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Blue clouds of smoke above the duchy?

**Consumption and distribution of tobacco in small towns and rural areas in Brabant
(eighteenth century)**

Preliminary version, please do not quote

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Introduction

Since Joan Thirsk and Neil McKendrick somewhat provocatively put forward the existence of a preindustrial 'consumer society' and 'consumer revolution', historians have become more and more interested in the study of early modern changes in consumption and distribution.¹ Increasing parts of society proved to be willing and able to consume a growing array of new goods and commodities that were marketed through an extensive and diversified retailing network using modern sales techniques. In the Southern Low Countries, this process has been well documented for the commercial metropolis of Antwerp.² However, far less is known about consumer habits and distributive practices in numerous small towns and rural areas whose inhabitants made up the bulk of the population.³ In my PhD-research, I aim to bridge this gap in our historical knowledge, and this paper is a brief presentation of some first results.

To accomplish this rather ambitious goal, I will connect with a tradition of historians who studied changing patterns of consumption and retailing through the lens of colonial groceries. This is a popular choice because these products played a dynamic role. Carole Shammas, for example, stressed that mass consumption of groceries proliferated the growth of country shops.⁴ Exotic consumables also tend to be highly visible in the source material because they were new and, by consequence, attracted the attention of contemporaries. Especially tobacco was considered "*comme une espèce vicieuse sur laquelle tous les Etats ont mis de gros droits à leur profit*".⁵ If preserved, the tax accounts of provincial excises on tobacco are a very interesting source because they allow for a time-series analysis and cross-time comparison of quantitative variables about demand and distribution covering a long period and a large number of small towns and villages in a wide and diverse area.

After a brief introduction of the normative framework that determined my primary source, the accounts of the Brabantine provincial tobacco excise, an analysis of the excise revenue will first and foremost make clear that demand for tobacco was increasing in small towns and rural

Abbreviations: SAA (State Archive Anderlecht), Cart. (Estates of Brabant: Cartons), Kwit. (Estates of Brabant: Receipts), Reg. (Estates of Brabant: Registers), Supl. (Estates of Brabant: Supplement).

¹ For a recent literature overview, see Bruno Blondé a.o. (eds.), *Retailers and consumer changes in early modern Europe. England, Italy, France and the Low Countries* (Tours 2005) 241-256; Bruno Blondé a.o. (eds.), *Buyers and sellers. Retail circuits and practices in medieval and early modern Europe* (Turnhout 2006) 7-29; Ilja Van Damme, 'Pendelen tussen revoluties en tradities. Recent historisch onderzoek naar de kleinhandel in de late middeleeuwen en de nieuwe tijd (ca. 1450-ca. 1850)', *Stadsgeschiedenis 2* (2007) 54-65.

² See for example the recent book by Ilja Van Damme, *Verleiden en verkopen: Antwerpse kleinhandelaars en hun klanten in tijden van crisis (ca. 1648-ca. 1748)* (Amsterdam 2007).

³ According to the 1784 population census, 76.06 percent of the Brabantine population lived outside the walls of the capital cities Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven (Claude Bruneel, 'Economie en samenleving in de eeuw van de Verlichting', in: Raymond Van Uytven a.o. (eds.), *Geschiedenis van Brabant van het hertogdom tot heden* (Leuven 2004) 481, fig. 4.1a).

⁴ Carole Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer in England and America* (Oxford 1990) 259-260: "The demand for groceries only obtainable from abroad and not traditionally sold in the public market stimulated the mercantile community to set up country shops. [...] It was the selling of goods that people had to buy constantly that made shop retailing attractive."

⁵ Quoted in Ghislaine De Boom, *Les ministres plénipotentiaires dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens principalement Cobenzl* (Académie royale de Belgique. Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques. Mémoires. Collection in-8°. 2^e série, 31) (Brussel 1932) 185.

areas in the mid-eighteenth century. The distributive trade responded to the rise in demand by both in-width and in-depth expansion. Secondly, I will examine a selection of both quantitative and qualitative information available from literature and published sources in an attempt to pinpoint the variables which created a favourable climate for the expansion of demand. In this first exploration of the subject I will mainly look at the effects of changes in price and taste. Considering price as a determining variable is an obvious choice in a pre-industrial society characterised by "*Warenhunger*" and "*Warennot*". The absolute price of tobacco presumably dropped after the development of inland tobacco cultivation and manufacture in the mid-eighteenth century. But in case of a stimulant like tobacco, taste also played an important role in the diffusion process. After all, consumers do not buy and use tobacco because it is cheap, they do it primarily because they like its taste. The first half of the eighteenth century saw the popularisation of a new form of tobacco consumption, namely snuffing. Demonstration effects probably played a role in the diffusion of taking snuff. In order to isolate the effect of each determining variable, I will compare divergent evolutions in different regions of the duchy and in an urban and rural environment.

