

Leaving the Promised Lands

Emigration from the Low Countries to Florence in the Fifteenth Century

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This article challenges the assumption that the late medieval Low Countries were predominantly an immigrant-receiving region by highlighting the significance of emigration from these supposed 'promised lands'. It examines evidence from the migrant confraternity of Saint Barbara in Florence. Database research on its membership register from 1445-1456 reveals details of 457 individuals who migrated from the Low Countries to Tuscany, revising Mario Battistini's earlier figures upward. Migrants from these areas constituted the largest share of the confraternity, questioning its previous characterisation as 'German'. Primarily composed of cloth and linen workers displaced by issues in their native urban textile industries, these migrants had different economic profiles compared to those moving to fifteenth-century England, who were mostly highly-skilled artisans. Cloth weavers found wage-based opportunities in Florence, while linen weavers faced less competition there. The confraternity also included many female migrants, but due to limited information, it is challenging to determine their reasons for migrating.

Dit artikel betwist de aanname dat de laatmiddeleeuwse Lage Landen voornamelijk immigranten opnamen door het belang van emigratie vanuit deze zogenaamde 'beloofde landen' te benadrukken. Het onderzoekt bronmateriaal van de migrantenbroederschap van Sint-Barbara in Firenze. Op basis van een database van het ledenregister uit de periode 1445-1456 worden gegevens gepresenteerd over 457 personen die vanuit de Lage Landen naar Toscane emigreerden, waarmee de eerdere cijfers van Mario Battistini naar boven worden bijgesteld. Migranten uit deze gebieden vormden de meerderheid van de broederschap, wat de eerdere karakterisering ervan als 'Duits' in twijfel trekt. Deze migranten, voornamelijk

laken- en linnenwevers die hun geboortesteden verlieten ten gevolge van problemen in de textielindustrie, vertoonden een ander economisch profiel dan degenen die in de vijftiende eeuw naar Engeland verhuisden, waar het meestal ging om hoogopgeleide ambachtslieden. Terwijl lakenwevers in Firenze vooral in loondienst werkten, ondervonden linnenwevers er minder concurrentie. De broederschap telde ook veel vrouwelijke migranten, maar vanwege de beperkte informatie blijven hun redenen voor migratie moeilijk te achterhalen.

Introduction¹

In his *Mémoires*, the Burgundian chronicler Philippe de Commynes famously described the Low Countries under Duke Philip the Good as ‘promised lands’. He emphasised that, due to the relative political stability and beneficial ducal policies, the inhabitants of these territories enjoyed greater wealth and opulence than most European contemporaries.² While many historians have questioned aspects of Commynes’ employer-biased optimism, most agree that the principalities of Flanders, Brabant, Holland, and Zeeland in particular, stood out compared to neighbouring European regions for their artisanal and commercial performance, and the affluence and political power of the urban middle class.³ The ‘promised lands’ trope has also had a profound impact on the historiography of migration in the late medieval Low Countries. Since the boom of migration history in the 1990s, historians have highlighted how the prosperity of these regions acted as a pull factor for immigrants from Europe and beyond to settle in Netherlandish cities. Drawing on registers of newly enrolled citizens, Erik Thoen and Elisa Bonduel demonstrated how the international trading centre of Bruges attracted skilled artisans from other parts of the continent throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁴ Hendrik Callewier showed how late medieval Flanders was also a popular destination for specific groups of migrants such as Byzantine refugees and

1 We want to thank Francesco Guidi Bruscoli for his help during our research in Florence, and Moyra Hoffack and Henderik Van Rymenant for their contribution to the database on which this article is based.

2 Original: ‘Et me semble que pource lors ses terres se povoient myeulx dire terres de promission que nulles autres seigneuries qui fussent sur la terre’. Philippe de Commynes, *Mémoires*, Joël Blanchard (ed.), (Librairie Droz 2007) 1, 13.

3 For the most explicit reference to Commynes’ description, see Raymond Van Uytven, ‘La

Flandre et le Brabant, “terres de promission” sous les ducs de Bourgogne’, *Revue du Nord* 43 (1961) 281-317. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/rnord.1961.2404>; Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier, *The Promised Lands: The Low Countries Under Burgundian Rule, 1369-1530* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1999). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812200706>.

4 Erik Thoen, ‘Immigration to Bruges During the Late Middle Ages’, in: Simonetta Cavaciocchi (ed.), *Le migrazioni in Europa secc. XIII-XVIII* (Le Monnier 1994) 335-353; Elisa Bonduel, ‘Nieuwe

Ethiopians, explicitly adopting Commynes' arguments when explaining their presence.⁵

Emigration away from the Low Countries, by contrast, has received less scrutiny. The idea that people also left these 'promised lands' during the fifteenth century has never been considered systematically. Scholarship in the social sciences, however, has stressed that today as in the past, regions are never characterised solely by immigration.⁶ At the end of the nineteenth century, the celebrated migration theorist Ernst G. Ravenstein already posited that 'each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current'.⁷ Migration scholars therefore look at net migration, or the difference between the numbers of immigrants and emigrants, to gauge the impact of migration on a community, rather than at immigration alone.⁸ Migration studies have also increasingly considered reciprocal migration, where distinct groups of migrants simultaneously move between two locations, but in opposite directions.⁹ In other words, focusing exclusively on immigration to the late medieval Low Countries may distort our view on the size, process, and impact of migration to and from this area. If immigration figures are adopted as mirrors of a region's economic performance and social and political well-being,¹⁰ we also run the risk of obscuring problems that functioned as push factors in the decisions of both those settling in the area and those leaving. General historiography has shown that, despite Commynes' rosy portrayal, such potential push factors were very much present in the late medieval Low Countries – from recurring civic unrest, including bouts of outright civil war,

poorters in Brugge. Migratie als indicator voor socio-professionele diversiteit en veranderend sociaaleconomisch beleid in laatmiddeleeuws Brugge (ca. 1350-1450)', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis* 158:2 (2021) 267-317.

- 5 Hendrik Callewier, "'For Help and Comfort and to Resist the Enemy of God': Greek Refugees in the Burgundian Low Countries", *Journal of Medieval History* 50:1 (2024) 119-139, 134. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2023.2292648>. (reference to Commynes on p. 16); idem, "'Een zwarte man uit het land van Pape Jan". Ethiopische bezoekers en het veranderende wereldbeeld in de Bourgondische Nederlanden', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 138:3 (2025) 215-230. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TvG2025.3.002.CALL>.

- 6 Agnieszka Weiner, 'Introduction', in: idem (ed.), *Emigration and Diaspora Policies in the Age of Mobility* (Springer 2017) 1-12. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56342-8_1.
- 7 Ernst G. Ravenstein, 'The Laws of Migration', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 48:2 (1885) 167-235, 199. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2979181>.
- 8 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'Migration and Population Change: Drivers and Impacts', *Population Facts* 8 (2017) 1-4.
- 9 Russell King, 'Reciprocal Migration', in: Laura Oso, Natalia Ribas-Mateos, and Melissa Moralli (eds.), *Elgar Encyclopedia of Global Migration* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2025) 468-469. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035300389.ch151>.
- 10 For the Low Countries, this has happened most explicitly in Bonduel, 'Nieuwe poorters'.

to the collapse of key economic sectors such as the once vast cloth industry.¹¹ Their impact on migration patterns deserves closer examination.

The aim of this article, then, is to shed light on those moving away from the late medieval Low Countries. Sources allowing us to do so, however, are scarce. While recording those entering an area served fiscal purposes and facilitated social control, medieval authorities had far less interest in registering those leaving their territories.¹² A promising approach tackling the absence of systematic emigration records is to focus on immigration sources in migrants' destinations that mention their origins, and then to work backwards considering what they reveal about the contexts in which people left. This methodology has been tested for late medieval England, where migrants from various parts of Europe were shown to have made up as much as 1.5 per cent of the total population. These migrant groups included thousands of so-called 'Dutch' people, originating from the Low Countries or German territories, for whom urban unrest and economic decline at home actually did serve as push factors and help to explain their departure.¹³

Yet, 'Dutch' emigrants did not settle exclusively in England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This article advances the study of emigration from the late medieval Low Countries through the case of a migrant confraternity in the Tuscan city of Florence. Previous scholarship has highlighted Renaissance Florence as a migration hub, with Samuel Cohn arguing that the presence of non-Italians in the city increased dramatically over the fifteenth century.¹⁴ Migrant groups in Florence that received particular scrutiny include Byzantine refugees and individuals from the German dominions.¹⁵ Some research has also considered migration from the Low Countries, albeit predominantly from an art historical perspective.¹⁶ Research on newcomers from the Low Countries in Florence outside this context remains limited. Franco Franceschi and Lucia Sandri did note a remarkable presence

11 Bruno Blondé, Marc Boone, and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene (eds.), *City and Society in the Low Countries, 1100-1600* (Cambridge University Press 2018) 47-48, 107-114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108645454>.

