
The Port and City of Ostend and the Process of State Consolidation in the Southern Netherlands in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Geopolitical Approach

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Introduction

The Geopolitical Relation between the Central Government and the Realm

Geography is a key topic in the discussion about harbours and port cities. Indeed, a first requirement for ports is the presence of navigable waterways because ships require access to and from them. Those harbours with shifting sandbars that obstruct the shipping channels, or which are guarded by rocky outcrops on their approaches, find it much more difficult to attract traffic. Other aspects must also be taken into account, such as the possibility of providing shelter for vessels, organising trading activities, defending the harbour from attack and connecting the port city to the hinterland. While I do not want to lapse into geographical determinism, success or failure often depended on a port's geographical circumstances. Some places became successful, thriving port cities, while others failed because nature reconfigured the landscape. The latter places were soon forgotten except by historians, most of whom see geography as an important factor in explaining change and continuity in port cities during the Middle Ages and the early modern period.¹

Yet it is not nature's impact that we want to discuss but rather man's effect on the continuity and change of ports. People can confirm or alter a port city's continuity in many different ways. Sometimes it is their economic or commercial interplay and every so often the quarrelling and warring characters of men that decide the fate of port cities. During the Middle Ages and early modern period, the on-going process of state consolidation had a major influ-

¹Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston, 1918; reprint, New York, 1980), 30-31; Herman Van der Haegen, *et al.*, "De steden," in Jacques Denis (ed.), *Geografie van België* (Brussels, 1992), 428-429, 432-433 and 435; and Reginald De Schryver, *Historiografie. Vijftiende eeuw geschiedschrijving van West-Europa* (Leuven, 1990; 3rd ed., Leuven, 1997), 339-340.

ence on port history. Especially during the Enlightenment, this process triggered a constant remodelling of the existing structures of the realm. Ancient institutions, customs, conventions and concepts were reconsidered, adapted and rationalised. In this era interest in geography gained tremendously due to the appearance of philosophical treatises explaining relations between people and their environment and by military mapmaking. Spatial relations between the central government and the geography of the realm (in its largest sense) were rethought to fit the new ideas of the Age of Reason. As such, the process of state consolidation can be considered from a geopolitical viewpoint, as “geopolitics” can also be thought of as the (sub)science trying to explain the relation between politics and geography. These new geographical or geopolitical relations were often the result of territorial rearrangements due to war, like revolutionary France’s new borders or *frontières naturelles*. But conflict or international disputes were not always the cause of changing geopolitical relations. They could as well have been driven by purely economic, commercial or administrative factors. A good example was the *départementalisation* of revolutionary France at the end of the eighteenth century. The only motive to carve out new *départements* was to improve and centralise French administration. It was also, without any doubt, a geopolitical act of state consolidation.²

The mounting geopolitical awareness in the eighteenth century influenced the spatial reshuffling of realms throughout Europe. In these reorganizations port cities played important roles as a nation’s “window on the world.” This created a multitude of commercial, political and military opportunities for ambitious rulers, or in the words of the nineteenth-century Belgian King Leopold II, “Un pays n’est jamais petit quand il est baigné par la mer.”³ Access to the open sea was especially important for the landlocked empires of Central Europe, such as Austria or Russia. It was also a primary geopolitical issue for countries trying to evade another nation’s control over shipping lanes. The creation of Gothenburg in 1619 was nothing more than Sweden’s geopolitical response to Copenhagen’s control over the Danish straits.⁴ Ostend, the only

²Jacques Marseille and Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, *Les grands événements de l’histoire de France* (Paris, 1991; 2nd ed., Paris, 1994), 168-169; Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières. Un tour du monde géopolitique* (Paris, 1988; 2nd ed., Paris, 1994), 95; and Paul Hohenberg and Lynn H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1994* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 153, 155 and 158.

³Quoted in Tanguy de Wilde d’Estmael, *Géopolitique* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1999), 20.

⁴Bertil Anderson, “Gothenburg from a Hinterland Perspective in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Randi Ertesvåg, David J. Starkey and Anne T. Austbø (eds.), *Maritime Industries and Public Intervention* (Stavanger, 2002), 45 and 47.

Southern Netherlands port city with free access to the open seas, was an important example of the geopolitical rearrangements in the eighteenth century. In this article I want not only to discuss how these geopolitical rearrangements were implemented but also why they were deemed necessary. I will show how they transformed Ostend as a port or “border” city of the Habsburg Empire. Cities, including also port and border cities, played socio-economic, military and political roles. Hence, I want to show how these different roles changed in Ostend after the geopolitical transformations of the century. I will therefore discuss these three roles in Ostend before and after these rearrangements, first during the Spanish regime in the seventeenth century and the first decades of Austrian rule in the early eighteenth, and then after the change of the geopolitical constellation in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Urban Networks in the Southern Netherlands and the Geopolitical Problems of Transport after the “Closure of the Scheldt”

To understand the geopolitical transformations of the enlightened central authorities in Brussels and Vienna, the geopolitical situation in the Southern Netherlands has to be explained first. In the sixteenth century, Antwerp was the major commercial and financial hub in Western Europe where products from all over Europe and the New World were eagerly exchanged and redistributed throughout the known world. It was also ideally located to ship all kinds of goods into Central Europe. Built on the banks of the River Scheldt, in the southeast corner of the common delta of the Scheldt, Meuse and Rhine rivers, Antwerp was at the head of a fluvial network leading straight into the heart of Europe. It was the continent’s gateway.⁵

In the second half of the sixteenth century however, the Habsburg Netherlands had to cope with a popular revolt due to economic crisis, dissatisfaction with Philip II’s state consolidation process and religious strife caused by the Reformation. Philip II and his successors did not manage to subdue this revolt, which grew into a civil war and finally into an international conflict, as two new “nations” emerged at the Westphalian peace treaties in 1648. The northern provinces became the Calvinist and mercantile Dutch Republic, while the Catholic southern provinces remained under the Spanish Habsburg monarchy. Between these two new political entities a border slowly emerged. By the end of the sixteenth century the Dutch controlled the mouth of the Scheldt and thus the access to Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges, its major seaports.

⁵Bruno Blondé and Harald Deceulaer, “The Port of Antwerp and Its Hinterland: Port Traffic, Urban Economies and Government Policies in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Ertesvåg, Starkey and Austbø (eds.), *Maritime Industries*, 21 and 23; and Jan de Vries and Ad Van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy. Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy 1500-1815* (Cambridge, 1997), 10.

From 1585 until the French annexation of the Southern Netherlands in 1795, Antwerp's so-called "economic winter" caused by the closure of the Scheldt set in. At first the Dutch blocked all traffic to and from Antwerp, but they soon discovered that a total blockade ruined their own trade as well. Navigation and trade to and from Antwerp thus quickly resumed. But goods were subject to expensive new customs regulations and mandatory transshipment in Dutch harbours, such as Flushing and Middelburg in Zeeland or Dordrecht and Rotterdam in Holland, before they could continue.⁶ Despite these obstacles, Antwerp remained the Southern Netherlands' main trading place, although it could not prevent Dutch cities from taking the commercial lead in Europe.⁷ Situated on the northern edge of the same common delta, these Holland and Zeeland seaports now functioned as the main gateways to the Central European hinterland.

In the long run the consequences of the Dutch revolt were harmful not only to Antwerp but also to the entire Southern Netherlands' economy. This can be explained by looking at the urban network system. Most cities in the Southern Netherlands were situated next to rivers, which of course was convenient for exporting their own products and importing goods from abroad.⁸ In the early modern period, river transport was not only swift but also cheaper and safer than overland haulage. Since land transport could not maintain steady flows because the dirt roads often turned into quagmires after rainfalls, trade remained a river-bound business in the Netherlands.⁹

A close look at a map of the Southern Netherlands shows that the Scheldt, Meuse and Moselle (a tributary of the Rhine) flow northwards to the Dutch Republic. If we compare the cities to beads and the rivers to strings, the urban networks may be thought of as necklaces.¹⁰ These urban networks,

⁶Stanley T. Bindoff, *The Scheldt Question to 1839* (London, 1945), 83-84, 87-92 and 98-99; and Léon Voet, "De Antwerpse haven vanaf de Gouden Eeuw tot en met de 18de eeuw," in Francine De Nave (ed.), *Antwerpen, een geschenk van de Schelde. De Antwerpse haven door de eeuwen heen* (Antwerp, 1993), 29-30.

⁷Bruno Blondé, *Een economie met verschillende snelheden: ongelijkheden in de opbouw en de ontwikkeling van het Brabantse stedelijke netwerk* (Brussels, 1999), 321; and Voet, "De Antwerpse haven," 30-31.

⁸Van der Haegen, *et al.*, "De steden," 428-429.

⁹Bruno Blondé, "Aux origines de la révolution des transports: l'exemple des chaussées 'belges' au dix-huitième siècle," in Stéphane Curveiller and Denis Clauzel (eds.), *Les champs relationnels en Europe du Nord XVIIIème-XXème siècles* (Balinghem, 1998), 24-26.