Tobacco taxation in the Duchy of Brabant

Although several towns had already begun taxing the consumption of tobacco in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, taxation of tobacco by the Estates of Brabant (*Staten van Brabant*) started only as late as 1694.⁶ In 1707, the Estates approved a new excise tax ("*impost*") on tobacco as well as on gin and brandy in order to raise the necessary capital for an extraordinary subsidy of 150,000 guilders to the monarch. Only the tobacco consumed in small cities and on the countryside ("*binnen de clijne steden, vrijheden ende dorpen van Brabant*") was subject to taxation. The capital-cities Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven remained exempt. During its first years of existence, the tobacco excise was subject to frequent changes in the method of collection. Lease, "*admodiatie*" (a form of lease where leaseholder and Estates shared profits), and direct exploitation by the Estates played leapfrog, making correct interpretation of revenue figures very difficult. In order to facilitate collection and reduce the risk of fraudulent imports, from 1726 onwards, the Estates allowed the local tax collectors ("*collecteurs*") to make agreements (generally called "*abonnerenten*" or "*akkoorden*") with the tobacconists ("*toebackverkoopers*") under the direction of their office ("*comptoir*").⁷ In this paper, I will focus

⁶ J.J. Nickmilder, *Inventaire des registres des Etats de Brabant* (unpublished inventory, SAA, Inventaires de la première section, nr. 122). However, these accounts are not precise enough to separate the revenues for beer, gin and tobacco. For an introduction and bibliography on the Estates of Brabant, see Beatrijs Augustyn, 'Staten van Brabant', in: Raymond Van Uytten a.o. (eds.), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795* (Brussel 2000) 97-132.

⁷ These local tax offices were grouped in three Quarters ("*Kwartieren*", also called "*Departementen*"), namely Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven. Each Quarter stood under the direction of a receiver general ("*Rentmeester-generaal*") charged with financial control (hence three series of accounts, one for each Quarter) and a director

on the period between 1726 and 1786, when a new instruction for the collection of the tobacco excise was issued.⁸

The tobacconists who agreed to the settlement paid an annual redemption fee that was in proportion to their sales' volume.⁹ Local tax collectors were probably well informed about individual tobacconists' turnover because tobacconists were obliged to declare any tobacco they bought to the local tax collector and have it marked with the seal of the Estates.¹⁰ Some of these accounts also provide information about the number of tobacconists and their individual turnover. Under these circumstances, I think it is justified to regard the total revenue of this excise as a truthful reflection of relative changes in demand, but an underestimation due to deterioration, spillage, and of course fraud can never be excluded. Also, this approach excludes tobacconists who did not have an agreement with the Estates (they paid two styvers for each pound of tobacco they sold), but their turnover was negligible in comparison to that of those who had an agreement.¹¹

Trends in demand and distribution

What trends in demand for tobacco can be derived from the total revenue of the Estates' tobacco excise? Judging from graph one, there was a growth in demand until around 1770, with peaks in 1768 and 1772. However, growth was not equally divided (see appendix one for compound annual growth rates). The increase in demand was strongest between 1743 and 1761. This is reflected by a compound annual growth rate which is more than 2.5 times that of the years between 1730 and 1743. From 1761 to 1774 growth slowed again, with the exception of the above mentioned peaks in 1768 and 1772. After 1774 revenues started to decline. This can point in the direction of an actual decline in demand as well as increasing tax evasion. Observations by tax officials and evidence from city excises on tobacco indicate the second option. Prior to the issue of the new instruction in 1786, tax officials complained about tobacco being smuggled in from neighbouring provinces. To cover the fraud, tobacconists who sold the contraband used

general ("*Directeur-generaal*") responsible for the collection of excise taxes. Agreements with tobacconist appeared first in the Quarter of Antwerp in 1725/26 (SAA, Kwit., nrs. 1,237-1,282 and 3,230-3,249), soon followed by the Quarter of Brussels in 1729/30 (SAA, Kwit., nrs. 1,172-1,223 and 3,222-3,228) and later by the Quarter of Leuven from 1760/61 onwards (SAA, Kwit., nr. 1,126-1,150 and 3,212-3,219). During the years 1732/33 (Brussels and Antwerp), 1744/45 (Brussels) and 1753/54-1754/55 (Brussels) a different method of collection was used. Due to war and revolution, the tobacco excise was not or only partially collected in 1747/48 (especially in Antwerp), 1788/89 (all three Quarters) and 1791/92 (Antwerp and Brussels). For 1782/83, the Brussels' accounts are missing.

⁸ SAA, Cart., nr. 432/4, Instruction of 31 October 1786.