12 On the registration of immigrants in the late medieval Low Countries, see Marc Boone and Peter Stabel, 'New Burghers in the Late Medieval Towns of Flanders and Brabant: Conditions of Entry, Rules and Reality', in: Rainer Schwinges (ed.), *Neubürger im späten Mittelalter. Migration und Austausch in der Städtelandschaft des alten Reiches (1250-1550)* (Duncker & Humblot 2002) 317-332.

13 W. Mark Ormrod, Bart Lambert, and Jonathan Mackman, *Immigrant England, 1300-1550* (Manchester University Press 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526135773>.

14 Samuel Cohn, *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (Academic Press 1980) 96-103.

15 Jonathan Harris, *Greek Emigres in the West 1400-1520* (Porphyrogenitus 1995) 32; Lorenz Böniger, *Die deutsche Einwanderung nach Florenz im Spätmittelalter* (Brill 2006). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047409205>.

16 Paula Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting, 1400-1500* (Yale University Press 2004); Hillie Smit, 'Flemish

of migrants from the Low Countries in the records of the Florentine textile industries and the city's hospitals, respectively, but did not systematically consider the contexts in which these individuals left their places of origin.¹⁷

The purpose of this article, based on the membership registers of the Florentine Saint Barbara Confraternity, is to demonstrate that the presence of migrants from the Low Countries in fifteenth-century Florence was quantitatively more significant and economically and socially more diverse than previously thought. We also explore the drivers behind this migration, considering both push factors in the Low Countries and pull factors in Italy. In the first part of the article, we address the sources enabling this analysis, as well as their institutional context. The second section provides an analysis of the numerical importance and geographical origins of these migrants from the Low Countries. In the third and fourth parts, we examine the available information on their occupations and gender, linking this to the economic and social contexts of their places of origin.

The Confraternity of Saint Barbara

Newcomers in Florence could turn to various associations or networks of people who had made the same journey. In the Mediterranean world and beyond, confraternities acted as 'settlement bridgeheads,' often referred to as 'a home away from home.'¹⁸ These associations provided spaces where migrants could express their longing for and sense of identity with their places of birth by singing songs of home or sharing news. This clustering has been described as allowing migrants to 'live "here" without forgetting "over there," by continuing to speak their own language, express their beliefs, retain their culture, and celebrate familiar festivals'.¹⁹ As religious corporations associated with a clerical institution – typically a church where members met or had their chapel – these groups usually bore the name of a patron saint.²⁰ In many medieval Italian towns, confraternities of foreigners

Tapestry Weavers in Italy c.1420-1520: A Survey and Analysis of the Activity in Various Cities', in: Guy Delmarcel (ed.), *Flemish Tapestry Weavers Abroad: Emigration and the Founding of Manufactories in Europe* (Leuven University Press 2002) 113-130.

- 17 Franco Franceschi, 'I tedeschi e l'arte della lana in Firenze fra Tre et Quattrocento', in: Gabriella Rossetti (ed.), *Dentro la città stranieri e realtà urbane nell'Europa dei secoli XII-XVI* (Liguori 1989) 278-290; Lucia Sandri, 'Stranieri e forestieri nella Firenze del Quattrocento attraverso i libri

di ricordi e di entrata e uscita degli ospedali cittadini', in: *Forestieri e Stranieri nelle città basso-medievali* (Salimbeni 1988) 149-161.

- 18 Rosa Salzberg, 'Towards a Social History of Home and Migration', in: Paolo Boccagni (ed.), *Handbook on Home and Migration* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2023) 82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800882775.00014>.
- 19 Ibid., 84.
- 20 Diana Bullen Presciutti (ed.), *Space, Place, and Motion: Locating Confraternities in the Late Medieval and Early Modern City* (Brill 2017).

were established to promote the interests of their respective nations, organise mutual solidarity, express devotion, and preserve their culture and language.²¹

In fifteenth-century Florence, confraternities were available for so-called *tedesc(h)i*, a term used in Italian cities for migrants from areas where *Diets* was spoken, that is, a vernacular language of Germanic origin – more specifically, *tedesco* refers to a Dutch- or German-speaking inhabitant of the Low Countries or the Holy Roman Empire.²² Most of these associations are poorly documented, leaving only scant evidence of their workings and membership. This is different for the Saint Barbara Confraternity, established in 1445. It was based in the Santissima Maria Annunziata, a Florentine church rebuilt in the 1440s, located in a neighbourhood where many northern migrants settled. The confraternity rented two rooms in the church and maintained its own chapel, dedicated to Saint Barbara. New members paid an enrolment fee of twenty *soldi*, which contributed to the chapel's furnishing, completed in 1452.²³ One of the furnishings, a painting funded by a member in 1468–1469, has been preserved. It depicts Saint Barbara holding a tower, symbolising her popularity as a patron saint of artisans in the Low Countries (Figure 1).

Many medieval documents of the Saint Barbara Confraternity, including its membership registers, were preserved in Florence's Archivio di Stato and were published by Mario Battistini in 1931, though with numerous errors.²⁴ Notably, Battistini omitted the details of female members, making his publication unsuitable for demographic and gender analysis.²⁵ Instead, our study is based on the original archival material, particularly the confraternity's oldest preserved membership register, spanning from 1445 to 1456. The register consists of alphabetical lists compiled by anonymous scribes, likely the *camerlenghi* who also produced the confraternity's accounts. Since this office rotated roughly bi-monthly – with men serving multiple terms – different hands appear in the register. Yet entries were recorded consistently. The text is primarily in Middle Dutch and Low or High

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004339521>.

21 See, for instance, for Venice: Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, 'Strangers in the City? The Paradoxes of Communitarianism in Fifteenth-Century Venice', in: Magdalena Skoblar (ed.), *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic: Spheres of Maritime Power and Influence, c. 700–1453* (Cambridge University Press 2021) 365–384. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108886987.019>.

22 Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 175.

23 Paula Nuttall, 'La "tavele Sinte Barberen": New Documents for Cosimo Rosselli and Giuliano da Maiano', *The Burlington Magazine* 127:987 (1985) 367–372.

24 Archivio di Stato, Florence, Compagnie religiose sopprese da Pietro Leopoldo, B1, 204 (Santa Barbara), nr. 4 [hereafter ASF, CPL, 204.4]; Mario Battistini, *La Confrérie de Sainte-Barbe des Flamands à Florence. Documents relatifs aux tisserands et aux tapisseries* (M. Lamertin 1931).

25 For instance, while Battistini included Mertyn Johansson from Ghent, his wife Lisebetta was



Figure 1. Cosimo Rosselli, *Santa Barbara, San Giovanni Battista e San Matteo*, 1468-1469. Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze. Public Domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=116472182>.

German, probably reflecting each scribe's native tongue. Frequent Italianised names and occasional Italian terms (such as month names) suggest specific information was entered by Italians or, more likely, by multilingual scribes, but had to be intelligible for locals. Each entry typically lists the member's name, patronymic, surname, origin, and occupation, followed by payment details, usually quarterly. Records are not always complete: surnames are often missing, and given names occasionally omitted. Still, they offer rich information – spouses and children often appear, some with arrival dates. Departures from Florence are sometimes also recorded, though these departures were not always permanent.

To ensure a systematic analysis, all information from the register was entered into a database.²⁶ Each entry preserved the original spelling of names, places, and occupations, alongside a standardised spelling to account for orthographic variations. When the place of origin was missing, it could often be inferred from related individuals in the same entry. Since the register spans several years, individuals appear multiple times due to ongoing payments. To gauge the number of unique members, we minimised double counting by systematically cross-referencing entries using identifying characteristics. The recurrence of combinations of names, patronymics, occupations, and places of origin, along with sequential payment dates, helped determine whether repeated entries referred to the same person. In most cases, consistency across entries allowed for the reliable identification of individuals over time. Cases where crucial details are missing are more challenging, which could lead to incorrectly merging distinct individuals with the same name or double counting a single person. These instances are extremely limited, however. Drawing on the methodology outlined above, this study provides the most thorough geographical and social analysis of the fifteenth-century Saint Barbara membership so far (Figure 2).

Not just a 'German' confraternity: Geographical membership analysis

In a 1448 charter permitting its residence in the Annunziata church, the Saint Barbara Confraternity was referred to as the *Compagnia de' Tedeschi titolata in Santa Barbera* (Saint Barbara being the chapel in the church). The document specified that the society provided a home to *tedeschi*, a term previously explained as designating German or Dutch language speakers.²⁷ However, the

not recorded, despite being listed together in the register. ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 129r; Battistini, *La Confrérie*, 104.

26 The processed database is available in the appendix to William Torbeyns, 'Vertrekken uit Vlaanderen. Migratie van Vlaanderen

naar Firenze tijdens de late Middeleeuwen' (Master's thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel 2024) 117-134.

27 Battistini, *La Confrérie*, 75. In most cases, the corporation was called 'Societas' or 'Confraternitas Sancta Barbara' (*ibid.*, 69).