¹⁰Hohenberg and Lees, *Making of Urban Europe*, 62-66; and Van der Haegen, *et al.*, "De steden," 428-429.

named after the major rivers (Scaldian, Mosan and Mosellean networks) all met in the Dutch Republic. It was in the common delta of these rivers that the Holland and Zeeland seaports were located, tying the necklaces together. A fourth urban network existed along the North Sea coast, the so-called Maritime urban network, which was linked to the Holland-Zeeland seaports by Dutch shipping.¹¹ These seaports functioned as the Southern Netherlands' gateway (see figure 1). As a result, the Dutch were well placed, to paraphrase Jonathan Israel, "to supply the Southern Netherlands because river craft were the most efficient means of transporting supplies into the interior and the chief rivers all flowed down...to the...Republic itself."¹² The Dutch thus could control (and tax) most of the goods moving to and from the Southern Netherlands. But because of the absence of a good land transport system, the Dutch also dominated the interior trade routes. Goods moving between urban networks in the Southern Netherlands first had to be transported to the Dutch Republic and then re-imported into the South.¹³

The following example will show how communications between Brussels and/or Ostend/England were organised around 1700. Say a merchant from Brussels wanted to send some goods to England. From Brussels, capital of the Southern Netherlands and one of the prime cities of the Scaldian urban network, there were two trade routes to England.¹⁴ The most traditional method was to ship goods by barge on the Willebroek Canal and then downstream on the Scheldt to Antwerp, where the commodities were put on a Dutch ship. On its way to Zeeland the vessel would halt at the Lillo toll station, where the Dutch levied expensive customs duties.¹⁵ After this *intermezzo* the ship sailed to a convenient harbour, like Middelburg or Flushing, with connections to

¹¹Michael-W. Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime de la Belgique" (Unpublished DEA thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 2004), 87-89 and 98-99.

¹²Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford, 1995), 333, describes the trade relations between the Dutch Republic and Germany (readers should read "Germany" instead of "Southern Netherlands").

¹³Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 101-103.

¹⁴Brussels participated in the Scaldian urban network because of its location on the banks of the Senne. As the river became too narrow and started to silt up, Brussels dug the Willebroek Canal linking it to the Scheldt; the canal was opened to traffic in 1561. Alphonse Wauters (ed.), *Documents concernant le Canal de Bruxelles à Willebroek* (Brussels, 1882; reprint, Brussels, 2000), xiv.

¹⁵Johannes M.G. Leune, *Lillo en Liefkenshoek. De geschiedenis van twee Scheldeforten 1585-1786* (Brussels, 2006), 485.

England. With ideal sailing conditions, it would have taken our Brussels merchant about a week to transport his goods to England (see figure 2).

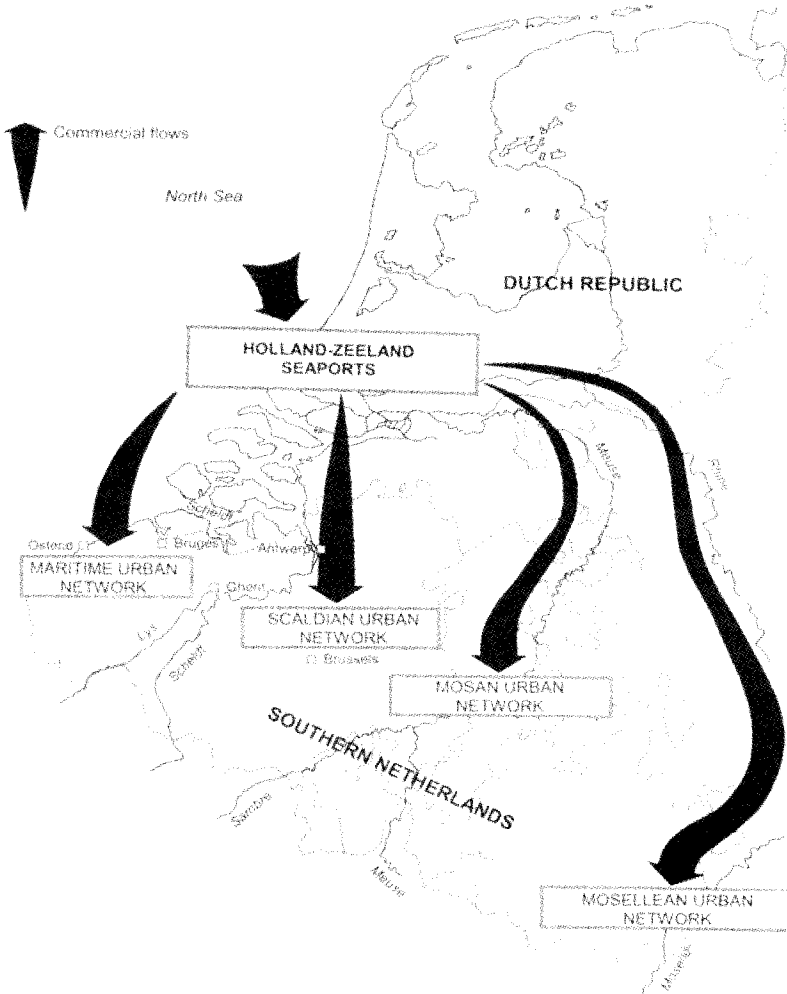


Figure 1: Urban Networks and Commercial Flows in the Southern Netherlands, 1585-1748

Source: Courtesy of the author.

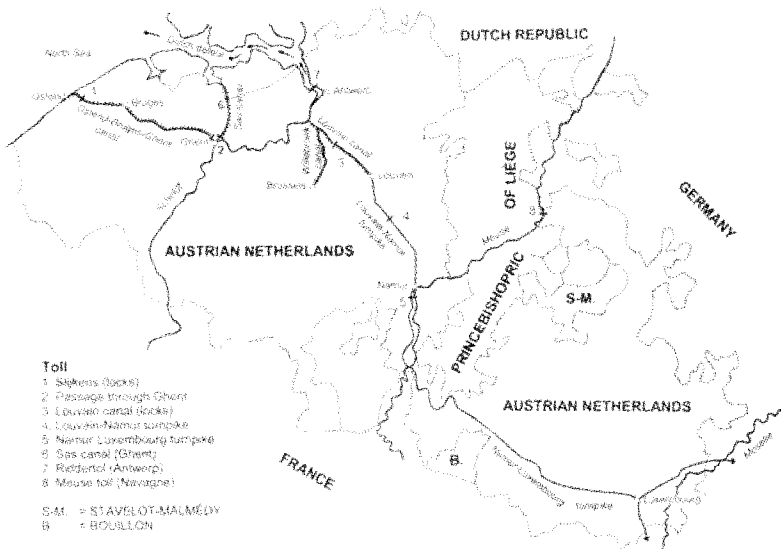


Figure 2: East-West Axis and North-South Trading Routes in the Austrian Netherlands, 1748-1789

Source: See figure 1.

The other trade route was via Ostend, the only harbour in the Southern Netherlands on the North Sea, and a place where no Dutch customs duties had to be paid. Ostend, however, was situated in the Maritime urban network and was therefore hard to reach from Brussels. Goods would be transported by barge on the Willebroek Canal and then upstream on the Scheldt to Ghent in Flanders where the merchandise would be unloaded and wheeled to the other side of town by the porter’s guild. There bargemen from Ghent and Bruges, both having navigation monopolies on the Ghent-Bruges Canal, would instantly start to raise the price of the journey to Bruges in return for a swift departure.¹⁶ And when the goods finally arrived in Bruges they were again transhipped. As in Ghent, negotiations would be required, this time with the bargemen from Bruges and Ostend, before the goods could depart for Ostend. Only after reaching Ostend could they be placed aboard a chartered vessel for England. It is clear that it was faster and less expensive to send goods from Brussels to Ostend via Antwerp and the Holland-Zeeland seaports than by way of Ghent and Bruges. It also reveals the efficiency of the so-called “Dutch de-

¹⁶We will use the French name, Bruges, for the old Flemish city of Brugge, as the English name for this city, “Bridges,” is not widely used today.

tour” when goods had to be transported from one urban network to another. Indeed, there are many other examples of the way the Dutch managed to control the exports and imports of the Southern Netherlands.¹⁷ But before we investigate the geopolitical solution concocted by the authorities in Brussels and Vienna we will first see how Ostend fared after the Dutch Revolt.

An Isolated Port City: Ostend from the Dutch Revolt until the War of Austrian Succession

The first mention of Ostend was in 814, when it was nothing more than a small fishing town, which it remained for the next few centuries.¹⁸ During the Dutch Revolt, however, Ostend made a conspicuous entrance into the history books when it rapidly gained strategic importance for both sides. At the end of the sixteenth century, Ostend's population swiftly adopted the Calvinist cause and was soon known as an impregnable Protestant stronghold. The Spanish armies sent by Philip II to capture it failed in 1583. With the closure of the Scheldt and Ostend firmly in Dutch hands, the Southern provinces could rely only on Dunkirk, their last remaining harbour on the North Sea.¹⁹ When *Stadtholder* Maurice of Nassau launched a raid from Ostend to capture Dunkirk in 1600, this was perceived by Brussels as a stratagem to deprive the Southern Netherlands of direct access to the sea.²⁰ When Maurice's raid was halted, Archduke

¹⁷André Vandewalle, “Op zoek naar nieuwe uitwegen,” in Valentin Vermeersch (ed.), *Brugge en de zee: van Bryggia tot Zeebrugge* (Antwerp, 1982), 81 and 84; Johan Decavele, René De Herdt and Noël Decorte, *Gent op de wateren en naar de zee* (Antwerp, 1976), 93 and 148-149; J. Pricken, *La douane belge sous Marie-Thérèse et Joseph II* (Brussels, 1964), 11; and Serruys, “La géopolitique maritime,” 102.