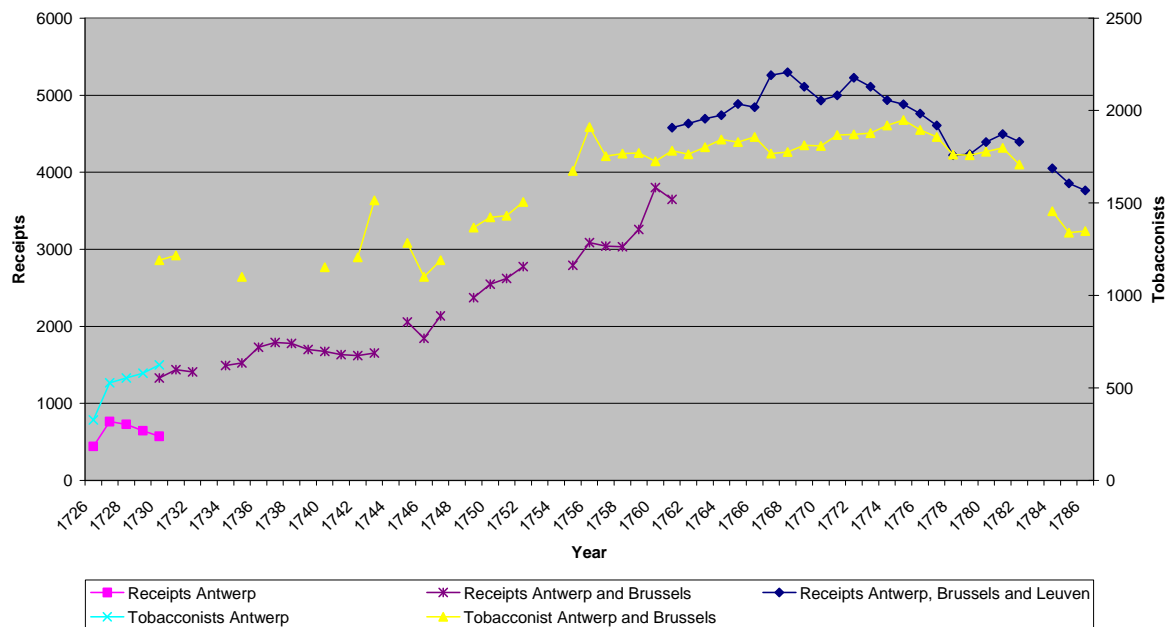
⁹ Detailed instructions were only issued as late as 1786 and 1789 (SAA, Cart., nr. 432/4: Instructions of 13 December 1786 and 17 February 1789), but these were only the codification of a long-existing practice (see for example SAA, Kwit., nr. 1,176: Resolution of the Permanent Deputation on 20 November 1733).

¹⁰ *Placcaerten van Brabant* IX (Brussel [1766]) 333-340 and 386-399: Ordinances of 9 October 1745 and 18 May 1764; SAA, Cart., nr. 432/4: Instruction of 17 February 1789.

¹¹ For example in the Quarter of Brussels, revenues from tobacconists who didn't have an agreement on average made up a mere 0.68 percent of revenues from agreements.

false seals and declared only small quantities to the tax collectors.¹² The revenues of the local city excises on tobacco in Leuven, Mechelen, and Diest showed some humps and bumps, but in general stagnated in the last quarter of the century.¹³

Graph 1: Demand for and distribution of tobacco in Brabant (1726-1786), receipts of the Estates' tobacco excise in Brabantine guilders and number of tobacconists in agreement with the Estates



Since the accounts also provide information about the number and turnover of tobacconists, it is possible to reconstruct how the retailing network responded to fluctuations in demand. In this respect, combining time-series analysis with cross-time comparison will prove very useful to determine how growth in demand was met by in-width and in-depth expansion of the retailing network. Although we only possess full information about numbers and individual turnover for the Quarter of Brussels, it is possible to roughly estimate the total number of tobacconists from the available data for the Quarter of Antwerp.¹⁴ Unfortunately, for Leuven the accounts are far too less precise to make this exercise.

Graph one shows a general increase in tobacconist-numbers in the second and third quarter of the century, with strong growth after 1743. Between 1761 and 1774, we see the same slow rate of growth as with the revenues. Finally, around 1774 the number of tobacconists started to dwindle. But the evolution of the number of tobacconists did not exactly parallel trends in demand. The expansion after 1743 was not as strong as that of the revenues: the compound

¹² SAA, Cart., nr. 432/4: "Mémoire touchant les abonnements" by Petrus Van Bommel, 21 March 1786.

¹³ City Archives Leuven, Old archives, nrs. 5,335-6,907: City accounts, 1713-1792; City Archives Mechelen, Old archives, K Subsidies S II, nrs. 50-111 and B Comptes S I, nrs. 373-468: Various accounts, 1635-1793; City Archives Diest, Old archives, nrs. 395-537: City accounts, 1717/18-179/92.

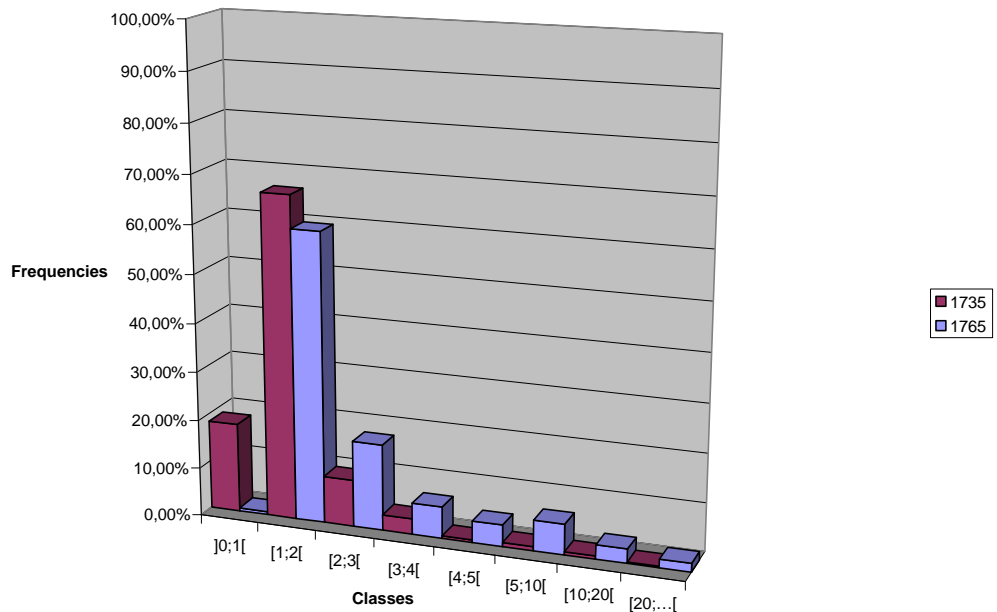
¹⁴ We have information about the number of tobacconists for roughly 60 percent of total revenues, but between 1735 and 1755 these figures have to be treated with caution. Especially the number for 1743, estimated from only 22 percent of total revenues, is probably too high. To calculate the compound annual growth rate I used the more probable figure of 1,231. This number was calculated using the figure for 1742 (1,206) and the CAGR between 1743 and 1745 (2.11 %).

