

“CECI N'EST PAS UN HISTORIEN”.

CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF HENRI PIRENNE

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The first ambition of this article is to find out which type of professional approach and which form of socializing Henri Pirenne was supposed to have constructed in order to become one of the greatest scientists of his generation and a successful societyman. My second question is: did he himself, or did his contemporaries, construct that icon?

**First thesis: the construction of Pirenne as a prominent historian
and as the “founding father” of the Ghent historical school
is a perfect example of a successful mythologization**

The American historian Gray Boyce (1940, 449-64), from Berkeley, a student of Pirenne in the 1920's, conferred the paternity of the Ghent school international brilliance in his study on “The Legacy of Henri Pirenne” from 1941. In fact he corroborated a format and an image that had been constructed by Pirenne's students and colleagues in the “*laudationes*” on occasion of each of the honorary meetings, from 1926 on¹. A strong symptom of the aim of defining Pirenne as their iconic father is the collective oath by all his alumni at Pirenne's funeral in 1935 to prepare a “*liber alumnorum*” and two solid volumes of “*hommages*” and memories², but, even more importantly, to reject firmly the edition of a similar “*liber*” for themselves in the future, a decision that most of these alumni indeed respected. Hans Van Werveke, however, remembered in 1966 that Pirenne's paternity of the Ghent school was not the original concept. In the years 1880 it was a common opinion that Paul Fredericq had the ambition to become the *numero uno* in

¹ *Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Henri Pirenne* (1926).

² Indeed published as: *Etudes d'histoire dédiées à la mémoire de Henri Pirenne* (1937); and as: *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938).

Ghent³. Fredericq was indeed in a position to claim the status of creator of the Ghent historical school, since he introduced, some years before Pirenne, the new methodologies and the format of the historical seminar, first in Liège, then in Ghent, when he came over in 1883. It was probably Fredericq, and not Pirenne, who was first invited by Karl Lamprecht in 1896 to produce a “History of Belgium” for his German collection of national histories. Fredericq claims, in his Diary, that he suggested Lamprecht to ask Pirenne for this honorable task, and so it happened (Van Werveke, 1979, 49 and 54; Tollebeek, 2008, 335-6; ⁴. In this case, like in many others, Fredericq dropped his priority to his younger colleague. He certainly realized that he lacked the synthetic *Schwung* for which Pirenne had the right to be proud. Jo Tollebeek (2008, 152-8) revealed the backgrounds of this professional and psychological resignation in his magnificent recent “anthropological” analysis of Paul Fredericq. Fredericq was innovative as a pedagogue and a teacher, but missed creativity and inventivity as a writer. Like Pirenne he was a networker, but on a geographically limited and thematically one-sided scale.

Pirenne had everything to develop into a mythological icon. Around 1900 academia visibly allowed a university professor to demonstrate, without risk, a flamboyant social behavior, and to enjoy colorful and uninhibited discussions with friends and colleagues in joyful Ghent brasseries and coffeehouses (Lyon, 1974, 289-90 and 411). Pirenne made great impression at All Souls in Oxford while, after savoring several glasses of a strong British beer, still being capable to present a perfectly lucid and brilliant discourse (Lyon, 1974, 413-4). Pirenne definitely displayed, apart from a significant IQ, an equally well developed emotional intelligence. He had a talent to make more friends than enemies. One other positive quality was his capability to assume critical remarks from his students and colleagues. Van Werveke, in his “Memories” reminds Pirenne’s remarkable variant on Claude Bernard’s boutade “*Démolissez-moi*”: “*Si dans 25 ans mon ‘Histoire de Belgique’ est encore debout, c’est que mes élèves auront mal travaillé*” (Van Werveke, 2000, 113).

I presume two backgrounds for professional and social successes. First, Pirenne’s permeability for a large variety of “*choses de la vie*”, for many cultures and languages. Pirenne was not a professional idiot. In his *Apologie pour l’histoire* Marc Bloch (1941) reminds the anecdote that, after the international historical congress of 1928 in Oslo, he made a trip to

³ Van Werveke’s memoirs were written in 1966, but published in 2000 (Van Werveke, 2000, 104-105).

⁴ It is in fact not totally clear if the invitation first went to Paul Fredericq or to Pirenne (Tollebeek, 1996, 408).