¹⁸Roger Dansercoer, “Oostende,” in Hervé Hasquin, *et al.* (eds.), *Gemeenten van België: geschiedkundig en administratief-geografisch woordenboek* (4 vols., Brussels, 1980-1981), II, 800-801; and Roland Baetens, “Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur van een kleine Noordzeehaven tijdens het Ancien Régime: het voorbeeld van Oostende,” *Communications de l'académie royale de marine de Belgique*, XXIII (1973-1975), 47.

¹⁹Dansercoer, “Oostende,” 802; Henri Anrys, *et al.*, *De Zeemacht. Van de Admiraliteit van Vlaanderen tot de Belgische Zeemacht* (Tielt, 1992), 51; Olivier Debaere, *Stedenatlas: Oostende. Een topografisch overzicht van de ontwikkelingen van een fel begeerde havenstad* (Ostend, 2002), 48-51 and 56; and R.A. Stradling, *The Armada of Flanders. Spanish Maritime Policy and European War, 1568-1668* (Cambridge, 1992), 7 and 12.

²⁰Maurice of Nassau was the second son of William of Orange (or the Silent). He was *stadtholder* of several Dutch provinces, including Holland and Zeeland.

Albert led a military campaign to drive the Dutch from the Flemish coast.²¹ After a three-year siege (1601-1604), Albert finally triumphed.²²

The capture of Ostend was hailed as a great victory throughout the Southern Netherlands. Albert made sure that the ruined city was rebuilt and given a new and very advantageous city charter.²³ He also understood that Ostend remained quite isolated from the interior. Besides, he was aware that if Antwerp wanted to regain its former commercial position, it had to be reconnected to the North Sea and to the Meuse and Rhine. Plans were drawn to dig a canal that linked Ostend via Bruges and Ghent to the Scheldt and thus to Antwerp. From Antwerp another canal, called Fossa Eugenia, would reach the Meuse and Rhine, thus bypassing the Dutch.²⁴ By linking Antwerp to the different urban networks, the Fossa Eugenia would reinvigorate the old merchant city's trade. The Dutch were opposed to these plans and launched several successful military raids to destroy the works. Financial difficulties, war and a vigorous particularism slowed the work, which was finally abandoned. Only the western sections Bruges-Ghent (1624), Dunkirk-Bruges (1641) and Ostend-Bruges (1619/1664) were finished, finally linking the Maritime urban network to the rest of the country and providing an alternative route to Antwerp.²⁵ In the meantime, Ostend's geopolitical significance as a port city increased for the Southern Netherlands because of the loss of Dunkirk to France in 1662.²⁶

Although a set of canals now connected Ostend and the Maritime urban network to the central provinces and the Scaldian urban network, commercial flows to the interior did not increase. At least in part this was due to the

²¹From 1598 until 1621 the Southern Netherlands was independent of Spain and ruled by Archduke Albert and his wife Isabelle. By giving the Netherlands to his daughter, Isabelle, Philip II hoped the Calvinist rebels would realign themselves with the Catholic Southern provinces. Because Albert and Isabelle's union was childless, the Southern Netherlands returned to the Spanish crown after Albert's death in 1621; Isabelle remained in the Southern Netherlands until her own death in 1633 and was appointed governor by Philip II's grandson, Philip IV.

²²Debaere, *Stedenatlas*, 56-62.

²³*Ibid.*, 74.

²⁴It was named after Archduchess Isabelle's third name, Isabelle Clara Eugenia.

²⁵Decavele, De Herdt and Decorte, *Gent*, 77, 80 and 84-87; Geneviève Costes, *Le Canal Albert: chronique d'une modernisation achevée sur le secteur wallon* (Brussels, 2000), 5-6; and Vandewalle, "Op zoek naar nieuwe uitwegen," 75-81.

²⁶Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 122 and 236.

fact that the Ostend-Bruges-Ghent canal, with its numerous transshipments and monopolies, could not compete with Dutch shipping via Zeeland, even if the latter necessitated paying expensive customs dues. The populous cities of the Scaldian urban network continued to rely on Dutch shipping by way of Antwerp.²⁷

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the central government in Brussels was weakened by Louis XIV's on-going military incursions into the Spanish Netherlands and the failing policy of the ailing Habsburg monarchs in Madrid. At the end of the century, the process of state consolidation came to a halt in the Southern Netherlands. Municipal, regional and provincial autonomy became stronger, but because of the overall economic decline, it had a protectionist and local reflex.²⁸ On several occasions the central government tried to overcome this particularism and to curb the economic decline, but to no avail. In 1699, Count Brouchoven de Bergeyck made a concerted effort to reinvigorate the trade via Ostend, but this failed when the local authorities, with some help from the Dutch, wrecked the plan. In such circumstances the Maritime urban network was just too remote from Brussels to have its economic, military and political needs met.²⁹

In general, the port and city of Ostend did not fare well in the seventeenth century. The lucrative fishing industry, which had earlier supported the town, was now relegated to low-yield coastal catches because the Spanish Netherlands was unable to defend the fishermen on the more remote grounds.³⁰ Most merchant vessels that called in its medium-size harbour came from Eng-

²⁷These cities included Brussels, Antwerp, Mechlin, Louvain, Ghent, Tournai and Mons; Baetens, "Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur," 49; and Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 102-103.

²⁸Helma Houtman-Desmedt, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden na de vrede van Munster 1648-1678," *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, VIII (1979), 307; and Reginald De Schryver, "Oorlog en vrede voor de Zuidelijke Nederlanden," *ibid.*, VIII (1979), 308.

²⁹Marc D'Hoker, "De economische conferentie te Brussel in 1699. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van de economische politiek in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden," *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, LXXXV (1970), 197 and 212; Reginald De Schryver, *Jan van Brouchoven, Graaf van Bergeyck 1644-1725. Een halve eeuw staatkunde in de Spaanse Nederlanden en in Europa* (Brussels, 1965), 180-182 and 196-197; and Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 199 and 217.

³⁰Gaston Desnerck and Roland Desnerck, *Vlaamse visserij en vissersvaartuigen* (2 vols., Handzame, 1974), I, 15-16 and 120-121; and Louis Sicking, *Zeemacht en onmacht. Maritieme politiek in de Nederlanden 1488-1558* (The Hague, 1998), 104-105.

land and the Dutch Republic, and to a lesser degree from northern Germany, France, the Iberian peninsula, the Baltic and Scandinavia. One reason for Ostend's limited success was its restricted hinterland. Instead of being the gateway to the Southern Netherlands, it was relegated to being the gateway only to the Maritime urban network. But this role had to be shared with Bruges because small seagoing vessels could also enter the Ostend-Bruges Canal.³¹

If the two cities could have been perceived as a cooperating entity, their local autonomies, particularistic interests and age-old antagonisms decided differently. Ostend had two advantages: it was closest to the North Sea and could handle vessels with deep draughts. Bruges, on the other hand, had a key disadvantage: it was twenty-five kilometres inland, which made it harder for seagoing vessels to reach because they had to pass the locks at Slijkens and often had to be towed on the medium-draught canal. On the positive side, it was closer to the inland markets.³² Bruges could also wield political powers in the States of Flanders. From 1597 to 1754 the population of Flanders was only represented by the so-called *leden*, who comprised the clergy and the oligarchic elites of the cities of Ghent, Ypres (until 1678), Bruges and the *Vrije* of Bruges, a rural district around the town.³³ Although the States of Flanders' main function was to represent the people's fiscal interests in relation to their ruler, they also had other duties. One of these was the maintenance of the Ostend-Bruges canal. As a member of the States of Flanders, Bruges could thwart Ostend's communications with the interior provinces, as with Ostend's flush basins.³⁴ These basins southeast of Ostend were not only situated in the *Vrije*

³¹Michael-W. Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie. De opbloei en neergang van een koloniale handelshaven (1713-1740)," *Tijdschrift voor Zeegeschiedenis*, XXIV (2005), 44 and 53; and Roland Baetens, "De havenbeweging te Oostende (1635-1662)," in *Annalen van de Federatie der kringen voor geschiedenis, oudheidkunde en folklore van België, XLIIIe congres* (St-Niklaas, 1974), 120 and 122.

³²Baetens, "Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur," 49-50; Daniël Farasyn, "Oostende," in *Belgische steden in reliëf. Plannen opgenomen door Franse militaire ingenieurs XVIIe-XIXe eeuw* (Brussels, 1965), 159-160; Jan Parmentier, "Het maritieme Oostende tijdens de 18de eeuw. Van kapersnest tot Europese doorvoerhaven" (Unpublished paper, Ostend, February 1998); and Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie," 44.

³³In theory, the States of Flanders represented the people of the County of Flanders. It is clear, however, that this representation was not based on democratic principles. Michel Nuytens, *Inventaris van het archief van de Staten van Vlaanderen* (Brussels, 1986), 8-9; and Piet Lenders, *Vilain XIII* (Louvain, 1995), 51-52.

³⁴A flush basin maintained a certain depth in a harbour. At high tide it was flooded by incoming seawater, which ultimately was sucked back into the sea at low tide. This wore away the sand brought in by the incoming tide.

of Bruges but were also one of the many obligations of the States of Flanders. Ostend and Bruges were constantly at odds when decisions had to be made about the canal's navigability and the maintenance of the flush basins.³⁵ This on-going squabble and the weak central government in Brussels, which could not intervene effectively, did not help to develop the maritime facilities in Ostend.

