Occupational Guilds as Charitable Institutions in Urban Europe, c. 1300-1550

The persistence of trade and craft guilds in pre-modern European cities and towns is well known, but their longevity is still a subject of lively debate among historians. In this discussion, the institutional flexibility and multiple functions of these occupational associations are often highlighted. This paper examines these assumed institutional features by exploring the charitable activities of the guilds and their interrelatedness with other urban institutions in this context. First, the social assistance provided by guilds in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London is briefly analysed. Second, assuming that these cities constituted a more or less coherent institutional whole, the paper discusses to what extent the interaction between the institutions therein shaped the guilds’ social responsibilities. As such, this paper sheds light on the comparative practices and organisation of corporate charity in a number of medieval European cities. Moreover, it offers insights that may be relevant to understanding the prevalence and longevity of occupational guilds in medieval and early modern Europe.

The support of members in distress was one of the many tasks fulfilled by occupational associations in cities and towns across late-medieval Europe. Corporate charity and mutual aid took a variety of forms; in general, senior guildsmen and their family members could count on relief in times of hardship. Although it is commonly known that the scope and organisation of social assistance differed from guild to guild and varied widely in time and place, the reasons explaining this variety are less clear. This paper argues that the differences in guild welfare were, above all, the result of variations in the wider system of urban poor relief; that is to say, the guilds’ charitable activities co-evolved with other collective and private social arrangements that emerged in medieval urban communities. The degree to which guild welfare was formalised then hinged on the size and organisation of the particular trade or craft guild.

In order to tease out the links between the social responsibilities of occupational guilds and the urban institutional framework of which they were part, the scope and characteristics of corporate welfare will be first examined for three case studies. Who were eligible for assistance provided by late-medieval guilds and on what grounds? How did guilds organise and finance mutual aid and charity? These questions will be answered for the well-documented cities of Ghent and London, and the results will be compared with the situation in Florence. Secondly, the factors that shaped the development of guild welfare will be determined by comparing the charitable activities of the guilds in these major urban centres, for which ample source materials exist. How did socio-economic circumstances and political conditions affect the position of guilds in urban society and, more specifically, their social responsibilities? To what extent were the guilds’ charitable activities coordinated and monitored by the municipal authorities? In other words, explanations for the variety in the types of guild welfare between the three case studies are not confined to studying the guilds’ respective organisational structures, but refer also to the wider urban context in which these institutions functioned.

Corporate welfare is often ignored or dismissed as negligible in the recent literature on medieval and early modern guilds, which has a strong economic orientation. But, since historians disagree about the historical contexts in which these institutions were beneficial to long-term economic growth, technological innovation and human capital development, it appears to be worth reconsidering political and social explanations for the prevalence and long

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survival of guilds. To what extent were occupational associations not merely instruments of economic organisation, but also the pillars of medieval and early modern civic communities? One clue lies in a comparative study of urban corporate solidarity, as it seeks to capture the diversity of corporate social arrangements and the underlying strategies of guildsmen for dealing with adversity.

Guilds in medieval Florence, Ghent and London

Occupational associations progressively evolved into complex and hierarchically structured organisations from the late-thirteenth century onwards. In Florence and Ghent, this process of institutionalisation was, above all, driven by the guilds’ involvement in urban politics, as a result of which they were inscribed into the cities’ constitutional order. The guild federation that was created in the Tuscan city in 1293 eventually included 21 corporations, and no other occupational groupings succeeded in achieving permanent recognition in the later Middle Ages. Similarly, a fixed number of 58 guilds were part of Ghent’s political order from the early 1360s onwards, excluding the fullers and other associations from political participation. London’s livery companies’ role in the election of the city’s mayor was recognised in 1467, meaning that there were no political reasons to restrict the freedom of occupational self-organisation before then. Nevertheless, only about fifty guilds were organised enough to participate in these elections, and political rivalry and economic competition forced a number of guilds to amalgamate into more sizeable and secure associations from the second half of the fifteenth century. A rigid hierarchy emerged among the London guilds in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, which was acknowledged by the Council of Aldermen.

