

# The "Grand Charters" by the Counts of Flanders in the Twelfth Century

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## I. Introduction

The "Grand Charters" which we are concerned with in this paper is the common name of the urban criminal law system that the counts of Flanders issued to main towns in the latter half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars have called it by this name so far, although it might not be an appropriate name for its contents because it doesn't deal with giving liberties to towns. They regard it as the most important policy of the Flemish counts toward towns during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

When we speak of towns in Medieval Flanders, you may wonder if they refer to the late middle ages. The starting point of their evolution, however, can be found earlier in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In this paper, through the "Grand Charters", we would like to consider this question: What was the relationship like between the counts and townspeople during the formative period of urban Flemish society?

### (1) What were the "Grand Charters"?

The "Grand Charters" were actually issued in four phases. In the beginning, the first version of the "Grand Charters" was issued only to a town called Arras around 1163. With some revisions and additions, the second version was issued by the count of Flanders, Philip of Alsace, to seven principle towns in the county in the 1170s. The seven towns were Arras, Bruges, Douai, Ghent, Lille, Saint-Omer, and Ypres (See the Map of Medieval Flanders). This second

phase was the most important. After that, the count again added some articles to it. Some smaller towns then also received the laws.

The "Grand Charters" were criminal laws and criminal procedure acts for those towns. They were aimed at unifying urban judicial institutions. Each of them consisted of 28 articles in the second phase. For examples of their important contents, we can point out penal provisions toward different crimes and provisions concerning town courts mainly held by aldermen.

## **(2) The Theory of R. C. Van Caenegem**

What considerations then have scholars made so far in reference to the "Grand Charters"? Recently, a theory established by Belgian historian, R. C. Van Caenegem has been widely accepted. His theory has been divided into three points as follows:

Firstly, he considers the issuing of the "Charters" as a policy by which Count Philip tried to establish his authority or to centralize the government as a sovereign principality. He supposes that the count tried to establish order by imposing the same new criminal law system in each of the major towns scattered throughout the whole county. The contents were advantageous to the count and disadvantageous to the townspeople.

Secondly, he considers the "Charters" as a brand-new criminal law system which the count had systematically created. Count Philip was the first supreme lawgiver in Flemish legal history. The count is credited with taking the first great step forward out of the traditional world of individual local customary laws for each town, to unifying them under a new set of laws, namely the "Grand Charters".

Thirdly, he regards the "Charters" as being a very modern and rational judicial system in its criminal laws or criminal procedure acts. He suggests that the "Charters" introduced the procedure of accusation by the public authority, which is similar to a present-day criminal court. In addition, he points out that the "Charters" stipulated that aldermen could inquire regarding the proof of one's guilt or innocence. They did not depend on ordeals or judicial duels anymore to determine the final judgment.

### **(3) Some Reservations over Van Caenegem's Theory**

Thus, according to Van Caenegem, the "Grand Charters" is a large-scale policy to unify urban criminal laws under the authority of Count Philip. Moreover, he states that the count appears to have already acquired modern concepts for establishing a law system or a judicial institution. This interpretation seems, however, too modernistic for the "Charters" issued in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Should we not rather reconsider the meaning of the "Grand Charters", by placing it back again in its proper place within the normal course of the political history of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders?

## **II. The Charters issued by Flemish Counts in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **(1) The List of Charters**

In order to reconsider the meaning of the "Grand Charters", we needed to analyze over 1,000 charters issued by Flemish counts as sources which tell us best about the course of the political history of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders. Accordingly, of all the charters, we first selected certain ones which seemed to give us clues to the meaning of the "Grand Charters". This examination was based on

the summaries of the charters written by modern-day scholars.

During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the counts introduced the movement "Peace of God" to the county instead of churches so they could maintain order. To establish this peace later called "the count's peace", the counts made efforts to protect the liberties of church groups such as abbeys from being violated by lay persons (i.e. nobles, knights). Up until the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, most charters were issued by counts in order to defend church groups through arbitration to resolve conflicts or through confirmation of donations.

Thus, we listed new types of charters with contents which were unrelated to "the count's peace". We believe that these charters showed how the government of the Flemish counts was gradually changing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. We set up the following two criteria to draw up the list (See Table 1).

The first criterion has contents related not to church groups such as abbeys but to towns or villages. The charters which conform to this criterion may be divided into three types. The first is a charter of liberties, one of which is an exemption from taxation. The second type is a charter which includes criminal provisions like the "Grand Charters". Finally, the third type is one which relates to the townsmen or villagers in other respects.