When Dunkirk was annexed by France in 1662, Ostend became the pivot of the Spanish Netherlands' naval activities. But the Southern Netherlands' naval clout had dwindled rapidly since the early sixteenth century. The Spanish treasury could not maintain a navy in the North Sea and at the same time wage a costly land war against the Dutch and French.³⁶ As a result, the required facilities to maintain a proper navy in Ostend, such as wharves, were never built. The wood needed for shipbuilding would probably have had to come from the Dutch Republic, which blockaded the Flemish coast, making it even harder to sustain an efficient naval policy.³⁷ Because of these problems the Spanish navy's task in the North Sea was limited to convoying merchantmen. The Spanish military and political decline became obvious when the governor in 1682 gave the task of convoying ships to the States of Flanders, which was not keen to maintain a small navy and swiftly discarded the convoy activities, marking the end of the Southern Netherlands' state navy. In 1694 the admiralty's task was given to the Council of Flanders by the central govern-

³⁵Michael-W. Serruys, "Oostende en de Oostendse Compagnie. Het economisch effect van koloniale zeehandel op een Zuid-Nederlandse havenstad tussen de Spaanse en de Oostenrijkse Successieoorlog (1713-1745)" (Unpublished MA thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1999), 34-35 and 256-273.

³⁶Gustaaf Asaert, "Admiraliteiten (Tweede helft 14de eeuw-1794)," in Erik Aerts, *et al.* (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen van de Habsburgse Nederlanden (1482-1795)* (Brussels, 1995), 486-488; Roland Baetens, "Scheepvaart in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1650-1800," *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, VIII (1979), 243; and Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 93, 122, 232 and 234-236.

³⁷Anrys, *et al.*, *De Zeemacht*, 54; de Vries and van der Woude, *First Modern Economy*, 426; Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power*, 30-31; Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie," 46 and 48; and Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 30 and 39. Stradling wrote that in the autumn of 1619 "the felling of trees had begun – presumably in the interior provinces, Luxembourg or the Basse-Meuse region, rather than the environs of Ostend itself." Actually, there were no forests around Ostend, so the wood had to have come from other places. It was impossible to bring that wood to Ostend because the transport infrastructure in the Southern Netherlands was deficient; it would only have been possible through the Dutch Republic. In 1619, it might have been possible to send wood from Luxembourg to Ostend via the Dutch because of the Twelve Years Truce (1609-1621) between the Southern Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, but after 1621 this option was unrealistic.

ment.³⁸ This example not only shows the stagnation in the process of state consolidation but also reveals the disinterested attitude of Spanish and Southern Netherlands' policymakers towards maritime activities. Unfamiliar with maritime affairs, they instead had a bent for continental matters, unlike their counterparts in coastal capitals, like London, The Hague, Lisbon or Venice. This indifference to the sea tended to enlarge the already significant geopolitical isolation of the Maritime urban network.³⁹

The void left by the absence of a navy was easily filled by privateering, a device that privatised maritime warfare. As a private initiative it hardly needed any guidance from the central government, although it was bound to follow regulations set out by the admiralty. At first, the admiralty directed operations at sea by both the navy and privateers. With the gradual disappearance of the state navy, admiralties became closer to courts of justice, issuing letters of marque and dividing the booty. The stagnation of state consolidation served the Ostend and Dunkirk privateers well by giving them more autonomy. After the fall of Dunkirk, Ostend became the Southern Netherlands' major privateering base, and throughout the seventeenth century many Ostenders lived from revenues from privateering. Recent research shows that Ostend's privateering started to decline at the end of the century.⁴⁰

In the meantime Archduke Albert had given Ostend new fortifications in 1607, as he was well aware of the strategic and maritime possibilities of its harbour. The Southern Netherlands' neighbours did indeed look at the city with longing eyes. The French tried several times to conquer Ostend; Cardinal Richelieu even proposed to erase the city completely from the map so that no

³⁸The Council of Flanders was the highest court of law in the County of Flanders. Asaert, "Admiraliteiten," 488 and 492; Baetens, "Scheepvaart, 1650-1800," 240-241; Bibliothèque royale Albert Ier, Brussels, Mss. 12320-12321, Recueil concernant l'administration des Pays-Bas, Jacques Ernest de Castillon, Memoire contenant L'Etablissement, le Progres, et l'Aúthorité du Conseil Supreme d'Admirauté subalternes, les Gages des Officiers, et entr'autres si l'Audencier des Pays-bas, est ipso júre Secretaire dudit Conseil, avecq plusieurs autres choses regardantes laditte Admirauté, 16 February 1719; and Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 237-238.

³⁹Jean Merrien, *Histoire des corsaires* (St-Malo, 2000), 88; and Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 72.

⁴⁰Anrys, *et al.*, *De Zeemacht*, 57-58, 65, 81-82, 86-87 and 89; Asaert, "Admiraliteiten," 490-492; Baetens, "Scheepvaart," 243; Fernand Pollentier, *De Admiraliteit en de oorlog ter zee onder de Aartshertogen (1596-1609)* (Brussels, 1972), 111; Parmentier, "Het maritieme Oostende;" Merrien, *Histoire*, 75; Roland Baetens, "Scheepvaart in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1585-1650," *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, VII (1980), 157-159; and Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 48, 147 and 228.

one would again covet it.⁴¹ The Dutch tried to take it again during the chaos of the War of Spanish Succession, which was triggered by the death of Charles II, the last Spanish Habsburg king. Instead of bequeathing his dominions to his Austrian family, he left everything to Louis XIV's grandson, Philip of Anjou, and thus created a huge French-Spanish alliance under the Bourbon dynasty.⁴²

This was opposed by the English, Dutch and Austrians. Most fighting took place in the Southern Netherlands, which was occupied first by the French and then jointly by the English and Dutch. During the Anglo-Dutch occupation (1706-1716), the latter strengthened their grip by making the Southern Netherlands' economy more dependent on their own economy by raising export duties (thus burdening the export of Southern products to the Dutch Republic) and lowering import duties (promoting the import of Dutch products).⁴³ To cement their political and economical grip, the Dutch also wanted to garrison troops in several Southern cities, including Ostend. The Amsterdam pensionary Buys argued that it was absolutely necessary to garrison Ostend to control its trade and to close the last remaining loophole in the Southern Netherlands. London, however, vehemently opposed this plan because the English feared that the Dutch would now totally control the Southern Netherlands' economy. In 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht ended the War of the Spanish Succession, which dramatically changed Europe's political constellation. The former Spanish Netherlands were given to the Austrian Habsburgs, although Vienna was obliged to follow the ensuing Rastatt (1714) and Barrier treaties (1715) in which London and The Hague obliged Vienna to accept (and pay for) the Dutch garrisoning of several cities (but not Ostend) and the new customs regulations.⁴⁴

⁴¹Debaere, *Stedenatlas*, 74-77 and 84; and Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, 133.

⁴²Philip of Anjou (1683-1746) became king of Spain in 1700. He abdicated in favour of his son Louis in 1724. His son's death a few months later put him back on the throne.

⁴³Paul Janssens, "De Spaanse en Oostenrijkse Nederlanden (1579-1780)," in Johan C.H. Blom and Emiel Lamberts (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden* (Meerhout, 1993; 4th ed., Baarn, 2006), 189-190; and Piet Lenders, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1715-1740. Politieke ontwikkeling," *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, IX (1980), 60-62.

⁴⁴Johanna G. Stork-Penning, *Het grote werk. Vredesonderhandelingen gedurende de Spaanse Successieoorlog 1705-1710* (Groningen, 1958), xii, 75, 131, 137 and 459; and Lenders, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden," 61-62.

During the first decades of the Austrian regime, Ostend enjoyed rapid commercial growth. But this boom did not last: its economy collapsed shortly, revealing the city's weaknesses, especially its geographic, commercial and political isolation *vis-à-vis* the other urban networks and centres of decision making. The short period of brisk economic growth in Ostend was the result of the activities of the first Southern Netherlands' colonial trading company.⁴⁵ Although Antwerp remained the country's major commercial centre, the General Indian Company (GIC, often called simply the Ostend Company), used Ostend as its home base because of the Dutch-enforced closure of the Scheldt. During the seventeenth century Madrid, fearing competition, had never allowed a colonial trading company to operate from the Southern Netherlands. But Vienna did not have the same objections, and between 1715 and 1728 numerous Indiamen sailed from Ostend to Bengal and China. The GIC quickly developed new niche markets and made huge profits.⁴⁶ The English, Dutch and French colonial companies reacted promptly and urged their respective states to halt the Austrian Netherlands' maritime and colonial expansion. At first, London, The Hague and Paris threatened military operations, but soon they proposed to trade the GIC for Maria Theresa's succession.⁴⁷ In 1731, Emperor Charles VI, the GIC's patron, chose his daughter's succession and sacrificed the maritime aspirations of the Austrian Netherlands.⁴⁸ Again, the aristocratic continental reflex had triumphed.

⁴⁵Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 163 and 206-207; and Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie," 56.

⁴⁶Anrys, *et al.*, *De Zeemacht*, 92; Jan Parmentier, "The Asian Challenge: The Socio-Economic Influence of the Ostend East India Trade in the Southern Netherlands, 1715-1735," in Leo Akveld, Frits Loomeijer and Morten Hahn-Pedersen (eds.), *Financing the Maritime Sector* (Esbjerg, 2002), 285; and Karel Degryse, "De Oostendse chinahandel (1718-1735)," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, LII (1974), 306-307 and 319-321. Degryse calculated the net returns of the GIC at 149.3 percent for 1722-1735; Karel Degryse, "De Antwerpse fortuinen. Kapitaalaccumulatie, -investering en rendement te Antwerpen in de 18de eeuw" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Gent, 1985), 537-538.

