

A REPLY TO JAN DHONDT'S CRITIQUE OF HENRI PIRENNE

by

BRYCE LYON
Brown University

In a long article published in 1966 the late Professor Jan Dhondt unleashed upon Henri Pirenne a harsh attack that so far has stood unchallenged¹. To reply to this attack is the purpose of the present paper and, if occasionally its tone seems unduly severe, it is because Dhondt repeatedly ignored accepted canons of historical scholarship and criticism².

Before discussion of the substance of Dhondt's critique it is important to note that he committed the same faults of which he accused Pirenne. After stating that Pirenne either misused or misinterpreted his documentation or was ignorant of the sources so essential for his celebrated books and articles, Dhondt blithely makes assertions for which he has no evidence and draws conclusions definitely unwarranted by the evidence he used. While Pirenne's works and those of other historians concerned with the research and ideas of Pirenne, as well as the printed collections of material on Pirenne's life and career, are all interesting and essential for a study of Pirenne, they certainly do not substantiate many of Dhondt's assertions and conclusions. Inexplicably, he failed to use the kind of documentation essential for his argument: the unprinted materials that abound in the various Belgian archives, libraries, and private collections. Although much of this material was well publicized by the expositions and catalogues of 1962 commemorating the centenary of Pirenne's birth, it is not surprising that, given the spirit of Dhondt's slashing attack, he not only failed to consult the valuable records in his own university library, in the Archives Générales du Royaume, and in the office of the Commission Royale d'Histoire at the Palais des Académies, but even chose to ignore the richest of all: those of Henri Pirenne then in the possession of the late Count Jacques Pirenne³. Dhondt's failure to use these sources condemns many of his assertions and conclusions to mere assumptions.

Ironically, Dhondt assails Pirenne for not being meticulous and accurate

(1) *Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines*, Annali della Fondazione Italiana per la Storia Amministrativa, III, 1966, pp. 81-129.

(2) My research resulting in the following studies is the basis of this reply: *Henri Pirenne: A Biographical and Intellectual Study*, Ghent, 1974; *The Origins of the Middle Ages: Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon*, New York, 1972; *L'œuvre de Henri Pirenne après vingt-cinq ans*, *Le Moyen Age*, LXVI, 1960, pp. 437-493; *The Letters of Henri Pirenne to Karl Lamprecht (1894-1915)*, *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, CXXXII, 1966, pp. 161-231; Bryce and Mary Lyon, *Maurice Prou, ami de Henri Pirenne*, *Le Moyen Age*, LXXI, 1965, pp. 71-107.

(3) *Catalogue de l'Exposition Henri Pirenne*, Brussels, 1962; G. Gérardy, *Henri Pirenne, sa vie et son œuvre*, Brussels, 1962.

in his research, yet himself is guilty of errors, incorrect citations, misprints, and misspellings⁴. Such trivialities one can perhaps overlook, but more serious and without excuse are his insinuations and his dishonest use of the works of other historians. When he writes that only friends, colleagues, and students have written articles on Pirenne, he not only errs but he insinuates that such persons could not be impartial. When studies suit his purpose, he readily repeats what they say without bothering to acknowledge the source, yet he never fails to cite those studies with which he disagrees⁵.

Bearing these points in mind, let us now examine Dhondt's article. That Pirenne was so successful in his career Dhondt ascribes somewhat to an ability to communicate ideas and to synthesize but mostly to luck and good timing: „Le facteur essentiel dans ce qu'on peut appeler le 'fait' Pirenne, est l'époque de sa naissance”⁶. Had Pirenne entered history ten years earlier, he might not have been so fortunate. When he went to the University of Liège in 1879 Belgium was just responding to the historical methodology of Germany, was introducing the *cours pratique*, was improving the quality of its professors of history, and was initiating more rigorous standards of scholarship. Professors like Godefroid Kurth, Léon Vanderkindere, and Paul Fredericq were enthusiastically instructing their students in the new Rankian scientific methodology and were recommending that they study at German and French universities so as to perfect their scholarship. Pirenne was one of the first to benefit from this improvement in instruction. His masters at Liège were Kurth and Fredericq who sent him for more study with eminent masters at Paris, Leipzig, and Berlin. All this is true. Certainly, if Pirenne had received his training earlier he would have been subjected to amateur, self-made historians with romantic notions and might never have become more than a gifted narrator of political events. Certainly, he was fortunate. But how does one explain that he rapidly achieved a reputation as a historian while his contemporaries with similar training did not? It is not enough to say that Pirenne's birth in 1862 coincided „avec l'introduction en France et en Belgique de 'l'histoire critique' importée d'Allemagne où elle triomphait depuis un demi-siècle, et avec la nouvelle révolution historique en Allemagne (Lamprecht versus Ranke, pour simplifier)”⁷. Nor is it relevant to state that Kurth easily adapted himself to German methods because he was

(4) See, for example, n. 1 on p. 81 where Dhondt makes numerous errors in citing two of my articles.

(5) Most of what Dhondt writes about Godefroid Kurth and Paul Fredericq comes from two articles by Pirenne which are not acknowledged: *Notice sur Godefroid Kurth*, *Annuaire de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, 1924, pp. 193-261; *Notice sur Paul Fredericq*, *ibid.*, 1924, pp. 311-374. For his discussion of the intellectual relations between Pirenne and Lamprecht, Dhondt relies upon my study in the *Bul. Com. Roy. d'Hist.*, CXXXII, 1966, pp. 161-231 but only refers to it when he disagrees with any of its conclusions. When he speaks of Belgian historiography in the nineteenth century, he ignores F. Vercauteren, *Cent ans d'histoire en Belgique*, Brussels, 1951, I, and M.-A. Arnould, *Le travail historique en Belgique des origines à nos jours*, Brussels, 1953.

(6) *Annali*, III, 1966, p. 82.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 83.

really German : „A vrai dire, Kurth, du point de vue du droit public, était belge, mais il était fils d'un allemand naturalisé belge et sa langue maternelle fut l'allemand. C'est dire que scientifiquement, il avait accès sans effort à la production scientifique allemande"⁸. And it is assuredly simplistic to contend that „la première explication (la première au sens de la chronologie) de l'étonnante ascension du maître de Gand" is that he was the first to be formed in the new rigorous disciplines of paleography and diplomatic and the first to have tasted the new social and economic ideas of a Lamprecht and a Schmoller and to have indirectly benefited from the work of Marx⁹. What Dhondt refuses to admit is that Pirenne had a superior mind and took full advantage of the improved instruction. Certainly more than chronology and luck explain Gibbon, Stubbs, Maitland, Fustel de Coulanges, Marc Bloch, Von Ranke, Mommsen, Burckhardt, and Huizinga. Like Pirenne, each was gifted intellectually and each, in taking advantage of the resources of his age, advanced historical writing and methodology to new dimensions.

Why, Dhondt next inquires, should Pirenne, born into a bourgeois industrialist family forsake a place in the prosperous family business for a career seemingly with no future? His answer is that Pirenne chose to become a historian and not an engineer because he was lamentably weak in mathematics and science. This is not true¹⁰. Pirenne's school records show that he obtained average marks in these subjects but that he did better in the humanities and was intrigued most by language, literature, history, and geography. There is no hint, however, that prior to his matriculation in the university history was to be his profession.

Undoubtedly Pirenne was led into history by his admiration for Kurth and his method of teaching, but there is absolutely no evidence for Dhondt's assertion that Pirenne chose history because Kurth dangled the possibility of a university position before his young student and used his considerable influence with Catholic politicians to arrange an appointment at Liège, or because Pirenne believed that Fredericq with his good Protestant and Liberal connections and influence on the other side of the Belgian political spectrum would be instrumental. Nor does any evidence support Dhondt's invidious suggestion that prior to Pirenne's departure for Paris there was a secret arrangement between Kurth and Pirenne assuring a position to Pirenne. Dhondt construes the events leading to Pirenne's appointment in the following manner. Supported by an affluent father influential in Liberal circles and by both Kurth and Fredericq, the young Pirenne was in an enviable position and played his cards so well that he could not fail. „J'ignore", writes Dhondt, „si Pirenne a fait le calcul, mais patronné par un catholique influent et un libéral influent, il paraissait à l'abri des vicissitudes de la politique des partis, qui en étaient à ce moment précisément à s'entre-déchirer comme

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 84.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 85.