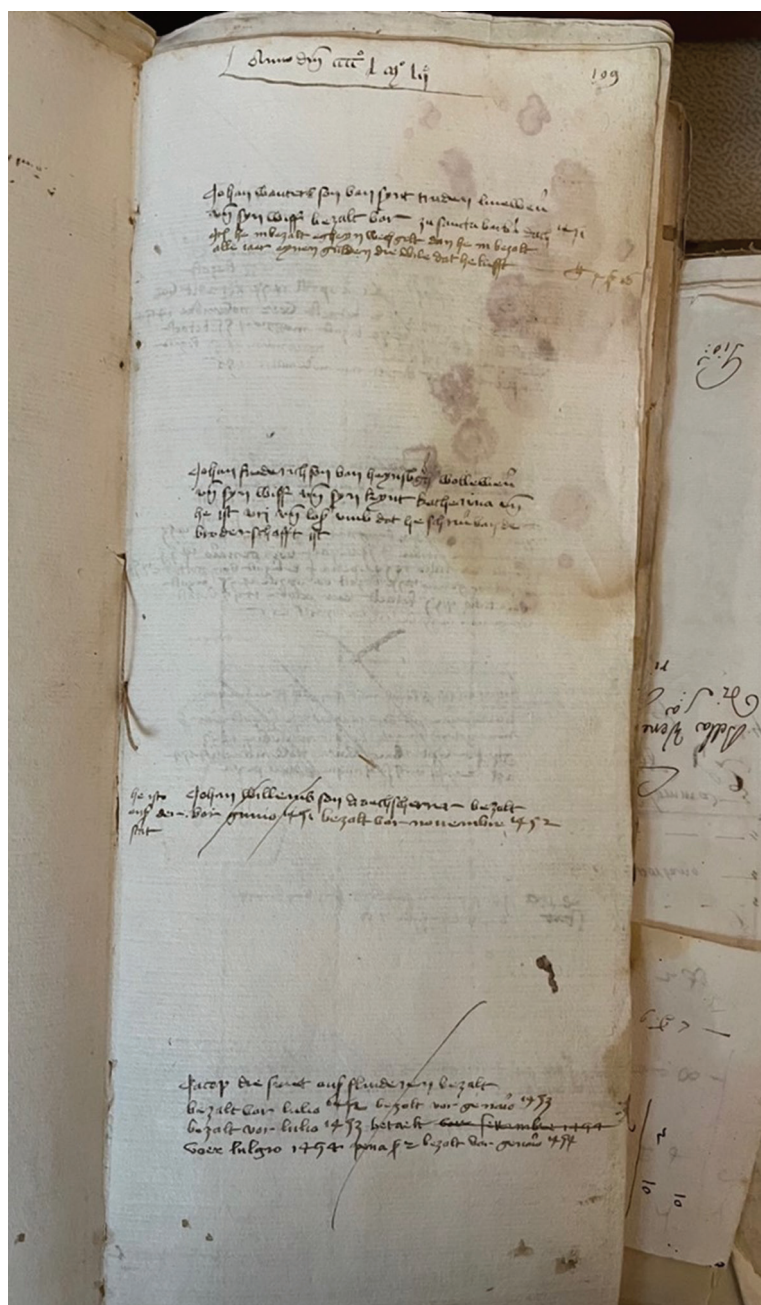


Figure 2. Folio from the membership register of the Saint Barbara Confraternity of Florence, 1445-1456 (1452). © ASF, CPL, 204.4, 109r. Photograph by William Torbeyns.

broad *tedesco* label obscures the significant geographical diversity among the confraternity's members. It also led later scholars to describe the brotherhood as 'German', which may be misinterpreted as comprising individuals exclusively from the Holy Roman Empire or present-day Germany.²⁸ In reality, Saint Barbara included members from within and outside these areas. This study specifically examines the confraternity members from the Low Countries, a complex of principalities recognised as a territorial unit by both contemporaries and generations of later historians due to their centuries-long entangled history and intense economic, cultural, and political ties. From the late fourteenth century, these territories were further politically integrated under the Burgundian dukes of the Valois dynasty.²⁹ In migration scholarship, the Low Countries have been acknowledged as an important place of origin of migrants settling in other parts of Europe, notably England.³⁰

The 1448 charter already suggests that among the broader regions of origin of the Saint Barbara members, the Low Countries held a prominent position. This act was signed by 48 members, whose names and origins were specified. Of these 48, 35 hailed from the Low Countries, predominantly Brabant and Flanders, while 13 came from other territories.³¹ This pattern is consistent with a notarial act of 1471, signed by 94 members. While the origins of 26 members could not be determined, 42 signatories came from the Low Countries, compared to 26 from other territories in the Holy Roman Empire and Switzerland.³² It is important to note, however, that the 1448 and 1471 acts provide only a partial view of the confraternity's size and composition. To achieve a more representative assessment, an analysis of its original membership register is necessary.

28 Böniger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 190. By contrast, but just as inaccurately, Battistini called the confraternity 'la Confrérie de Sainte Barbe des Flamands'.

29 These territories were called the *pays de par-deçà* by contemporaries, as opposed to the *pays de par-delà*, the southern dominions of the Burgundian dukes. Regions of origin included as part of the Low Countries here are the counties of Flanders, Holland, Zeeland, and Hainaut; the duchies of Brabant, Luxembourg, and Guelders; the prince-bishoprics of Liège and Utrecht; the seigneurie of Mechelen and the Tournaisis. All mentioned principalities (except for Guelders and the Tournaisis) were formally under Burgundian rule by the time of the membership register – Tournai and the

surrounding Tournaisis were French territories but were surrounded by Burgundian dominions and maintained close ties with them. Liège and Utrecht were not formally part of the Burgundian empire but within its sphere of influence, leading to the election of Burgundian partisans as prince-bishops in both areas. We consider Maastricht a separate entity because it belonged to two principalities, Liège and Brabant.

30 Ormrod, Lambert, and Mackman, *Immigrant England*, 102–110.

31 Battistini, *La Confrérie*, 75. 17 came from Brabant, 11 from Flanders, 4 from Holland, 2 from Liège, 1 from Zeeland, and 2 from France.

32 Battistini, *La Confrérie*, 18, 82.

Territories	Total
Flanders	82
Brabant	69
Liège	42
Holland	16
Maastricht	13
Utrecht	7
Mechelen	5
Limburg	3
Guelders	2
Hainaut	2
Tournai	2
Zeeland	2
Luxembourg	1
Totals	246

Table 1. Origins of emigrants from the Low Countries by principality, 1445-1456.

Source: ASF, CPL, 204.4.

457 unique individuals were recorded in the register between 1445 and 1456. Regional affiliations were provided for 90 per cent of these members (411 individuals), and for 78 per cent of them (348 individuals), the exact city or town of origin was specified. The largest group came from the Low Countries. Among the 411 members with a stated origin, 246 individuals (60 per cent) hailed from this region over the period 1445-1456 (Table 1). Whereas Battistini believed that the 94 signatories in 1474, including 42 migrants from the Low Countries and 26 members without a specified origin, reflected the confraternity's full membership that year, the highest number of members at any given time between 1445 and 1456, recorded in 1452, was 139, including 71 migrants from the Low Countries and 12 individuals without a stated origin. The figure of 71 people does not include undated entries, meaning that the actual number of Low Countries members in 1452 was probably higher.

For 198 of the 246 members from the Low Countries, the register also details the town or city of origin. Within the Low Countries, the County of Flanders contributed the highest number of members (82). Ghent (15) and Bruges (10) were the most frequently recorded Flemish cities, while other towns such as Ypres (5) and Kortrijk (4) also appear in the register. The Duchy of Brabant was the second most significant region, accounting for 69 members. Brussels was the primary city of origin of migrants (17), followed by Diest (6), Olmen (5), and Eindhoven and Lier (4 each). The Prince-Bishopric of Liège also made a notable contribution with 42 members, predominantly from Peer (12), Tongeren (8), Herk-de-Stad (7), Hasselt (6), and Sint-Truiden

(5).³³ Smaller numbers came from the County of Holland (16), the city of Maastricht (13), the Prince-Bishopric of Utrecht (7), and the Seigneurie of Mechelen (5). It is notable that many members came from the Dutch-speaking part of the principality of Liège, the county of Loon, but not from its French-speaking capital of the same name (Figures 3 and 4). This confirms that language, rather than territorial boundaries, was an important criterion for joining the confraternity, likely due to the need to socialise in the same language.

The close relationship between the languages spoken in the Low Countries and the Rhineland is also reflected in the confraternity's membership. Members from other territories within the Holy Roman Empire numbered 155 out of 411 identified members, representing roughly 38 per cent of the total. For 147 of them, a specific place of origin was recorded, revealing a markedly concentrated pattern of migration. The majority hailed from the Rhineland, a region adjacent to the Low Countries, and were drawn from a limited number of urban centres, notably Cologne (30) and Aachen (22). Further south, Augsburg (10) and Salzburg (8) emerge as important points of departure (Figure 5). While the confraternity also drew members from various smaller towns, their contribution was less significant, with Hamburg accounting for five, and Nuremberg, Landau in der Pfalz, Regensburg, and Marburg each supplying four individuals.