⁴⁷Since Emperor Charles VI did not have any sons, he named his daughter Mary-Theresa heir to the Austrian throne. The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) was the Achilles heel of Habsburg international policy in the first half of the eighteenth century.

⁴⁸Michel Huisman, *La Belgique commerciale sous l'Empereur Charles VI. La Compagnie d'Ostende. Étude historique de politique commerciale et coloniale* (Brussels, 1902), 354 and 411-412; and Parmentier, "Asian Challenge," 286.

If Ostend's colonial adventure had shown the port city's weaknesses, it also revealed its maritime potential and strong points. The central government's Council of Finance was happily confronted with the bounty of the colonial trade's tax revenues. This bounty was eagerly used to reinforce and enlarge Ostend's fortifications, which were constantly threatened by the English, Dutch and French.⁴⁹ The disinterested policymakers in Brussels and Vienna were now obliged to send their best jurists and diplomats to defend Charles VI's interests in the GIC against the repeated legal attacks by the English and Dutch. These actions certainly made Brussels and Vienna aware of the Austrian Netherlands' maritime potential.⁵⁰ Ostend also used its colonial heyday to strengthen its ties with the central government in Brussels. This was not achieved by using the ordinary hierarchic channels of communication but rather through the GIC's shareholders' meeting. As a shareholder, the port city of Ostend could communicate its needs to other shareholders, most of whom were highly-placed officials in Brussels, such as the Arenberg family.⁵¹ Moreover, attention was given to the poor connections between Ostend and Bruges, and with the other urban networks in the Southern Netherlands. The deepening of the Ostend-Bruges Canal in the 1720s was the sole long-term result of this booming colonial trade.⁵² When the colonial trade ended in the 1730s, it was a hard blow for Ostend and the Austrian Netherlands.

Geopolitical Remodelling of the State: The Unification of Urban Networks after 1748

With Maria Theresa's ascension to the Austrian throne in 1740, a new generation of policymakers came to power. These enlightened and centralist policymakers wanted to unify the heterogeneous Austrian empire to make it stronger, wealthier and easier to rule. This was not easy, especially where regional,

⁴⁹Herman Coppens, *De financiën van de centrale regering van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden aan het einde van het Spaanse en onder Oostenrijks bewind (ca. 1680-1788)* (Brussels, 1992), 106; Huisman, *La Belgique commerciale*, 354 and 411-412; and Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie," 49-51.

⁵⁰Bruno Bernard, "Patrice Mac Neny (1676-1745). Secrétaire d'État et de Guerre," in Hervé Hasquin and Roland Mortier (eds.), *Études sur le XVIIIe siècle, XII* (Brussels, 1985), 49-54; and Huisman, *La Belgique commerciale*, 380-381, 402, 436-437 and 446.

⁵¹Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie," 52; and Serruys, "Oostende en de Oostendse Compagnie," 146.

⁵²Baetens, "Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur," 56; and Serruys, "Oostende en de Generale Indische Compagnie," 53.

provincial and local interests were deep-rooted, as in the Southern Netherlands. Vienna's first concerns were to rationalise the chain of command and to restore financial health to its dominions by improving agriculture, trade and industry. For this, Maria Theresa put her trust in her enlightened chancellor, Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz.⁵³

But Austria's great reforms and state consolidation process still had to wait. Barely two months after Maria Theresa's ascension, the War of Austrian Succession broke out as France, Prussia, Bavaria and Spain rejected Charles VI's succession. Austria was first defeated by the Prussians, and in 1745 the French successfully invaded and occupied the Southern Netherlands. Nevertheless, Maria Theresa's right to the throne was confirmed at the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. Moreover, she was able to withdraw the Southern Netherlands from the Dutch sphere of influence. Thereafter, Maria Theresa refused to pay the garrisoning costs of the Dutch troops in the "barrier" cities and decided that the Austrian Netherlands could modify their customs duties without Dutch-English consent. The diplomatic successes of 1748 gave Brussels and Vienna the opportunity to reorganise the Austrian Netherlands without Dutch interference. In this new state consolidation process there would be plenty of room to remodel and reshape the Southern Netherlands' spatial relations.⁵⁴

Vienna did not rush this process by creating radical new institutions but rather by appointing allies to the country's century-old institutions, such as the Council of Finance. In Brussels, Maria Theresa was represented by the governor, Charles of Lorraine. Although he was officially the highest-ranking official, power actually resided with the plenipotentiary minister who followed Chancellor Kaunitz's main directions. Because of their great power and autonomy, successive plenipotentiary ministers would become the engines of state consolidation in the Austrian Netherlands in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵⁵

⁵³Herman Coppens, "Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij te Wenen (1757-1793)," in Aerts, *et al.* (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen*, 125-126; Piet Lenders, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden onder Maria Theresa," *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, IX (1980), 92 and 98; and Lenders, "Ontwikkeling van politiek en instellingen in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden. De invloed van Europese oorlogen," *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis bijzonderlijk van het aloude hertogdom Brabant*, LXIV (1981), 35.

⁵⁴Lenders, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden onder Maria Theresa," 92-95, 97 and 108-109; and Lenders, "Ontwikkeling van politiek," 60-61.

⁵⁵Coppens, "Departement voor de Nederlanden," 125 and 128-129; Hugo de Schepper and René Vermeir, "Landvoogd - Gouverneur-Generaal (1522-1598, 1621-1789, 1790-1794)," in Aerts, *et al.* (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen*, 206; Lenders, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden onder Maria Theresa," 92 and 98; Lenders,

One of Kaunitz's main directives was to improve the Southern Netherlands' economy. This was one of the goals the first plenipotentiary minister, Antoniotto di Botta-Adorno (1749-1753), was given. Botta-Adorno understood that one of the Southern Netherlands' weaknesses was its dependence on the Dutch. They always needed a Dutch intermediary not only to ship goods abroad but to trade with their fellow countrymen. Therefore, Botta-Adorno decided that the Dutch detour had to be ended and devised a new policy, which was soon known as the *politique de transit* (transit policy). This was executed by the Council of Finance, which became the main instrument to realise his programme. After Botta-Adorno's retirement to Italy in 1753, the transit policy was consistently and vigorously pursued by his successors: von Cobenzl (1753-1770), von Starhemberg (1770-1783), di Belgioioso (1783-1787) and von Trauttmansdorff (1787-1789). On the eve of the Brabantine revolution in 1789, the Southern Netherlands' spatial relations had been systematically reshaped by these men and the Council of Finance.⁵⁶

Botta-Adorno's transit policy was based on Archduke Albert's old idea of bypassing the Dutch Republic by linking the North Sea to the Rhine. Botta-Adorno understood that shipping to and from Antwerp would always be easier and cheaper via the Holland-Zeeland seaports as long as the Dutch controlled the Scheldt estuary. But now, it was not Antwerp, as in Albert's Fossa Eugenia plans, but Ostend which was to be the gateway to the Southern Netherlands.⁵⁷ To achieve this, Ostend and the Maritime urban network had to be

"Ontwikkeling van politiek," 61 and 67; and Piet Lenders, "Gevolmachtigd minister (1714-1789, 1790-1794)," in Aerts, *et al.* (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen*, 236-242.

⁵⁶Joseph Laenen, *Le ministère de Botta-Adorno dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens pendant le règne de Marie Thérèse (1749-1753)* (Antwerp, 1901), 164 and 191-199; Lenders, "Gevolmachtigd minister," 237-239; Lenders, "Ontwikkeling van politiek," 61 and 65-66; Leo Van Buyten, "Bronnen voor de geschiedenis van de transitohandel en de transitowegen in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden. De doorvoerhandel op Lorreinen," in Carlos Wyffels (ed.), *Histoire économique de la Belgique. Traitement des sources et état des questions* (Brussels, 1972), 315; and Nicolas Bacon, *Les réflexions sur l'état présent du commerce, fabrique et manufactures des Pays-Bas autrichiens (1765) du négociant bruxellois, Nicolas Bacon (1710-1779), conseiller député aux affaires du commerce* (Brussels, 1978), 108-109.

⁵⁷Blondé and Deceulaer, "Port of Antwerp," 33-35; Laenen, *Le ministère de Botta-Adorno*, 175; Léopold Génicot, "Études sur la construction des routes en Belgique," *Bulletin de l'institut de recherches économiques*, X (1939), 448; and *Bulletin de l'institut de recherches économiques et sociales*, XII (1946); and XIII (1947); Österreichisch Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), Haus-, Hof und Staatsarchiv (HHuStA), B, Rep. DD, Abt. A, Berichte 114, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Charles von Cobenzl to Wenton Anton von Kaunitz, 25 August 1766.

connected to the other urban networks. After the plenipotentiary minister and the Council of Finance launched the transit policy in the 1750s, the Austrian Netherlands underwent an unprecedented road and canal building era. Whereas the Southern Netherlands had a mere 229 kilometres of paved roads in 1704, by 1793 it could boast a network of more than 2480 kilometres.⁵⁸ At the end of the eighteenth century, all the urban networks in the Southern Netherlands were linked by a multitude of paved roads. To ensure that the merchants would ship their exports via Ostend, successive plenipotentiary ministers forbade the building of roads or canals towards the Dutch Republic. Special attention was given that all new connections fostered east-west rather than north-south links.⁵⁹

Building roads or canals was one thing, but getting people to use them was another. To secure the commercial flows on its new routes, the Council of Finance had to wage war against all those who created obstacles and impeded traffic on the east-west axis to and from Ostend. Not surprisingly, the barge-men from Ghent and Bruges were tackled first. Other local and particularistic barriers, like tolls, were removed by the Council.⁶⁰ Since customs duties were

⁵⁸Génicot, "Études sur la construction," XII, 549.