The second criterion relates to the economic activities of abbeys. The charters conforming to this criterion were not for arbitration or confirmation regarding lands or tithes. This had been the common practice for establishing "the count's peace" until the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. But these charters are related to new activities such as the progress of reclamation or an exemption from tolls.

With such criteria, we selected only those charters issued

from 1067 to 1206 and grouped them by decade. The results have been arranged in Table 1.

## **(2) The Analysis of the List**

As a result of this examination, we noticed that the charters issued by Flemish counts in the 12<sup>th</sup> century were, in respect to content changes, characterized by the following two features.

Firstly, two different types of charters increased simultaneously during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, namely, charters issued to towns or villages and those related to the economic activities of abbeys. This tendency did not change even after the issue of the "Grand Charters" in the 1160s and the 1170s. Furthermore, the charters were issued not only to major towns which received the "Grand Charters", but also to smaller towns and villages. Therefore, we would like to propose this question: Can we state without any doubt that the count who issued the "Grand Charters" tried to establish his sovereign authority by controlling only the major towns, as Van Caenegem supposes?

Secondly, regarding charters issued to towns or villages, liberties and criminal provisions also increased simultaneously in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, there were quite a few charters which included both of them. This tendency did not change even after the issue of the "Grand Charters". From these observations we conclude that we should not make a sharp distinction between liberties and criminal provisions. Thus, we cannot share Van Caenegem's opinion that the "Grand Charters" was a brand-new criminal law system which the count created and which was quite different from the charters of liberties by which the counts confirmed local customary liberties.

### **(3) Three Questions as to Van Caenegem's Theory**

As a result of the analysis, three questions have arisen concerning Van Caenegem's theory. Firstly, why were the targets of the "Grand Charters" the seven main towns? Secondly, why were many of the articles criminal provisions? Thirdly, were the contents really advantageous to the count and disadvantageous to the townspeople, as Van Caenegem supposes?

## **III. Comparison between the "Grand Charters" and Other Types of Charters to Towns or Villages**

### **(1) Other Types of Charters to Towns or Villages**

In order to consider these three questions, we tried to compare the "Grand Charters" with the following charters. We selected these charters because they are big enough in size and offer enough contrast to compare them with the "Grand Charters". Firstly, the law of the Castellany of Bruges issued in 1190, an organized criminal law applied to villages. Secondly, two charters of liberties, which were very advantageous to the townsfolk of Saint-Omer and Aire. Thirdly, the charter of liberties to Ghent in 1191 which was also very advantageous to the townsmen according to Van Caenegem. He explains that they didn't like the "Grand Charters" which Count Philip imposed on them and acquired this new charter from his widow soon after he died. Along with other principle and additional charters to other towns, we have arranged all of them in Table 2.

As a result of the examination, we arrived at the following views to the three questions, although still provisional.

## (2) The First Question

Why were the targets of the "Grand Charters" the seven towns?

The towns which received the "Grand Charters" were, according to Van Caenegem, already the seven major towns representing Flanders and that is why the count aimed at establishing his sovereign authority trying to control the towns through the issue of the "Charters". But, we assert that the towns represented Flanders only after the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, if this is correct, those towns would still be in a period of growth and development compared with the other political groups such as nobles or churches, during the latter half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

As shown in Table 2, we notice the targets of the charters, not only the "Grand Charters", were mostly growing towns throughout the county. It was only the Castellany of Bruges on the North Sea coast that received one of the charters in the rural areas. That is to say, the counts did not issue any charters of liberties or criminal laws which were organized enough to be compared with the "Grand Charters", to villages in the inland areas of the county.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, many charters for rural areas, especially for abbeys' domains, were issued mainly to confirm donations both in the coastal and inland areas. Moreover, as we have seen in Table 1, charters related to the economic activities of abbeys tended to increase year by year in both areas. Nevertheless, the count never issued any organized charters of liberties or criminal laws to any villages in the inland areas but only to developing towns.

The inland rural areas of the county may have been dominated by local lords or other groups such as abbeys. Therefore

the count executed control by issuing charters of liberties or criminal laws only in the growing towns. This is our view to the first question regarding Van Caenegem's theory.

### **(3) The Second Question**

The second question was why many of the articles of the "Grand Charters" were criminal provisions. Looking at Table 2 again, it tells us that the charters which the counts issued to the townspeople during the 1120s were not criminal provisions but confirmations of liberties such as an exemption from tolls.