Lastly, a small minority of members originated from the Mediterranean region, totalling ten individuals. These included one member from Rome and two from Slavonia, a term historically associated with Dalmatian and Balkan populations. Additionally, five female members were recorded as Florentine. These five belonged to prominent patrician families, including the wife of Alessandro della Stufa and four women from the Neroni family. Their presence in the register likely reflects honorary memberships, as these families appear to have supported the confraternity during its foundation and maintained close ties in subsequent years, likely for economic benefit.³⁵

The geographical analysis of the Saint Barbara membership thus provides key insights into broader migration patterns. The fact that most

33 For a detailed study, see Jan Leunis, 'Limburgse ambachtslieden der 15de en 16de eeuw in Italië. Een bijdrage tot de uitwijkingsgeschiedenis', *Het Oude Land van Loon* 10 (1955) 24–51, 89–100. However, Leunis' figures contain mistakes as they were based on Battistini.

34 The GIS maps of the Low Countries presented in this article use a base map derived from Rombert Stapel, 'Historical Atlas of the Low

Countries: A GIS Dataset of Locality-Level Boundaries (1350–1800)', *Research Data Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences* 8:1 (2023) 1–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/24523666-bja10033>. Version 15.0. The data visualised is entirely our own.

35 Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 195–197. See below for how the confraternity may have been economically beneficial for these families.

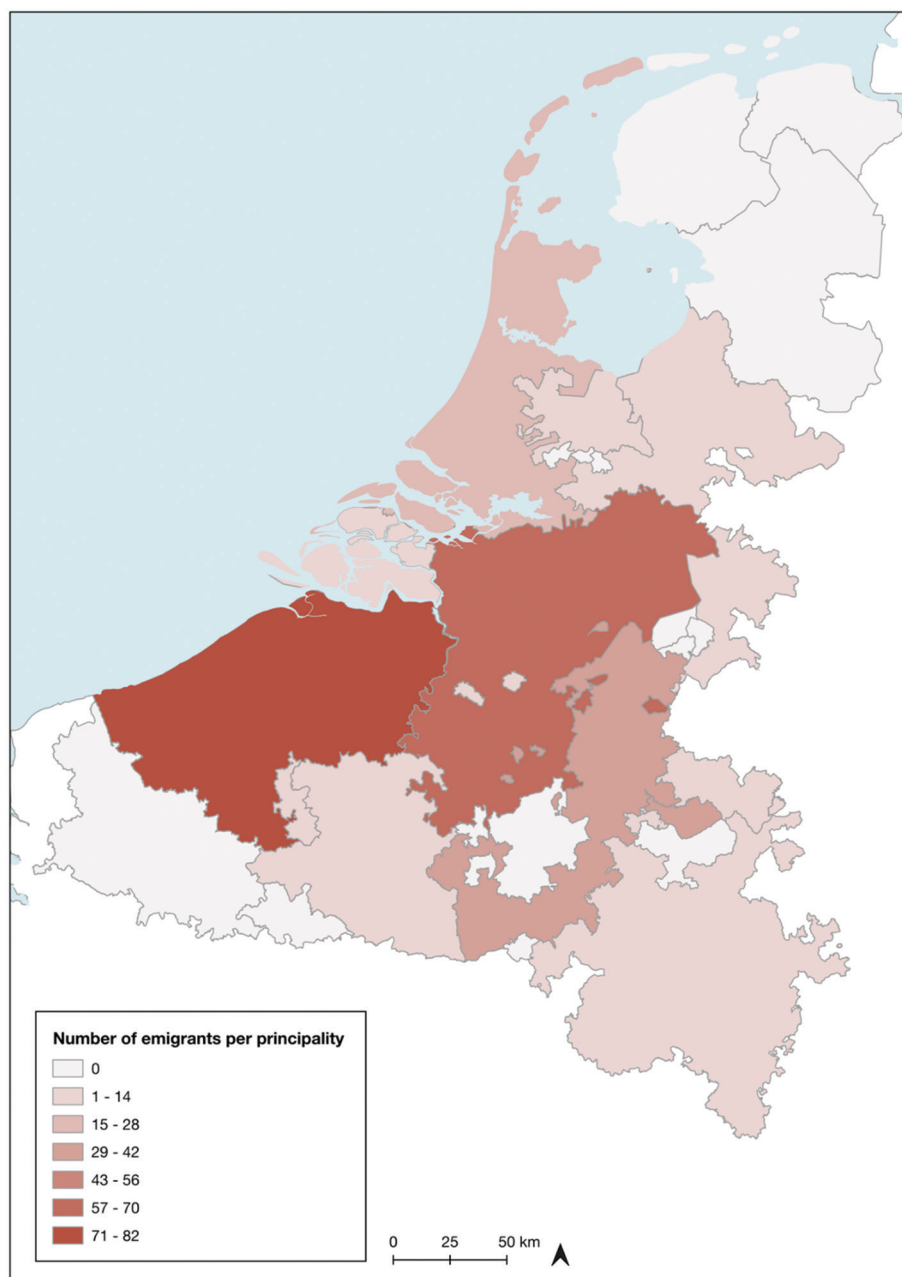


Figure 3. Origins of emigrants in the Low Countries by principality, 1445-1456. Source: ASF, CPL, 204.4. Map made by William Torbeyns.³⁴

members hailed from within the Holy Roman Empire may have contributed to historians considering the confraternity as ‘German’. However, with Flanders, a fief of the French Crown, alone accounting for 20 per cent of identifiable members, it is clear that membership extended well beyond the Empire’s borders. Our analysis highlights the particularly high number of members from various cities in the Low Countries, again challenging the dominant historiographical narrative that primarily frames the latter region solely as a destination for immigrants. The presence of individuals from places such as Ghent and Bruges underscores the dual function of these urban centres as both arrival points and departure hubs within wider European migration networks.

The Saint Barbara registers stand out for documenting such high numbers of immigrants from the Low Countries in a single fifteenth-century European city – especially considering that the 246 identified members from these regions likely exclude French-speaking newcomers, and possibly also those working in certain trades.³⁶ As stated above, comparable sources with similar geographic detail exist only for England, where London and its suburbs hosted 621 immigrants from the Low Countries in 1436.³⁷ For Italian cities, comparison is complicated by the generic *tedeschi* label. Drawing on notarial evidence, Philippe Braunstein argued that several thousand *tedeschi* – both merchants and artisans – lived in fifteenth-century Venice. These included immigrants from the Low Countries, but the source material does not allow to quantify their presence.³⁸ Rome had two major *tedeschi* confraternities. One, Santa Maria dell’Anima, has fifteenth-century membership registers but these do not reveal the specific origins of their members. The registers for the other, Santa Maria del Campo Santo, do, but only from the sixteenth century. For the period from 1501 until 1536, they show that 109 of 475 members came from the Low Countries, but this may not reflect earlier patterns. Occupational confraternities for immigrants in Rome, including guilds for shoemakers and bakers, mostly attracted artisans from the southern part of present-day Germany, yet records for the weavers’ confraternity – likely to include Low Countries immigrants – are missing.³⁹ Evidence from smaller Italian cities like Bologna hints at definite Low

