be equally divided among owner and tenant. The tenant was entitled to the fruit which fell from the trees (the *afvalle*). But if the fruit would fell from the trees prematurely due to stormy weather, the owner was entitled to half of the fruit on the ground as well.⁷

The conditions in the lease contracts were not fully standardized, but tend to be customized, hence probably reflecting the intended practices. On the one hand we have contracts with an extensive range of products to be delivered by the tenant farmer to the landlord. In 1437 for instance, Wouter Pot leased out his *Nachtegalen* farm in Kontich to Jan Brau *Den Bastaert* for 6 lb. *groten* Vlaams, 18 *sister* rye, 12 *sister* oats (*evene*), 2 *steen* flax, 1 *steen* butter, 1 (fattened) lamb and 100 eggs.⁸ The farm had been allocated to him in 1431 by his father as a wedding gift.⁹ The rent had to be delivered by the tenant to Antwerp, and the goods ought to be measured using Antwerp measures. Moreover, the tenant farmer owed 6 one-day transport services with horse and cart, which could not be demanded when the farmer had to sow the grain on his land. The owner, Wouter Pot, retained the dovecote and the possibility to

⁷ CAA, SR 97, f°233v : «ten waere dat bij storme oft bij onvedre troyt afgeslagen werde in welken gevalle de voorseide Jonckbeer Peter et uxer hebben souden deen helft van dien afvalle».

⁸ CAA, SR 24, f°311r.

⁹ CAA, SR 18, f°303v.

plant an orchard on the estate (of 50 trees); owner and tenant also made arrangements on the maintenance of the trees on the estate, with the tenant liable to plant additional willows (32) each year, and the owner allowed to plant further quantities of poplars, oaks and *abelen* (a species of poplars). Duration of the contract was 12 years. The volume of both rye (c. 5229 litres) and oats (c. 4320 litres) were considerable, and probably exceeded the necessities of even a large urban household like the one of Wouter Pot, a rich merchant from Dordrecht who had migrated to Antwerp and had established his own chapel and almshouse in 1436.¹⁰

Religious institutions leased out farms on broadly similar conditions. In 1431 for instance, St. John's hospital in Ghent leased out its major farm in Appelterre (107 ha.) to Hendrik de Jaeghere and his wife Geertrui Wasiels *alias* Soys for a substantial amount of money (10 lb. *groten*), 12,960 litres wheat, 12,960 litres rye, 1080 litres peas, 2 sacks of rapeseed, and 2 *steen* flax. Some contracts included elements of sharecropping: in 1437 the *Kerckhove* farm in Boechout was leased out by Willem Mengiaert to Benedictus de Keersmaker. The arable land – 19 *bunder* or c. 16 ha. – was held in sharecropping, with the cereal sheaves being divided on the field. The farmer was to store the sheaves in the barn, but for the threshing the tenant farmer and the owner would both hire a thresher, with the farmer providing food for both of them. Afterwards the owner's share should be transported to his Antwerp residence - «*tot zijnen huysen*». The farm also included wet pastures (*beemd*) which were paid for in cash, as was often the case. The tenant farmer was allowed to cultivate a certain quantity of beans for his horses, and flax (with a set quantity of 4 *steen* of flax to be delivered to the owner each year). The orchard was kept by the owner.¹¹

Not all contracts concerned large farms: sometimes individual plots of land were leased out. In Antwerp in 1437-38, there were 36 contracts for lands or farms smaller than 5 hectares. (of a total of 66 for which the size was specified); even in Ghent, where only contracts above 3 *bunder*/4 hectares have been retained, some lease records for smaller holdings survive (in the 1430s 12 out of 172). However, the extent of the land was not always specified, and if it was recorded, the details were sometimes limited to the arable acreage. As we will see below, leases for plots of land were more often expressed in cash, whereas complete farms – including arable, pasture, an orchard and/or woodland – had more chance of being at least partly settled in kind.

Sometimes the largest part of the lease had to be paid in cash, but some products were nevertheless to be delivered in-kind. When Cornelis Alaerts leased out his farm in Merkssem in 1438, the tenant Jan Van Cruyningen had to pay 6 lb. 15s. *groten* per year, and supply the owner with 3.5 *viertel* (or c. 254 litres) of rye. Both the tenant and the owner would also be allowed to dig a certain amount of peat on the land to cater for their respective fuel needs («*elc sijn voringen daer op te moegen delven*»). The owner kept control of the trees.¹² In Ghent, in 1431, we see Sanders van der Beken and

¹⁰ Later converted into a Cistercian abbey, the S. Salvator Abbey, see <<https://inventaris.onroerendergoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/4068>>.