It was in the beginning of the 1160s that organized criminal laws first appeared in the charters issued to townfolk. During that period, the first version of the "Grand Charters" was also issued to Arras.

According to Van Caenegem, the first version was tentatively issued in the 1160s by the count before the second version was issued to the seven towns during the 1170s. He is arguing that the count started his policy of unifying urban criminal law systems with a definite purpose at that time. But, can we state that as firmly as he?

Almost at the same time with the first version to Arras, two other sets of criminal provisions were issued to the inhabitants of other towns. As Table 2 indicates, the count first issued criminal provisions as well as a tariff of tolls to a newly built port town called Nieuwpoort in 1163, when he also issued the "Charters" to Arras. The next year in 1164, he reconfirmed liberties to Saint-Omer which was famous for its commune and gave additional articles to that town. Criminal provisions were provided as additional articles.

We compared these two sets of criminal provisions with the



"Grand Charters" in respect to the content of each article. The comparison made it clear, first of all, that each of the three charters included criminal provisions for some principle crimes such as murder. But their procedures and judicial processes were quite different from each other. Additionally, the unique contents of many articles within each charter could not be found in other charters.

In this way, the three sets of criminal provisions were very different. The contents of their articles were very particular and specific. Therefore, could we not rather say that each of the criminal laws, including the "Grand Charters", was based on local customary penal provisions peculiar to each town?

Especially for Saint-Omer, the count later added criminal provisions to the customary liberties which were extremely advantageous to the townspeople. Also, if the criminal provisions were based on local customary laws, it could be that the townsmen had their own reason for wanting the count to confirm their customary criminal provisions as well as their customary liberties.

As we have seen in Table 1, for other towns, the count also issued charters which included both of them. Regarding charters to towns, liberties and criminal provisions increased simultaneously in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible that the townsfolk had some positive reason for accepting not only liberties but also criminal provisions. Criminal provisions may also have been a part of the customary liberties which the townsfolk wanted the count to confirm.

Furthermore, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the counts of Flanders seem to have paid more attention to the Crusades than to domestic politics. The criminal provisions shown in Table 2 were issued

either between each of their seven Crusade expeditions or just before some of them began. Count Philip died in 1191 during his last expedition. It does not seem to us that his main political concern was to establish his sovereign authority within his county.

Thus, isn't it probable that the criminal provisions were not the result of the count's domestic policy but rather the townsmen's petitions to him for their issue? They may have at times seized the opportunity of the count's leaving home for the Crusades in order to have him confirm their customary criminal provisions.

Judging from the above, as to the reason why many of the articles of the "Grand Charters" were criminal provisions, we cannot readily believe that it was the result of the count's policy of trying to establish his sovereign authority, as Van Caenegem supposes. It may have been the result of the townsmen's petitions to the count for the issue of the criminal provisions, at least in the 1160s. This is our view to the second question regarding his theory.

#### **(4) The Third Question**

The third question was whether the contents of the "Grand Charters" were really advantageous to the count and disadvantageous to the townspeople or not. Compared with other principle criminal laws during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which are shown in Table 2, certainly the "Grand Charters" was advantageous to the count. For example, its articles include many provisions which seem profitable to the count or emphasize his role in the urban judicial system.

It is mainly based on the following two features of the "Grand Charters" that Van Caenegem supposes it was advantageous to the count.

The first feature is that the "Charters" stipulated a maximum

fine of 60 libra, which was an extraordinarily large amount. Moreover, when a collected fine was shared among the count, a castellan, a victim, and a town, the count's share was very large. As for the fine of 60 libra, Van Caenegem considers that it was so expensive that even the richest townfolk could not afford to pay it. Then he suggests that we can see, from the fact that the count imposed such an impractical and severe fine, how vigorously he was pushing forward his policy of unifying urban criminal law systems in order to establish his authority.

On the other hand, Van Caenegem supposes the count mainly aimed at collecting fines through articles other than ones which stipulated the maximum fine of 60 libra. The count was trying to earn a more realistic income from lighter fines which we can also find in other criminal provisions besides the "Grand Charters".

If so, in considering the question whether the "Grand Charters" was advantageous to the count or not, more attention should be paid to the more realistic profits received from the lighter fines. We do not agree with Van Caenegem regarding the unrealistic maximum fine as the count's main method to establish his sovereign authority by issuing the "Charters".