The restriction placed on the number of formally recognised trade and craft guilds in late-medieval Florence and Ghent resulted in the formation of guild conglomerates, in which several professional groups were united, either as full or as second-tier members. Consequently, only a small minority of the 21 Florentine guilds had a homogeneous membership, while, for example, the arti di medici e speziali comprised more than ten occupations. The 53 lesser guilds in Ghent, on their part, represented guildsmen from a hundred different occupations. About a third of these guilds had a mixed membership; the guild of smiths even counted artisans of twelve different professions. A further consequence of the guilds’ political involvement was that the urban authorities sought to extend their control over the leadership and internal organisation of the corporations, particularly in Florence, where the guilds lost most of their

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3 J.M. Najemy, A History of Florence, 1200-1575 (Malden, MA, 2006), pp. 37, 43–44, 137, 165. The dyers briefly gained independence from the arte della lana in 1342–1343, while the subordinated skilled artisans and unskilled workers in the cloth industry were allowed to organise themselves into three guilds for some time between 1378 and 1382.


autonomy during the fourteenth century, effectively being reduced to ‘offices of the state’ by the end of that century.  

Hence, the urban guild ‘system’, as well as the internal organisation of the guilds, can only be understood by taking the political context in which they operated into account. Moreover, the large size of some guilds in medieval Florence, Ghent and London resulted in a rather hierarchic internal organisation, making it hard to describe them as proper voluntary associations. In late-thirteenth-century Florence, the guilds together counted around 8,000 matriculated members, while there were an estimated 14,267 guild masters and journeymen in Ghent in 1358-1359. Estimates for London put the number of guildsmen at 3,000 masters around 1400.  

Assuming an active population of 48,5 per cent, it can be estimated that the masters of the guilds alone constituted 16,5 per cent of the labour force in Florence around 1300; 15,5 per cent in London in 1450; 19,6 per cent in early sixteenth-century Ghent.  

Obviously, membership varied considerably among the guilds. The seven arti maggiori accounted for 40 per cent of the total guild membership in Florence in 1293, underlining their prominence. Approximately 67 per cent of the 14,267 guildsmen in Ghent in 1358-1359 were members of the textile guilds, while a minority of the artisans belonged to the 53 lesser guilds.  

Less precise data are available for medieval London, but Thrupp’s estimates show the preponderant position of the city’s merchant guilds, which counted about 1,200 freemen (liverymen and yeomen) in 1501-1502.  

These numbers, even though they are scattered snapshots, illustrate the sheer size of some of the guilds, which was an important factor in the emergence of an internal guild hierarchy, separating the governors of each guild from the ordinary masters and the masters from the journeymen and apprentices. The formation of consular elites within each Florentine guild was reinforced by the efforts of the city’s ruling elite from the early fourteenth century to control the internal elections of the major guilds for political reasons. The election of the guild consuls of the minor guilds, meanwhile, fell into the hands of the five major guilds unified in the
Mercanzia, the merchants’ court that oversaw all of the guilds.\textsuperscript{14} The Ghent guilds remained autonomous with regard to the election of their wardens, and the formation of corporate elites was comparatively less pronounced, due to the participation of the journeymen in the elections of, for example, the deans of the weavers’ guild.\textsuperscript{15} In the course of the fourteenth century, socio-economic distinctions also emerged among the larger London guilds; in the following century, a clear hierarchy of liverymen, ordinary freemen and yeomen was established. The yeomen sometimes organised themselves into confraternities, some of which were suppressed, whereas others, such as the confraternity of the yeomanry of the tailors by 1437, were eventually incorporated within the structures of the company.\textsuperscript{16}