¹¹ CAA, SR 24, f°380v.

¹² CAA, SR 25, f°148v.

Katlijne van den Hulle rent out their 34.7 hectares farm in Borsbeke to Jan de Coc Pieters for an in-cash annual rent of 11 lb. 6 s. *grooten*. Each year the tenant farmer had to deliver 2 *steen* flax and one third of the fruit which grew on the estate. In this case, the in-kind dues were clearly very modest compared to the cash-payment. Such 'minor' in-kind duties complementing a monetized lease can be found quite frequently. In Ghent, they often involved minor quantities of butter, flax, poultry (capons) or eggs. Did these small in-kind supplements retain a function in the provisioning of the urban household, or was their function merely symbolic, stressing the social bond between tenant and landlord? Perhaps a more systematic analysis of the lease contracts might indicate the conditions in which (urban) landlords opted for in-kind deliveries.

Cash or kind: explaining preferences

In the corpus of lease contracts analysed in this paper, several variables can be identified which might explain the preference for in-kind or in-cash leases: the location of the landlord (Antwerp or Ghent); the timeframe (1430s or 1490s); the social profile of the landlord (starting with the difference between ecclesiastical institutions and private households); the type of property involved (land, farms or pastures) and the region in which the property was situated (differentiating between the three social agro-systems mentioned above). A binary logistic regression (see Appendix) confirms that Antwerp contracts were significantly more likely than Ghent contracts to include in-kind payments, and that the 1490 sample was not significantly different from the 1430 sample in the preference for cash or kind. No general trend towards less or more in-kind deliveries could be observed (Tab. 3)

The statistical analysis yielded another significant difference: leases of entire farms involved in-kind payments more frequently than leases of simple plots of land. In Antwerp in the 1430s, 29 out of 37 leases for farms involved some payment in kind, of which 24 included cereals. In the 1490s, this was the case in 99 out of 112 leases of entire farms. The Antwerp leases also contain separate leases for '*beemden*': wet pasturelands along rivers or in the polder area. Both in the 1430s and the 1490s, these were largely settled in cash.

Tab. 3. Preferences for Cash, Kind and/or Cereals, according to type of property, social profile of the owner and the regional agro-system

	Antwerp 1430			Antwerp 1490			Ghent 1430			Ghent 1490		
	<i>N</i> <i>Total</i>	<i>N</i> Kind (%)	<i>N</i> Cereals (%)	<i>N</i> <i>Total</i>	<i>N</i> Kind (%)	<i>N</i> Cereals (%)	<i>N</i> <i>Total</i>	<i>N</i> Kind (%)	<i>N</i> Cereals (%)	<i>N</i> <i>Total</i>	<i>N</i> Kind (%)	<i>N</i> Cereals (%)
Type of Property												
Farm	37	29 (78.4)	23 (62.2)	112	99 (88.4)	89 (79.5)	187	66 (35.3)	26 (13.9)	85	31 (36.5)	10 (11.8)
Land	63	29 (46.0)	24 (38.1)	91	35 (38.5)	26 (28.6)	66	7 (10.6)	1 (1.5)	19	5 (26.3)	1 (5.3)
pasture	10	1 (10.0)	1 (10.0)	34	4 (11.8)	3 (8.8)						
Owner: Ecclesiastical Institution or Natural Person?												
Institutions	46	23 (50.0)	17 (37.0)	120	66 (55.0)	54 (4.0)	66	29 (43.9)	19 (28.8)	17	4 (23.5)	3 (17.6)
Natural Persons	65	36 (55.4)	31 (47.7)	117	72 (61.5)	64 (54.7)	187	44 (23.5)	8 (4.3)	87	32 (36.8)	8 (9.2)
Agro-System												
Antwerp	9	2 (22.2)	1 (11.1)	7	0	0						
Antwerp Periphery	17	7 (41.2)	6 (35.3)	54	23 (42.6)	19 (35.2)						
Campine	13	7 (53.9)	6 (46.2)	44	34 (77.3)	34 (77.3)						
Inland	43	35 (81.4)	30 (69.8)	70	52 (74.3)	45 (64.3)	240	71 (29.6)	27 (11.3)	98	35 (35.7)	11 (11.2)
Polder	26	7 (26.9)	5 (19.2)	59	27 (45.8)	18 (30.5)	13	2 (15.4)	0	6	1 (16.7)	0
Unknown	3	1 (33.3)	0	3	2 (66.7)	2 (66.7)						