(10) School records in the Pirenne Archives do not support this statement which is based on remarks of J. Pirenne in his article *Henri Pirenne*, *Le Flambeau*, XIX, 1936, pp. 641-683.

jamais avant ni depuis."¹¹ Although Pirenne failed to be appointed *chargé de cours* with responsibility for instruction in the Ecole Normale of Liège because of the defeat of the Liberal Party by the Catholic in the elections of 1884, he succeeded, in September 1885, in being appointed *chargé de cours* to teach paleography and diplomatic because „le très influent catholique Kurth arrangeait les choses avec le ministère."¹² Counseled by both Kurth and Fredericq to prepare himself for the position they planned to secure for him by concentrating on paleography and diplomatic at Paris, Leipzig, and Berlin, Pirenne followed their advice and, in addition, demonstrated his political *savoir-faire* by establishing contacts with the leaders of the principal schools of German historiography in order to return to Belgium as *the* interpreter of contemporary German historical methodology. It seems that even as he paid his respects to the aged Von Ranke, he was allied with forces supporting Von Ranke's adversary, Lamprecht, who scorned political history and called for historians to emphasize the collective forces of social, economic, and cultural movements.

Dhondt's conception of Pirenne's professional training and his appointment is distorted; it falls beneath the weight of evidence. There is correspondence showing that Pirenne's father used what influence he had with Frère Orban, the Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, and with the Minister of Public Instruction to advance his son's cause, but that his influence ended with the Catholic victory.¹³ Letters Pirenne received from Kurth and Fredericq prove that his two masters loyally supported him and hoped that he would obtain an appointment at Liège, but there is no evidence of a secret deal. Although Kurth wrote letters of support to the proper Catholic ministers, he never seemed to have much influence. He abhorred politics and, according to his own account and those of his colleagues, was never an effective politician. The endorsement of both Kurth and Fredericq, while a necessary ingredient, was not enough to obtain the appointment. During the critical summer months of 1885 J.J. Thonissen, the new Catholic Minister of the Interior and an eminent jurist who had written reputable works on Belgian history and law, was inclined to deny the appointment to Pirenne because of the well-known Liberal politics of his father. What finally persuaded Thonissen to approve the appointment was an enthusiastic letter from a friend and respected academic colleague who convinced him that he must forget his political instincts and appoint the best man. This friend was Marcel Thévenin who had taught Pirenne at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris.¹⁴

As for the courses that Pirenne followed at French and German universities, no evidence supports Dhondt's statement that Pirenne consciously concentrated on paleography and diplomatic so as to obtain the appointment at Liège. Like all aspiring young medievalists of that time,

(11) *Annali*, III, p. 87.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 88.

(13) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 53-56.

(14) *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.

he received much training in these developing disciplines but devoted even more time to courses in method, medieval institutions, economic history, medieval archaeology, art, and architecture. First to awaken Pirenne's interest in economic history were Giry and Schmoller, rather than Lamprecht¹⁵. To be sure, while a student in Germany Pirenne had met Lamprecht and was familiar with his work, but not until the 1890's, when writing his articles on the medieval town and beginning his *Histoire de Belgique*, did Lamprecht's ideas become a major influence on his conception of history. It was then that Pirenne definitely proclaimed himself an admirer of Lamprecht's various studies on historiography and disassociated himself from what Dhondt calls the *Neurankianer*. The evidence refutes Dhondt's accusation that in the 1880's Pirenne had one foot in the camp of Von Ranke and the other in that of Lamprecht. In the 1890's when he openly embraced Lamprecht's ideas, he then repudiated the *Neurankianer* whom he felt had carried Von Ranke's methods to ridiculous extremes and whom he believed were not receptive enough to new historical ideas and methods¹⁶.

In his effort to portray Pirenne as a kind of political entrepreneur, Dhondt makes two statements regarding Pirenne's move from Liège after one year to become *professeur extraordinaire* at the University of Ghent: first, that Pirenne intended to return to Liège after only a few years at Ghent and, secondly, that his close association with the haute bourgeoisie, who dominated the cultural life of Ghent, helped him to gain social and intellectual acceptance. The evidence shows that instead of planning to remain only a short time at Ghent Pirenne chose not to return to Liège despite the efforts of his former colleagues there to persuade him differently, and that he even rejected subsequent offers of positions elsewhere¹⁷.

Certainly his actions belied any thought of temporary residence in Ghent. In 1887 he married Jenny Vanderhaegen, the daughter of the prominent lawyer and judge Edouard Vanderhaegen, and soon thereafter purchased a large house on the Rue Neuve St. Pierre, not far from the University, for rearing the family that they had already begun. He immersed himself in his teaching, the affairs of the University, and was soon active in the cultural and intellectual organizations of Ghent. Undoubtedly his association with the haute bourgeoisie of Ghent brought social and intellectual acceptance, but if Dhondt is insinuating that he should have forsaken the haute bourgeoisie for the petite bourgeoisie or for the proletariat, he misunderstands the position of a European professor in the late nineteenth century.

Attacking next Pirenne's intellectual development, Dhondt contends that it progressed with „extrême lenteur” from 1885 to 1890¹⁸. He sees

(15) *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52, 63-64. See also F.L. Ganshof, *Pirenne (Henri)*, Biographie nationale publiée par l'Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts, XXX, 1959, col. 673.

(16) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 128-132; *The Letters of Henri Pirenne to Karl Lamprecht*, Bul. Com. Roy. d'Hist., CXXXII, 1966, pp. 171-179.

(17) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 77-85.

(18) *Annali*, III, p. 95.

Pirenne at this time as a very conventional historian whose published writings manifested no appreciation of the new social and economic history but were rather very traditional works of erudition concerned with editions and bibliography. He was, moreover, not an accomplished diplomatist or paleographer, „son argumentation érudite est déplorable”, and he never edited texts solely for pleasure „mais seulement à cause de l'intérêt de texte” for some historical question.¹⁹ These charges are patently unjust. Dhondt is asking Pirenne, then in his early twenties, to demonstrate immediately his mastery of the new social and economic history. He forgets that in these years Pirenne was acquiring his exceptional knowledge of German and French scholarship concerning urban institutions and becoming familiar with the sources essential for the writing of social and economic history. If in these five years and the following ten Pirenne edited more texts than he wrote creative articles and books on social and economic history, it was because he knew that good texts had first to be provided and mastered before other writing could begin. To criticize Pirenne for editing texts because he considered them as a means to an end is to misunderstand the task of the historian. The true historian knows what sources are important and singles them out for editing and study. To edit texts merely for the sake of editing them is the proper work of other disciplines. It would be wrong to assert that Pirenne was a diplomatist and paleographer equal to Giry, Prou, Pertz, or Bresslau, but it is also wrong to say that his editions are lacking in erudition. If his editions of such texts as the *Histoire du meurtre de Charles le Bon, comte de Flandre (1127-1128) par Galbert de Bruges*, and the *Polyptique et comptes de l'abbaye de Saint-Trond au milieu du XIII^e siècle* are so lacking in erudition and so filled with errors, why have not Dhondt and other medievalists corrected and reedited them?