annual growth rate was roughly 2.5 percentage points higher. Also, the saturation point was reached a few years earlier, around 1757 as opposed to 1761. Apparently, the existing retailing network proved quite capable to meet the growing demand for tobacco, and tobacconists were able to expand their businesses by increasing turnover. A cross-time comparison of two years before and after the period of strong expansion between 1743 and 1761, namely 1735 and 1765, makes this evolution even more clear. However, this exercise will forcedly remain geographically limited to the Quarter of Brussels (see appendix two).

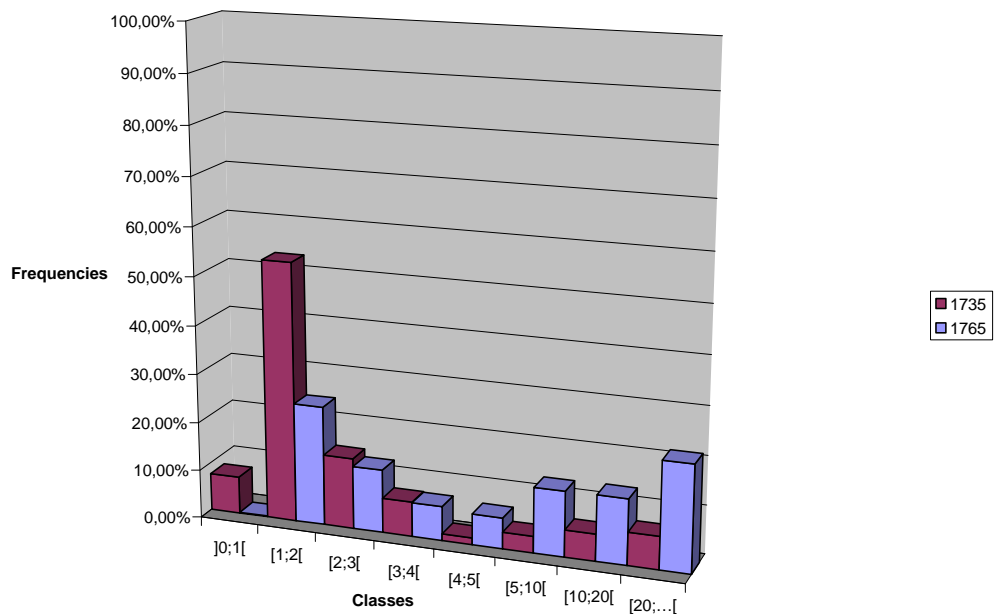
Between 1735 and 1765, demand more than tripled while the number of tobacconists not even doubled. Opportunities for geographical expansion and opening up new markets were indeed limited, as tobacco-selling in 1735 already extended far beyond the urban walls into the countryside: 70.3 percent of the urban and rural communities had one or more tobacconists amongst its residents. By 1765, this percentage had increased to 83.4.¹⁵ The average number of tobacconists per community rose only slightly from 2.93 in 1735 to 4.25 in 1765 (or from 4.17 to 5.09 if only those communities with at least one tobacconist are considered). While the number of tobacconist did not increase drastically in comparison to the growth in demand, individual turnover did. As the median redemption fee rose from one to one-and-a-half guilders, the bulk of tobacconists benefited from the increase in demand. But although the majority of tobacconists still paid between one and two guilders, graphs 2a and 2b show that especially those with a larger turnover profited. Not only did the number of tobacconists who paid more than two guilders increase between 1735 and 1765, but also the share in total turnover of tobacconists who paid more than four guilders augmented. The increasing gap between average and median redemption fee also points in the direction of a right-skewed distribution and growing concentration. The slightly-faster-than-revenues dwindling of the number of tobacconists after 1774 too suggests that during this period of contraction some, most likely larger tobacconists managed to further expand their business at the expense of others.

¹⁵ In 1735, the location of 486 tobacconists on a total of 620 was known. The collectors of Beert, Evere, Genappe, Grimbergen, Sint-Agatha-Berchem and Walem did not specify the location of tobacconists. In 1765, Duisburg, Kapelle-op-den-Bos, Overijse, Puurs, Tubize, Vilvoorde and Willebroek have to be added to this list, but Genappe can be left out. For this year the location of 605 out of 1,014 tobacconists is known. I used the list in Herman Coppens, 'Meerijen en kwartieren', in: Raymond Van Uyten a.o. (eds.), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795* (Brussel 2000) 661-668 as a guideline for the total number of communities. But because this list was compiled from an administrative viewpoint, communities that did not have their own aldermen's court ("*schepenbank*" or "*echevinage*") were not included. In 1735 there were four communities that did not appear in this list but had at least one tobacconist and in 1765 their number had risen to 11. With the exception of Klein-Willebroek, this where hamlets with one or two tobacconists each (11 in total in 1735 and 14 in 1765).