In Ghent as in Antwerp, in-kind deliveries seem less frequent in the coastal 'Polder' area, compared to the inland regions. In Antwerp in the 1430s the difference is very pronounced: only 7 out of 26 lease contracts for the polders involved some payment in kind, against 35 out of 43 for the inland region. This was unrelated to distance: one of the Antwerp city gates – the *Slijkpoort* – gave access to the polder district immediately north of the city. In Ghent, the polders were situated 20 to 30km north of the city, and transport over water existed via a dense network of canals developed for the transport of peat in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The preference for rents in cash or in kind seems to have been influenced rather by the type of agriculture, the soil and the social organisation of farming. This becomes clear, when a single lease covers land in both the polder districts and the inland region, and the contract stipulates that the lease for *thoogbe land* (i.e. the higher, inland, plots) is to be paid in rye, whereas the lease for *dlege lant* (i.e. the polder) in cash.¹³ The preference for cash-leases in the polders might have been related partly to the predominance of animal husbandry, but it might also be linked to the higher degree of commodification of land and agriculture in the polders. Exceptions of course existed. In 1490, Jan Pels leased his farm in the polders near Steenberg (N-Brabant) to Anthonis Voordeel Corneliss for an annual rent of c. 20,000 litres of cereals (half of which was wheat, the rest oats and barley). The names of the plots – *int Nyeuwelant*, *Gheenengors* and *tHoochbeerengoet* – indicate that the land had been recently drained and embanked. The landlord might have hoped to profit from the alleged fertility of the newly drained polders by actively engaging in the grain trade.¹⁴ This was, however, exceptional in most cases polder leases were negotiated for a fixed amount of money per surface unit of land.

Overall, institutions seem somewhat more likely than private households to demand in-kind deliveries from their tenants, but while significant, the statistical difference is not very pronounced. By the 1490s, (ecclesiastical) institutions in Ghent seemed to have converted most of their leases to cash, even though the 1490s sample includes more hospitals and alms-houses and fewer abbeys (in the 1490s, the Benedictine abbeys of St. Peter and St. Bavo, probably the largest landlords in the whole county of Flanders, no longer resorted to the Ghent aldermen to register their leases). The Ghent hospitals might have limited their direct food supplies to a single farm – a 'food farm' which kept a pivotal role in the provisioning of the hospital. The case of St. John's hospital in Ghent illustrates this. In the 1490s, three leases were registered involving this hospital (two concerning Zaamslag in the coastal polders, one concerning Destelbergen, 10km from Ghent. In these three cases, only cash was demanded. However, its largest estate – in Appelterre, Inland Flanders, was missing from the sample. Both in previous and later decades, leases for the Appelterre estate (100 *bunder* or c. 133 hectares) were always stipulated in kind, involving large

¹³ This is the case in an already mentioned lease from 1438 for Merksem, situated close to Antwerp, at the border of the polder area and a higher sand ridge with an 'inland' farming system, see note 12.

¹⁴ CAA, SR 97, f°18v. Near Steenberg, old peat marshes had been flooded in the early fifteenth century and were progressively reclaimed in the later part of that century.

quantities of wheat, peas, beans, butter and rapeseed.¹⁵ Interestingly, distance was not the major factor in the decision to maintain Appelterre as a ‘food farm’: the estate was situated at about 40km from Ghent. Transport over water was, however, possible via the Dender and Scheldt rivers, although this prolonged the journey to at least 70km.

Both the ecclesiastical institutions and the private households were socially heterogeneous, in Antwerp probably more so than in Ghent. Unravelling the social profile is difficult for the private landowners, as professions or indications of social status are not systematically listed. Nevertheless, as can be seen from Table 4 (for Antwerp), a preference for in-kind payments was not restricted to a single social group: both monastic, charitable institutions, and members of the nobility, the political elite and even some members of the craft guilds made use of in-kind deliveries, in most cases involving cereals:

Tab. 4. Social profile of Antwerp landlords in the 1430s and 1490s

Institutions (N)	Actors	Leases	with in-kind	with cereals
Parishes	7	8	4	4
Regular Clergy	7	156	81	64
Charity	8	18	14	12
Beguinage	1	1	0	0
Total	23	183	99	80
Private households (N)	Actors	Leases	with in-kind	with cereals
Nobility	22	32	21	21
Political Elite	41	48	32	29
Merchant Elite	2	2	2	2
Craft Guilds	28	30	14	11
Non-Antwerpen	14	15	5	4
Unknown	51	58	34	29
Ecclesiastics (private property)	2	2	2	2
Total	160	187	110	98

Among the Antwerp institutional landlords, the Collegiate Chapter of Our Lady and the Premonstratensian abbey of St. Michael were dominant, with respectively 42 and 74 leases in the sample.¹⁶ The abbey was more likely to include in-kind deliveries

¹⁵ De Vos, *Landbouwpachten*, op.cit., nr. 2752 (in 1561). In 1573, the requirement for deliveries of cereals as part of a food rent was dropped, and the estate was split in several parts (Ibidem, nr. 2779, 2780).