After portraying Pirenne as traditional and uncreative from 1885 to 1890, Dhondt goes to the other extreme and says that the next five years were not only the most creative years of Pirenne's life but also the only ones in which he was truly original in his thinking. By 1895, at the age of thirty-three, he had finished with the creative phase of his life and henceforth built essentially upon the ideas that emerged in this short span. In this period, according to Dhondt, Pirenne conceived his three principal theses: the mercantile settlement theory of the medieval town, the synthetic concept of the history of Belgium, and the unorthodox interpretation of the Arab role in the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

Dhondt is but partially correct. In this period Pirenne did write his famous articles on the town with their emphasis on social and economic causation. Also in 1894 he did agree to write a history of Belgium that was to appear in the Heeren-Uckert *Geschichte der Europäischen Staaten* directed by Lamprecht and soon thereafter sent Lamprecht an outline of what he proposed to write, stating that it would not be a traditional political history but would be constructed on collective economic, social,

(19) *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

and cultural phenomena. Dhondt asserts, quite wrongly, that Lamprecht first asked Fredericq to write this history because of Pirenne's „obscurité relative.”²⁰ Lamprecht did first ask Fredericq to write a history, but it was to be a limited history of Belgium with emphasis on the modern period. Fredericq refused and proposed Pirenne for the task. Lamprecht, who was familiar with Pirenne's writings and knew him to be the most promising historian in Belgium, immediately contacted him and was delighted to receive a positive response²¹. It is, however, when Dhondt states that Pirenne's ideas on Mohammed and Charlemagne were conceived in this period that he is truly inaccurate. In „L'origine des constitutions urbaines au moyen âge” published in 1893 Pirenne did portray the western economy as decaying in the seventh and eighth centuries with the height of the agrarian economy coinciding with the Carolingian period and asserted that the Mediterranean had become a Moslem lake. In this article, however, he did not attribute the end of the ancient world to the Arab sweep around three sides of the Mediterranean. When Dhondt states that he found the phrase „la Méditerranée, lac musulman” in the notes of a student taking Pirenne's course on the Middle Ages in 1889, this phrase only reiterates what Pirenne wrote in his article of 1893.²² It is nonetheless curious that in my reading of Pirenne's lecture notes for all his courses given at Ghent, I have never seen the phrase „la Méditerranée, lac musulman.”²³ There is little evidence that before World War I Pirenne had given much thought to when the Middle Ages began. Occasionally his lectures hinted at dissatisfaction with the traditional interpretations for the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages but embodied no serious questioning of them, revealing only by his emphasis that the empire had serious problems prior to the fourth century, that its culture and institutions were declining, and that this decline extended over a long period of time, and that he did not believe the Germans had abruptly destroyed the western empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. At this stage of his research he was concerned with the end of the empire in the West only as it spelled the disintegration of towns and the rise of an agrarian economy. It was, in fact, only later when he was prisoner in Germany and had begun to give lectures on the social and economic history of medieval Europe for his fellow prisoners at Holzminden that he began to think specifically about the end of the ancient world and to experiment with various of his ideas. It is also apparent that his contact with Russian prisoners and his acquisition of a reading knowledge of the Russian language so broadened his perspective of European history and gave him new insights into Byzantine and middle eastern history that later, alone in the small Thuringian village of Creuzburg-an-der-Werra, he decided to expand the lectures given at

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 97.

(21) Lyon, *Bul. Com. Roy. d'Hist.*, CXXXII, 1966, pp. 161-164.

(22) *Annali*, III, p. 97.

(23) Pirenne's preparations and notes for his courses at Ghent are preserved in *Manuscrits divers*, nos. 4521-4523, in the *Archives Générales du Royaume* in Brussels and also in the Pirenne Archives.

Holzminden and thus embarked upon that history of Europe that, when published posthumously in 1936, appeared under the title *Histoire de l'Europe des invasions au XVI^e siècle*. What emerges from this work is that Pirenne began to revise his conceptions of the early Middle Ages in 1917 and 1918. What essentially took shape in his mind was an ancient world that was for some centuries in decline but, except for the political existence of the empire in the West, was not destroyed by the Germans. He perceived that the Germans did not arrive in the empire as enemies but as men who wished to enjoy and partake of its superior culture, to preserve all that they could. It was this thinking that eventually led him to his theory that the Arabs ended the Roman Empire in the West.²⁴

The foregoing examination of what Dhondt regards as Pirenne's sole creative period indicates that, in attempting to discredit Pirenne, Dhondt employs a combination of flimsy evidence and insinuation. Moreover, the idea that Pirenne had a creative period of only five years is absurd. Besides his ideas on the end of the ancient world conceived during his captivity in Germany, Pirenne's works after 1895 but before the War included his well-known article on the social, economic, and legal condition of the peasant during the ninth and tenth centuries, his long demographic study of Ypres, and his classic article on the social stages of capitalism²⁵. After the War came his provocative address on comparative history, his intriguing suggestion on the origin of the bourgeois merchant, and his yet debated thesis on the fourteenth century as one of depression, retrenchment, and catastrophe.²⁶

Not wholly satisfied with his picture of Pirenne as unproductive and uncreative in the years after 1895, Dhondt embellishes it with further stratagems. That Pirenne was not elected a member of the Académie Royale de Belgique until 1898 was because he „avait peu publié jusqu'à ce moment." That he became a member was due only to „les facteurs extra-historiques"²⁷. Dhondt chooses to forget Pirenne's election to the Commission Royale d'Histoire at the age of twenty-nine and that in 1898, then only thirty-six, he was the author of numerous books and articles covering a wide range of historical scholarship. Not able to

(24) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 258-261, 441-444; *The Origins of the Middle Ages*, pp. 58-61. Evidence that not until his captivity in Germany did Pirenne begin to think about this problem and to formulate his unique ideas on it comes from his *Journal de guerre* preserved in the Pirenne Archives which, edited by my wife and myself, will be published by La Commission Royale d'Histoire.

(25) *Liberté et propriété en Flandre du VIII^e au XI^e siècle*, Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres, 1911, pp. 496-523; *Les dénombrements de la population d'Ypres au XV^e siècle (1412-1506)*, Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, I, 1903, pp. 1-32; *Les étapes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme*, Bul. de l'Acad. Roy. de Belgique, Classe des Lettres, 1914, pp. 258-299.

(26) *De la méthode comparative en histoire*, Compte rendu du cinquième Congrès International des Sciences Historiques, Brussels, 1923. This address stimulated Marc Bloch to write his well-known article *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, Revue de Synthèse Historique, XLVI, 1928, pp. 15-50. See also Pirenne, *Les villes du moyen âge*, Brussels, 1927, pp. 95-115; *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, ed. H. Van Werveke, Paris, 1963, pp. 157-171.

(27) *Annali*, III, p. 98.

ignore the honors bestowed upon Pirenne between 1900 and 1912, Dhondt ascribes them not to Pirenne's scholarship but to his immensely popular *Histoire de Belgique* that was nationalistic, nonscientific, and expressed what Belgians desired to read about their country. Even if disagreeing with Pirenne's master concept of Belgian history, no one reading the multi-volume *Histoire de Belgique* will concede that it is popular and devoid of scholarly method and evidence.

Despite the honors received in the years just prior to 1914, Pirenne is seen by Dhondt as jealous and wary of some of his Belgian colleagues because he had passed his creative period and considered them contenders for his fame. A particular such contender was a colleague at Ghent, Hubert Van Houtte, a specialist in demographic history. Not wanting to be eclipsed by Van Houtte, Pirenne became interested in quantitative history and decided in 1903 to write his substantial article on the population of Ypres during the fifteenth century, a study possible only because of texts called to Pirenne's attention by the archivist Emile De Sagher of Ypres. This portrayal ignores Pirenne's frequent trips to Germany in the last decade of the nineteenth century, his admiration for the new quantitative methods of German historians, and his repeated suggestions to the Commission Royale d'Histoire that it undertake the publication of texts valuable for quantitative history.²⁸ Dhondt would also have us believe that Pirenne was jealous and fearful of Léon Vanderkindere of the University of Brussels. Pirenne's words belie this. At Vanderkindere's death in 1906 Pirenne wrote to Maurice Prou that „c'est une grande perte pour nous et surtout pour l'université de Bruxelles” and that it was fortunate Vanderkindere had received that spring the *Prix quinquennal d'histoire national* for his work *La formation territoriale des principautés belges au moyen âge*, a study climaxing the career of a man who, along with Kurth, had forced Belgian historians to become professional.²⁹ Moreover, Pirenne's notice on Vanderkindere written in 1908 for the *Annuaire de l'Académie Royale de Belgique* is not that of a fearful, jealous man relieved by the death of a competitor.