⁵⁹Archives générales du Royaume (AGR), Conseil des Finances (CF), 3295, Chaussées et chemins en général, 1731-1794, internal memorandum, 3 March 1762; Conseil du Gouvernement général (CGG), 740, Chaussées, ponts, barriers, Brabant, Exhibé 89, 17 December 1787, Octroi en faveur des États de Brabant pour la construction de quatre chaussées dans cette province, internal memorandum, 14 January 1788; CGG, 756, Chaussées, ponts, barriers, Limbourg, Exhibé 964, 28 September 1788, Le Major Court, Maijeur d'Aubel, semble vouloir dire quelque chose contre le projet qu'il ij auroit d'une chaussée d'Henri Chapelle vers Maestricht, Major Court to Council of the General Government, 15 September 1788; and internal memorandum by Limpens, 2 October 1788; and Exhibé 397, 17 July 1789, Ceux de la Régence d'Herve demandent la construction d'une chaussée sur le chemin de Battice à la Croix rouge, Et ceux d'Henri-Chapelle une de leur endroit vers le Paijs de Fauquemont, internal memorandum de Limpens, 20 August 1789; Beatrix Baillieul, "De aanleg van steenwegen rond Antwerpen tijdens het Oostenrijks bewind (1715-1794)" (Unpublished MA thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Gent, 1972), 94, 96 and 100; Michael-W. Serruys, "A Vectorial Analysis of the Reorientation of the Transport Network in the Austrian Netherlands" (Unpublished paper presented at the Conference on Economy and Society of the Low Countries in the Pre-industrial Period, Antwerp, November 2004); and ÖStA, HHuStA B, Rep. DD, Abt. A, Berichte 82, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Council of Finance to Charles of Lorraine, sent with Cobenzl to Kaunitz, 23 February 1760.

⁶⁰Decavele, De Herdt and Decorte, *Gent*, 148-151; Georges Bigwood, *Les impôts généraux dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens. Étude historique de législation financière* (Louvain, 1900), 251-255; Guy Thewes, *Route et administration provinciale au siècle des Lumières: l'exemple des États du Duché de Luxembourg (1748-1795)* (Brussels, 1994), 122; Herman Willemys, "De tolrechten in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en

effective means to promote exports and discourage imports, and as such to regulate trade and traffic, as early as 1748 Brussels lowered them for goods transiting on the new east-west axis, while it raised them on the routes to the Dutch Republic. From the 1760s, transit duties in Antwerp were substantially higher than in Ostend.⁶¹

If the transit policy improved things, it was not perceived as positive by all interests. Cities like Ostend or Louvain, situated on the new east-west axis or transit route to Germany, applauded the plan and eagerly cooperated with the Council of Finance.⁶² Other cities, however, were very much against the new policy. Antwerp and Mechlin, for instance, vehemently opposed it because their trade was directed towards the Dutch Republic.⁶³ Ghent and Bruges, although both situated on the east-west axis, also complained because Botta-Adorno dug the missing stretches of canal and thus made mandatory transshipment superfluous.⁶⁴ The centralist plans were attacked by a multitude

de ontwerpen tot afschaffing 1687-1795" (Unpublished MA thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1964), 94-97; ÖStA, HHuStA B, Rep. DD, Abt. A, Berichte 114, Diplomatische Korrespondenz, Cobenzl to Kaunitz, 13 August 1766; Pricken, *La douane belge*, 12; and Van Buyten, "Bronnen voor de geschiedenis," 315-316.

⁶¹Greta Devos, "Oostenrijkse douanestatistiek en de Oostendse handel in de tweede helft van de XVIIIe eeuw," in Wyffels (ed.), *Histoire économique de la Belgique*, 338 and 341; Michel Dorban, et al., *Douane, commerce et fraude dans le sud de l'espace belge et grand-ducal au XVIIIe siècle* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1998), 244-245; Philippe Moureaux, "Un organe peu connu du gouvernement des Pays-Bas autrichiens: le bureau de Régie des Droits d'entrée et de sortie," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, XLIV (1966), 479; and Pricken, *La douane belge*, 14.

⁶²Daniël Farasyn, *1769-1794. De 18de eeuwse bloeiperiode van Oostende* (Ostend, 1998), 36; and Leo Van Buyten, *De Leuvense stadsfinanciën onder het Oostenrijks Regiem (1713-1794)* (Louvain, 1985), XI, 93-94, 103 and 105.

⁶³AGR, CF, 3312, Chaussées de Louvain à Aarschot et Diest et d'Aarschot à Diest, 1778, City of Antwerp to the States of Brabant, 12 May 1777; CF, 3397: Cours d'eau du Brabant, Guillaume Hetzler to Antoniotto Botta-Adorno, 31 October 1752; CF, 3441: Canal de Louvain à Malines, 1755-1760, Memoire et observations concernant les marchandises qui avant la construction du nouveau canal de Louvain se dechargeroient dans la ville de Malines, et dont la villes se trouvera absolument privée par ledit canal, c. 1755; Laenen, *Le ministère de Botta-Adorno*, 176; P. Smolders, "Verkeersmiddelen voor Leuven," *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis bijzonderlijk van het aloude hertogdom Brabant*, XXXIX (1956), 149; and Raymond Van Uytven, et al., *De geschiedenis van Mechelen. Van heerlijkheid tot stadsgewest* (Tielt, 1991), 186 and 188-189.

⁶⁴Decavele, De Herdt and Decorte, *Gent*, 148-150; and Vandewalle, "Op zoek naar nieuwe uitwegen," 88.

of provincial, regional and local entities, each fearing it would lose its trade because of a new road or the removal of one of its ancient privileges, like a toll or some kind of staple market. The Council's major problem was its financial weakness; only the provincial, regional and local authorities had the means to construct this infrastructure. But these authorities could not build a road at will; they first needed the approval of the Council of Finance, and the Council used this power to keep the local authorities in check. To solve this stalemate the parties had to negotiate. The Council of Finance was much better organised and usually managed to persuade, or sometimes to lure, fool, force or even blackmail local authorities into building the road deemed necessary by the central government. At the end of the eighteenth century even the Council's fiercest opponents, like Ghent and the States of Flanders, were brought to their knees.⁶⁵ The Austrian Netherlands could finally pride itself on having one of Europe's most modern transportation networks, a fact that Voltaire acknowledged: "De toutes les nations modernes, la France et le petit pays des Belges sont les seuls qui aient des chemins dignes de l'Antiquité."⁶⁶

Ostend: Gateway to the Austrian Netherlands

When Botta-Adorno set out to dig the missing stretches of canal in Ghent and Bruges, he encountered fierce opposition from the States of Flanders. Charles Cobenzl, Botta-Adorno's successor, reacted by breaking the power of Ghent and Bruges in Flanders over the next few years by letting small cities become new members in the States of Flanders. This considerably reduced the ability of Ghent and Bruges to rule over the rest of Flanders. After 1754 it became much easier for the municipal councils of smaller cities, like Ostend, to create new political and personal relations with the central authorities in Brussels. Relations with cities that wanted to align themselves with the transit policy were much welcomed by the plenipotentiary minister.⁶⁷

⁶⁵AGR, CF, 3332, *Chaussées de Luxembourg à Namur, 1766*, Council of Finance to Charles of Lorraine, 27 August 1766; Decavele, De Herdt and Decorte, *Gent*, 148-151; Génicot, "Études sur la construction," X, 444-451; and Thewes, *Route et administration*, 155-156 and 160-164.

⁶⁶Quoted in Laurent Dechesne, *Histoire économique et sociale de la Belgique depuis les origines jusqu'en 1914* (Paris, 1932), 276.

⁶⁷Decavele, De Herdt and Decorte, *Gent*, 96-98, 105 and 148-151; Laenen, *Le ministère de Botta-Adorno*, 170-172; Lenders, "De Zuidelijke Nederlanden onder Maria Theresa," 98; Nuyttens, *Inventaris*, 17; Lenders, *Vilain XIII*, 54-55; and Vandewalle, "Op zoek naar nieuwe uitwegen," 87-88.