Urban guild ‘systems’ were never entirely static in the Middle Ages, since the guilds’ fortunes were not determined by political factors alone, but also depended on the economic environment in which they evolved. The economies of Florence, Ghent and London were structured differently from one another. The English capital became the most important gateway to the Continent in the fifteenth century, especially with regard to the export of cloth. Still, domestic trade, manufacturing and the service industry were all significant economic sectors in the city’s economy.\textsuperscript{17} Ghent and Florence had a stronger industrial character. Drapery was the backbone of medieval Ghent’s growth and prosperity, but the industry experienced major challenges in the late-medieval period due to changing patterns of demand and disruptions to the supply of wool. After the mid-fourteenth century, the grain staple enjoyed by the Flemish city on the Leie and Scheldt rivers became an increasing source of profit, in particular for the shippers.\textsuperscript{18} Whereas the basis of Ghent’s growth was predominantly the manufacture of wool cloth, the economic base of Florence was broader than its wool and, later, silk industries. The economic growth of the Tuscan city was driven by the initiative of local merchants to sell artisanal products abroad, resulting in the formation of international trading and banking networks.\textsuperscript{19} As a consequence, the sources of guild power in the three cities differed: in Ghent, it rested mainly upon industrial interests, in contrast to the stronger commercial basis of the guilds in Florence and London.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Najemy, \textit{A History of Florence}, p. 130; J.M. Najemy, \textit{Corporatism and consensus in Florentine electoral politics}, 1280-1400 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), pp. 174–175; cf. Goldthwaite, \textit{The building of Renaissance Florence}, pp. 261–262. In Florence, according to the latter author, the terms master, apprentice and worker referred to chronological phases, not to juridical or social categories.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Barron, \textit{London in the later Middle Ages}, pp. 211–216.
\item \textsuperscript{18} M. Boone, ‘L’industrie textile à Gand au bas moyen âge ou les resurrections successives d’une activité réputée moribonde’, in M. Boone and W. Prevenier (eds.), \textit{La draperie ancienne des Pays-Bas, débouchés de survie (14e-16e siècles)} (Leuven and Apeldoorn, 1993), pp. 15–58; D.M. Nicholas, \textit{The metamorphosis of a medieval city: Ghent in the age of the Arteveldes, 1302-1390} (Leiden, 1987), pp. 135–141, 241–250, 290–291. The authors disagree with each other on the evolution of Ghent’s medieval cloth industry.
\end{itemize}
Corporate social arrangements
The occupational associations in Florence, Ghent and London played different political and economic roles in urban society, which were largely shaped by the chronology of their development and the specific context in which they were embedded. To what extent can similar variations in social activities and responsibilities be observed? The political nature of the guilds in medieval Florence, as well as their sizeable and heterogeneous membership, resulted in a lack of cohesive identity, and meant that their ‘social-welfare activities’ were limited. In London, on the other hand, ‘the distribution of charity became increasingly important in the self-representation of the livery companies during the early modern period’. These contrasting conclusions can only be understood by going beyond identifying the political and economic factors that explain the functioning of the guilds in the respective cities; it requires a careful analysis of the types of mutual aid and charity provided by occupational associations in relation to other forms of social assistance available to guild members. In other words, did the social responsibilities of the medieval guilds co-evolve with those of other secular and religious urban institutions, resulting in complementary institutional arrangements for social support?

Although a sharp line cannot be drawn between the formal and informal assistance provided by medieval guilds, the more institutionalised forms of social support, in contrast to occasional payments or donations in kind to members in distress, are better documented in the guilds’ statutes and account books. More formalised forms of relief were mostly found among the larger guilds, which could dispose of sufficient resources. A distinction can be made between arrangements to which members specifically contributed (as a type of insurance against unemployment and burial), and those which were paid from the guilds’ general income from properties, rents and contributions. Furthermore, the guilds managed endowed charitable trusts, whose benefactors often determined to whom and how the charity was to be distributed. Endowments to hospitals or almshouses were left to guilds, because testators assumed that these institutions were better at managing these foundations. A famous example of such a foundation was the almshouse for the poor, non-livered members of London’s mercers’ guild set up in 1424, established under the will of Richard Whittington (d. 1423), a former mayor of the city and master of the same company. Some London mercers were also involved in the supervision of the hospital of St Thomas of Acon, long before the mercers’ company acquired the hospital from the Crown in 1542. In the same vein, the Florentine Ospedale degli Innocenti was founded by a legacy of 1,000 florins by a well-known merchant from Prato, Francesco Datini (d. 1410), who initially entrusted the building of this orphanage for abandoned children to the hands of the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, but in 1419 the executors of Datini assigned the management of the project to the consuls of the arte della seta, who engaged Francesco Brunelleschi to design the hospital, which was completed in 1445.