In this vein Dhondt continues to debase Pirenne's ability and character. The recognition that came to Pirenne in 1912 at the age of fifty when he was honored for his twenty-five years of teaching at Ghent came to a man amidst an intellectual crisis, a man henceforth destined to survive on others' ideas, a man whose position and honors stemmed from his anti-German position and captivity during the War rather than from his scholarship. Dhondt emphasizes that Pirenne's international honors after the War invariably came from France and the allied powers. The one kind remark he has for Pirenne's behavior after the War is that he held up admirably under the deaths of three sons and his favorite student Guillaume Des Marez.³⁰

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 101. See Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 174-175; Pirenne, *Les documents d'archives comme source de la démographie historique*, in proceedings of 23rd Congrès International d'Hygiène et Démographie, Brussels, 1903.

(29) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 147-148.

(30) *Annali*, III, pp. 103-106, 108.

After thirty pages explaining what he feels were the personal traits of Pirenne and the circumstances accounting for his success and reputation, Dhondt devotes the rest of his article to what he considers Pirenne's three principal historical contributions: the *Histoire de Belgique*, the collective studies on the medieval town, and *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. Considering Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* his most fragile yet most indestructible work, Dhondt seeks to explain this phenomenon. Because Pirenne only put into Belgian history what his historical conceptions and perspectives determined as valuable and consequential, this is a history of selected facts presented with a special interpretation, that is, Pirenne's personal idea of what Belgian history was. It contains errors and has been largely revised by modern research but, Dhondt grudgingly admits, it has the merit of being the first constructed not on political events „mais à la puissance économique et aux forces sociales incarnées dans les villes." This concept of Belgium as a microcosm of Europe is therefore original and „s'agit d'une vision réellement belle, puissante, neuve, et dans une large partie, vraie," but it is bad history because Pirenne limited a group of common tendencies to the narrow basin of the Scheldt and Meuse rivers, tendencies that Dhondt sees as extending from the Rhine to the Somme and possibly to the Seine.³¹ Obviously Pirenne's enchantment with the Burgundian state of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries led him to make such an artificial limitation. Yet, strangely, when the southern and northern provinces were separated in the sixteenth century, Pirenne then ignores or forgets the very tendencies he hitherto had considered common to this geographical region. Why also did Pirenne lose interest in Holland upon its separation from those provinces subsequently to become Belgium? Because, Dhondt contends, he was very pro-French in language and culture and violently opposed to the Dutch language and culture. The facts deny Dhondt's assertion. Although Pirenne preferred French to Dutch culture, he did not fiercely oppose the introduction of Dutch as a teaching language at the University of Ghent. Instead, immediately after the War, he worked for the teaching of all courses in both French and Dutch. Even as prisoners in Germany, he and his friend and colleague Paul Fredericq agreed that upon their return to Ghent they would cooperate to achieve this objective.³²

Dhondt is correct in saying that Pirenne disagreed with Pieter Geyl's interpretation of Netherlandish history and with Geyl's vision of a fusion of Dutch and Flemish into a Greater Netherlands but wrong in explaining why Pirenne ceased talking about the tendencies common to Holland and the southern provinces after the Dutch Revolt separated them. Pirenne, regretting the failure of the Burgundian state and the religious strife in the sixteenth century that led to the separation of the northern and southern provinces, nevertheless accepted historical reality, that the Belgium in which he lived derived from the southern provinces and that these

(31) *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

(32) Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. 283-284, 348-350. On 22 November 1918 Fredericq wrote to Pirenne: „1. Maintien intégral des cours français. 2. Création de cours flamands parallèles, n'est-ce pas?" (p. 274).

provinces must form the cadre of his history of Belgium down to 1914. This he said in various volumes of his *Histoire de Belgique*.

Conceding the originality of Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique*, Dhondt does not regard it as objective or scholarly. Pirenne may have been sincere in his vision of Belgian history as the unfolding of common social, economic, cultural, and institutional tendencies uniting a people into a country, and may well have thought that this is what he saw in the historical texts, but is hardly reason to conclude, as have his disciples, that his account of Belgian history is objective. Dhondt contends that Pirenne found these common tendencies in Belgian history *a priori* rather than *a posteriori* from the evidence, that „Pirenne, poussé par son apriorisme de départ : écrire une histoire de Belgique, ne pouvait pas faire autrement que d'axer ses recherches vers le devenir de la Belgique à l'exclusion de tout autre développement”³³. That Pirenne explained Belgium as a product of common historical tendencies was, Dhondt maintains, because he lived at a moment when the tendencies he saw as guiding forces of Belgian history were at their height: the powerful cities with their dynamic bourgeoisie, social tensions and aspirations among the proletarian masses, the economic prosperity of the new Belgian state, and a neutral Belgium integrated culturally into western Europe and serving as a bridge between France and Germany. Living under the influence of these tendencies, Pirenne was a product of his age, as are all historians, and could only view Belgian history in a transitory and subjective manner. Consequently, the *Histoire de Belgique* has no real merit as history but is rather a statement of those forces „qui moulent un peuple, elle est sans rivale et ne trouvera sans doute pas d'imitateurs, parcequ'elle réclame au plus haut degré deux qualités qui cohabitent malaisément : le sens de l'histoire humaine et la foi nationale”³⁴.

Dhondt, it seems, is himself less than objective when he refuses to see Pirenne as unique among Belgian historians in the period between 1890 and 1914. Most contemporaries of Pirenne had backgrounds similar to his and all of them lived under the influence of the same forces and tendencies, but Dhondt seems not to perceive that Pirenne among them all was the only one to identify these tendencies, to study them, to realize that they might have their origins in the Middle Ages, and to sense that they might provide a common theme and framework for writing a history of Belgium that accounted for its final fusion into a state. How could Dhondt not see that only Pirenne developed a synthetic view and interpretation of Belgian history? One can only conclude that Dhondt was either blinded by his biases or consciously avoided any comparison that would show Pirenne to be unique as a historical mind both among his Belgian peers and those of western Europe.

That the *Histoire de Belgique* has been revised and corrected Dhondt particularly emphasizes. But what innovative and synthetic work has not been? The appearance of Pirenne's ideas and theses in each chapter of

(33) *Annali*, III, p. 113.

(34) *Ibid.*, p. 114.

such fine collaborative histories as the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* and the *Geschiedenis van Vlaanderen* show that the *Histoire de Belgique* has and will continue to be revised and corrected but will never be superseded. Without the historical framework provided by Pirenne, it is doubtful that such histories could have been conceived. No Belgian histories rival the *Histoire de Belgique*. Rather, they, as well as the publications in the well-known series *Notre Passé*, depend upon the *Histoire de Belgique* even when disagreeing with some of Pirenne's ideas.

Certainly Pirenne was not wholly objective. What he thought was the right course for Belgium and Europe occasionally blurred his vision of Belgian history, causing him to force some points, gloss over others, and stretch still others. A few times he came perilously close to committing the historical transgression of using history in the service of politics. But these defects, small in perspective, do not seriously distort his *Histoire de Belgique* because its basic story and themes follow closely the contours of historical reality. Pirenne did for Belgium what George Grote did for classical Greece, Mommsen for Roman history, and Von Ranke for the history of the papacy. He put order into Belgian history for the first time and with such intelligence, erudition, and logic that any further effort is unlikely to equal its excellence. As no historian can write on Roman history without confronting Mommsen, so no historian can write on Belgian history without confronting Pirenne. The *Histoire de Belgique* must be ranked as a historical classic destined to endure because it meets the demands of the most exacting historical standards and because the themes and explanations are not the dubious ones of racial genius, cultural superiority, political endowment, and military prowess. Who is prepared to argue that Pirenne's vision of Belgium and Europe is wrong or to prophesy that in time it will not prevail?