Moreover, according to Van Caenegem, it was the count's chancellor, Robert of Aire who was actively engaged in designing the "Charters". He was known as a person who made some administrative and fiscal reforms such as the organization of the count's chancery, during the latter part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, we may say that the government's issue of the "Grand Charters" was based not on a sovereign abstract idea, but on a practical approach by government officials who were engaged in administrative and fiscal affairs. It seems reasonable to assume that they were interested in securing income from fines rather

than in establishing their sovereign's authority.

Next, Van Caenegem points out the following feature of the "Grand Charters" as the second reason for which he regards the "Charters" as being advantageous to the count. In criminal provisions for towns including the "Charters", two kinds of judges appeared in articles which stipulated judicial procedures, namely judges under the direct order of the count and judges(aldermen) chosen by the townsfolk. It is certain that the "Grand Charters" often confirmed and emphasized that the count and his judges were placed above aldermen.

However, if the count's officials were focusing mainly on income from fines rather than on establishing his authority, we can also interpret this feature differently from Van Caenegem's view. In other words, the "Charters" emphasized the role of the count's judges in order to make it easier to collect fines with more certainty. Perhaps this was the reason the count, or rather his chancellor, tried to unify the judicial systems of the seven towns.

In this way, in answer to the last question of whether the contents of the "Grand Charters" were advantageous to the count or not, we believe that there is another explanation than Van Caenegem's.

#### **(5) Our Views as to the Three Questions**

Now, to the three questions regarding Van Caenegem's theory, we can propose the following possible answers. Firstly, why were the "Grand Charters" issued to developing towns? Because the inland rural areas of the county were dominated by local lords, therefore the count executed control by issuing charters of liberties or criminal laws only in the growing towns. Secondly, why were criminal laws given to the townsmen? Because they wanted

the count to confirm their local customary criminal provisions for some reason. Thirdly, why did the "Charters" emphasize the count's role in the urban judicial system? Because his government officials tried to secure income from fines.

On the basis of these views, the meaning of the "Grand Charters" can be different from the one suggested by Van Caenegem in the course of the political history of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

##### **(1) Summary of our Discussion**

During the 1170s, Count Philip of Flanders issued an urban law system, the "Grand Charters", to all the seven major towns scattered within the county at the same time. According to Belgian historian, R. C. Van Caenegem, the issue of the "Charters" was a policy by which the count aimed to establish his sovereign authority or centralize the government. To that purpose, the count created the brand-new urban criminal law system as the supreme lawgiver and imposed it on the main towns. Van Caenegem's theory, however, seemed to us too modernistic and abstract. We supposed that in the background of the issue of the "Grand Charters", there could have been specific circumstances peculiar to both the count and the townsfolk in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders.

Thus, we made the following two examinations as the first step in clarifying the circumstances. First, we followed the changes of the contents of the charters which the Flemish counts issued during the 12<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of summaries written by modern-day scholars. As a result of the examination, three

questions arose more concretely about Van Caenegem's theory for the "Grand Charters". Then we selected some charters with contents sizable enough to be compared with the "Grand Charters" in order to consider the three questions. Comparing those charters with the "Grand Charters", we came to have certain views that are different from Van Caenegem's theory as to the meaning of the "Grand Charters".

## **(2) Another Meaning of the "Grand Charters"**

Judging from the discussion above, we are now able to suggest another meaning of the "Grand Charters" in light of the changing relationship between the counts and towns during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

First, at the end of the 1120s, inhabitants of some towns took advantage of the political disorder over a succession to the countship and gained charters of liberties. Their liberties were an exemption from tolls, a town court held by aldermen, a right to modify customary laws by themselves, and so on.

Then, during the 1160s, the organized criminal laws were first issued to some towns, for example, the first version of the "Grand Charters" to Arras. We suppose that these criminal laws were issued as the result of petitions from the townsmen to the count. They may have asked him to confirm criminal provisions which had existed as various local customary laws.

Thus we think that the issue of the "Grand Charters" to the seven towns during the 1170s was the count's answer to their request. The count's competent chancellor, Robert of Aire, and other government officials may have planned to expand the count's role in urban judicial systems mainly in order to secure income from fines. In that period, the interests of the townsmen who

wanted the count to confirm their criminal provisions seemed to harmonize with the interests of the count, who was prevented by local lords from executing control in the inland rural areas of the county. The count probably received the petitions from some towns, and his chancellor found a good opportunity to extend his influence into the inland areas and secure income from various fines.

From the end of the 1180s to the beginning of the 1190s, however, criminal laws were again issued to each town separately. For instance, the townsfolk of Ghent acquired another law system instead of the "Grand Charters" from Count Philip's widow soon after he died.