Stockholm with Pirenne. Walking in the streets of Stockholm, he asked Pirenne “*Qu’allons-nous voir d’abord?*”. The answer was: “*Il paraît qu’il y a un Hôtel de Ville tout neuf. Commençons par lui*”. Bloch showing some astonishment, Pirenne added that he was not an antiquair, but an historian : “*c’est pourquoi j’aime la vie*”⁵. The second factor is the homemade tolerance within Pirenne’s familial biotope. He was the son of a businessman, a cloth manufacturer from Verviers, who was also a freemason of Protestant descent, and active on the local scale in the liberal party (Lyon, 1974, 5-25). His mother came from a pious, conservative-catholic background. In a sociological perspective, this double track brought Pirenne into an intriguing pluralistic niche. It gave him at the University of Liège the ability to show empathy for the classes of the very catholic Godefroid Kurth, with a German-speaking background, as well as for those of the liberal, moderate Flamingant, Paul Fredericq. It is by the support of the catholic Kurth that the “liberal” young graduate Pirenne could be appointed at the University of Liège in 1885, and at the University of Ghent in 1886. The longstanding friendship with Fredericq in Ghent and in the German camps, during World War I, may explain Pirenne’s tolerance on the Flemish emancipation movement. In the 1920’s Pirenne switched, influenced by his less tolerant son, to a lesser understanding, particularly on the plans of the Dutchifying of the Ghent alma mater, but in those days Fredericq was no longer alive⁶.

We should not underestimate the knowledge of languages as a key for a successful career. In the case of Pirenne it lead to interest for foreign cultures, and to readiness to leave Liège for postgraduates as well in France as in Germany. The knowledge of German allowed him to develop a direct dialogue with prominent German scholars, such as economic historians Alfons Dopsch and Gustav Schmoller, and very intensively with Karl Lamprecht, a friend for many years. It gave him a chance to read Max Weber in original, and to become, at least before 1914, one of the most prominent bridge-persons between the German and the French historical erudition⁷. Pirenne’s sufficient knowledge of Dutch gave him access to the sources of medieval

⁵ See Bloch (1959, 13) (the quote is used to illustrate the chapter : “*Comprendre le passé par le présent*”). Bloch must have been strongly impressed by the Stockholm trip, for which he thanks Pirenne in a letter of August 30, 1928 (Lyon & Lyon, 1991, 105-106).

⁶ See Van Werveke (2000, 109); similar opinion on Pirenne, as not being a typical “*fransquillion*”, in Verhulst (1975, 1252-1253).

⁷ Particularly during the last part of his stay in German imprisonment, in Creuzburg, the German officials allowed him to borrow books from the University Library of Jena, more specifically works by Max Weber (Die Protestantische Ethik, from 1904-1905) and by Werner Sombart (Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben, from 1911). In

Flanders, but was no less helpful, after his move from Liège to Ghent, for socializing outside the small world of the university and the “*charme discret*” of the French-speaking Ghent bourgeoisie (Prevenier, 1987, 25-6). Van Werveke has some memories of his master, buying in the Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat where he lived, his cigarettes in a shop in “Flemish” (Van Werveke, 2000, 108). The good, be it less well developed, knowledge of English permitted his great success for talks in Oxford, Princeton and Harvard, and lively discussions with British and American colleagues. He even studied Russian with the help of some Russian fellow prisoners in the German camps of World War I (Lyon, 1974, 247).

The reputation of Pirenne got already mythical proportions at a relatively early age, as the result of a legendary talent as a fascinating pedagogue and causeur. In a revealing caricature Jacques Ochs, eyewitness, represented Pirenne as a vivid and engaging teacher⁸. Pirenne had a type of personality constantly that needed an audience to which he could sell his ideas. Even during his imprisonment in Germany, in 1915, he could not refrain to give his fellow prisoners an introduction class on the past of Europe (Tollebeek, 2003, 12). The myth has been strongly encouraged by his talent as a tireless “network-tiger”, as Jo Tollebeek (2008a, 154-8; 2008b, 336-7) qualified him. Networking should not be identified as politically incorrect, as long as its methods remain respectful. It was and it is an extremely efficient technique, not only for the networker himself, but no less for his professional environment. Most of Pirenne’s alumni realized an impressive cosmopolitan curriculum just because of the master’s international contacts and recommendations. I never heard my Ghent teachers Ganshof, Van Werveke and Verlinden ever complaint on the powerful backing they got from their supervisor. In 2009 any reference to the connection with Pirenne is still a marvelous introduction card for Ghent alumni outside Flanders.