Although international recognition first came to Pirenne for his studies on the medieval town, Dhondt finds them of little merit. He dismisses Pirenne's first and only published monograph on urban history, that on Dinant, as traditional and untouched by the currents and methods of the evolving economic history of his time, and as scant preparation for the series of articles on the town that appeared in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth³⁵. These articles, despite their fame, were written without any further research on the development of towns in western Europe, lacked sufficient attention to economic phenomena, glossed over Rudolph Sohm's *Marktrecht* explanation because Pirenne desired to hide the fact that some of his ideas derived from this explanation, showed no appreciation of urban topography, and looked to the research of Siegfried Rietschel for their central thesis. Dhondt would have us believe that Pirenne's mercantile settlement theory was appropriated from Rietschel. And there are still other deficiencies in these celebrated articles. Truly knowledgeable only in the urban history of Flanders and Brabant, where his mercantile settlement theory could be

(35) *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

partially substantiated, Pirenne applied it to all of western Europe where it generally could not be substantiated and where towns developed in numerous other ways. Thus he ignored the Italian towns where there was urban continuity extending back to the Roman Empire, underrated the importance of old Roman towns and camps in the development of towns in northern Europe, assigned no role to various fortified and strategic places like abbeys as centers around which towns grew, and completely misunderstood and underemphasized the *villes neuves* in medieval urban formation. Dhondt concludes that Pirenne's famous theory on the origin and development of the medieval town rests on little substantial evidence, that, where it does, it is limited to Flanders and Brabant, and that it is largely derived from Rietschel and Sohm³⁶.

Dhondt is harsh in his criticism of Pirenne and devoid of perspective. If Pirenne's book on Dinant is his least original work on urban history, it is also his first, published only four years after his university formation. Although lacking the broad comprehension of urban history so characteristic of his later studies, it is certainly not as unoriginal and uninformed about economic history as Dhondt believes. The first sentence reveals its purpose: „J'ai cherché à faire, pour une ville belge, ce qui a été fait, pendant les dernières années, pour tant de villes allemandes et françaises”³⁷. In thus modeling his book on Dinant after the French studies of such scholars as Arthur Giry, Abel Lefranc, Jules Flammermont, and Maurice Prou, and after the German studies of such as W. Arnold, K. W. Nitzsch, M. Heusler, G. von Below, and K. Hegel, Pirenne became the first Belgian historian to use the more advanced techniques of contemporary German and French specialists in urban history to trace and explain the growth of a medieval town on Belgian soil. Nor is there a dearth of social and economic history in his discussions of the fourteenth-century struggles between the haut bourgeois merchant-industrialists and the *métiers* for political and economic power, the economic role of Dinant in the Hanse, and the social condition of the merchant-industrialists, the copper beaters, and other artisans.

That Pirenne did not write other monographs on urban history before publishing his series of articles was probably because he understood the need of mastering the corpus of scholarly writing on the medieval town and of familiarizing himself with the principal textual evidence for the Low Countries, Germany, and France. These articles as well as his books on *Les anciennes démocraties des Pays-Bas* and *Les villes du moyen âge* are a distillation of long research with the texts and pertinent monographs, the *sine qua non* for a work of synthesis. In the long period between 1890 and the 1920's Pirenne, alone of medievalists, understood the need for such a synthesis and produced it. These works on the town, regardless of whether one agrees with their total substance, pioneered in emphasizing the cardinal importance of the medieval town in the unfolding of the civilization of western Europe.

(36) *Ibid.*, pp. 115-118.

(37) *Histoire de la constitution de la ville de Dinant au moyen âge*, Ghent, 1889, p. 1.

To say that Pirenne glossed over Sohm's studies in order to disguise his debt to them is unfair. In Pirenne's articles in *La Revue Historique* Sohm's work figures prominently, especially when Pirenne, denying Sohm's conclusion that markets with special economic and legal privileges produced towns and merchants, argues rather that a grouping of merchants around some strategically located fortified point produced a market and a town. Pirenne concludes that the towns he studied owed their origins to the *portus*, „c'est-à-dire à des étapes, à des débarcadères de marchandises, bref à des places de commerce.”³⁸ And it is indeed nonsense to assert that Pirenne's ideas for his mercantile settlement theory were those of Rietschel. Pirenne's first article appeared in *La Revue Historique* in 1893 while Rietschel's first study *Die Civitas auf Deutschem Boden* appeared in 1894. In 1895 Pirenne introduced his thesis on town origins, citing Rietschel's work as evidence for the disappearance of towns in the early Middle Ages. Two years later Rietschel's more important study *Markt und Stadt in ihrem rechtlichen Verhältniss* appeared. Then, in 1898, Pirenne wrote a third article, amplifying his explanation of urban origins and agreeing with what Rietschel had written in 1897: „Die Stadt ist ein Markt, der zugleich Burg ist. Alle Städte sind Märkte, aber nicht alle Märkte sind Städte. Alle Städte sind Burgen, aber nicht alle Burgen sind Städte.”³⁹ Both scholars, simultaneously at work on urban origins, were greatly interested in research that independently confirmed their own findings. Writing to Pirenne on 24 May 1898, Rietschel said that he was delighted their ideas on urban history coincided, that he agreed with Pirenne's criticism of the juristic approach, and that he welcomed this support because in Germany his ideas had been severely criticized.⁴⁰

Finally, let us examine Dhondt's criticism that Pirenne's theory on urban origins is valid only for Flanders and Brabant, that it ignores the *villes neuves* and slights the development of towns around non-fortified points. Here Dhondt strikes at the vulnerable points of Pirenne's theory. In southern Europe, especially around the Mediterranean, there is enough evidence of the continuity of economic activity in the early Middle Ages to make plausible the view that urban continuity of Roman towns provided an important linkage with those of the Middle Ages. From her fine work on the different ways in which medieval towns originated, Edith Ennen has concluded: „La ville méditerranéenne se distingue nettement

(38) *Villes, marchés et marchands au moyen âge*, Annales de l'Est et du Nord, I, 1905. For Pirenne's disagreement with Sohm see *L'origine des constitutions urbaines au moyen âge*, La Revue Historique, LIII, 1893. After summarizing Sohm's *Marktrecht* theory and noting its strong points, Pirenne concluded: „En somme, M. Sohm s'est placé, je crois, à un point de vue trop exclusif. Il a voulu expliquer le droit municipal par quelques principes juridiques comme s'il eût eu affaire à une question de droit romain. Tout entier à l'abstraction, il a perdu de vue les conditions politiques et sociales au milieu desquelles il s'est développé. Bref, il a écrit une admirable théorie du droit urbain tel qu'il aurait pu être si les principes juridiques étaient les seuls facteurs du développement de l'humanité”.

(39) *Markt und Stadt in ihrem rechtlichen Verhältniss*, Leipzig, 1897, p. 150.

(40) Pirenne Archives.

de la ville du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe et apparaît comme un type particulier de la civilisation urbaine médiévale. C'est en Italie qu'elle atteint son expression la plus remarquable. Dans ce pays la ville a toujours existé."⁴¹ But other studies on the urban history of southern Europe, concluding that real urban continuity can be proven only for Italy and parts of southern France, caution against embracing too enthusiastically the old nineteenth-century Romanist theory. In the Midi of France and in Spain, Roman municipal organization and its associated economic and social functions seem to have disappeared. In a second study on medieval urban history, Edith Ennen admits the heterogeneity of urban development around the Mediterranean, a position strengthened by studies of André Dupont on the towns of the Narbonnaise, of Georges Sautel on the Midi, of A.R. Lewis on Montpellier, and of Paul-Albert Fevrier on Provence. Sautel, in fact, concludes that „la théorie de Pirenne est, dans son ensemble, exacte pour le Midi, avec quelques nuances complémentaires.”⁴²

Correct in underlining the greater continuity of Roman urban institutions in southern Europe, particularly in Italy, and the richer diversity of town origins, these studies have not at all superseded Pirenne. He never pretended that his theory was as generally applicable in the south as in the north. Nor did he argue that disappearance of urban life was as pronounced in the south as in the north. Of Roman municipal organization after the fifth century he wrote : „Peu à peu cependant, la décadence de l'organisation sociale en fit disparaître la plupart des traits... En même temps, la poussée de l'Islam dans la Méditerranée, rendant impossible le commerce qui jusqu'alors avait encore entretenu quelque activité dans les villes, les condamne à une irrémédiable déchéance. Mais il ne les condamne pas à la mort. Si diminuées, si anémiées qu'elles soient, elles subsistent. Dans la société agricole de ce temps, elles conservent malgré tout une importance primordiale.”⁴³ Two points, therefore, should be made. First, Pirenne underestimated regional variation and the continuity of Roman urban institutions. Secondly, his contention that new economic and social forces breathed life into the towns of southern Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries remains for most historians as valid as when he first made the argument in the 1890's.