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26 P. Gavitt, Charity and children in Renaissance Florence: the Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536 (Ann Arbor, 1990), pp. 33–59. From 1294, the same silk guild of Por Santa Maria already administered the Ospedale di San Gallo, a foundling hospital that was merged with the Ospedale degli Innocenti in 1463.
Hospitals and almshouses

The majority of the hospitals and almshouses administered and provisioned by occupational associations were founded by individual members who appointed guilds to safeguard the longevity of the pious works for their souls. Since many guilds had a religious confraternity at their heart, social responsibilities were often executed by these devotional and charitable organisations, of which the membership could include brothers and sisters not belonging to the guild itself. Hospitals and almshouses generally fulfilled a variety of functions in the later Middle Ages, ranging from offering short-term shelter to pilgrims to permanent residency to the poor, infirm and elderly. In the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the functions of these foundations became more specialised with regard to the type of charity or (medical) care provided, as well as to whom the aid was distributed, because, at the same time, the growing pressure on the resources of these institutions and the urban community resulted in more discriminatory poor relief policies and new conceptions of poverty, which carefully distinguished between the respected or shamefaced poor who deserved support, and the unworthy poor: the vagabonds and healthy beggars. Historians have also stressed the limited capacity of medieval hospitals and almshouses, as well as that the poor relief provided in late medieval cities and towns was barely enough for the beneficiaries to support themselves.

These important issues, however, will be left aside here, since this paper concerns the institutional organisation of corporate welfare, rather than the effectiveness of medieval poor relief in general.

Table 1: Hospitals and almshouses in Florence, Ghent and London, c. 1300-1550

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Guilds</th>
<th>Guilds' almshouses and hospitals</th>
<th>Other institutions</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghent</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>London</td>
<td>c. 110</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>45</td>
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It was mainly the wealthier guilds in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London that were involved in the foundation, financing or management of hospitals and almshouses, and the corporations in Ghent (29%) and London (32%) slightly more so than their Florentine counterparts (22%), as can be derived from Table 1. A closer look at the ways in which the guilds were involved reveals an even more significant difference. Except for the arte dei vaiai e pellicciai – the furriers and skinners – all of the seven major guilds in Florence acted as overseers of hospitals and almshouses from the late-thirteenth century onwards. The arte di calimala, for example, held supervision over the leper house of San Jacopo a Sant'Eusebio (1192), the hospital of Bonifazio (1389) and the hospital of San Giuliano (1508), amongst a few other smaller hospices and religious houses in and around Florence. Often these charitable foundations were founded by one of the guild’s members, but they were typically not intended for members themselves, but served the urban community as a whole.

Only three of the fifteen hospitals attached to the Florentine guilds were specifically reserved for sick or elderly guild members: the hospitals of San Giovanni decollato dei norcini (porters from Norcia), of Sant’Onofrio dei tintori (dyers), and of Santa Trinita dei calzolai (cobbblers). These were all lesser occupational associations, of which only the shoemakers belonged to the politically recognised guilds as one of the arti minori of the Tuscan city. The motivation for founders and benefactors of hospitals to engage guilds in the administration of these charitable institutions has already been mentioned; on their part, the guilds profited from the administrative involvement in civic charity and the patronage of charitable foundations. It allowed them to control the often sizeable properties of these institutions and to contribute to the maintenance of public order in the city; perhaps even more importantly, it enhanced the public prestige of the guilds. It was for this reason that the guilds willingly invested in the edifices of the hospitals, to which the Ospedale degli Innocenti still testifies.

The hospitals and almshouses administered by the guilds in Ghent and London were oriented towards supporting guild members, and none of them targeted a wider public or offered more specialised (medical) care. In the Flemish city, four occupational associations founded a hospital for poor and elderly guildsmen in the fourteenth century. The hospital of the weavers, founded before 1336, was intended for sick and poor weavers, but the capacity of this foundation was limited – it accommodated only between 21 and 24 prebendaries at the end of the fifteenth century – and its places were reserved for the guild’s impoverished masters, who surrendered all their property in return for lodging and board. The hospitals of the fullers, bargees, smiths, tick weavers, and butchers could accommodate only up to 24 elderly guildsmen