¹⁶ The chapter of Our Lady was a secular chapter. It is not always clear in the contracts, whether the canons acted as administrator of their stipend (prebend), or as private landlords. Both configurations

(42 out of 74 leases, against 14 out of 42 for Our Lady). Most of the contracts related to St. Michael's Abbey date from the 1490s, when the abbey had many of its leases registered in a 'bulk' contract (although still including the details for each individual lease). Overall, parishes seem less inclined than monasteries and charitable institutions to ask for in-kind deliveries, which might reflect differences in the actual needs of the institution. As for the private individuals, members of the political elite (the aldermen of the city) and the nobility (part of which resided in the city) were easier to identify than commoners. Many commoners were ranked in the 'unknown' category, potentially mixing up with villagers from the Antwerp hinterland. Although the sample is limited, the members of craft guilds which could be identified seem more likely to prefer cash, compared to elite households. Nevertheless, when craftsmen owned larger estates, or entire farms, they did prefer payments in kind. In 1492 wood merchant Gheerd van Borssele and grocer Jan van Eertborne and his wife Lijsbette van Borssele leased out a farm in Ekeren-Muisbroek of about 16 *bunder* (9.3 hectares) for 1440 d. *grotten Brabants*, 8.5 *sister* of rye (2469 litres), 1 *viertel* of buckwheat (72.6 litres), and modest quantities of eggs and butter each year.¹⁷ For his farm in Essen, north of Antwerp, mercer Jan Claus Heyns only demanded labour services (one day with horse and cart per year) apart from cash. And Jan Pels, the son of a *shipmaster* leased out newly reclaimed polder land near Steenbergen, and included in-kind deliveries of cereals in the contract.¹⁸ Many other craftsmen, including a butcher, a carpenter, a *smoutslager* and a *shoemaker*, asked cash leases. Even Jan van Lare, who was a gardener (*hovenier*), leased out his farm on the Sint-Willibrordusveld in the urban periphery to a fellow gardener for a cash rent. The owner intended to plant 50 extra sour cherry trees (*kriek boommen*) on the land, for which the rent would then be raised. However, no in-kind deliveries were stipulated, indicating that the lessee would be responsible for the (commercial) exploitation of the orchard.¹⁹

By now it is clear that in-kind deliveries remained important in lease contracts throughout the fifteenth century, but more so in Antwerp than in Ghent. Moreover, a social bias in the preference for in-kind deliveries, rather than cash, could be observed. Only households owning entire farms in the countryside – hence, richer households – negotiated in-kind supplies with their tenants, whereas those leasing out a small plot of land seemed mostly interested in cash with only a few exceptions. But one question remains: can we really consider these in-kind deliveries as an alternative for cash?

Cereals as alternative currency

Leases are legal contracts, and in legal contracts every sentence matters. Sometimes even the exact order of the sentence matters. Above, we already mentioned the lease of the *Nachtegalen* farm in Kontich from 1437 – one of those Antwerp contracts

are possible. All contracts involving the Chapter, also those involving a specific chapel or foundation, have been grouped together.

¹⁷ CAA, SR 100, f°199v.

¹⁸ CAA, SR 97, f°018v.

¹⁹ CAA, SR 97, f°073r.

which included a wide range of products and services to be delivered by the tenant to the owner Wouter Pot and his wife. However, in the text of the contract not all of these products and services are treated in the same way. Flax, butter and eggs are only introduced at the very end of the contract, as part of a number of additional clauses related to the obligations of the tenant regarding maintenance of the buildings, planting of trees etc. In contrast, one product is introduced at the very beginning of the contract, where the actual rent is mentioned. Every year the tenant has to pay «6 lb. *groten grabants prout cour. 18 sister rocx ende 12 sister evenem*».²⁰ In this contract, rye and oats clearly functioned as alternative form of currency. According to the contracts, the conversion into cash is almost never an option. In the entire sample, only two contracts allow for up to half or the entirety of the cereals to be converted into cash, one at a fixed price per volume and one at the current market price.²¹ The Antwerp contracts are also very explicit on the use of lawful measures (usually to the Antwerp standard) and on the destination of the delivered grain. In most cases the tenant has to bring the cereals to Antwerp, to the home of the family, the hospital or the *herberg* (probably a storage facility) of the institution. In a minority of cases, neighbouring cities or grain markets are mentioned: Lier, Mechelen, Bergen-op-Zoom. Sometimes no destination of the grain is specified leaving the decision to the landlord.²²