Irony on the phenomenon “Pirenne as a scientific hero” came from Wim Blockmans (1975, 27-38) and Marc Boone (2006, 3-19). But the sharpest statement came from Pirenne’s most irrepectuous grandson Jan Dhondt (1966, 81-129), in a merciless analysis of 1966, in which he ironized on the many doctorates honoris causa, memberships of academies, knighthoods, Francqui and other prizes, so generously awarded to Pirenne. I could not very well

his *Réflexions* he rejects most of the thesis of Weber on the origins of the capitalistic spirit (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 168-170 and 213).

⁸ On the cover of the review *Pourquoi Pas?*, October 9, 1925 (Univ. Library, Ghent, P 2180).

frame this criticism in 1966. Jan Dhondt was without doubt the most brilliant of my teachers, and the only one who introduced us in the methodology of the *Annales*, and other “prohibited literature” in Ghent in those days. And let Pirenne have been the Ghent historian who was the closest of all to the *Annales* school. The best proof is that Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre tried, in 1921, without result however, to convince him to accept the directorship of their new planned journal (Lyon & Lyon, 1991, 2-19). I also remember that Dhondt’s cruel analysis has been perceived, when it came out, by Pirenne’s alumni and my teachers, as a brutal “father-murder”. As is often the case, this sharp critical statement tells more on the personality of the critic than on the object of the analysis. The non-conformist Dhondt was perfectly allergic for all forms of establishment, for academies and awards, as well in civil society as in his academic *Umwelt*. I have a strong feeling that Dhondt’s arrows were rather directed to those who composed the mythological Pirenne, than on the man himself. When I reread his discourse after 40 years, it is no longer the irony and the sarcasm that is striking, but rather the great admiration for the signs of genius in Pirenne, an empathy that never should have been amazing to me.

Pirenne did not conquer his high status stupidly as a free gift. All the “*éloges*” on him would never have happened without a long prehistory of unsuspected respect and recognition of his talents. An early sign of positive perception was the invitation, in 1896, by Lamprecht for the “*Geschichte Belgiens*”. The most significant one the proposal in 1921 of the directorship of the *Annales*. But Pirenne’s image of a serious professional also came from intrinsic elements: his credibility as a “*pur sang*” historian of challenging synthetical constructions was based on a second credibility as a solid technician, mastering the whole toolbox with the same level of conviction as the most traditional German positivist. Raoul Van Caenegem (1994, 166) called him “*an erudite savant: even after launching himself into very broad themes and interpretations, he never stopped publishing detailed critical studies*”. Pirenne moved with great easiness as a fish in many waters, as well those of the critical study of sources, as the general lines of world history. Thanks to the aureole of his education at the two mecca’s of the auxiliary sciences, the Ecole des Chartes in Paris, the seminars of paleography and diplomatics in Leipzig, the reviewers of the time had nothing than sincere admiration for his critical edition of Galbert of Bruges (Pirenne, 1981) and the collection of facsimiles of his *Album belge de diplomatique*, so useful for the teaching of the practical seminars on medieval sources (Pirenne, 1909). At the fundamental reform of historical studies in Belgium in 1890 he was, without any competition, considered by

his peers as the unchallenged gangmaker and ghostwriter of the texts of the Minister of Education introducing the doctorate with thesis, and the new Seminar system that definitely replaced the Romantic by the modern scientific approach (Gérin, 1987, 64-103). He was in the same 1890's the ultimate innovator for new spheres of interest in history, by publishing the first studies on demography, social revolts, working class conditions, and international business in Belgium.