It is possible that such a change was caused by the following: The contents of the "Grand Charters" during the 1170s were based on unrealistic ideas, indicating that the way of thinking of the government officials may have been far from the local realities of each town. The maximum fine of 60 libra serves as a good example of such a contrast. They imposed the impractical fine on all the seven towns at the same time. Rather, if the count gave a particular criminal law separately to each town with contents conforming to the realities of each, it would be more advantageous both to the count and to the townsfolk. The government officials may have noticed that they could secure income from fines more reliably by doing that, rather than by imposing the same criminal law system on various towns.

Therefore, this is another meaning of the "Grand Charters" which we suggest in contrast to the theory established by Van Caenegem: The "Charters" in the 1170s was the count's answer to the townsmen who came to ask him to confirm their customary criminal laws in the 1160s. Rather than the count, it was his officials who found opportunities to expand his authority into the

inland areas of the county and to secure income from various fines. But its contents, which reflected more their businesslike ideas, turned out to be far from the realities of each town.

### **(3) Unresolved Questions**

In the future, we would like to clarify more concretely how the relationship between the counts and towns was changing during the 12<sup>th</sup> century by analyzing in detail charters related to towns. First of all, we will have to inquire into this question: Why did the townsfolk come to need organized criminal laws for the first time in the 1160s? Then the following two questions remain to be solved. Firstly, even if they needed criminal laws, why did the townsmen of Arras accept the "Grand Charters" which was rather advantageous to the count's interests? Secondly, why did the other six towns follow Arras by also accepting the second version of the "Grand Charters" in the 1170s, which was more advantageous to the count?

Starting from the conclusions which we have tentatively arrived at here, we would like to add some new knowledge to the image people have of medieval Flanders as an urban society viewed from its formative period in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, more generally, we would like to consider the relationship between medieval towns and their authorities, by using material on 12<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders, and by placing the whole political structure, including groups other than the counts and towns, within our perspective.



**<Table 1> The Charters issued by the Counts of Flanders  
from 1067 to 1206**

Contents Years	CRITERION 1			CRITERION 2	Total*	
	① Liberties	② Criminal Provisions	③ Others	Towns or Villages		Economic Activities of abbeys
1067-1100	1	0	0	1	0	26
1101-1110	0	0	0	0	5	23
1111-1120	4	3	3	9	4	51
1121-1130	5	5	1	7	2	46
1131-1140	0	0	0	0	5	40
1141-1150	1	0	5	6	2	71
1151-1160	4	0	0	4	8	65
1161-1170	7	5	5	14	18	118
1171-1180	10	8	7	19	10	164
1181-1190	11	7	6	17	12	146
1191-1200	14	7	11	21	22	155
1201-1206	5	5	15	24	15	143

This table is based on (1), (3), (4), (5), and (13) of the following bibliography.

\*---The "Total" includes the charters which relate to "the count's peace".

The shaded areas indicate that the charters include the "Grand Charters".

**<Table 2> The Principle Charters to Towns or Villages  
issued by the Counts of Flanders during the 12<sup>th</sup> Century**

<1120s>

Year	Towns/Villages	Liberties	Criminal Provisions	Other Contents	Source
1127	Bruges	○			(2)---c.55
1127	Aardenburg	○			(2)---c.55
1127	Saint-Omer	○			(6)
1128	Bruges	○			(2)---c.102
1128	Saint-Omer	○ = 1127		○	(3)---n.2

<1160s>

Year	Towns/Villages	Liberties	Criminal Provisions	Other Contents	Source
1163	Arras		○		(8)---n.107
1163	Nieuwpoort		○	○	(3)---n.222
1164a	Saint-Omer	○ = 1128		○ = 1128	(3)---n.231
1164b	Saint-Omer	○ = 1164a	○	○ = 1164a	(3)---n.233

<1170s>

Year	Towns/Villages	Liberties	Criminal Provisions	Other Contents	Source
--1177	Arras		○		(15) (17)
--1177	Bruges		○		(15)
--1177	Donar		○		(7) (17)
--1177	Ghent		○		(15)
--1177	Lille		○		(17)
--1177	Saint-Omer		○		cf (15)
--1177	Ypres		○		(17)
1178	Ghent		○		(16)

<1180s—1190s>

Year	Towns/Villages	Liberties	Criminal Provisions	Other Contents	Source
1188	Orchies	○	○ = Grand Charter of Douai		(7)---n.259
1188	Aire	○	○		(8)---n.20
1189	Oudenaarde		○ = Grand Charter of Ghent		(9)---n.III
1190	Castellany of Bruges		○		(10)---n.I
1191a	Ghent	○	○		(5)---n.1
1191b	Ghent	○ = 1191a	○ = 1191a +2 articles		(5)---n.4
1199	Saint-Omer	○ = 1164b	○ = 1164b	○ = 1164b	(5)---n.87

The numbers of sources are the same as in the following bibliography.