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32 G. Filippi, L’Arte dei mercanti di Calimala in Firenze ed il suo più antico Statuto (Turin, 1889), pp. 75–76.
34 Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Arte dei Calzolai, no. 1, fol. 15r-v (1434). See, for the failed project of the arte dei maestri di pietra e legname to build a hospital in the square of San Marco in the second half of the fifteenth century; Goldthwaite, The building of Renaissance Florence, p. 268. The guild had difficulties to finance the hospital, but its consuls decided not to ‘aggravate the purses of the artisans’; ASF, Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e Legname, no. 3, fol. 2r (1466).
in the early sixteenth century. By founding and managing a hospital, these guilds distinguished themselves from the other guilds, not only because of their large membership and economic importance, but also through their display of social and material prestige. None of the Ghent guilds, however, was involved in the running of civic public charitable foundations.

The majority of the fourteen guild almshouses in London were set up in the fifteenth century. By the time of the dissolution of the religious houses and chantries (1534-1548), however, London’s incorporated companies were the most popular institutions among citizens for administering trust funds. The tailors’ company was the first company to build an almshouse: for seven men near their hall in 1414-1416, after the guild’s confraternity of St John the Baptist received a bequest from a prominent member, the grocer and alderman John Churchman. Bequests of prominent liverymen, such as the earlier mentioned mercer Richard Whittington in 1423 and the vintner Guy Shuldham in 1446, gave other companies cause to establish their own almshouses for poor, sick and elderly guildsmen and women. Similarly to the Ghent guild almshouses, the charitable foundations of the London companies offered a place for impoverished but respectable guild members and their widows. This form of social assistance was not extended to the urban community at large, but the running of almshouses was only one of the charitable works for which the livery companies were entrusted with endowments by late-medieval Londoners. The patronage of the hospital of St Thomas of Acon on Cheapside in London by the mercers, who also met in the hospital and had a chapel there, is an example of the guilds’ broader civic responsibilities. The same company also administered estates for the running of three schools in and outside London in the first half of the sixteenth century.

**Mutual aid**

Given the small number of medieval guild almshouses and their limited capacity, only the more fortunate senior guild members could expect to be admitted as pensioners. However, some guilds also disbursed outdoor relief to aged and infirm masters on a regular basis, beside the more common contributions that guildsmen were expected to make to each other’s burials. The statutes of the guilds in Florence, Ghent and London are a first source in which stipulations regarding corporate solidarity can be found. The statutes (1349) of the arte dei medici, speziali e merciai, for example, contain the general rule that the consuls of the guild would financially assist members who fell into need or poverty. Several other lesser guilds also assisted their members in times of hardship. The indigent members of the pizzicagnoli, the grocers, received aid from a common fund, which was financed by means of a payroll tax and annual contributions. The social arrangements thus varied among the Florentine guilds, and far from all of the preserved guild statutes mention regulation in this regard.

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37 Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, pp. 99–100. Four of the seven hospitals were attached to the guilds’ halls, and these were confiscated by Emperor Charles V in 1540, after a failed uprising of the city against the prince.


41 R. Ciasca (ed.), *Statuti dell’Arte dei medici e speziali* (Florence, 1922), p. 144.

There are few indications that guilds in Ghent developed similar support schemes or set up poor boxes for their needy members in the later Middle Ages. At least, the guilds’ ordinances and account books give little evidence of formal assistance; only occasional references to members receiving alms can be found in the accounts. An exception to this rule was the smiths’ guild, of which each member who became a master – according to their fifteenth-century ordinances – had to pay two pounds *gros tournois* to the almoners of the guild, who were entrusted with this fund to support the guild’s poor. Unfortunately, it cannot be checked whether and how this stipulation was executed in practice, since there are no surviving accounts of the guild. The income raised by the mentioned funds could not have sustained payments to many indigent members, but the fact that the ordinances mention the office of almoner suggests a certain degree of institutionalisation of this charitable practice. The virtual absence of regular corporate poor relief in medieval Ghent is remarkable, since a growing number of guilds in the nearby city of Antwerp established poor boxes from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards.