The second face of the mythologisation process, as the father of the "Ghent school", is much more problematic. No doubt that it is, in many ways, a construction by his direct alumni (Van Werveke, 2000, 104-13). The idea and the existence of a school is partly real, partly fake. Each of Pirenne's former students wandered his own very personal way, on the level of themes and of methodology. It was even not a real Ghent school. Pirenne's alumni were teaching in Ghent, but also in Brussels, Liège, Antwerp, Genève, South-Africa and at 5 to 6 American campuses. The expression of Boyce, "Pirenne legacy in Ghent", is indeed more appropriate than the "father of a school" qualification. "Legacy" is the perfect term for the 125-year long continuity of an impressive cluster of teachers and researchers in the medieval department at the Ghent university. One additional legitimization of the thesis is that they continuously respected the essence of Pirenne's approach of the historian's craft, the cultivation of erudition on the one side, of creative synthesis on the other. A decisive step in the consecration of the mythological Pirenne is the enthusiastic study from 1974 by Bryce Lyon, a student of Carl Stephenson, one of Pirenne's American alumni in 1924-1925 (Bachrach & Nicholas, 1990, IX-XIV). It was an extremely sympathizing biography, full of empathy and exhaustive heuristic. When we read the book today, 35 years later, many pages sound now excessively dithyrambic: "*a remarkable man ... the spirit of Pirenne ... brilliant, charming, indomitable, sturdy, adventurous, curious and yet simple, natural, unassuming and disarming, Pirenne was born to conquer. Whoever knew him ... rejoiced in his achievements and triumphs. ... No wonder that he was loved. No wonder that he was the subject of tales that have since become legend*" (Lyon, 1974, 414). For Wim Blockmans and most others of his generation this biography was too heavily coloured from the viewpoint of the constructed hero. It is certainly true that Lyon has been in some ways under the spell of over-enthusiastic members of the family and of the direct *discipuli* of Pirenne. But we should not underestimate the still unbroken usefulness of Lyons masterpiece, as a monument of erudition, as an incredibly rich source of information on the slightest action, discourse and opinion of the

historian, and as an excellent mirror of the perception of Pirenne by the generation of Ganshof and Van Werveke.

The second thesis: Pirenne as the icon “par excellence” of the nation-state Belgiumis only partly correct

The enforced imprisonment of Pirenne in Germany during World War I, has been leading to understandable, but rather virulent and fanatic anti-German discourses in his inaugural speeches as a rector of the Ghent University in 1919-1921. These statements displayed even some dark edges, such as the many years boycott of the German historians on the meetings of the International Congress of Historical Sciences (Lyon, 1974, 292-8). Raoul Van Caenegem (1994, 176-7) suggested that this prejudice might explain why Pirenne, in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, left the role of the German component largely undiscussed, or even worse, considered it as pure barbarism. It could be that Pirenne exaggerated the role of the Islam to be able to minimize the German factor. Pirenne’s view remains a curious statement for an historian being so strong under tribute of German historical science, and representing his country, before the war, as a binding force between the German and the Latin cultures (Schöttler, 1998, 875-84; Sproemberg, 1971, 375-446; Toubert, 2001, 317-20). This deficit of scientific objectivity, explicitly mentioned by Van Caenegem and Blockmans, can be ascribed without a doubt to his personal emotions and disillusionings by the imperialistic collaboration of his former German friends⁹.

But is also true that Pirenne could never become the symbol of “*la Belgique martyre*” if there had not been the *Histoire de Belgique*. On this second construction of Pirenne as a Belgian icon and as an advocate abroad of the Belgian establishment, Jan Dhondt produced some marvelous cynical phrases. As early as 1912 Paul Fredericq (1912, 11), during a homage, declared that they came together “*pour fêter notre historien national*”. Yet, the *Histoire* has been, before the war, essentially a scientific success story. By the war it suddenly got the color and the tone of a political statement. Pirenne appeared on the public stage with lectures on *La Belgique*

⁹ On the origins and the ending of his longstanding friendship with Karl Lamprecht, see Van Werveke (1972, 39-60).

*est-elle un pays artificiel?*¹⁰. He published a contribution to a special issue of the Times (London), in 1920, on this theme, and mentioned “*l’étonnante vitalité dont ce pays a donné des preuves éclatantes à toutes les époques*”¹¹. For the media he was no longer an historian, but rather a public figure, a “Famous Belgian”, the “brightest man”, who knew where Belgium came from and would be going, at least should be going. The Belgian Establishment broadly involved Pirenne on the international scene, more specifically in the United States in 1922. He gave lectures at almost all first-class American universities, and was also officially received by then secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the former architect of the “Commission for Relief in Belgium”, and by the American president Warren G. Harding¹². The trip had a significant intellectual spin-off: several young American historians came to Pirenne in Ghent for a postgraduate (Boyce, 1940, 449-64).