The case of Thomas de Grysperre, Ostend's pensionary, speaks volumes. In 1763, de Grysperre zealously advocated the construction of a turnpike to connect Ostend to the nascent road network. His main rationale was to stimulate the export of Ostend's fisheries to the interior and to northern France. Bruges, however, opposed these plans because the proposed turnpike would bypass its important fish market. As fisheries were not yet on the Council of Finance's agenda, it seemed as though Bruges might manage to put an end to de Grysperre's venture. But Cobenzl saw in this projected turnpike an excellent opportunity to reinforce the east-west axis, and he contacted de Grysperre and told him exactly what to write to the Council of Finance. Following the plenipotentiary minister's recommendations, de Grysperre wrote to the Council that the turnpike would strengthen the east-west transit policy, and as such, make the Austrian Netherlands less dependent on the "violent, capricious and bad-tempered Dutch." Consequently, the Council of Finance, backed by Cobenzl and Vienna, granted Ostend permission to build the turnpike. Delighted with the way de Grysperre supported the transit policy, Cobenzl submitted his name to Vienna, and from 1764 until 1767 de Grysperre sat in the *Jointe des Administrations*, a kind of state audit office. In 1767, he became a councillor of the Privy Council, the Austrian Netherlands' highest judicial and political institution. He also held office in the *Jointe des Eaux* from 1772 and on the Committee for Maritime Trade after 1781; both government agencies were responsible for maritime infrastructure and overseas trade.⁶⁸ These functions enabled de Grysperre to advance Ostend's maritime aspirations among the bureaucracy. Like the plenipotentiary ministers, de Grysperre was energetically supported by Kaunitz, who repeated more than once that "il [faut] établir un commerce maritime actif à Ostende. C'est donc sur cet objet important que doivent principalement porter nos vues et speculations."⁶⁹ Backed by Vienna, de Grysperre not only successfully continued to stimulate the country's fishing industry but also became the port of Ostend's early modernizer. The renewed pilotage service (1771), the building of the lighthouse (1772) and

⁶⁸AGR, CF, 3352, *Chaussées d'Ostende à Winendale, 1765-1766*, Council of Finance to Charles of Lorraine, 1 August 1763; Cobenzl to Thomas de Grysperre, 22 August 1763, 11 April 1764 and 15 June 1764; and Christiane Van Slambrouck, "Thomas de Grysperre: van stadspensionaris tot economisch deskundige binnen de centrale regering (1729-1785)" (Unpublished MA thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1981), 25-30.

⁶⁹AGR, CF, 3331, *Chaussées de Luxembourg à Namur, 1760-1765*, Kaunitz to Cobenzl, 15 August 1766; Greta Devos, "Comité voor de Zeehandel (1781-1786)," in Aerts, *et al.* (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen, 1799-1800*; Piet Lenders, "Jointe voor de Waterstaat (1772-1787) and Corps en school voor waterbouwkunde (1774-1794)," in Aerts, *et al.* (eds.), *De centrale overheidsinstellingen, 1782-1784*; and Van Slambrouck, "Thomas de Grysperre," 12-13.

the digging of two new tidal docks (1776 and 1783) were de Grysperre's work. As one of the most resolute promoters of the Austrian Netherlands' transit policy, he persuaded Emperor Joseph II to turn Ostend into a free port in 1781. Thanks to the new political relations between the central authorities and Ostend, the city not only had a modern harbour infrastructure at the end of the eighteenth century but also enjoyed very attractive customs duties.⁷⁰

Botta-Adorno's road-building policy not only created a dense road network but also unleashed a cutthroat competition between the Southern Netherlands' cities. Some saw their trade dwindle as they were bypassed by a new road and quickly submitted a road project to the Council of Finance. To ensure the Council's approval, they made sure the proposed connection favoured Ostend's gateway function and harmed the Dutch.⁷¹ For instance, when Sankt-Vith, a little town tucked away in the Ardennes highlands, asked permission to build a road, the Council of Finance was informed that it was because "les marchands...ont fait [jusqu'ici] leurs amplettes en Hollande en les faisant monter le Rhin et la Meuse, se termineront, certainement, après la construction de ce chemin, de faire venir leurs cuirs, aports et autres marchandises par le port d'Ostende."⁷² Ostend was thus not only on the central authorities' (and de Grysperre's) minds but also became a rallying point for local authorities seeking permission to build a road. The Flemish port now symbolised the transit policy and the on-going geopolitical reorganisation of the Austrian Netherlands.⁷³

The new communication and transport network that came into being in the second half of the eighteenth century served Ostend well. In the 1760s Kaunitz even started to worry about what he called the Southern Netherlands' "reckless enthusiasm" in regard to road building.⁷⁴ But thanks to this uncommon road-building policy triggered by Botta-Adorno, Ostend and the Maritime urban network became less isolated as they were integrated into the Austrian

⁷⁰Devos, "Oostenrijkse douanestatistiek," 336-341; Farasyn, *1769-1794*, 67-68, 80, 88 and 120; and Van Slambrouck, "Thomas de Grysperre," 23-25, 114-120 and 125-136.

⁷¹Génicot, "Études sur la construction," X, 449-450; and Michael-W. Serruys, "The Austrian Netherlands' Transit Policy and Dutch Decline in the Eighteenth Century: A Policy of Revenge?" (Unpublished paper presented at the Conference on Dutch Decline in Eighteenth-Century Europe, Rotterdam, September 2006).

⁷²AGR, CF, 3330, *Chaussées du Luxembourg, 1775-1791*, P. Praët and H. Keller to the Council of Finance, 14 August 1778.

⁷³Serruys, "Austrian Netherlands."

⁷⁴Thewes, *Route et administration*, 159-160.

Netherlands' road and canal network. At the end of the eighteenth century, Ostend truly emerged as the Southern Netherlands' gateway. It was linked to the country's various urban networks and the German hinterland by the new east-west axis. Whereas merchants chose to ship their goods by way of the Holland-Zeeland seaports early in the century, they now could opt for Ostend, with its moderate transit duties and other fiscal advantages like being a free trade zone. Commercial facilities, such as a stock exchange, maritime assurance companies, banks and international courier services (Romberg) to continental Europe were also at hand from the early 1780s.⁷⁵ Barges could now ply their way from Ostend through Bruges and Ghent on the Ostend-Bruges-Ghent Canal without time-consuming and costly transshipments. Nor did merchants any longer have to haggle with the bargemen from these two cities to gain a speedy departure, as in the old days. From Ghent the barges continued downstream on the Scheldt and then onto the new Louvain Canal. In Louvain, terminus of inland navigation, goods were put on carts ready for departure. New paved roads led straight to the German hinterland by way of Namur and Luxembourg (see figure 2). Compared to the high customs duties and numerous tolls in the Dutch Republic, the Austrian Netherlands' transit route via Ostend became a more attractive and interesting alternative. Trade from one Southern Netherlands' urban network to another no longer needed the Dutch detour.⁷⁶

The transit policy had given a new direction to its transport infrastructure. In other words, the geopolitical remodelling of the Austrian Netherlands had been achieved. The question remains, however, whether the east-west axis – the country's new backbone – effectively redirected commercial flows from the Dutch Republic towards Ostend. The answer can be found by measuring and comparing the traffic on the east-west route between Ostend and Germany and on the different trading routes towards the Dutch Republic like the Sas Canal and the Scheldt and Meuse rivers.⁷⁷ Traffic can be indirectly measured by using revenues from the different tolls along these commercial arteries. Moreover, these revenues can provide valuable information on the traffic's evolution, although prudence is required because toll revenues can be mislead-

⁷⁵Devos, "Oostenrijkse douanestatistiek," 336-341; Farasyn, *1769-1794*, 100 and 163; and Génicot, "Études sur la construction," XII, map 1-6.

⁷⁶Decavele, De Herdt and Decorte, *Gent*, 151; Génicot, "Études sur la construction," map 1-6; Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 164-165; and Van Buyten, "Bronnen voor de geschiedenis," 317.

⁷⁷The Sas Canal was dug in the sixteenth century by Ghent to provide a link to Zeeland; Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 162-165.

ing. It is therefore important to look at the toll's stipulations and the way it was managed before making comparisons.⁷⁸

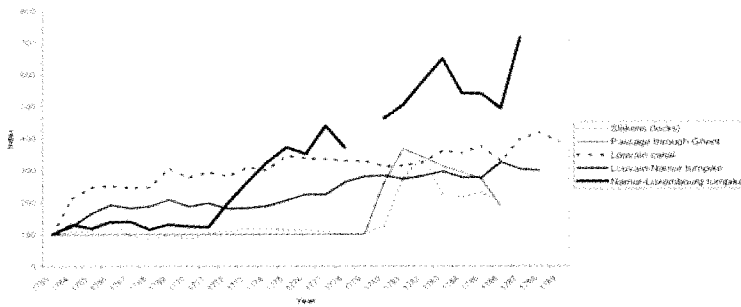


Figure 3: Toll Revenues (indexed) on the East-West Axis between Ostend and Germany, 1763-1789 (1763=100)

Sources: AÉN, VN, 474-479 and 577-587; Archives générales du Royaume (AGR), CC, 30375-30399; and SAL, VL, 5932 and 5996-5999.



Figure 4: Toll Revenues (indexed) on the Trading Routes to the Dutch Republic, 1763-1789 (1763=100)

Sources: AGR, CF, 7361-7368 and 7392; Johan Decavele, René De Herdt and Noël Decorte, *Gent op de wateren en naar de zee* (Antwerp, 1976), 335; and SAA, R, 196-213, 216-217, 219, 221 and 223-226.

⁷⁸Does the merchant need to pay for the volume or value of goods, the vehicle used or a mixture? Do tariffs change over time? How is the toll collected: direct collection or farming out? Who is exempt and who is not? What about fraud? These are just a few questions that have to be answered before analysing toll revenues.