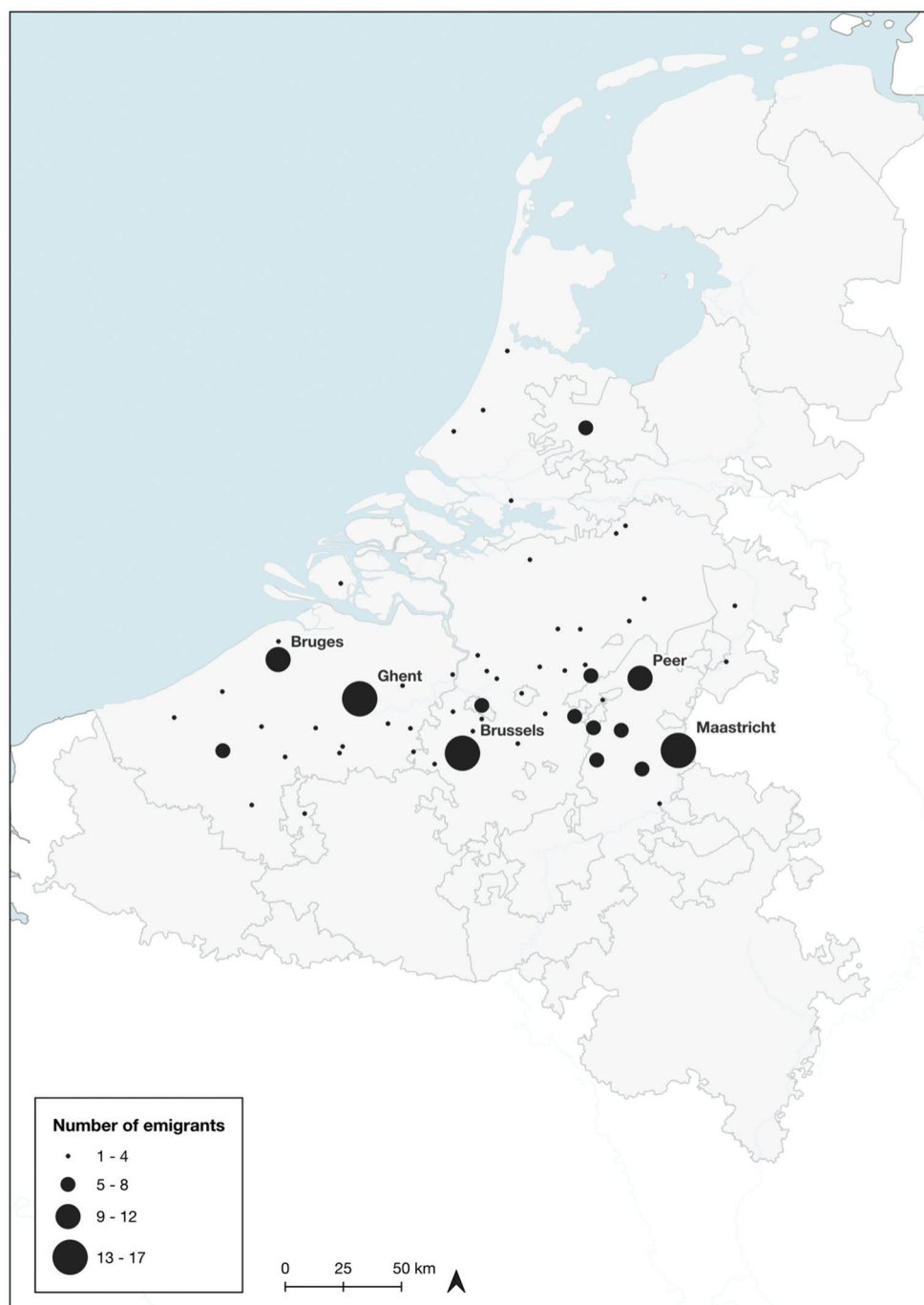
36 For missing occupations, see the comments on artists further down.

37 These immigrants recorded in 1436 included heads of households, so the actual numerical presence is likely substantially higher. Ormrod, Lambert, and Mackman, *Immigrant England*, 103–105.

38 Philippe Braunstein, *Les Allemands à Venise (1380–1520)* (École Française de Rome 2016)

579–764. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.efr.38097>.

39 Knut Schulz, *Confraternitas Campi Sancti de Urbe. Die ältesten Mitgliederverzeichnisse (1500/01–1536) und Statuten der Bruderschaft* (Herder 2002) 74–75; Clifford Maas, *The German Community in Renaissance Rome, 1378–1523* (Herder 1981).



▲
Figure 4. Origins of emigrants in the Low Countries by city/town, 1445-1456. Source: ASF, CPL, 204.4. Map made by William Torbeyns.

Countries presence, but the use of broad labels like *tedesco* or *Alemania* again defy quantification.⁴⁰ In all Italian cities, the *tedeschi* label likely excluded French-speaking newcomers from the Low Countries. On the Iberian Peninsula, associations for immigrants from these areas are documented only from the sixteenth century, except for one in Lisbon, for which no registers survive.⁴¹

The numerical significance of Low Countries immigrants highlighted by the Saint Barbara registers also becomes clearer when compared to other non-Italian groups in fifteenth-century Florence. How they ranked against other *tedeschi* beyond Saint Barbara depends on the context, sources, and labels used. Richard Trexler noted that in 1436, 36.6 per cent of women punished for sex work in the city were said to have come from the Low Countries, versus 22.5 per cent from 'Germany'.⁴² Lucia Sandri reported that over 40 per cent of non-Italian hospital visitors in fifteenth-century Florence were labeled *tedeschi*, and 5.3 per cent as from the Low Countries – though the *tedeschi* category also included people from principalities such as Brabant.⁴³ What most sources do suggest is that both immigrants from the Low Countries and other *tedeschi* outnumbered other foreign groups.⁴⁴ Trexler and Sandri mention a notable French presence, though details are scarce.⁴⁵ Cosimo de Medici's Platonic Academy drew individual Byzantine refugees to Florence, but no sizable Greek community.⁴⁶ Katalin Prajda studied immigrants from the Hungarian territories in Florence, but emphasised that their presence remained limited to around ten individuals.⁴⁷ Most enslaved people in Florence were women from non-Christian regions, including Tartars, Russians, Circassians, Slavonians, and Albanians. Their numbers had dropped significantly, however, from several thousands in the fourteenth century to just 294 in 1427, as recorded in the Florentine *Catasto*, a detailed tax census of

40 Aldo Giuseppe di Bari, *Lavoratori forestieri a Bologna nel basso Medioevo. Competenze, ruoli, spazi* (Viella 2025) 57–61.

41 Eddy Stols, *De Spaanse Brabanders of de handelsbetrekkingen der Zuidelijke Nederlanden met de Iberische wereld (1598–1648)* (Paleis der Academiën 1971) 81.

42 Richard Trexler, 'La prostitution florentine au xve siècle. Patronages et clientèles', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 36:6 (1981) 983–1015, 986. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/ahess.1981.282801>.

43 Sandri, 'Stranieri', 151–152.

44 72 per cent of non-Italians involved in intermarriages with locals in fifteenth-century

Florence were *tedeschi*, including people from the Low Countries. Cohn, *Laboring Classes*, 98.

45 Trexler, 'La prostitution florentine', 986; Sandri, 'Stranieri', 151–152.

46 Harris, *Greek Emigres*, 32.

47 Katalin Prajda, 'Reti mercantili a servizio della migrazione del primo Rinascimento. Insediamento dei sudditi della corona ungherese nella Firenze del Quattrocento', in: Andrea Fara (ed.), *Italia ed Europa centro-orientale tra Medioevo ed Età moderna* (Heidelberg University Publishing 2022) 55–64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17885/heup.832.c13880>.

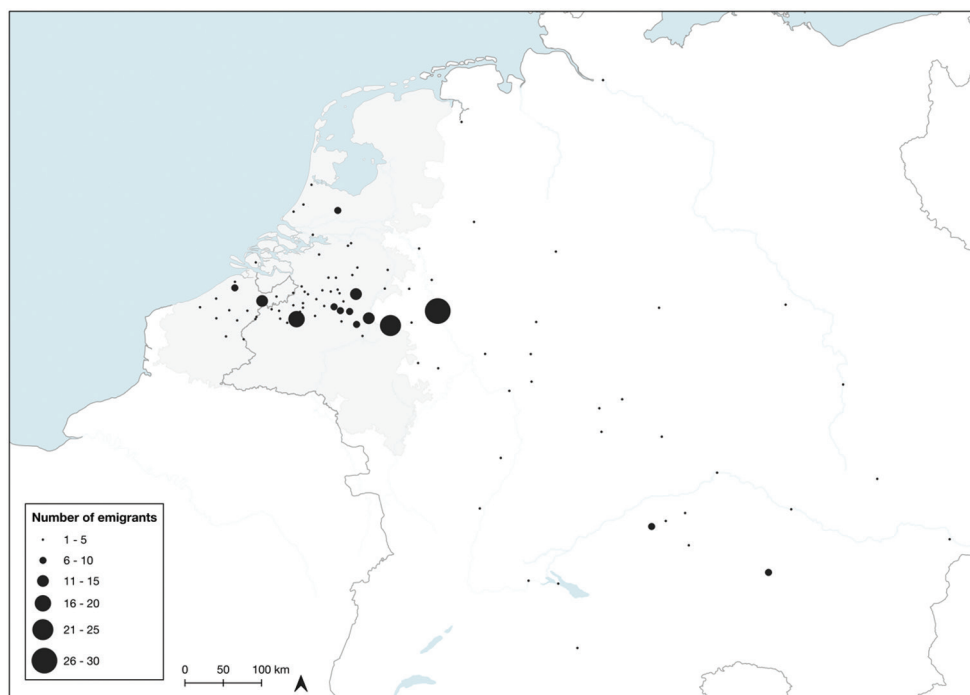


Figure 5. Origins of emigrants in the Holy Roman Empire and the Low Countries by city/town, 1445-1456. Source: ASF, CPL, 204.4. Map made by William Torbeyns.

households and their assets.⁴⁸ Figures may have been underreported to avoid taxes, but it seems unlikely that any of these groups were more numerous than the immigrants from the Low Countries in fifteenth-century Florence.