The Belgicists were not the only ones to make use of Pirenne’s theses. Pirenne was usable for many political and ideological strategies, of liberals, of socialists, even for New Order figures. For the Flemish socialists Pirenne happened to be an ally in the battle against Flemish-nationalist body of thought. Socialist leader Edward Anseele quoted him during his July 11–speech in Kortrijk in 1302, while arguing that 1302 was very close to the phenomenon of class struggle, and that the “racist” reading by the Flemish militants was a complete mistake (Elias, 1971, 268 and 279). In 1910 the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* again used Pirenne’s *Histoire* to elucidate that in 1302 “national feelings” were absolutely out of the question, and that the clericals used this myth for no other reason than to distract the attention of people away from the real social problems (Elias, 1971, 273). Such a reading of the *Histoire* was only possible because Pirenne used a rather social-economic than a political discourse on the events of 1302. In a letter of October 1934, the Belgian New Order supporter Léon Degrelle applied for authorization to reprint the *Histoire* in the collections of his political movement Rex, but without expressing what he had in mind as a goal or motivation (Despy-Meyer, 1988, 87). Pirenne, who refused of course, probably had in mind what he wrote to Heinrich Sproemberg three years before: “*le parti qu’on en a tiré en politique s’est développé tout à fait en dehors de moi. Je n’ai voulu que faire oeuvre d’historien*” (Lyon & Lyon, 1976, 20-21, note 12).

¹⁰ *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938, 81-84).

¹¹ PIRENNE (H.), “L’avenir de la Belgique”, The Times. Numéro spécial consacré à la Belgique, Bruxelles, 1920, 98.

¹² Lyon (1974, 298-302); Pirenne (1923, 151-176).

Icon or not, one cannot pretend that Pirenne started his *Histoire de Belgique* premeditatedly. It was not his own initiative, but an invitation by his then friend and kindred spirit Karl Lamprecht for a German series of national European histories. The *Geschichte Belgiens* was published in 1899 (Pirenne, 1899-1913), and was followed in 1900 by a French edition (Pirenne, 1900-1932). Can we call the *Histoire* a construction or not? In an unguarded moment and blunt mood Pirenne himself called his work “*un essai de construction historique*” (Pirenne, 1900-1932, XIV). Indeed, from the start a “political” thesis was interwoven in his discourse. “*Il existe donc, en dépit des apparences, une histoire de Belgique*” says the *préface* of volume 1 (Pirenne, 1900-1932, XIII). In volume 2 Pirenne (1900-1932, 170) claims: “*il a été donné aux ducs de Bourgogne d’achever l’oeuvre d’unification commencée bien avant eux*”. A second ideological component is that of Belgium as a “*microcosme de l’Europe occidentale*”, or as “*une sorte de syncrétisme, où l’on retrouve les génies de deux races*” (Pirenne, 1900-1932, vol. 1, IX). The formula is no construction by Pirenne himself. He borrowed it from a sentence in Karl Lamprechts’ *Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte* in 1895 (Tollebeek, 1996, 407-8). Inspiration also came from one of his teachers at the University of Liège, Auguste Stecher, in a publication of 1859 (Stecher, 1859), and one from Alfons Prayon Van Zuylen, in 1896¹³, both considering Belgium as an osmosis of German and Romance cultures. Pirenne, as a social-economic historian, was more tempted to find the “longue durée” in the social and economic, than in the cultural, intellectual and political factors. But in most of his discourses, already in 1899, on *la nation belge*, he used a variety of factors as elements of “*a nécessité historique*” and “*un aboutissement inévitable*”¹⁴. And there is no doubt that in the emotional aftermath of World War I Pirenne did not take much trouble to disclaim that the *Histoire de Belgique* was in essence a political story.

I am inclined to descry a second paradox: Pirenne had not primarily a nationalistic, but a cosmopolitan perspective in mind¹⁵. Marc Boone (2008, 294-5) observed that he opposed the idea of “*l’âme belge*” of Edmond Picard (1897). But the commission by Lamprecht, going back to 1896, forced Pirenne inevitably to make choices, the choice of a political and geographical frame,

¹³ (Prayon van Zuylen, 1896)

¹⁴ “*les différentes provinces ... tendaient inconsciemment à l’unité. La maison de Bourgogne n’a fait que recueillir les résultats du travail commencé bien avant elle. ... Si elle a réuni nos divers territoires en un Etat commun, c’est parce que ceux-ci possédaient d’ancienne date une civilisation commune. Ils formaient ... une seule région de culture intellectuelle, comme de solidarité économique*” (Pirenne, 1899)