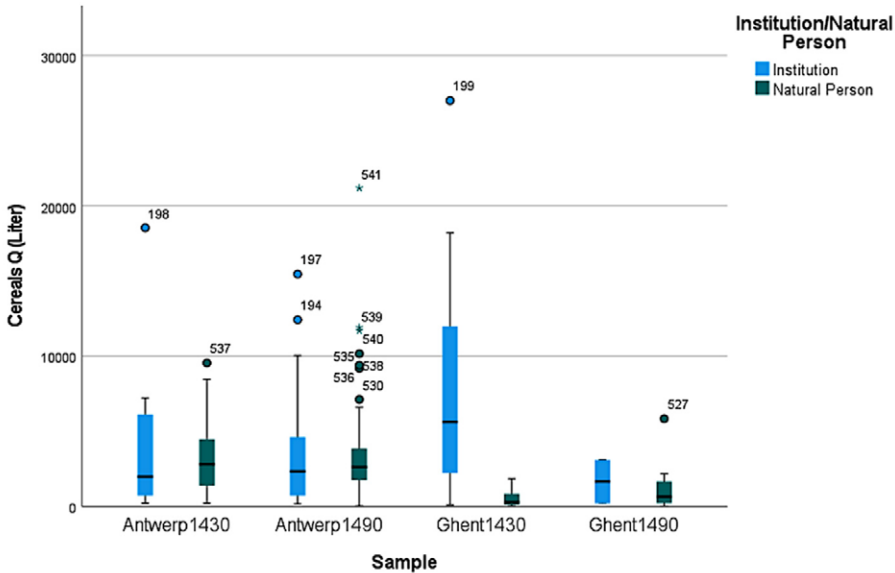
Whereas in Antwerp the use of cereals as an alternative currency in leases was very prominent, it was much less common in Ghent. Already in the 1430s, private households seldom demanded cereals in Ghent (only 8 out of 187 contracts), and if grain was involved, the quantities were modest (on average 546 litres in the 1430s and 1464 litres in the 1490s). The ecclesiastical landlords from Ghent were more inclined to include cereal deliveries in their leases during the earlier phase, even in large quantities (7526 litres on average), but by the 1490s, such volumes had become less frequent. In Antwerp, a completely different picture emerges: both ecclesiastical institutions and private landlords were more likely to desire cereals, and they continued to do so throughout the fifteenth century. Interestingly, they often demanded comparatively 'standard' volumes of cereals: on average 3515 litres in the 1430s and 3898 litres in the 1490s. Combinations of rye and oats were dominant, with minor quantities of wheat, buckwheat, or peas added on occasion.

²⁰ CAA, SR 24, f°311r.

²¹ This is stipulated in a contract from 1491 regarding the farm *Goet ter Voort* in Edegem, south of Antwerp: CAA, SR 99, f°46r. The annual rent is 4 lb. *groten brabant*, 132 *viertel* of rye (9586.8 litres), 1 *sister* of peas (290.5 litres), 1 *sister* of wheat (290.5 litres) and minor quantities of butter. Only the rye could be partly converted into cash at a fixed price of 2 s. 6 d. *groten brabant* per *viertel*. See also : CAA, SR 101, f°079v.

²² In a lease of 4 *bunder* of land in Wilrijk in 1437, owned by the poor table of Mortsel, the annual rent of 16 *viertel* (1162 litres) of rye has to be delivered either in Antwerp or in Mortsel «*ter stede ende plaetsen daer de selve provisoren nu synde oft navels wesende liefste hebbem*» (to the place where the administrators of the poor table prefer the cereals to be delivered) (CAA, SR 24, f°300r).

Fig. 4. Cereals as part of the lease



A tentative quantification of the total volume of cereals entering the city of Antwerp via the settlement of leases in kind shows that considerable volumes are involved. In the 1430s, the lease contracts examined demanded the supply of 43,907 litres of bread grain per year. The average duration of a lease was 9.4 years, as a result the total amount of bread grain which entered the city through tenant farmers can be assessed at 412,727 litres, enough to feed 1130 adults throughout the year (supposing that an adult consumed one litre of bread grain per day, either as bread, beer or boiled). By the 1490s, this volume had increased to 679,968 litres, the equivalent of 1863 yearly rations. In other words: the amount of bread grain entering the city through the payment of leases, was sufficient to feed five to ten percent of the Antwerp population. Oats were also supplied in large quantities, but interestingly, declined between the 1430s and 1490s (from 330,786 litres to 72,337 litres). In Ghent, such deliveries did not make a significant contribution to urban food supplies (125,334 litres of bread grain per year in the 1430s; a modest 12,894 litres in the 1490s) and only a select number of ecclesiastical institutions relied on this kind of supply, more so in the 1430s than in the 1490s.