We should now examine what drove these comparably high numbers of fifteenth-century migrants from the Low Countries to Florence. Key to answering this question is an occupational analysis of the Saint Barbara members.

Migrant occupations in the Confraternity

The interplay between migrants' occupations and their places of origin can provide valuable insights into the socioeconomic drivers shaping emigration.⁴⁹ In this regard, the Saint Barbara Confraternity presents a revealing case study. Unlike other migrant confraternities in Florence, it did not impose occupational restrictions on its members and permitted dual membership with other confraternities.⁵⁰ This inclusive character allows for a relatively unfiltered view of the occupational composition of its membership, offering insight into the economic push factors for migration. That said, the occupational data in the confraternity's registers has limitations, as members' professions were not systematically recorded. This inconsistency is especially evident for women, for whom no occupations are listed. In contrast, the register records the professions of 309 men, approximately 78 per cent of the confraternity's male members.

Among the most prominent migrant groups in fifteenth-century Florence highlighted in the literature are artists, particularly those working in the visual arts.⁵¹ Yet the 1445-1456 register contains no mention of painters, sculptors, or tapestry weavers, suggesting that they relied on other social or professional networks for support, making membership in Saint Barbara's confraternity unnecessary or less appealing. This changed after 1473, when the number of artists in the confraternity gradually increased.⁵² Florence also attracted musicians from the Low Countries. The popularity

48 Monica Boni and Robert Delort, 'Des esclaves toscans, du milieu du xiv^e au milieu du xv^e siècle', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 112:2 (2000) 1057-1077, 1069-1076. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/mefr.2000.9080>.

49 Mathias Czaika and Constantin Reinprecht, 'Migration Drivers: Why Do People Migrate?', in: Peter Scholten (ed.), *Introduction to Migration Studies: An Interactive Guide to the Literatures on Migration and Diversity* (Springer 2022) 49-82,

65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_3.

50 Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 191.

51 See footnote 17.

52 Gert Jan van der Sman and Bouk Wierda, 'Wisselend succes. De loopbanen van Nederlandse en Vlaamse kunstenaars in Florence, 1450-1600', in: Frits Scholten, Joanna Woodall, and Dulcia Meijers (eds.), *Art and Migration: Netherlandish Artists on the Move, 1400-1750* (Brill 2014) 170-239.

of Franco-Flemish polyphony, for instance, drew many to Italy.⁵³ The choirs of the Baptistery of San Giovanni and the Duomo depended heavily on *oltremontani* singers, with frequent turnover and some recruited through the branch of the Medici family's bank in Bruges.⁵⁴ The Saint Barbara register lists nine flutists, one trumpet player, and a single violin maker – though whether they were linked to the choristers or represented additional musical migrants remains unclear.

A more substantial group of occupations recorded in the membership register pertains to professions integral to the internal workings of the confraternity and the broader immigrant community. Innkeepers, for example, played a significant role. While their establishments were open to the general public, they primarily served as points of arrival and temporary accommodation for fellow migrants. The inclusion of innkeeper Allut Puttins from Leuven in the register underscores the importance of such spaces as informal entry points into the city's social and economic life.⁵⁵ Similarly, food supply held both practical and cultural significance, allowing migrants to maintain connections to their homeland. The membership of two cooks and three bakers in the confraternity reflects this. One such baker, Johan Johanssone from Hainaut, ran a bakery near Santissima Annunziata, providing bread to his compatriots.⁵⁶ Additionally, the register lists one barber, Juliano di Juliano from Brussels, a profession that involved providing minor medical treatment.⁵⁷ Jan Janssone from Montabaur is recorded as a priest, likely responsible for offering pastoral care to the confraternity's members.⁵⁸ While the presence of innkeepers, food suppliers, barbers, and priests highlights the confraternity's role in offering mutual support, these occupations are typical of most immigrant communities and offer limited insight into the specific economic drivers for migration from the Low Countries to Florence.⁵⁹

This differs for the two most prominent occupational clusters within the Saint Barbara membership. Of the 309 members with recorded occupations, 242 (78 per cent) were engaged in textile production, concentrated within two sectors. The first, the woollen cloth industry, employed 111 individuals. Weavers formed the vast majority (97), alongside seven shearers, three dyers, two cleaners, a fuller, and a carder. Examining the origins of these woollen workers (documented in 103 cases) reveals a

53 Richard Goldthwaite, 'Music: A Growth Industry in Renaissance Italy', *Rivista di Storia Economica* 38 (2022) 85–106.

54 James Haar and John Nadas, 'I cantori di San Giovanni a Firenze negli anni 1448–1469', *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 46 (2011) 79–103.

55 ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 78v.

56 ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 31r; Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 130.

57 ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 30v. This man's name was probably Italianised in the register.

58 *Ibid.*, 10r.

59 Salzberg, 'Towards a Social History', 82.

significant Rhineland presence, with 60 individuals originating from this region, particularly from Cologne (16) and Aachen (18). Liège (15) and Brabant (8) were the main principalities in the Low Countries providing woollen cloth workers, while Flanders, despite its reputation as a major woollen-producing area, contributed only six. The second, slightly larger occupational cluster comprises 119 individuals involved in the linen industry. This group consists almost entirely of linen weavers (117), except for one bleacher and one linen merchant. The geographical origins of these linen workers differ from those of the woollen workers. Of the 115 linen workers with recorded origins, 99 came from the Low Countries (86 per cent). Flanders (41), Brabant (30) and Liège (17) were the predominant regions of origin, with towns such as Ghent (12), Brussels (9), and Peer (7) being particularly well represented (Figure 6). In contrast to the strong presence of migrants from the Rhineland among Saint Barbara's woollen workers, the linen sector saw minimal migration from this area (15 migrants), with Aachen contributing one and Cologne three linen workers.

In addition to the woollen and linen industries, the confraternity also had relatively few members in other textile trades (Table 2). They included three furriers, one silk weaver, one silk embroiderer and five other embroiderers. The fashion and accessories trades were also represented, with five tailors, two belt makers, and two hat shearers. The largest subgroup, however, were shoemakers, accounting for fourteen members. Among them were Joris Arnoltssone from Utrecht and his son Andries, better known in Florence as Giorgio di Rinaldo and Andrea di Giorgio. Giorgio mainly served the mass-produced footwear market, supplying institutions such as the San Bonifacio Lupi hospital. His son Andrea further capitalised on these opportunities, setting up two additional workshops.⁶⁰

A comparison of the occupational patterns among Saint Barbara's immigrants with those of their counterparts in fifteenth-century England reveals significant differences. While textile workers formed the bulk of migrants crossing the North Sea from the Low Countries during the fourteenth century, their numbers declined in the fifteenth century. Instead, 'Dutch' immigrants in fifteenth-century England predominantly worked as artisans in the service, fashion, and luxury industries.⁶¹ These occupations were far less common among those from the Low Countries in Florence, or at least among the Saint Barbara members. One of the main reasons textile workers left the Low Countries for England in the fourteenth century was their prominent role in urban revolts, which led to their repression and, at times, exile across the North Sea.⁶² This seems to have been less relevant for

60 ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 29v; Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 227-229.

61 Ormrod, Lambert, and Mackman, *Immigrant England*, 127-141.

62 Milan Pajic, *Flemish Textile Workers in England, 1331-1400: Immigration, Integration and Economic Development* (Cambridge University Press 2023) 50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108774215>.

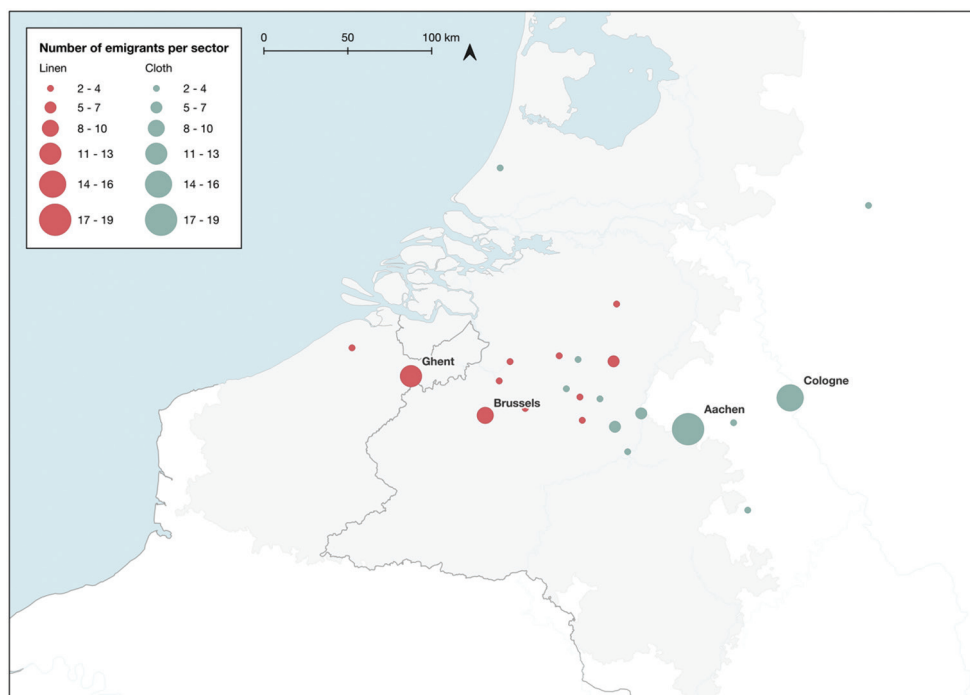


Figure 6. Origins of emigrants involved in the textile sector by city/town, 1445-1456. Source: ASF, CPL, 204.4. Map made by William Torbeyns.