In northern Europe between the Loire and the Rhine rivers Pirenne's theory is still predominant. Studies on German, French, and Low Country towns have generally supported the conclusion of F.L. Ganshof in his excellent study of the region between the Loire and Rhine that „la ville

(41) *Les différents types de formation des villes européennes*, Le Moyen Age, LXII, 1956, pp. 397-411.

(42) Ennen, *Frühgeschichte der europäischen Stadt*, Bonn, 1953, pp. 84-121; Dupont, *Les cités de la Narbonnaise première depuis les invasions germaniques jusqu'à l'apparition du consulat*, Nîmes, 1942; Lewis, *The Development of Town Government in Twelfth Century Montpellier*, Speculum, XXII, 1947, pp. 51-67; Sautel, *Les villes du Midi méditerranéen au moyen âge: aspects économiques et sociaux (IXe-XIIIe siècles)*, in *La Ville*. Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin, Brussels, 1955, VII, pp. 313-356; Fevrier, *Le développement urbain en Provence, de l'époque romaine à la fin du XIVe siècle*, Paris, 1964.

(43) *Villes du moyen âge*, pp. 55-56.

médiévale s'est constituée à côté ou dans le voisinage du noyau pré-urbain, dans certains cas même, dans l'enceinte de cet organisme. La cellule génératrice de cette ville a été une nouvelle agglomération habitée par des personnes exerçant des activités de toute autre nature que la population rurale environnante, en tout premier lieu des activités commerciales ou se rattachant au commerce."⁴⁴ Significantly, the latest discussion of urban origins in northern Europe concludes that „recent research has modified and nuanced interpretations of medieval urban origins in northern continental Europe which were generally held before the Second World War while maintaining them in broad outline."⁴⁵

If Pirenne seems to have neglected those agrarian villages that, with their peasants, developed into towns of bourgeois merchants and artisans, it was because he focussed upon the better known towns that grew up around or in old Roman *civitates*, *castra*, castles, abbeys, and other strategically located strong points. Did he perhaps slight the agrarian villages in his articles because he had to combat not only the Romanist, immunity, *Hofrecht*, *Marktrecht*, *Burgrecht*, and gild theories but also the romantic *Landgemeinde* theory of Maurer and Below? Never in any study did he deny that towns were able to develop from agrarian villages well located for commercial or industrial development. What he said was that the first medieval towns arose around or in strategically located Roman and non-Roman fortified points such as Cologne, Mainz, Constance, Lyon, Bordeaux, Paris, York, Lincoln, Ghent, Bruges, Arras, Magdeburg, Merseburg, Bremen, Cambrai, Nottingham, and Bristol, and that, later, other towns developed, including those on agrarian sites. But, as understood by Pirenne, these later towns were stimulated by the former and developed in response to regional commercial and industrial needs. Hundreds of these were, of course, the *villes neuves* that spread over western Europe during the course of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, some of which, like Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Montauban, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, became successful commercial centers while others, like Lorris and Beaumont-en-Argonne, remained small agrarian towns inhabited by free farmers. But whatever their fate, all, Pirenne stressed, possessed the elementary bourgeois legal, social, and economic privileges differentiating them from the seignorial villages, and some acquired political privileges like those of the great communes.⁴⁶

(44) *Etude sur le développement des villes entre Loire et Rhin au moyen âge*, Paris, 1943, p. 21. See also the more comprehensive Flemish edition *Over Stadsonwikkeling tusschen Loire en Rijn Gedurende de Middeleeuwen*, Brussels, 1944.

(45) D. Nicholas, *Medieval Urban Origins in Northern Continental Europe: State of Research and Some Tentative Conclusions*, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, VI, 1969, pp. 53-114. For a few of the more recent studies supporting the Pirenne thesis see Van Werveke, *The Rise of the Towns*, in *Cambridge Economic History*, Cambridge, 1963, III, pp. 3-41; H. Planitz, *Die deutsche Stadt im Mittelalter von der Römerzeit bis zu den Zunftkämpfen*, 2d ed., Cologne, 1965; F. Rörig, *The Medieval Town*, Berkeley, 1967.

(46) See Pirenne, *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, pp. 60-61: „Il importe maintenant de constater que si le paysan de la ville neuve s'oppose au vilain domanial, il se rapproche en même temps du bourgeois. Les chartes qui le régissent sont directement influencées par le droit urbain, et c'est à ce point que la

If Pirenne did not sufficiently tie the urban revival of the eleventh century to the vigorous domanian economy of the ninth and tenth centuries, he scored the importance of developments in these centuries that were indicators of an improving economy and were the *sine qua non* for economic revival: increasing political stability provided by the strong feudal states, more intensive cultivation of land on the large estates, reclamation of new land for cultivation, increase of local markets, and a rise in population.⁴⁷ His denial that merchants and artisans came directly from peasants related only to the earliest stage of commercial and urban revival when it is virtually impossible to find examples of peasants transforming themselves into merchants or artisans. After all, in Pirenne's celebrated example, the vagabond St. Godric of Finchale came from a peasant family, left his agrarian village in Lincolnshire, and by luck and shrewd opportunism became a successful merchant.⁴⁸ Few historians have found other such cases. The most they can do is to document agrarian villages become towns and argue that then the peasant inhabitants often acquired bourgeois status and professions. This, as we have seen, Pirenne admitted. To attack Pirenne on this front is to ignore what he said about the social mobility of the peasant and the economic and social transformation of agrarian villages in his *Les villes du moyen âge*, *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, and *Histoire de Belgique*.

If Dhondt belittles Pirenne's thesis on town origins, he vehemently disparages Pirenne's celebrated theory on the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Concerning the decisive role assigned to the Arabs by Pirenne, Dhondt writes: „On croit rêver quand on lit cela.” He concludes that „toute l'argumentation du *Mahomet et Charlemagne* du début à la fin est sans valeur: il n'est pas vrai que le commerce entre l'Est et l'Ouest ait été interrompu par les Arabes, il n'est pas vrai que la monnaie d'or ait disparu à cause de la disparition du grand commerce, il n'est pas vrai que le papyrus, la soie, les épices aient disparu vers 700. Ils n'ont jamais disparu. En face de toutes ces inexactitudes criantes, il y a tout ce que Pirenne n'a pas vu ou a mal vu, ou plutôt, interprété en fonction de sa vision”⁴⁹. Incredulous that Pirenne should attempt to attribute to the Arabs the economic decline and woes of Carolingian Europe, in fact of the western economy, Dhondt asserts that real towns were already developing in the eighth and ninth centuries and that one must be blind not to see that the great economic transformation

qualification de bourgeois est donnée très fréquemment aux habitants des villes neuves. A l'exemple des bourgeois, ils ont reçu en effet une autonomie administrative correspondant à leurs besoins... De même, et sur le modèle des villes encore, les villes neuves sont dotées chacune d'un échévinage spécial, organe de leur droit et tribunal de leurs habitants. Ainsi, la classe rurale nouvelle a bénéficié des progrès antérieurs de la bourgeoisie.” See also C. Stephenson, *Borough and Town*, Cambridge, Mass., 1933, pp. 29-34.