¹⁵ Pirenne used quite often the notion of cosmopolitanism, like in the *Times* article of 1920 (Pirenne (H.), “L’avenir de la Belgique”, p. 103). Pirenne’s cosmopolitan view is explicitly noticed by De Schaepdrijver (2004, 39).

the choice of a thematic line of approach, the choice of methodological accents. As an Enlightenment cosmopolite he preferred to have nothing more to do with the Romantic and nationalistic approach of Jules Michelet and George Macaulay. Jo Tollebeek insisted how he privileged the cultural-historical and economic outlook of Lamprecht: “*what Pirenne wanted to reconstruct before all is the ‘social life’ that the various principalities already shared with each other in the middle ages*” (Tollebeek, 2003, 9). In fact, the most vigorous criticism of the *Histoire de Belgique* referred to the Belgian political and geographical frame. Pieter Geyl firmly cut down this perspective in the first volume of his *Nederlandsche Stam* of 1930 (Geyl, 1930). No less violent was the revealing reply of Pirenne’s alumnus Hans Van Werveke to this book in 1931 (Van Werveke, 1931, 5-13). It shows that both Ghent historians were most of all shocked in their liberal Enlightenment ideology, because they considered Geyl’s thesis on “language as a nation making factor” to be a perfume of racist theory, linked in those days to the fascist movements in the Europe of Hitler and Mussolini. Geyl’s theory indeed totally collapsed with World War II.

The third thesis: Pirenne was simply successful because the historical community perceived him as a brilliant, provocative and useful historian, more than as a classical erudite

Pirenne was more successful than Paul Fredericq, because his colleague was more of a classical erudite. Pirenne was a rather complex and sophisticated personality. He had disposal of some efficient secret weapons, which we know quite well, as he often allowed us to look behind the scenes of his craft. The most revealing case to observe Pirenne’s technique is *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, one long fight with the angels. It all started with a flashing intuition in a Ghent classroom. In October 1889 two law students, G. Würth and Victor Maistriau (later mayor of Mons in Hainaut), wrote down, independently, in their respective handwritten notes the following words from their teacher. I quote Würth : “*L’empire avait des ports, Marseille et Bordeaux, qui maintenaient une situation économique. Le premier a disparu par suite de la prise de la*

*Méditerranée par les Arabes. Alors disparut tout commerce au 7ème siècle*¹⁶. Maistriau wrote: “*La Méditerranée, lac musulman*” (Dhondt, 1966, 97, note 23). There is a real chance that the words of Pirenne have been literally rendered. They bear indeed the typical Pirennean elliptic style, provoked by the needs of a classroom. After 1889, and for a pretty long time, we learn not so much any more in Pirenne’s publications on the transition from antiquity to the middle ages. Not before his forced exile to Germany in 1916-1918, isolated, far away from his books and notes, Pirenne got unwittingly time for reflection and hypotheses. Fellow Russian prisoners challenged him to consider the impact of Eastern Europe, the Byzantine Empire and Islam on Western European history (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 145; Van Caeneghem, 1994, 174). After the war Pirenne came at the third phase of the conception: the confrontation with the scientific forum. In 1922 he published an article with the title *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Pirenne, 1922, 77-86; 1923, 223-35). The reactions, as could be expected, were extremely divergent. Marc Bloch insisted in each of his letters to Pirenne for the completion of the book. Economic historian Alfons Dopsch ventilated sharp grievances on the International Congress at Oslo in 1928 (Lyon, 1974, 328). The conclusion of Pirenne’s “opus magnum” had to give in for other urgent duties. Only several years after his retirement at the Ghent university in 1930, Pirenne was able, on May 4, 1935, to write down the last sentences of his masterpiece (Dhondt, 1966, 108). *Mahomet et Charlemagne* has been published, posthumously, in 1937 (Pirenne, 1937; Translated in English as Pirenne, 1939).

The real secret weapon of Pirenne was his talent for audacious synthesis and for oneliners, such as *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. This behavior made him more vulnerable than needed (Tollebeek, 1996, 429). As a result he has not been spared of criticism on that point. From 1922 on he provoked reactions of countless colleagues. As regards content these polemics dealt with economic aspects (Robert Lopez¹⁷), with monetary realia (Philippe Grierson¹⁸), with early urban development (Adriaan Verhulst¹⁹), and with the precise role of Islam (Kenneth Frank²⁰). But most of all archeologists brought new materials²¹. The mere fact that all of their collective volumes bear the title *Mahomet et Charlemagne* shows that Pirenne’s provocation was effective.