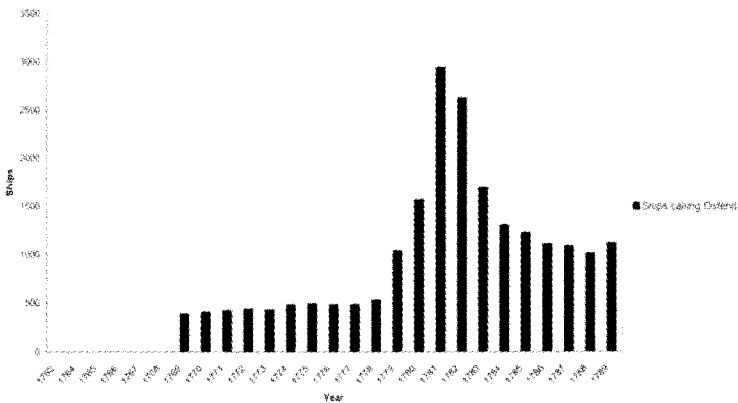


Figure 5: Ships Calling at Ostend, 1769-1789

Sources: Daniël Farasyn, 1769-1794. *De 18de eeuwse bloeiperiode van Oostende* (Ostend, 1998), 65, 100, 121 and 169.

The evolution of traffic on the Southern Netherlands' main thoroughfares shows how Ostend managed to enlarge its hinterland all the way to the German border at the expense of the Dutch seaports. This new spatial relation considerably enhanced Ostend's maritime opportunities. From the 1760s the number of ships calling at Ostend grew rapidly, from 386 in 1769 to nearly 3000 in 1781.⁷⁹ The statistical correlations between the number of ships calling at Ostend and the toll revenues at the Slijkens locks (0.89) and the passage through Ghent (0.93) prove that maritime transport was continued inland.⁸⁰ Figure 5 strikingly demonstrates the extremely rapid increase in shipping between 1778 and 1781. This booming maritime activity was a result of the War of American Independence (1775-1782) and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784). While England, Spain, France and the Dutch Republic battled each other on Western Europe's seas, merchants flocked to Ostend. Austria's neutral stance, Ostend's free port status and its good overland connections to Central Europe provided these merchants with everything they needed. Attracted by these growing mercantile activities, Ostend's population nearly dou-

⁷⁹Farasyn, 1769-1794, 65, 100, 121 and 169.

⁸⁰AGR, CC, 30381-30399, Trente-trois comptes, rendus par Corneille Carpentier, trésorier général de la province de Flandre, de l'administration qu'il a eue des revenus provinciaux dits *moyen courants*, 1 May 1769 until 31 October 1787; and Farasyn, 1769-1794, 65, 100, 121 and 169.

bled to reach 10,000 inhabitants in 1793. To satisfy the exploding housing market, a new district was built outside the city's walls, which were partly demolished.⁸¹

Ostend's merchant fleet also expanded rapidly during these years, as numerous shipowners decided to fly the neutral Austrian colours. Nevertheless, de Grysperre's Committee for Maritime Trade was a bit reluctant to deliver the necessary documents. This was because Vienna feared that its expanding merchant fleet would trade with the American rebels and anger the British, despite the fact that it had joined Catherine II of Russia's (1762-1796) League of Armed Neutrality in 1780.⁸² Without a navy Vienna could not risk a war at sea that might jeopardise its new maritime expansion, since this expansion was in fact mercantile. Although the necessary infrastructure, such as shipyards and lumber mills (supplied with Russian timber), to build a fighting navy existed in Ostend, Vienna did not aspire to become a naval power, at least not then. As a landlocked empire with continental enemies (Prussia, Saxony, the Ottoman Empire and possibly Russia), Austria preferred to protect its long land borders and not its small maritime facade along the North Sea. Ostend truly remained a remote border city in the Habsburg Empire.⁸³

When warfare finally ended on the North Sea in 1784, Ostend's boom years ended. The number of ships calling dropped from 2626 in 1782 to 1223 in 1785.⁸⁴ Some authors have described Ostend's maritime expansion as of little importance.⁸⁵ But even if maritime trade did decline sharply in 1783, this is not entirely true. First of all, Ostend's maritime development could not have

⁸¹Debaere, *Stedenatlas*, 102; Devos, "Comité voor de Zeehandel," 799; Farasyn, *1769-1794*, 99-101, 131-132, 134, 137-139 and 187; and Van Slambrouck, "Thomas de Grysperre," 73-74.

⁸²Devos, "Comité voor de Zeehandel," 799-801; Farasyn, *1769-1794*, 100; and Van Slambrouck, "Thomas de Grysperre," 74-81.

⁸³Ferdinand Gevaert, "Het zaagmolenpark te Bredene (1752-1824)," in Roger Deplancke, et al. (eds.), *Bredeniana. Jubileumboek 900 jaar Bredene* (Bredene, 1988), 140 and 153; Helma Houtman-Desmedt, *Charles Proli, Antwerps zakenman en bankier, 1723-1786: een biografische en bedrijfshistorische studie* (Brussels, 1983), 106-111; and Michael Hochedlinger, *Krise und Wiederherstellung. Österreichische Grossmachtpolitik zwischen Türkenkrieg und "Zweiter Diplomatischer Revolution" 1787-1791* (Berlin, 2000), 24, 26 and 32-33.

⁸⁴Farasyn, *1769-1794*, 100 and 169.

⁸⁵Blondé and Deceulaer, "Port of Antwerp," 35-36; Devos, "Comité voor de Zeehandel," 801; and Hubert Van Houtte, *Histoire économique de la Belgique à la fin de l'ancien régime* (Ghent, 1920), 351-352.

taken place if its port had been devoid of infrastructure, useful fiscal advantages and good links with an extensive hinterland.⁸⁶ Second, Ostend's trade did not collapse with the return of peace. After 1784, maritime traffic (and traffic on the east-west axis to and from Ostend) was maintained at a level two to three times higher than before the war.⁸⁷ Finally, Ostend emerged as the Southern Netherlands' major harbour after 1780, a position it retained until the 1820s.⁸⁸ With the French annexation of the Southern Netherlands in 1795, and in 1815 by the Dutch, Ostend would be geared into new geopolitical relations, dictated successively by Paris and The Hague. But this is another story.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Consolidation is a process where the ruler wants to increase the state's power and wealth without losing control over decisions. In other words, central authorities seek to centralise or dominate all aspects of society. This process has usually been seen as the evolution of the state's administrative, political and legal bureaucracy. In the Southern Netherlands the role of the plenipotentiary minister, the Council of Finance and the lesser boards, like the Committee for Maritime Trade, are examples. Centralisation also affected other aspects of society, like religion, art, education and architecture. In this article I focussed on the way central institutions in Brussels and the Habsburg authorities, first in Madrid and later in Vienna, tried to cope with the spatial relations between the Southern Netherlands and Ostend, the country's last North Sea port.

This spatial relationship had two aspects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first was decided by the vagaries of the Southern Netherlands' geography: that its main navigable rivers (Scheldt and Meuse) flow from the south to the north towards the North Sea. The second was more politically determined and consisted of the fact that the mouths of the main rivers lay in the Dutch Republic which controlled geographically and politically all traffic to and from the Southern Netherlands towards the sea, and equally all river traffic from one river system – or urban network – to another. Hence, we can describe the spatial relations between Brussels and Ostend as a geopolitical

⁸⁶Baetens, "Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur," 49; and 54-55; Devos, "Oostenrijkse douanestatistiek," 336-342; Génicot, "Études sur la construction," XII, map 6; and Serruys, "Vectoral Analysis."

⁸⁷See figures 3 and 5.

⁸⁸Jan Parmentier, "Fishery and Merchant Shipping under the French and Dutch Flag in the Southern Netherlands" (Unpublished paper presented to the Seventh North Sea History Conference, Bremerhaven, September 2005).

⁸⁹Serruys, "La géopolitique maritime," 166-171.

problem. With the Dutch in control of the trade arteries, the Southern Netherlands' heartland drifted apart from its North Sea coast. This resulted in the loosening of the central authorities' institutional, economical and military grip on the coastal area, and more specifically over maritime affairs.

In the seventeenth century the process of state consolidation came to a standstill as a result not only of the disastrous wars against the Dutch and French but also because of poor decisions made by the ailing Spanish Habsburgs. The weak central authorities were powerless to tighten the spatial relations with Ostend and the coastal region because other regional powers managed to override projected reforms which they deemed harmful to their own interests. In such a predicament, Spanish naval might, first concentrated in Dunkirk and later in Ostend, was limited to independent, if daring, privateers. Until the mid-eighteenth century, Ostend remained isolated from the heartland, and its maritime importance was strictly limited to its immediate surroundings.

After having secured its dynastic interests at the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, Austria energetically restarted the process of state consolidation in the Southern Netherlands by appointing enlightened confidants to its bureaucracy. It was these people who filled the institutional gap by eliminating the autonomy of obstructionist local interests. The elimination of this particularistic resistance enabled the central government to launch an extensive road and canal building policy in order to create an east-west axis linking the Southern Netherlands' urban networks to Ostend. Other fiscal and infrastructure measures, like attractive customs duties and new docks, enhanced the new east-west trade via Ostend. At the same time, the century-old north-south trade flows towards the Dutch Republic were discouraged by Brussels. This geopolitical remodelling of the Austrian Netherlands reduced the political distance between the central government, the country's different urban networks and the sea, creating new political and economic opportunities for Ostend. By the end of the eighteenth century traffic to and from Ostend, by land and sea, greatly increased, turning Ostend into the Austrian Netherlands' largest and most active maritime hub. It was the on-going struggle to overcome its lack of connections to the rest of the Southern Netherlands that marked the process of state consolidation in that port city's geopolitical relation to the central government in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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