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‘From rags to riches? Welfare ratios in the southern Low Countries and the Little Divergence, 1275-1550’

Despite increasing criticism on the usefulness of real wages, they still remain the primary evidence for comparing living standards across time and space. The publication of Robert Allen’s seminal article and database, compromising daily wages of construction workers and the cost of living in major cities across Europe, has re-inspired several scholars in recent years to retrace and explain the origins of the wage and, by extension, economic gap between north-western Europe and its central and southern parts, a process known as the Little Divergence. Although often working with the same dataset, they have come to different conclusions: one group of historians proposes the period immediately after the Black Death as a crucial period of transition, putting much weight on the fifteenth- century golden age of labour when premodern real wages were at their peak and demography started to recover, whereas another group believes the divergence to be much more recent, pointing at the seventeenth or even eighteenth century.

The discrepancies in chronology largely depend on the chosen units of analysis. Those favouring a later timing tend to focus on England and Italy, while those looking at the Late Middle Ages often include other regions. Most notably, the higher levels of north-western European real wages in the fifteenth century are mainly driven by the Low Countries. Remarkably, the analysis has been limited to the cities of Amsterdam and Antwerp even though the leading economic center was then still situated more southward, in the County of Flanders. The absence of the region in international comparisons is even more striking considering that the area boosts exceptionally well preserved archives and a long tradition of wage studies. The proposed paper therefore reconstructs several series of welfare ratios for Flanders, based on a large dataset of wages paid to construction workers in primary and secondary sources (n=14,396). It includes 63 locations and encompasses the period between 1275 and 1550. A consumer basket, including six foodstuffs as well as one textile and one fuel product, has been reconstructed for the same period.

Most importantly, the resulting series fundamentally question the importance of the Black Death as a primal cause for the Little Divergence. Up to now, the analysis of the early fourteenth century rests predominantly on the evidence for England (London and Oxford) and Italy (Florence). Data for the Low Countries only becomes available from 1349 (Amsterdam) or 1400 (Antwerp) onwards. The paper introduces evidence for a much earlier date, showing that higher wage levels were already achieved before the mortality crises, especially in the cities of Bruges and Ghent. Notwithstanding some short periods of convergence, real wages of skilled construction workers were on average 20% higher in those two metropoles compared to Florence. Alternative variables, such as urbanization and agricultural output, seem to confirm the hypothesis of an earlier than hitherto supposed wage gap between the leading regions in Europe.