(47) *Villes du moyen âge*, pp. 71-75.

(48) *Ibid.*, pp. 103-107; *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, pp. 37-40. In his study on capitalism Pirenne admitted that documents show merchants coming from the countryside to live in towns.

(49) *Annali*, III, pp. 119-121.

of Europe began in the Carolingian epoch, in precisely that period Pirenne saw as the nadir of western economy.

What explains, Dhondt asks, this patently indefensible theory of Pirenne? Why did Pirenne embrace such bizarre ideas when in his early articles on urban origins he admitted the existence of merchants, trade, and localities bearing the name of *portus*? Why did he abruptly change his mind in the 1920's when he began research leading to *Mahomet et Charlemagne*? Partly, Dhondt avows, because of psychological reasons. Noting that Pirenne had already referred to the Mediterranean as a Moslem lake in one of his early articles on urban origins, Dhondt asserts that Pirenne, having conceived of the Mohammed idea, then forgot about it, adhering to the traditional interpretation of the Carolingian period until after World War I when he finally addressed himself to the problem of the end of the ancient world. Dhondt then quotes certain statements at random from Pirenne's early articles to show an inconsistency between his early traditional ideas and his later non-traditional ones. Taken out of context, as Dhondt has done, these statements would seem to indicate that Pirenne was not only inconsistent within an article but inconsistent over a long period. Dhondt has Pirenne in 1895 first referring to the Mediterranean as a Moslem lake and then stating: „C'est à l'époque carolingienne que nous apparaît pour la première fois le type du marchand médiéval... les *mercatores* avec leurs barques... leurs cargaisons de blés ou de vins, provenant sans doute de l'excédent de la production des grands domaines..."⁵⁰. What Dhondt conceals are Pirenne's statements portraying these merchants as untypical of Carolingian society. He does not tell us that Pirenne wrote: „Dans les régions qu'ils traversent, on les considère comme des étrangers, et, de fait, un grand nombre d'entre eux, Juifs ou Lombards d'origine, n'ont vraiment rien de commun avec les populations de l'Europe occidentale. Ainsi ils vivent en dehors des conditions régulières de l'existence.”⁵¹ Also conveniently omitted is what Pirenne wrote apropos Carolingian Europe: „Il n'existe plus de circulation, ni des hommes, ni des choses: tout est seigneurial, tout est local, tout est immobile. Les routes ne sont plus entretenues, les ponts tombent en ruines... Dans ces conditions, toute vie urbaine disparaît.”⁵² Placed in proper context, these statements are actually consistent in thought. Pirenne's 1895 view of a stagnated Carolingian economy is that expressed in the 1920's when he began the research that resulted in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. The same view appears in *Les villes du moyen âge* (1927) and in his manuscript on *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1935). How inconceivable, then, is Dhondt's argument that in the postwar period Pirenne psychologically could neither see nor admit that what he had written and believed earlier contradicted what he now believed about the Mediterranean, the Arabs, and the Carolingian economy.

(50) *Ibid.*, p. 122. This quotation which comes from *L'origine des constitutions urbaines au moyen âge*, La Revue Historique, LVII, 1895, is misquoted by Dhondt who, after the word *mercatores*, omits the words „montant et descendant” and after *barques* omits „le Rhin et le Mein.”

(51) La Revue Historique, LVII.

(52) *Ibid.*

Turning from this tortuous and ingenious attempt to portray Pirenne as inconsistent and unable to face this inconsistency, Dhondt launches another attack, stating that Pirenne, western oriented by training and ambience, was not equipped to undertake research on eastern history, that he lacked the necessary language skills and was ignorant of key Arab sources. Here Dhondt is on firmer ground. Pirenne did not know Arabic and was ignorant of certain sources. *Mahomet et Charlemagne* would have been a more convincing book without these deficiencies. It must nevertheless be noted how few were the sources Pirenne neglected and how few others have been added by Arabists since Pirenne sparked the great debate which, as one familiar with its course knows, has essentially revolved around the interpretation by specialists of certain texts and coins, all of which are too scarce⁵³.

To conclude, as does Dhondt, that the sole merit of *Mahomet et Charlemagne* was to stimulate debate and research on the early Middle Ages resulting in a clearer and more scholarly understanding of this previously neglected period, or that the research stimulated by Pirenne has completely discredited his theory, is unjust. The historical literature on this subject is far too abundant to discuss in detail, but it may be said that the specialized research of Arabist, Byzantinist, and western medievalist has weakened the famous theory. Pirenne obviously overemphasized Merovingian economic activity and its continuity with the Roman, and may have underemphasized Carolingian economic activity. He seems also to have assigned to the Arabs too decisive a role in the destruction of Mediterranean economic unity and, consequently, in the emergence of the Middle Ages. His treatment of politics and institutions is victim to the same weaknesses as his interpretation of economic and social history: overemphasis regarding the continuity of Roman institutions in the Germanic kingdoms and some delusion in believing that the German chiefs took the Roman emperors as models. Although correct in stressing the exclusively secular bases of German political authority prior to Charlemagne and his father Pepin, Pirenne perhaps attributed too much to the spiritual sanction of secular authority given by the church. It is true that his bent toward social and economic causation caused him to slight the cultural and religious differences separating the ancient and the medieval world or to place such differences out of focus as in distorting Theodoric's love of classical culture and his patronage of such as Boethius and Cassiodorus. Undoubtedly there was more religious and educational reform and more cultural achievement in the so-called Carolingian renaissance than Pirenne admits, but not in the inflated proportion that some historians would have it. Like most theories concerned with the explanation of vast historical transformations, Pirenne's suffers from over and understatement, generalizes at times upon evidence too scant and cryptic, and explicates too much from certain types of evidence. Later research suggests that the Carolingian and post-Carolingian periods were not as dark socially and economically as Pirenne portrayed.

(53) Lyon, *Origins of the Middle Ages*, pp. 70-87; Henri Pirenne, pp. 449-456.

These deficiencies, it must be emphasized, are overshadowed by the credibility a majority of scholars, except perhaps classical historians, concede to Pirenne's large picture or synthesis. He was, after all, not the first historian to perceive that after the empire in the West no longer existed politically some features of its civilization continued. He did not deny that during the third and fourth centuries political disintegration, social and economic misfortunes, cultural malaise, and a profound shift in religious values occurred, but he did not believe that they alone ended Graeco-Roman civilization. Despite the German conquests with their turmoil and new political arrangements, no new civilization arose because the Germans were generally willing to partake of the Mediterranean civilization and the unity upon which it depended. What impressed Pirenne was how much all this had changed in the West by the time of the Carolingians. He noticed that after 600 Italy lay prostrate with the Ostrogothic kingdom destroyed by Justinian's unfortunate attempt to reconquer the West; that all the lands ringing the Mediterranean, except for some in southern Europe, were under Arab dominion; and that the Carolingian state was oriented northward rather than southward to the Mediterranean, with its center lying between the Loire and the Rhine. He sensed also that there was much less trade, especially on the Mediterranean, that few real towns existed, that the economy was much more agrarian, and that culturally Europe was relatively barren. But why had such change come after 600? For Pirenne the logical reason seemed to be the Arab conquest of the Mediterranean, which made it a barrier rather than a boulevard for East-West exchanges, causing the orbit of power in the East to shift to Baghdad and in the West, to the north. This transformation isolated western Europe and presaged seigniorialism, feudalism, and the domination of the church, all of which were consecrated by the coronation of Charlemagne in 800.

Although giving the Arabs too decisive a part in this change, Pirenne was the first to understand that they had exercised a profound influence upon the Mediterranean and the West. Comparing the culture of the Arab lands with that of the West, he saw an impoverished and underdeveloped West facing in the East a thriving, creative culture rooted in a money economy. This picture was little changed until the West revived and pushed its way back into the Mediterranean during the eleventh century, a push climaxed by the First Crusade. For the first time in centuries the West established regular contacts with the East. Without this development the extraordinary achievements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would have been inconceivable. One may fault Pirenne for his details, but in terms of western history his synthesis is both credible and imaginative. Its hypotheses account for the relative darkness of the early Middle Ages and for the recovery and vigorous achievements of western Europe in the High Middle Ages. By placing in better perspective those centuries between 400 and 1000 that had been ignored by classical historians and slighted by medievalists, he dramatically reminded historians that in this period lie the answers to the uniqueness of western history.