Graph 2a: Tobacconists distributed by redemption fee (1735 and 1765), histogram of relative frequencies



Graph 2b: Turnover distributed by redemption fee (1735 and 1765), histogram of relative frequencies



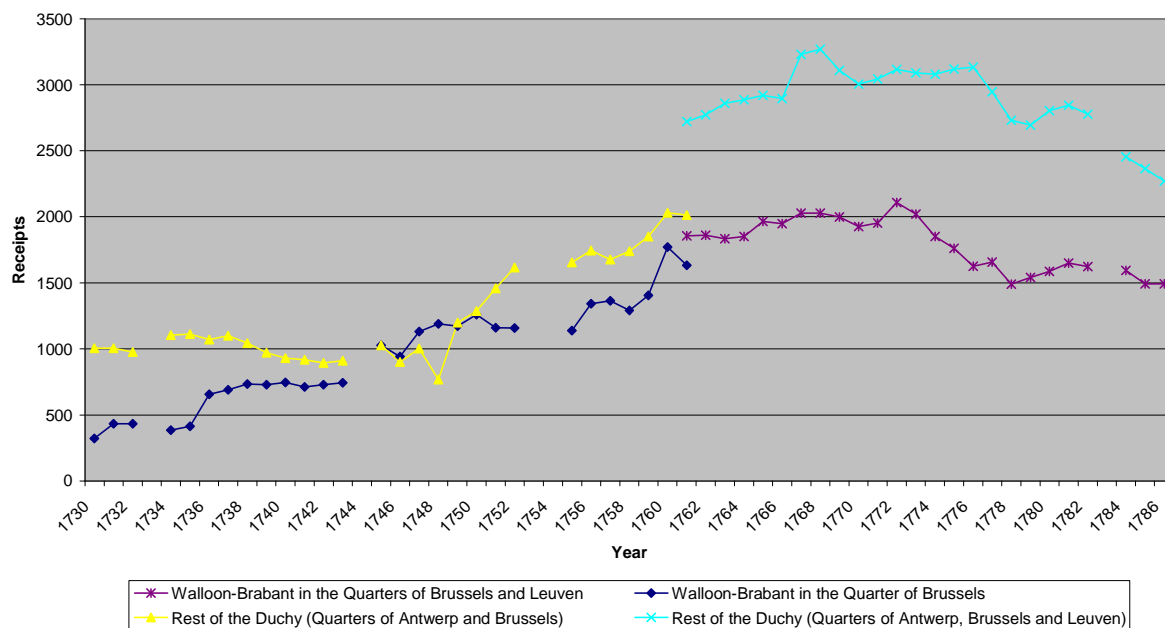
The remaining part of this paper will deal with how these fluctuations in demand were determined by changes in price and taste.

The effect of price: changes in supply

An increase in supply caused by the development of inland tobacco cultivation and manufacture and growing tobacco imports in the mid-eighteenth century probably caused absolute prices of tobacco leaves and manufactures to drop, allowing for an increase in demand. On the contrary,

prices probably rose when supply from imports declined during the American War of Independence. Isolating changes in demand in French-speaking Walloon-Brabant from the rest of the duchy is interesting in this respect because this was one of the few places in Brabant where tobacco was grown. Also, according to the 1764 industrial census, all of the Brabantine tobacco manufactures outside the capital cities were located here. Finally, it was close to important areas of cultivation and manufacturing in the province of Hainaut. As a result, probably the effects of the price-drop firstly manifested here.

Graph 3: Demand for tobacco in Walloon-Brabant and the rest of the duchy (1730-1786), receipts of the Estates' tobacco excise in Brabantine guilders



Graph three clearly shows that the growth in demand before 1743 mentioned earlier came from Walloon-Brabant alone, and also in the following period demand increased first in Walloon-Brabant. Indeed, at last in the early 1730's, tobacco was being cultivated and manufactured in Nivelles. Jean Jacques Gomez and Jean Baptist Nasteu engaged in tobacco cultivation and processed the leaves they had grown themselves or that were produced by fellow townsmen.¹⁶ The tobacco they produced was probably quite cheap, selling at twelve guilders per 100 pound, which was only half the price of unprocessed Virginia leaf and one third the price of snuff on the Amsterdam Commodities Exchange ("*Goederenbeurs*") at that time.¹⁷ Judging by the demand curve, the rest of the duchy had to wait for relatively cheap priced tobacco until after the Treaty of Aachen (1748). This freed the Austrian government from the straightjacket of the Barrier Treaty, and it began to conduct a mercantilist economic policy. National production of goods was encouraged by a protectionist customs policy and "*octroys*". These "*octroys*" offered producers

¹⁶ SAA, Cart., nr. 431/4: Requests of Jean Jacques Gomez and Jean Baptist Nasteu to the Estates of Brabant, 1733 and 1735.