migration to Florence, as textile workers no longer played a major part in rebellions in the Low Countries or the German regions during the fifteenth century.⁶³ A second motive for moving to England was the crisis afflicting the urban woollen industries in their homelands. Due to changing trade flows, a faltering supply of raw materials, and increased competition from other centres, woollen cloth production in major Flemish cities declined, leading to widespread unemployment. One of the newly emerging regions producing woollens was England, where the booming industries provided opportunities for Flemish woollen workers willing to relocate. Employment in the Low Countries' woollen sector further contracted in the fifteenth century, now affecting Brabant, Holland, and Liège as well.⁶⁴ In Cologne and Aachen, the two cities in the Rhineland that also supplied many of the confraternity's woollen cloth workers, similar issues were caused by increased competition from English woollens and the loss of the Eastern European market due to political reasons.⁶⁵ The registers of Saint Barbara suggest that woollen cloth workers affected by the sustained crisis in the Low Countries and the decline in the Rhineland in the fifteenth century no longer migrated to England but to Florence.

At first glance, this seems surprising: recent research has claimed that living standards for the middle and lower classes in late medieval Florence were lower than in the Southern Low Countries.⁶⁶ Moreover, Florence's wool industry faced a downturn of its own in the decades preceding the Saint Barbara records, with rising unemployment rates as a consequence.⁶⁷ Yet, as Richard Goldthwaite showed, wool weavers who still managed to find work in Florence generally fared better than workers in many other sectors.⁶⁸ The fact that the Arte della Lana – the Florentine wool guild – offered incentives to recruit highly-qualified foreign weavers also indicates that the skills

63 The exception may have been Aachen: Herbert Kisch, *From Domestic Manufacture to Industrial Revolution: The Case of the Rhineland Textile Districts* (Oxford University Press 1989) 157-158.

64 Pajic, *Flemish Textile Workers*, 35-130.

65 These political factors included the Hussite revolts, which made transport through the region difficult, and the growing importance of Vienna's staple system, where High Germans enjoyed stronger connections. Franz Irsigler, *Die wirtschaftliche Stellung der Stadt Köln im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert: Strukturanalyse einer spätmittelalterlichen Exportgewerbe- und Fernhandelsstadt* (Franz Steiner Verlag 1979) 57-58; Kisch, *From Domestic Manufacture*, 157.

66 Sam Geens, 'A Golden Age for Labour? Income and Wealth Before and After the Black Death in the Southern Low Countries and the Republic of Florence, 1275-1550' (PhD thesis, Antwerp University 2023).

67 John H. Munro, 'The Dual Crises of the Late-Medieval Florentine Cloth Industry, c. 1320-c. 1420', in: Angela Ling Huang and Carsten Jahnke (eds.), *Textiles and the Medieval Economy: Production, Trade, and Consumption of Textiles, 8th-16th Centuries*. In *Memoriam John Munro (1938-2013)* (Oxbow Books 2015) 113-148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dmot.11>.

68 Richard Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2009) 576. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.3422>.

Occupations	Total
Linen weaver	117
Cloth weaver	97
Shoemaker	14
Flute player	9
Shearer	7
Servant in craft	7
Textile embroiderer	5
Tailor	5
Messenger	5
Servant	5
Baker	3
Reed-maker	3
Furrier	3
Belt maker	2
Cook	2
Merchant	2
Hat shearer	2
Cleaner	2
Scribe	2
Dyer	2
Blue dyer	1
Barber	1
Bleacher	1
Silk embroiderer	1
Innkeeper	1
Carder	1
Carriage driver	1
Linen merchant	1
Horse merchant	1
Priest	1
Trumpet player	1
Violin maker	1
Cobbler	1
Fuller	1
Silk weaver	1
Totals	309

Table 2. Occupations recorded in Saint Barbara membership register, 1445-1456.

Source: ASF, CPL, 204.4.

of some immigrant woollen workers were rated more highly than those of local craftspeople, offering them a competitive advantage in securing employment.⁶⁹ The downside for many weavers from the Low Countries was that their move may have entailed a loss of status. Franceschi demonstrated that the *linaiuoli* or Florentine wool merchants responded to the industry's challenges in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries by replacing traditional household-based production – where women played a significant role – with a more cost-efficient putting-out system. Whereas woollen cloth workers in the late medieval Low Countries were used to operating in independent household units, they had to adapt to this wage-based economy, producing cloth for a salary in their new homes.⁷⁰

The situation for the Low Countries linen industries was different, as they continued to expand during this period. However, not everyone in this sector had promising prospects. While the finishing and distribution stages of linen production were concentrated in the cities of the Low Countries, weaving activities were primarily situated in the countryside. Urban linen weavers struggled to compete with their rural counterparts, despite cities' protectionist measures.⁷¹ It is predominantly these urban linen workers who are represented among Saint Barbara's members. The pull factors that the poorly documented Florentine linen industry offered these workers are difficult to determine. Nevertheless, there are indications that demand for linen in the city increased and that competition was less intense than in the Low Countries. In 1428, the Arte dei Rigattieri e Linaioli, the Florentine guild for linen weavers and second-hand clothing dealers, had 160 linen weavers and dyers among its members, compared to 111 immigrant linen weavers in the Saint Barbara Confraternity alone.⁷² This numerical prominence must have provided Low Countries linen weavers with a strategically important position in the city.

Another pull factor that may explain the strong presence of both wool and linen weavers from the Low Countries and German dominions in Florence is the city's migration policies. As noted earlier, the Arte della Lana sought to attract highly skilled wool workers by offering them specific

69 Francesco Ammannati, *Per filo e per segno. L'arte della lana a Firenze nel Cinquecento* (Firenze University Press 2020) 28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36253/978-88-6453-983-6>; Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 84–85; Franceschi, 'I tedeschi', 298.

70 Franceschi, 'I tedeschi', 289–291.

71 Marc Boone, 'Les toiles de lin des Pays-Bas bourguignons sur le marché anglais (fin XIV^e-XVI^e siècles)', in: Jean-Marie Cauchies (ed.), *Rencontre*

d'Oxford (22 au 25 septembre 1994). *L'Angleterre et les pays bourguignons* (XV^e-XVI^e s.) (Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes 1995) 61–81. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.PCEEB.2.302348>.

72 Alessia Meneghin, *The Social Fabric of Fifteenth-Century Florence: Identities and Change in the World of Second-Hand Dealers* (Routledge 2019) 70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367809690>. There seems to be no overlap between the guild and confraternity members.

incentives. These included tax breaks, free housing, and workshops equipped with looms.⁷³ Comparable measures aimed at foreign linen workers are not documented. However, all immigrant textile workers must have benefited from the *forenium immunitas* – a law introduced by the Florentine government in 1427 granting foreigners settling in Florentine territory a twenty-year exemption from taxes and immunity from existing debts.⁷⁴

Alongside push and pull factors, migration scholars stress the importance of social networks in shaping migration decisions, noting that people move where they have contacts offering information, support, and opportunities.⁷⁵ The Florentine members of the Saint Barbara Confraternity may have played this role for textile workers from the Low Countries and German territories. Francesco di Nerone di Nigi, the father of one of the confraternity's female honorary members, was a *linaiuolo*, a wool manufacturer and merchant, with commercial ties to German regions and to Bruges, one of the main cities from which migrants originated.⁷⁶ He may have used these overseas connections to recruit skilled wool workers for his Florentine enterprises. Similarly, the della Stufa family – who counted a female in-law among the members of Saint Barbara – were active as linen producers and traders and may have attracted linen workers through the confraternity.⁷⁷ Both families employed German servants, further underscoring their links to German areas.⁷⁸ Earlier migrants, whether in textiles or other sectors, may also have served as points of contact for relatives and friends following later, creating classic patterns of chain migration. The many cases in the register where family members joined the confraternity over several years suggest this was a common practice. For example, in September 1451, linen weaver Gerard Guesenszoon began paying dues, and in May 1453 his wife – likely migrating to Florence at a later stage – also enrolled.⁷⁹

Our analysis thus suggests that to understand the synergies between immigration and emigration in the late medieval Low Countries, we should not only consider overall migration figures but also engage in sectorial analyses. While in the cities of the Low Countries newly emerging industries such as artistic production attracted thousands of immigrants, the collapse of their textile industries continued to drive thousands of others away. Even within the textile sector, we should be cautious of making sweeping generalisations. Although both groups may have been drawn in by social connections and favourable migration policies, the economic circumstances

73 Ammannati, *Per filo*, 28; Franceschi, 'I tedeschi', 298.

74 Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 84–85.