And yet, these assessments still underestimate the influx of grain from tenant farms to urban households. First of all, sharecropping is not taken into account, as the quantities to be delivered were not fixed in the contract. In the 1430s there were 3 sharecropping contracts (compared to 45 with fixed quantities of cereals to be delivered). Secondly, we limited the analysis to leases of land and farms. Urban landlords also owned tithes and mills: in the 1430s there were 11 lease contracts for tithes per year, and 5 for mills (either water mills or windmills). About half of them was paid in kind, the others in cash. Thirdly, not all lease contracts are registered by the

Antwerp aldermen. As mentioned above, registration was voluntarily and there were competing administrations providing the same service. And finally, leases were not the only form of in-kind income for urban landlords. In both Antwerp and Ghent, there was a vivid market in annuities, both life annuities and heritable annuities, mortgaged on land. A significant part of the annuities was expressed in kind – cereals notably. Taking all these direct cereal flows together, we might easily conclude that not 5 to 10 %, but rather a quarter to a third of the urban cereal supplies in fifteenth century Antwerp could have come from direct, land-based, supplies.

Apart from cereals, other products were delivered albeit in lower quantities. Poultry appear in the lease contracts (the occasional capons) as do sheep and pigs, but cattle – the basis of meat provisioning in both Antwerp and Ghent – were absent. In fact, in only 1 contract for the four samples and more than 500 contracts, cattle were mentioned (1 fattened calf supplied to the St. Bernards abbey in Hemiksem near Antwerp from Vremde in 1490).²³ Landlords, both private households and ecclesiastical institutions, clearly had other ways of acquiring meat. This is confirmed by an exceptional example of a household account by a member of the Ghent bourgeoisie: Simon Borluut, whose account book from the 1450s and 1460s has been edited and studied by Marc Boone (2021, 225-240). Borluut was a member of a prominent patrician family from Ghent, and was heavily involved himself in municipal politics in a turbulent age. His account books reveal a lot on both his relationships with tenants (very personal, as he presented them for instance with wedding gifts for their children), and his food provisioning strategies. At first sight Borluut did not make use of direct supplies: we see him buying cattle, pigs, beer, dry herring and sprat, pies etc. The cattle were bought, be it not on the urban market, but rather directly imported from Diksmuide in the polders. Borluut made ample use of ‘trusted suppliers’: The pastrycook is *his pasteidebacker*, the (female) brewer, is *his brusterighe*, and payments were done once in a year. However, the account book is only about *expenditure*, and not about income, and Borluut does not pay for either fresh fish, poultry and, most of all, cereals, which were most probably delivered to him by his tenants.²⁴

As such, Borluut’s provisioning patterns – cereals in kind, the rest bought on the market from trusted suppliers – perfectly resembles the strategies deployed almost two centuries later, by a household from Antwerp – the Moretus family (De Staelen 2002). In the 1660s and 1670s Elisabeth Moretus was responsible for the provisioning of the Moretus family, and meticulously noted every expenditure. While almost all foodstuffs were bought, once again often preferring the same suppliers year after year, grain was sent in by tenant farmers from Hamme. Moretus paid the expenditure for taxes and the transport (which was not the case in the later Middle Ages, when these costs tend to be paid by the tenant farmer). Once the grain arrived in the city it was brought to the baker, who apparently also was responsible for the milling. In exchange, the family obtained a ‘credit’ from the bakery: it could buy the value of the

²³ CAA, SR 98, f°110v.

²⁴ In one case, this is confirmed for the delivery of oats (evene), for which Borluut paid the taxes: «Item, betaelt bi Liefkijne mijnen zuene de cuellootte van eenen muude evenen mersch witte evene die mi brochte Lievin Van den Walle js. Boudins in betalinghe liep de cuellootte 2 s. gr.» (Boone 2021, 235-38). The account book however does also contain examples of cereal rents paid by Borluut to different landlords, and converted to cash.

cereals delivered in bread.²⁵ So, just like the fifteenth-century Borluut family in Ghent, the 17th-century Moretus family in Antwerp held on to eating bread made from cereals produced on their own land. For all other foodstuffs, this was clearly less imperative.