The shaded areas indicate that the charter is one of the "Grand Charters".

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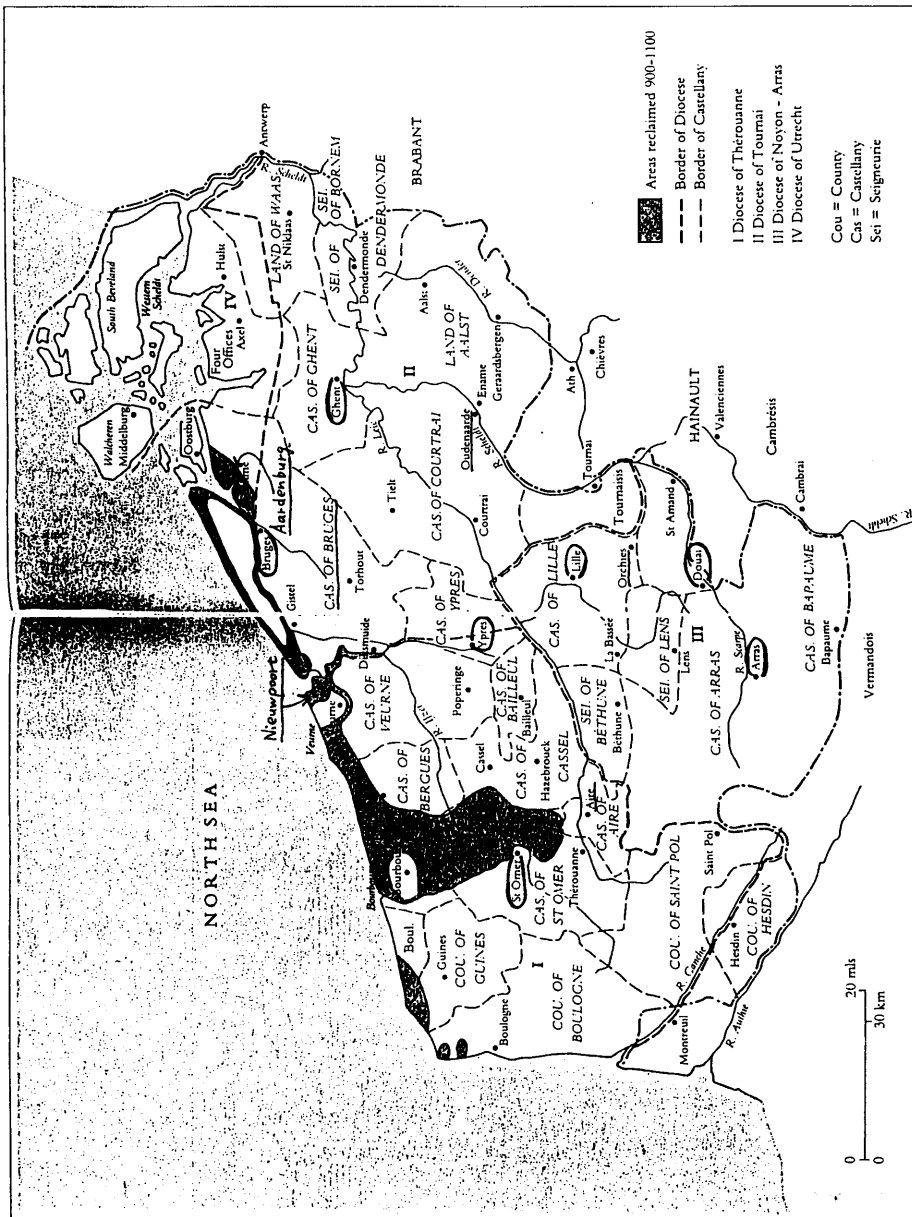
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Map of Medieval Flanders



2. Flanders around 1100, showing alterations of coastline after 900  
 After F.L. Ganshof, *La Flandre sous les premiers comtes* (Brussels, 1943)

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