Historiographically he did even more. He delivered medievalists from

Edward Gibbon's spell by forcing them to acknowledge that they must repudiate much of what Gibbon had argued, and that this meant reexamination of a historiographical tradition dating back to the Renaissance. For this reason alone *Mahomet et Charlemagne* ranks among the historical classics. It compels every scholar of the Middle Ages to wrestle with its concepts because within their framework rests a truer understanding and appreciation of the Middle Ages. It may well be that what Gibbon referred to as the world's great debate will never end because we lack the evidence for a real solution, but, as yet, Pirenne's theory, though revised, has not been replaced by any other more credible or convincing on the enigma of the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

Having shrewdly contrived the decline and fall of Pirenne the historian and his celebrated theories, Dhondt seeks, finally, to identify the historical conceptions underlying Pirenne's work. Convinced that conceptually Pirenne passed through a number of different phases, some of them the products of contemporary historical methodology and others of contemporary European trends and ideas, he sees Pirenne adhering at the outset of his career to Rankian values and methods. Soon, however, he fell under the influence of Lamprecht and accordingly, from the early 1890's to about 1910, began to write history explained by anonymous mass social and economic forces. This change, according to Dhondt, coincided with the contemporary bourgeois progressives' infatuation with social, economic, materialistic, deterministic, and Marxist history, and although he refrains from saying that Pirenne was a Marxist or that he had even read much of Marx, he contends that Pirenne's history was strongly deterministic and materialistic. In the next phase, just prior to World War I, Pirenne became intrigued with Hegelian concepts and investigated the alternating cycles of economic liberty and economic regimentation, writing his famous paper on the social stages of capitalism. Then came the War which was a shock to most European intellectuals and progressives. The loss of a son and his ordeal for almost three years as a prisoner in Germany led Pirenne quite naturally to reexamine his prewar concepts and attitudes, discarding some of them. He thus entered another conceptual phase, a *mélange* of old and new ideas. Dhondt argues that the shock and deep disenchantment of the bourgeois liberal class with the Russian Revolution influenced Pirenne to desert his interest in social and economic history and its explanation in terms of collective social and economic movements, to return to political history as seen in the postwar volumes of the *Histoire de Belgique* and, toward the end of his life, to embrace a kind of spiritualism. He is convinced that Pirenne abandoned his conviction that history was rationally explicable in favor of the idea that much in history is explained by chance, by what he called „le hasard en histoire,” and that on this note he died.⁵⁴

Some of this neat schema of Dhondt's is correct. Pirenne admired Von Ranke's approach to history and his rigorous treatment of historical

(54) *Annali*, III, pp. 125-128.

evidence. He was definitely intrigued by the ideas of Lamprecht and found Lamprecht's „materialistische Geschichtsauffassung" of special value for the early volumes of his *Histoire de Belgique*.⁵⁵ He became impressed by the alternation and cycles he found in social and economic history.⁵⁶ After the War he was much more prone to admit the influence of individuals and individual events on the historical process, to see that sometimes certain events and developments can only be explained by „le hasard en histoire".⁵⁷ But Dhondt's schema is also distorted. It has Pirenne passing from one phase to another and, in each, exclusively embracing a particular methodology or concept. This is exactly what he did not do. He never lost interest in political history and never repudiated all of Von Ranke. Throughout his career his precise editions, his explanation of documents, and much of his writing were Rankian. More convinced prior to the War than afterwards of the supremacy of social and economic history and the importance of collective social and economic phenomena for historical developments and periods, he nevertheless kept social and economic history as his prime concern. As evidence of this, witness his *Les villes du moyen âge*, his *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, his *Mabomet et Charlemagne*, the last volume of his *Histoire de Belgique* with its fine chapters on nineteenth-century Belgian social and economic history, and his *La Belgique et la guerre mondiale*.

Like many gifted historians, Pirenne experienced various conceptual phases but he never completely abandoned one concept or set of concepts for others. The more he studied history and the longer he lived, the more he understood and worked to make his history reflect the vast complexity of historical causation. He did not repudiate rational explanation of history and embrace irrational, spiritual, and chance explanation toward the end of

(55) Lyon, *Bul. Com. Roy. d'Hist.*, CXXXII, pp. 171, 173-179, 211-212.

(56) See his article on the social stages of capitalism. While a prisoner at Creuzburg-an-der-Werra in Germany during World War I, Pirenne wrote to his friend Joseph Cuvelier about the oscillation between liberty and regulation: „Le XIVe siècle avance. Avec cela, je pense à une étude sur la périodicité de l'histoire économique, dans laquelle il me semble constater un curieux balancement entre les époques de liberté et les époques de réglementation. Exemples :

XIe - XIIe siècles : commerce libre.

XIIIe - XVe siècles : commerce réglementé par les métiers.

XVe - XVIe siècles : libertés commerciale et industrielle sous l'influence du capitalisme.

XVIIe - XVIIIe siècles : mercantilisme soumettant cette liberté au contrôle de l'Etat.

Fin XVIIIe - fin XIXe siècles : libéralisme économique, concurrence libre.

XIXe - XXe siècles : socialisme d'Etat commençant" (Gérardy, *Henri Pirenne, sa vie et son œuvre*, p. 92). After the War Pirenne gave lectures on this idea.

(57) While at Creuzburg-an-der-Werra Pirenne began to write down his thoughts on history in a notebook that he called *Réflexions d'un solitaire*. He considered sociology to be abstract history because it does not concern itself with historical chance or personalities. Writing that the social scientist ignores individuals, events, and chance in history, Pirenne speculated on „la nécessité" and „le hasard" in history. There was, he wrote, no such thing as historical necessity because chance (*fortuna*) could upset or divert a development or tendency long in progress. After the War he lectured frequently on „le hasard en histoire." For his views on the writing of history, see *La tâche de l'historien*, *Le Flambeau*, XIV, 1931, pp. 5-22.

his life. Rather, he sought out and used ideas and methods that seemed to him sensible and efficacious. Never an ideologue, never rigid and intolerant, never afraid of new ideas, never exclusively embracing or abandoning, but always flexible, fluid, and open, Pirenne became more eclectic as he matured and saw ever more clearly the complex, diverse, rich, and kaleidoscopic nature of history⁵⁸. When he died in 1935 he was more the complete historian than at any other time.

After some forty pages highly critical of Pirenne, Dhondt concludes on a note of sympathy intermingled with slight approbation. He contends that Pirenne's influence rapidly waned after his death, that historians, no longer beguiled by his eloquent tongue and dynamic personality, came to see that little of his historical work had any validity. And yet, by forcing men to meditate upon the past and the future, by making people think, Pirenne did have a valuable role. He was, Dhondt grudgingly concedes, even a superb human being.⁵⁹

Free to disagree with Pirenne, why has Dhondt chosen to spoil his acute and penetrating observations that could have contributed to a more balanced appreciation of Pirenne by being so vindictive, so prone to resort to stratagem, artifice, and distortion of facts? Why has he relentlessly sought to destroy Pirenne? Only he knows. But any attempt at explanation cannot be Rankian, Lamprechtian, Hegelian, or Marxian; it must be Freudian or even „le hasard en histoire.”

(58) In his *Réflexions d'un solitaire* Pirenne wrote that to approach truth the historian must always study both mass and individual events which, combined, produced historical reality. Deaths, births, personalities, and gifted or demented men have abruptly changed the course of long-term economic, social, cultural, and intellectual developments. The historian must see history in its totality. It should be noted that normally flexible by temperament, Pirenne became even more so by what he had endured between August 1914 and November 1918.

(59) *Annali*, III, p. 129.