¹⁷ SAA, Cart., nr. 431/4: Request of Jean Jacques Gomez to the Estates of Brabant, 1735. See graph 4 for prices on the Amsterdam Commodities Exchange.

substantial benefits, most importantly immunity from custom duties and taxes.¹⁸ One economic sector that profited from this policy was the tobacco industry. The 1764 industrial census mentions 164 tobacco manufactories, 83 percent of which were set up after 1747.¹⁹ Judging by the remarques of the custom officials who carried out the census, their produce was mainly destined for the inland market. The establishment of tobacco manufactories spurred the inland cultivation of tobacco. By 1757, the cultivation of tobacco had spread to the extent that councillor De Nobili of the Council of Finances (*Raad van Financiën*) complained that "*la culture de cette feuille est tellement accrue dans ces provinces [...] qu'il est à craindre qu'elle ne se multiplie de plus en plus, au grand préjudice de ce pays, si le Gouvernement ne prend au plutôt des mesures rigoureuses pour extirper le mal*".²⁰

But cultivators and manufacturers could not completely satisfy demand and both tobacco leaves and finished tobacco products had to be imported. The imports of tobacco increased very strong between 1749 and 1761, causing De Nobili to remarque "*que la consommation en est tellement augmentée dans ce pays-ci, qu'il entre présentement plus de tabac dans le courant d'une année, qu'il entrainait en trois avant cette époque*".²¹ As graph four demonstrates, tobacco imports in the Austrian Netherlands and tobacco prices followed roughly the same pattern as the Brabantine demand. After the strong expansion of imports and demand between 1748 and 1761, both growth of imports and demand stopped. More or less stable prices suggest supply and demand reached equilibrium in the period roughly between 1760 and 1775. During the American War of Independence (1775-1783), there was a dramatic drop in imports due to the diminishment of British exports from the American colonies, causing prices of Virginia tobacco leaves to soar. Prices of inland tobacco leaf also rose, but to a lesser extent because inland cultivation was quickly expanded.²²

¹⁸ For a general overview, see Hilde Coppejans-Desmedt, 'Aspecten van de industriële politiek in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', in: Idem (ed.), *Overheid en economie. Economische aspecten van de overheidsbeleid in en met betrekking tot de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden. Handelingen van het colloquium te Antwerpen 27 februari 1988* (Antwerpen 1989) 71-83

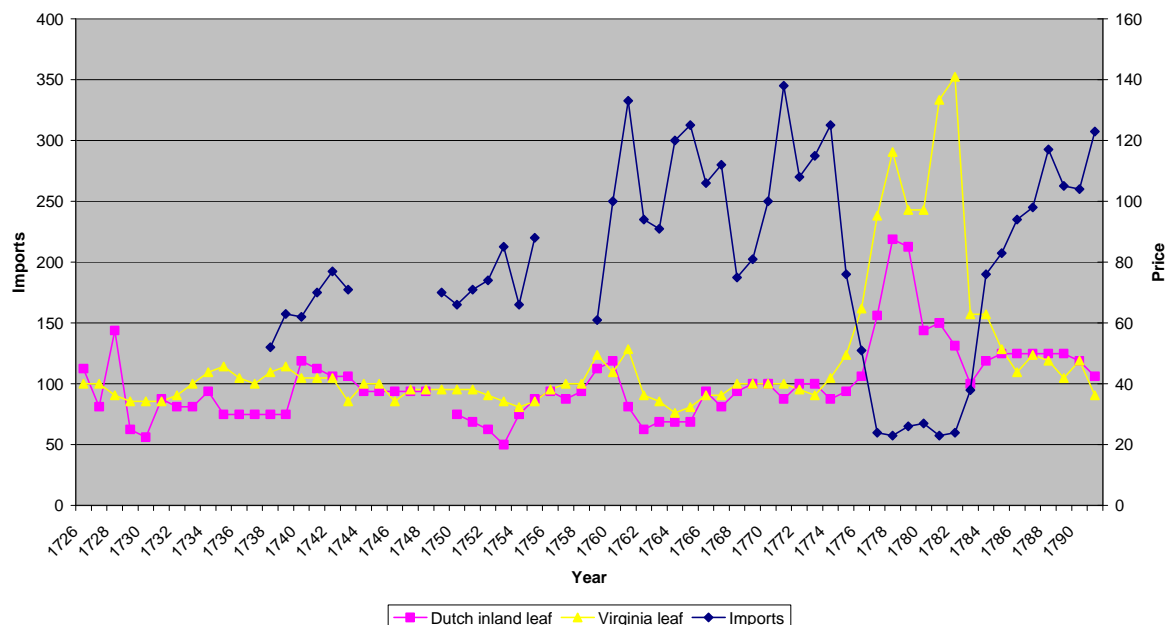
¹⁹ My own calculation based on Chris Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation. L'agriculture et l'alimentation dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens. Contribution à l'histoire économique et sociale à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Centre belge d'histoire rurale. Publication, 49) (Ghent and Leuven 1975) 457. The 1764 industrial census was published by Philippe Moureaux (ed.), *La statistique industrielle dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens à l'époque de Marie-Thérèse: documents et cartes* (Brussels 2 vols. 1974-1981).

²⁰ Quoted in Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture*, 455.

²¹ Quoted in Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture*, 455.

²² H.K. Roessingh, *Inlandse tabak. Expansie en contractie van een handelsgewas in de 17^e en 18^e eeuw in Nederland* (Zutphen 1976) 350-370, 532-533; Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture*, 452-453. Unfortunately, there are no long-term series of tobacco prices available for the Austrian Netherlands, but they probably followed the same pattern.