¹⁶ Notes by G. Würth in a manuscript, called: *Cours d’histoire politique de moyen-âge, donné par Mr. Pirenne, Gand, le 16 octobre 1889*, vol. 2, p. 9, and vol. 3, p. 20 (Archives University of Ghent, 7G 1470).

¹⁷ (Lopez, 1943, 14-38).

¹⁸ Grierson (1959, 123-140); another critique on the monetary aspects: Morisson (1963, 402-432).

¹⁹ (Verhulst, 1989, 1-35).

²⁰ (Frank, 1993, 371-383).

²¹ Havighurst (1962), Hodges & Whitehouse (1983).

Hardly one sentence of *Mahomet et Charlemagne* remained upright after the erudite criticisms. “*Et alors?*”.

The weapon was effective. There is not yet an expiration date on his most contested book. The thesis still has the best chances of survival, as a thesis. The simple observation that a military event, the conquest of North-Africa by the Arabs, provoked a new urban economic dynamics in agrarian Europe was a refreshing discovery, after Edward Gibbon’s thesis on decline (Lyon, 1971), and Arnold Toynbee’s civilisation determinism (Toynbee, 1934-61, Somervell, 1960). Islamist Kenneth Frank gave, in 1993, a perfect explanation for the vitality of Pirenne’s book. On the one side he pointed out that Pirenne did not use several Arabic sources, on the other side he refined Pirenne: “*the evidence against the Pirenne thesis implies that there was no single ‘ancient world’ to be conquered by the Muslims*”. But most of all he explained why he is so grateful to Pirenne: “*What I appreciate about Pirenne is to remind us that the history of the West must be seen in global perspective, alongside the history of the Arabs and the Byzantines*” (Frank, 1993, 379). In other words: “without Mohammed no Charlemagne”, but also “without Pirenne no Kenneth Frank”. Or as Marc Bloch summarized in 1935: “*Tout grand livre, en même temps qu’une leçon, est un point de départ*”²².

The fourth thesis: Pirenne was succesful because he voiced ideas many contemporaries were waiting for

John Mundy argued in 1977 that Pirenne’s analysis of the medieval past was totally colored by his personal liberal bourgeois premises on economic growth as the ultimate goal, and as a guarantee for parliamentary democracy and personal freedom (Mundy, 1977, 476). This body of ideas was brought to the surface in its most radical form in *Les périodes de l’histoire sociale du capitalisme* from 1914 (Pirenne, 1914, 258-99)²³. This contribution is an explicit ode to the optimism of permanent progress and to the makeability of society by the creative individual. It must have been music in the ears of his affluent fellow citizens. The thesis explains that late-medieval capitalism shows no linear evolution, but a cyclical curve. After each phase of

²² Bloch (1935, 79-80) (in fact a review on Pirenne’s *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, Paris, 1933).

²³ Translated as : “The stages in the social history of capitalism”, *The American Historical Review*, XIX, n°3, Avril 1914, pp. 494-515.

economic growth and increasing freedom followed a period of stagnation and strict regulation. This second generation of conservative businessmen is immediately challenged by “*homines novi*”, placing new cards with progressive ideas on the table. Briefly, the merchant-entrepreneurs of a first generation are invariably followed up by heirs with less talent, who on their part abandon the field for another new, more dynamic, generation. Until 1914 Pirenne, as a child of the Enlightenment and of 19th century liberalism, believed unconditionally in this story. It even drove Pirenne to project the idea of political democracy into the middle ages in a book of 1910 (Pirenne, 1910). Raymond Van Uytven (1962, 373-409) admonished him firmly for this, and expressly preferred the term “plutocracy”. Marc Boone (2007, 187-228), more recently, published a strong revision of Pirenne’s notion of “*démocraties urbaines*”.

The inspiration on this point did certainly not come from the romantic historiography, but from historical determinism and cyclical theories. Edward Gibbon already believed in cycles. Auguste Comte developed his determinist theory between 1830 and 1842, Karl Marx and Hippolyte Taine went on in the same vein. Pirenne was made familiar with Hegel and the Marxist analyses by Lamprecht during his German postgraduate time (Lyon, 1974, 129-34). Lamprecht also convinced him to recognize the anonymous and economic factors as driving forces in history. Pirenne’s convictions are also tributary to Max Weber’s *Idealtypen*. But he considered Weber’s famous thesis on the link between early modern capitalism and Calvinistic morals from 1905 as an aberration, and he recycled it into the mechanism of the alternation of traditionalist and young dynamic capitalists (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 168-70).