For the Borluut and Moretus families, social status might have been the primary driver explaining the preference of cereals as an alternative currency in leases. On the other hand, the strategic importance of cereal stocks in times of food shortage might also help to explain their persistence. This is clearly shown for Antwerp in 1481-1483, when the combination of adverse weather, warfare and disruption of grain trade produced one of the worst subsistence crises of the fifteenth century. Starting in February 1481, the Antwerp aldermen intervened to secure the grain provisioning of their city, first of all relaxing the restrictions on the sale of bread (in order to attract suppliers from outside the city). At a later stage, export was forbidden and wholesale trade in grain was restricted, in favour of retail. In May 1481, the aldermen ordered the survey of all grain stocks available in the attics of houses, which already indicates the importance of grain stocks in private households. This was followed on the 17th of November 1481 by an ordinance which explicitly demonstrated the importance of in-kind deliveries by rural producers to urban consumers, covering both leasehold, and the payment of annuities in-kind:

men gebiet van sheeren ende vander stadt wegen dat een yegelic, pachter ende lantman bynnen den margravesche geseten sinnen meester dien lijffrente oft pacht van coerne, het zij tarwe, rogge ofte ander greyn schuldich is, sal moeten contenteren ende betalen van tgene des hij hem tachter ende schuldich is, voere ende eer de selve pachter yemanne anders eenich coren sal moegen vercoopen (CAA, PK 913: Gebodboeken, 1439-1496, f°68r)

(our translation: «it is ordered by the Lord and the City that every inhabitant of the margravate [of Antwerp], tenant farmer or villager, who owns his master an annuity or lease in cereals – either wheat, rye or other – will have to pay his arrears and settle his debt in full, before this tenant will be allowed to sell any cereals to third parties»)

Once the landlord had been satisfied (*sijn meesters betaelt*) and the subsistence needs of the peasant farmer had been covered (*tgene des hij met sijne familien totten naesten oexste in redelicheiden behouden sal*), any surplus had to be brought to the Antwerp market. On the first of December, these measures were generalized for the entire Duchy of Brabant, in an ordinance by duchess Marie of Burgundy.²⁶ The ‘corn laws’ of the 1480s hence demonstrate that cereal rents always had precedence over sales, providing landlords with a powerful incentive to maintain and expand their rents-in-kind.

²⁵ «gelevert aen den backer int Vosken 4 veertelen korens a 6 gulden d'veertel maer een kerf hebbe om voor 24 gulden broot te balen» (De Staelen 2002).

²⁶ CAA, PK 913: Gebodboeken, 1439-1496, f°65v-74r.

To conclude

In the heart of the urban Low Countries, cereals frequently continued to be used as an alternative currency in the settlement of leases. For fifteenth-century Antwerp we estimated that a quarter to a third of the urban population could be fed by direct supplies from the hinterland, either from leases or annuities. In Ghent, this share would have been much lower. So, why did cereals remain a valuable alternative for money in one of the most commercialized regions of late medieval Europe?

First of all, these cereal rents were not a relic of an autarkic past. Rents-in-kind were not simply converted to cash as cities grew: the population of Antwerp increased in the fifteenth century, but so did the importance of cereals as a form of currency in lease contracts. Neither was there a relationship with trends in food consumption: while meat clearly gained importance in fifteenth-century food provisioning, it was notoriously absent in the in-kind supplies, which in Antwerp remained focused on cereals, and in Ghent on poultry, fruit, butter, and flax. In contrast, socio-economic status played a role: there is an evident social bias in the ownership of rural land, and only landlords owning an entire farm opted for an extensive range of in-kind deliveries. Bread made from homegrown grain, was important for the 15th-century Antwerp elite – an observation already made by Philippe Wolff (1954, 92, 175) for the elite of Toulouse. Even in Ghent, some institutions and some families kept on doing so, as the Borluut account book proves. In general, the whole concept of tenant farmers being obliged to deliver foodstuffs (or flax) or to perform labour services to an urban landlord, might have been a strong signifier of social status. During times of famine, leases-in-kind gave urban landlords a ‘preferential’ claim to highly valuable cereals, as the legislation in Antwerp in the 1480s shows. Even landlords, including those of middling status, who settled for cash payments possibly enjoyed a more direct access to grain in times of food shortage due to their landownership in the countryside. The quasi-absence of cereals in the Ghent leases confirms the observation that its citizens enjoyed a privileged access to cereals (via the grain staple), making ‘private’ arrangements largely redundant.