Graph 1: Annual average of London guildsmen receiving alms per decade, 1390-1549

The records of the livery companies in late-medieval London bear more traces of mutual aid among the guild members, although the evidence for the fourteenth century is scanty. The major

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44 See, for example: Stadsarchief Gent (SAG), Reeks 165/1, fol. 6r (alms to Jan Bouten, a hosier).

45 SAG, Reeks 173/2, fol. 7v.

46 B. de Munck, 'Fiscalizing solidarity (from below). Poor relief in Antwerp guilds: between community building and public service', in M. van der Heijden (ed.), *Serving the urban community. The rise of public facilities in the Low Countries* (Amsterdam, 2009), pp. 168–93.

guilds had a system of paying pensions to respectable members who had fallen into poverty due to sickness, old age or other misfortune. The recipients received weekly stipends that were enough to survive on, but which were hardly generous. The statutes (1418) of the drapers’ guild, for example, stipulated that freemen who had been members of the company for seven years and ‘hath been of good name and fame’ were entitled to assistance (13 s. 4 d. annually) if they fell into ‘poverty, impotency or sickness’, while former wardens would receive 14 d. weekly. The assistance provided by the company was drawn from the common box, to which rents, quarterages, fees for entry into the freedom and livery, fees for apprenticeship and fines were paid. The confraternity of the tailors company, in contrast, collected alms from their members (a shilling per annum), which generated most of the revenue for assisting the needy members of the confraternity, who were virtually all members of the craft as well. This arrangement might well be characterised as a corporate insurance scheme.

It still has to be determined which of the London companies organised mutual aid schemes. The records of smaller companies, such as the guilds of the pinners and wiresellers which merged in 1497 and then amalgamated with the girdlers in 1511, show no traces of similar arrangements. A second issue relates to the evolution of the number of guildsmen who received assistance. Based on the data of the tailors’ confraternity, it has been assumed that the number of recipients decreased in the second half of the fifteenth century. However, as can be derived from Graph 1, this observation cannot be generalised for other companies, even though, unfortunately, not all accounts of the companies have been preserved, especially for the second half of the fifteenth century, and not all accounts specify the number of recipients of aid. Yet, the annual average number of pensioners per decade gives a more reliable impression of the scope of this welfare system than calculating the expenses on mutual aid as a relative part of the total expenses of the guilds, which fluctuated and are not in all cases given. Anyhow, compared to what is known about the guilds in Florence and Ghent, the medieval London companies provided more elaborate assistance to their freemen, a system which continued to function into the early modern period.

Concluding remarks: guilds in an urban society
Corporate mutual aid among the living guild members, as well as memorial services for their departed brothers and sisters, is sometimes portrayed as the ultimate embodiment of the medieval ideal of brotherhood. More practically, it reduced one of the insecurities medieval guildsmen faced, and as such also strengthened their loyalty to the guilds’ common interests. Notwithstanding that the provision of aid was socially differentiated and confirmed the socio-economic hierarchy within guilds, the integrative effects of charity on both the guild and its...

51 The possible growth or decline of the guilds' membership should be taken into account before definite conclusions can be drawn about changes in the scope of corporate mutual assistance.
place in the wider urban community are emphasised in this interpretation. However, what this brief analysis of the types and scope of corporate social assistance in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London demonstrates is that far from all occupational guilds ran charitable institutions or relief schemes for their members. Of the multiple functions fulfilled by medieval trade and craft associations, the provision of more formalised forms of social assistance by guilds seems not to have been a general practice. The question, then, is: why not?

First of all, because the limited resources of the guilds placed restrictions on the form of assistance they could organise or provide to members. Charitable foundations administered by the guilds in Florence, Ghent and London were generally funded from testamentary bequests and donations by individual guild members, who increasingly showed preference for guild consuls and wardens to manage their charitable legacies. With the exception of London’s major livery companies, the ordinance and accounts books show little evidence of poor rates levied by guilds to supplement the revenues that could be spent on charity. It appears, therefore, that only the larger and more affluent guilds were able to bear the payment of regular stipends – always on strict conditions – to indigent members. Yet, if guilds grew too large, which was particularly the case in Florence, where the guilds were forced into guild amalgamations for political reasons, they lost their voluntary character, while their heterogeneity undermined the members’ solidarity. For this reason in the Tuscan city, there was only one politically recognised guild, that of the cobblers, which ran an almshouse for its infirm and elderly brothers and their families. A further twenty religious confraternities, however, were attached to artisanal groups, of which several disbursed alms among their members, and at least eight of them founded their own almshouse during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