Pirenne was a full-blood 19th century liberal, but one with affinity for a progressive liberalism, as emerges from his understanding of the motivations of the revolting workers around 1900 and in the 19th century. He admired the capitalist elites of 1300 for their economic guts, but he swiped “*ces orgueilleux patriciens*” for their social ignorance. This relative progressive perception of the social mechanisms could well be the inheritance of his Marxist discussions with Lamprecht. John Mundy (1977, 478), a pretty critical admirer of Pirenne, decoded with high perspicacity the double empathy of Pirenne, on the one side “*the town, and its entrepreneurs or merchants, were the principal generative agents of human advancement*”, on the other side “*Pirenne had a certain sympathy and even love for workers*”. This combination perfectly reflects Pirenne’s social-liberal world view.

I think that it is an interesting question to check if the change in course in Pirenne's work before and after World War I coincided with and may be explained by an analogous change in the political liberalism in Belgium in the same period. Pirenne did not often express on his party political views. But on the basis of the tenor of his historical analyses it is plausible to presume that, before 1914, he stood close to the progressive-radical purport of Paul Janson, the ideological cradle of the Belgian Socialist party, and not the conservative and doctrinary trend of Jules Bara (Lefevre, 1996, 35-40; Janson-Delange, 1962-1964, Vercauteren, 1969, 383-404; De Paepe, 1977-1978, 476-531). After the war the appeal of political liberalism strongly shriveled up (Van Caenegem, 1994, 164). Democracy got a heavy blow. It is surprising that we then face a relativizing and demoralized Pirenne, who is trading in his confidence in determinism for belief in the notions "accident" and "role of the individual"²⁴. Even more crucial was that he gave up his belief in the parliamentary system for a pessimism in the line of Oswald Spengler and Johan Huizinga, and for fear about the discourse of the then advancing fascism in Europe. In a letter of 1931 Pirenne thanks Hans Van Werveke for his virulent refutation of Pieter Geyl's *Nederlandsche Stam*, with a sentence that is close to the *Shadow of Tomorrow* of Johan Huizinga: "*par ce temps de confusion intellectuelle et morale, il est réconfortant de constater que l'esprit critique conserve des fidèles*"²⁵. Marc Boone and Sophie de Schaepdrijver traced back the aversion of 1931 for "*cette funeste théorie des races*" to WW I, when Pirenne's cosmopolitan conviction dramatically collapsed (Boone, 2008, 295).

"*Ceci n'est pas un historien*". This variation on the famous pre-postmodern adagium of René Magritte is certainly not appropriate for the Pirenne of before 1914, but it certainly is for the postwar Pirenne. It is still unclear if it is Pirenne who invented "*la Belgique éternelle*", or if it is "*une certaine Belgique*" that constructed "un certain Pirenne". If Pirenne were still alive today there is no doubt that he would write a column in *The New York Times* every week, or more probably in the French *Libération* or the Belgian *De Morgen*. He certainly was "*un intellectuel gourmand*", with a strong view on the past, but no less on the actual "*choses de la vie*". Pirenne was, like most, if not all, historians, the prisoner of his environment and his time. His time was

²⁴ First statement in 1918 (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 233). Pirenne (1931) developed the idea in his article *La tâche de l'historien*

²⁵ Letter of Pirenne of October 1931 to Hans Van Werveke, thanking him for his reaction to Geyl in *De Vlaamsche Gids*: "*Je viens de lire avec un véritable plaisir intellectuel votre réfutation de Geyl*" (Ghent University Library, Ms. III, 88, Archief Van Werveke, Map Pirenne); see also, Huizinga (1935) (translated: *In the shadow of tomorrow*, New York, 1936).

the optimistic 19th century as well as the depressing interbellum. That is why I agree so fully with Jan Dhondt's final statement on Pirenne : *“nos postulats de base, nous les subissons, nous ne les choisissons pas, même quand on est Pirenne. Et nul n'a le droit de nous le reprocher”* (Dhondt, 1966, 114).

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