However, the rural economy also mattered, as is demonstrated by the high prevalence of cash leases in the polder area, versus the preference of in-kind supplies in the Campine area and Inland Flanders. How should we interpret these regional differences? Insufficient monetarisation of some regions is not the answer. In both regions, tenant farmers who were involved in food rents, nonetheless paid part of their leases in cash. Regions like Inland Flanders and the Campine area also participated actively in commodity markets. The level of competition in the land market might be more important. In Inland Flanders and the Campine Area, land was not primarily allocated via the land market, and apart from the few major farms in the area, leases were often supplementing inheritances. In the coastal polder areas, however, the access to land was primarily over a highly competitive lease market, in which leases were set at competitive cash rates linked to acreage. In this proto-capitalist rural economy, it is possible that the competitive lease market left less room for the interpersonal relationship between landlord and tenant farmer that was associated with the food rents.

Finally, what are the implications of this study for our knowledge of urban food provisioning in the later Middle Ages? In the ‘pragmatic moral economy’ of late medieval cities (Davis 2012), food was marketed, but this market was ruled by conventions, expectations and mutual trust between buyers and sellers. However, the price-setting of the most essential foodstuff – grain – largely escaped the control of individual cities or households.²⁷ And it was exactly this staple which was frequently used as an alternative currency. Hence, the use of grain as alternative currency was not a consequence of limited commercialisation, but rather of the volatility of prices associated with an uncontrollable market. Only the working class had no choice but to buy their daily bread, fully exposed to the volatility of the grain market.

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²⁷ Not a single system of bread price regulation developed in early modern Europe succeeded in shielding consumers from price spikes (De Vries 2019, 454).

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Appendix: Statistical analysis of the preference for cash, kind and/or cereals as payment of rent.

A binary logistic regression in SPSS produces the following results:

A. The preference for in-kind deliveries (as compared to contracts including only cash payments)

306 out of 706 contracts include payments in-kind. Significant (sig.) and strong (Exp (B)) differences in the preference for in-kind payments can be found only for the variables City (Antwerp more than Ghent) and Type of Property (Farms more than simple plots of land). Pastures are less likely to be associated with in-kind deliveries, but the explanatory value (Exp(B) is weak). The region also provides some significant results, with contracts in the coastal (Polder) area less likely to include payments in kind, compared to the Inland region. A low (Exp(B)) indicates a limited explanatory value of the latter observation.

Variables in the Equation							
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	City Antwerp (ref. Ghent)	2,783	,312	79,803	1	<,001	16,169
	Decade 1430 (ref. 1490)	,003	,003	,666	1	,414	1,003
	Owner: Institution (ref. Natural Person)	,248	,197	1,587	1	,208	1,281
	Region (ref. Inland)			38,823	5	<,001	
	Region Antwerp	-3,693	,828	19,889	1	<,001	,025
	Region Antwerp-Periphery	-1,090	,379	8,257	1	,004	,336
	Region Campine	-,011	,481	,000	1	,983	,990
	Region Polder	-1,488	,325	21,008	1	<,001	,226
	Region Unknown	-,945	1,149	,676	1	,411	,389
	Type (ref. Land)			81,947	2	<,001	
	Type Farm	1,725	,247	48,854	1	<,001	5,614
	Type Pasture	-2,295	,533	18,565	1	<,001	,101
	Constant	-6,097	4,686	1,693	1	,193	,002

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: City, Decade, Institution/Natural Person, Region, Type.

B. The preference for cereals (as compared to contracts without deliveries of cereals).

204 out of 706 contracts include payments in cereals. Significant (sig.) and strong (Exp (B)) differences in the preference for in-kind payments can be found only for the variables City (Antwerp more than Ghent) and Type of Property (Farms more than simple plots of land). Pastures are less likely to be associated with deliveries in cereals, but the explanatory value is weak. The region also provides some significant results, with contracts for properties in the coastal Polder area less likely to include payments in cereals, compared to the Inland region. A low (Exp(B)) once again indicates a limited explanatory value of the latter observation.

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a						
City Antwerp (ref. Ghent)	3,566	,329	117,535	1	<,001	35,380
Decade 1430 (ref. 1490)	,001	,004	,059	1	,809	1,001
Owner: Institution (ref. Natural Person)	,475	,227	4,386	1	,036	1,607
Region (ref.Inland)			41,626	5	<,001	
Region Antwerp	-3,875	1,082	12,817	1	<,001	,021
Region Antwerp Periphery	-,946	,372	6,460	1	,011	,388
Region Campine	,409	,463	,782	1	,376	1,506
Region Polder	-1,687	,345	23,909	1	<,001	,185
Region Unknown	-1,526	1,090	1,958	1	,162	,217
Type (ref. Land)			67,354	2	<,001	
Type Farm	1,749	,275	40,328	1	<,001	5,750
Type Pasture	-2,146	,589	13,271	1	<,001	,117
Constant	-5,089	5,622	,819	1	,365	,006

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: City, Decade, Institution/Natural Person, Region, Type.