Graph 4: Tobacco imports in the Austrian Netherlands (1738-1791) and tobacco prices on the Amsterdam Wares Exchange (1726-1791, indices (1770=100))



Unfortunately, revenue figures are difficult to interpret in the last quarter of the eighteenth century because of the signalled tax evasion. But even if we assume higher prices effectively caused demand to drop, revenues dropped significantly less in comparison to more than doubling and tripling prices. So the price elasticity of demand for tobacco was relatively inelastic (E_d was -0.28 during the period 1774-1779 and if the revenues effectively underestimate demand, E_d would tend even more to 0).²³ The use of tobacco clearly had (and still has) a compelling character: it was an addiction and few substitutes were available. After they had grown accustomed to its taste, people proved not too eager to alter their consumptive habits even when prices rose. In the next paragraph, I will focus on how the taste for a new kind of tobacco spread amongst the consumer population. Demonstration effects probably played an important role in this process.

Changes in taste: demonstration effects

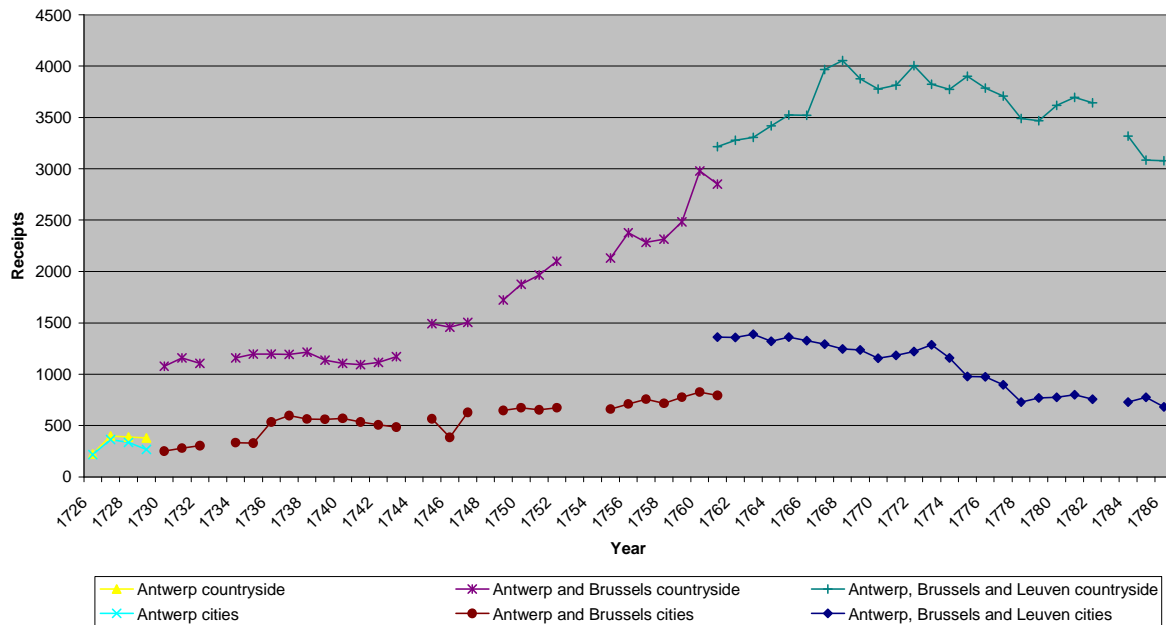
In this part, it will be interesting to look at evolutions in urban and rural areas separately because cities are traditionally regarded as more progressive in accepting change than the more conservative countryside. As a criterion for what was a city, I took 5,000 inhabitants in 1784 as a cut-off point.²⁴ However, because gathering revenue figures for individual localities is a very

²³ Supposing that (a) the demand curve reflects best the demand for inland tobacco products and (b) the price of inland tobacco products followed that of raw material.

²⁴ This is the criterion used by Paul Bairoch, *Cities and economic development. From the dawn of history to the present* (Chicago 1988). Jan De Vries, *European urbanization 1500 - 1800* (London 1984) proposes 10,000 inhabitants as the cut-off point, but that would label the entire Duchy of Brabant outside the three capital cities as countryside. The cities with more than 5,000 inhabitants were Lier and Turnhout in the Quarter of Antwerp, Nivelles in the Quarter of Brussels and Diest and Tienen in the Quarter of Leuven (Bruneel, 'Economie', 481 fig.

labour-intensive process, for this first exercise I used the readily available figures per urban tax office, which also includes a number of villages in the surrounding countryside. I expect that this will not influence results drastically because revenues from the city were generally determining for the total.²⁵

Graph 5: Demand for tobacco in cities and rural areas in Brabant (1726-1786), receipts of the Estates' tobacco excise in Brabantine guilders



Graph five clearly shows that the overall growth in demand for tobacco discussed earlier came mainly from rural areas. Revenues of the tax collectors with a city in the resort of their office grew only half as fast between 1743 and 1761, already diminished slightly between 1761 and 1774 and much stronger after 1774. Clearly, the consumption of tobacco was already well established in urban areas before the second quarter of the eighteenth century, allowing little room for further growth. Demand remained remarkably stable until the last quarter of the century, with only a little growth in the third quarter. Probably, the urban middle class had already embraced the use of tobacco before the start of the time-series under scrutiny here. Evidence from the Mechelen city excise on tobacco shows a first phase of expansion starting roughly around 1670-1680. Changes on the supply side of the economy after 1748 made regular consumption of tobacco available for the less well-to-do. In rural areas, the process of massification followed a similar pattern. Many villages already had at least one tobacconist in the second quarter of the century, so there was some local demand. But the boom in tobacco