75 Czaika and Reinprecht, 'Migration Drivers', 62.

76 Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 195–196;

Goldthwaite, *Economy*, 213.

77 Andreas Lotheringhi della Stufa registered as *linaiuolo* in 1457; ASF, Arte dei Rigattieri, Linaioli e Sarti, 10, f. 52r.

78 Böninger, *Deutsche Einwanderung*, 195–196, 217 n. 58.

79 ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 95r.

that led wool and linen weavers to leave Northwestern Europe for Florence differed in several important ways.

The gendered dimensions of migration

Migration has long been recognised as a gendered phenomenon, with experiences differing significantly between male and female migrants.⁸⁰ Ravenstein famously argued that men were more likely to migrate over long distances, while women favoured shorter moves.⁸¹ This theory has shaped the traditional view of pre-twentieth-century migration as predominantly male-driven⁸² – a perspective echoed in studies of fifteenth-century Florence. For instance, approximately 78 per cent of the patients of the town's San Matteo hospital originating outside the Italian peninsula were said to be men.⁸³ However, such findings may reflect biases in the documentation rather than actual gender patterns.⁸⁴ In our case, this bias is compounded by the omission of women in Battistini's publication of the Saint Barbara registers. Re-examining the original membership records therefore offers a valuable opportunity to reassess the gendered dimensions of migration.

As the membership register does not explicitly mention gender, the presence of female members was determined using other indicators, such as their names or how they were addressed, including being referred to as 'wife'. Among the 457 recorded members, 62 were identified as female, representing 14 per cent of the total migrant population. A further 49 had a recorded region of origin, and 38 of these specified a city or town. The majority (30) originated from the Low Countries. Within this group, twelve came from Flanders, nine from Brabant, four from Liège, and three from Holland. On an urban level, Brussels accounted for three female migrants, while Bruges, Ghent, and Herkede-Stad each contributed two. Outside the Low Countries, twelve women came from other parts of the Holy Roman Empire. Cologne and Hamburg contributed three and two female migrants respectively, while the rest were the sole representatives of their respective cities. The remaining seven women were from the Mediterranean region, including five from Florence.

Of the 49 identifiable female migrants listed in the confraternity's register, most appear as wives (*huysvrouw* or *wijf*), recorded alongside their

80 Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe Since 1650* (Indiana University Press 2003) 14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11288868>.

81 Ravenstein, 'Laws of Migration', 196–198.

82 Marlou Schrover, 'Migration Histories', in: Scholten, *Introduction to Migration Studies*, 25–47, 27. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_2.

83 Sandri, 'Stranieri', 152. Franceschi also indicates an overwhelmingly male presence of 'German' migrants (Franceschi, 'I tedeschi', 282).

84 Bart Lambert, 'Double Disadvantage or Golden Age? Immigration, Gender and Economic Opportunity in Later Medieval England', *Gender & History* 31:3 (2019) 545–564, 547–550. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12454>.

husbands. This was true for 23 of the 30 women from the Low Countries, and for 17 of the 19 women from other regions. When a separate place of origin was noted for these wives, it matches that of their husbands, suggesting that most couples married before migrating. The register records no marriages between migrants and Florentines. Three members are listed as daughters, all from outside the Low Countries and entered alongside their parents. One example is Francisca, recorded as arriving from Cologne with her father Gerard and mother Sandra.⁸⁵ While most women appear as part of a household, a few from the Low Countries seem to have migrated independently. Lizabetta Heyndrixdochter from Brussels and Margarita Jacopsdochter from Kortrijk, for instance, appear without a husband or family.⁸⁶ No women are labelled in the register as widows. The presence of single women suggests that women from the Low Countries may have had greater opportunities to migrate on their own than their counterparts from other regions. By contrast, male migrants were more likely to migrate independently regardless of their origin.

The gender distribution of migrants in Florence mirrors trends in England, where women accounted for 11 per cent of recorded migrants,⁸⁷ a slightly lower proportion than in the Saint Barbara Confraternity. In the English context, much of the gender imbalance can be attributed to documentary biases; its fiscal sources frequently recorded only male heads of households, underrepresenting female migrants.⁸⁸ Whether similar biases affected the Florentine registers remains unclear. Since membership was open to both genders and there is no evidence of deliberate exclusion, the low representation of women raises questions about systematic under-reporting or under-admission.

Earlier research suggested that immigrant women were underrepresented in independent occupations in fifteenth-century England, although this may have been place-specific.⁸⁹ The lack of occupational information for the women in the Saint Barbara register prevents us from making definitive hypotheses regarding Florence. The occupational patterns of husbands in the register closely resemble those of male members in general, with most employed as woollen and linen weavers. The marginalisation of female labour in Florence's woollen industry at the turn of the fifteenth century does not imply that immigrant women from the Low Countries were excluded from the textile sector. Cohn has shown that, even in the fifteenth century, 27 per cent of Florentine women with a recorded occupation still

85 ASF, CPL, 204.4, f. 48r.

86 Ibid., f. 78v, 23v.

87 Ormrod, Lambert, and Mackman, *Immigrant England*, 170-171.

88 Lambert, 'Double Disadvantage', 547-550.

89 Bart Lambert and Joshua Ravenhill, 'Travelled Women: Female Alien Immigrants in Fifteenth- and Early-Sixteenth-Century London', in: Caroline Barron and Martha Carlin (eds.), *Medieval Travel: Essays from the 2021 Harlaxton Symposium* (Shaun Tyas 2023) 155-173.

worked in textiles, performing tasks across all stages of production, including weaving.⁹⁰ Franceschi even argued that, as the century progressed, the number of women from *Diets*-speaking regions in Florence's wool industry increased,⁹¹ making it likely that at least some female members of Saint Barbara were engaged in textile work. Outside the weaving trade, husbands' occupations matched those of male members overall, except among dyers, where two of three were married – suggesting dyeing in particular was a household activity. It is also worth noting that the high number of women from the Low Countries in Florence's sex industry during this period observed by Trexler may point to limited alternative opportunities for female immigrants.⁹² However, whether sex work in late medieval Europe was driven solely by economic precarity is uncertain. The relationship between these immigrant sex workers, often operating under trade names, and the confraternity – which, as a church-affiliated institution, would likely not accept women who were active in the sex industry – also remains to be established.

Conclusion

Like most regions today, the late medieval Low Countries were not solely 'promised lands' attracting migrants from across Europe. At the same time, many people emigrated from these areas. While earlier scholarship has shown that thousands of city-dwellers from Flanders, Brabant, Holland, and Zeeland settled in England during the later Middle Ages, this article has demonstrated that hundreds of others travelled south to *Quattrocento* Florence. Bypassing deficient source publications and returning to its original membership lists, our analysis revealed that the Florentine Saint Barbara Confraternity had more members from the Low Countries than was previously assumed. Contrary to its frequent characterisation as 'German', migrants from this area also made up the majority of its membership between 1445 and 1456. While it is hard to compare the numbers presented in this article with Low Countries immigrants in other cities, they were among the largest groups of non-Italian residents in fifteenth-century Florence.

Our analysis also demonstrated that the economic range of migrants in Florence was broader than previously thought, despite a concentration of occupations in the woollen and linen industries. We have attributed the presence of these Low Countries textile workers partly to macro-level factors.

90 Samuel Cohn, 'Women and Work in Renaissance Italy', in: Judith Brown and Robert Davis (eds.), *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (Routledge 1998) 115. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315841670-15>.

91 Franco Franceschi, *Oltre il "tumulto". I lavoratori fiorentini dell'Arte della Lana fra Tre e Quattrocento* (Olschki 1993) 115.

92 Trexler, 'La prostitution florentine', 986.

A comparison with England suggests that shifts within the European textile industries acted as important push factors, while a preference for foreign skill, favourable migration policies, and a combination of increased demand and limited competition in Florentine linen production served as pull factors. However, migration scholarship has shown that migration drivers and, above all, its selectivity cannot fully be explained by looking at the macro-level alone.⁹³ This study suggests that meso-level factors, such as social networks and chain migration mechanisms, may also be crucial factors accounting for the strong presence of textile workers from the Low Countries in Florence. Micro-level factors, such as household and individual characteristics, deserve more attention in future research into historical migration. This is perhaps most pertinent to the role of gender, as women were more prominent among Low Countries immigrants in fifteenth-century Florence than earlier research indicated. However, the factors informing their decisions to leave their homelands is a question that cannot be understood based on the membership register of Saint Barbara alone. Still, this article serves as a starting point for more comprehensive research, drawing on the wealth of Florentine fiscal and judicial sources and the rich civic archives of the Low Countries.

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