A second reason why guilds were not equally devoted institutionalised forms of social assistance is connected to the place they took within the wider system of urban poor relief. Guild members may have had alternative possibilities for seeking social assistance in times of hardship, as a result of which incentives were lacking for guilds to develop more elaborate or inclusive forms of mutual aid. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence, urban poor relief was organised and distributed by the commune, the Church and the guilds, and above all by the many religious confraternities. The confraternity of Santa Maria of Orsanmichele, which was primarily financed by well-to-do citizens, provided wide-ranging support for the poor in the city until the arrival of the Black Death. Another example was the Buonomini di San Martino, a charitable confraternity which served the needs of artisans and shame-faced poor in the fifteenth century. The smaller confraternities, as well as the various hospitals, and the informal support of kin, friends and neighbours, were often entwined with the patronage networks that characterised the city.

54 J. Henderson, Piety and charity in late medieval Florence (Chicago, 1997), pp. 426–428. Not all of these hospitals are listed in: Henderson, The renaissance hospital appendix.
A similar mix of public welfare and private charity emerged in late-medieval Ghent, where poor guild members could appeal to several religious and lay charitable institutions, of which the so-called Holy Ghost Tables were probably the most important. These parish-based institutions were founded from the twelfth century onwards, and functioned under the governance of lay wardens elected by the city council. The Tables distributed food, fuel, shoes and sometimes cash on a regular basis to deserving parishioners who had fallen into poverty.\(^5^8\) In London, in contrast, urban poor relief only became more institutionalised from the beginning of the fifteenth century. Before then, the provision of charity and medical care was in the hands of religious institutions, lay confraternities and individual Londoners. In the fifteenth century, however, the urban authorities, as well as the livery companies, gradually assumed more responsibilities regarding the provision of charitable assistance: witness the foundation of hospitals and almshouses in this period.\(^5^9\) The confiscation of religious properties in 1534 en 1548, accompanied by the introduction of parish-based poor relief by King Edward IV from 1536 onwards, caused a major reorganisation of London’s poor relief system, but the livery companies maintained their charitable responsibilities vis-à-vis the parishes.\(^6^0\)

The main point that can be drawn from both answers to the question why the charitable activities varied among the trade and craft guilds in late-medieval Florence, Ghent and London is that these institutions evolved along different trajectories, which were shaped by their interactions with other urban institutions and by political, economic and social dynamics. In Florence, the guilds became subject to the authority of the commune over the course of the fourteenth century, meaning that they were first and foremost vehicles of political participation. Although they were less appropriate institutions for organising mutual aid, the public devotional and charitable activities of the Florentine guilds became a matter of strong rivalry and civic prestige. This was exemplified by the building of Orsanmichele, the city’s grain-oratory, which was a locus of patronage and representation for the corporations in the fourteenth century. As such, the guilds were instruments of the communal authorities for the organisation of public charity and the control of the urban space.\(^6^1\) This was less the case in Ghent and London, where the limited charitable activities of the guilds were overwhelmingly confined to their own membership; and particularly the London companies developed, comparatively speaking, the most regularised forms of charity, in the absence of alternative social arrangements.

In sum, medieval corporate mutual aid and public charity were the result of processes of exaptation and adaptation to the urban institutional environment. Whether, and to what extent, guilds developed more institutionalised forms of welfare ultimately depended on the needs of their members, as well as the leeway they enjoyed in the specific urban context in which they operated.\(^6^2\) Moreover, institutional complementarities emerged among urban institutions that provide social assistance, either reinforcing or compensating for each other's effects, without a priori entailing better performance of these institutions. The resulting entanglement of these


\(^{59}\) Barron, *London in the later Middle Ages*, pp. 266–301.


urban institutions – not only in economic or political ways, but also in the social domain – to a large extent explains the functioning and long survival of pre-modern guilds.

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