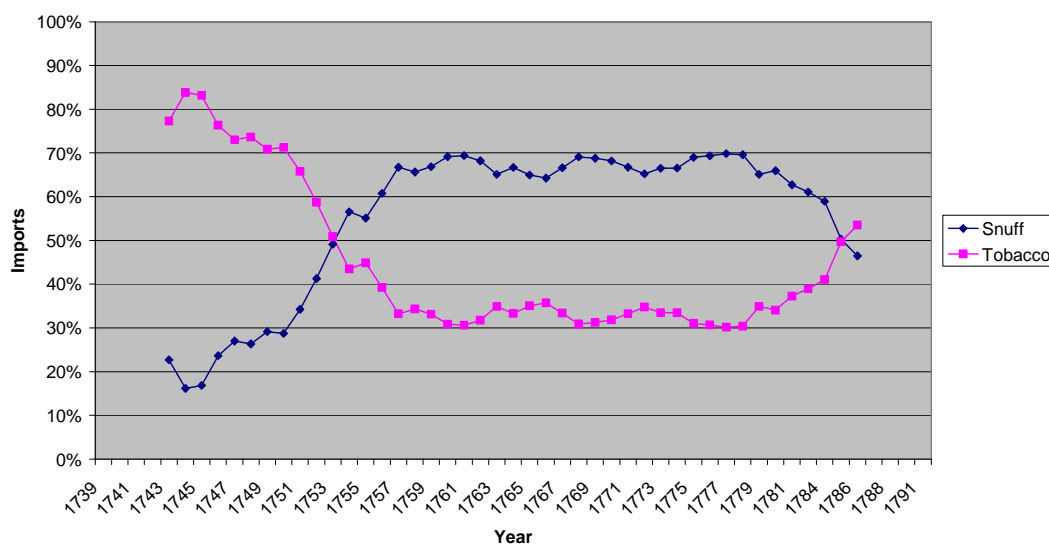
4.1b). I deliberately left out Geel in the Quarter of Antwerp because the population lived spread out over a very large territory. A different approach would be to use a juridical definition of 'city' (Carlos Wyffels, 'De niet als stad erkende historische steden in België', *Tijdschrift van het Gemeentekrediet van België*, 153 (1985) 20-21). This would include 14 more towns with a population between 3,800 and 470 inhabitants.

²⁵ In the tax office of Turnhout the city amounted for 95 percent of the total in 1726, then gradually dropped to 80 percent in 1747, 75 in 1775, 69 in 1783, then suddenly fell to 54 percent in 1784 to end at 40 percent in 1786.

consumption did not follow until the third quarter of the century. Then, things went very fast. Already in 1752, a tobacco manufacturer signalled “*qu’il n’est si petit n’y si grand qui n’en fit usage tant dans la ville que dans le plat pays pour fumer ou autrement*”, by which he probably meant snuffing.²⁶

This brings us to the variable of taste. In the course of the eighteenth century, a new tobacco product, namely snuff, became increasingly popularised. Initially, after its introduction in the late seventeenth century, taking snuff remained reserved for the elite.²⁷ The process of popularisation probably took the form of a waterfall: first the middle-class, then the lower classes. The sources under scrutiny here provide us with detailed information about the growing popularity of snuff in rural areas. As graph six shows, snuff imports from Mechelen increased in the third quarter of the century. Before 1750, they accounted for 15-30 percent of the total amount of specified tobacco, around 1760 this was nearly 70 percent. This snuff was mainly destined for small retailers in the surrounding villages and hamlets who did not have an agreement with the Estates. In cities, the use of snuff had probably already spread earlier.²⁸ The fact that the Nivelles tobacconists argued against the planned taxation of snuff in 1788 by writing “*que tout les classes des citoyens, et sur tout le bas peuple faisant un grand usage du tabac rapé*” also points in the direction of the popularity of snuffing amongst the urban lower classes.²⁹

Graph 6: Imports of snuff and smoking tobacco from Mechelen to Brabantine rural areas (1739-1791), 9 year moving average percentage of total tobacco imports



²⁶ Quoted in Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture*, 458.

²⁷ Rudi Mathee, 'Exotic substances: the introduction and global spread of tobacco, coffee, cocoa, tea and distilled liquor, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries', in: Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (eds.), *Drugs and narcotics in history* (Cambridge 1995) 39-40.

²⁸ In Antwerp, at last in 1733-1737 the number of newly enrolled mercers (“*meerseniers*”) selling snuff outnumbered those selling tobacco (Bruno Blondé and Ilja Van Damme, ‘Een crisis als uitdaging? Kleinhandelsetevoluties en verbruiksveranderingen te Antwerpen (ca. 1648-ca. 1748)’, *Tijdschrift voor sociale en economische geschiedenis*, 4:1 (2007) 69).

²⁹ Brussels, General State Archives, City of Nivelles: old archives, nr. 1109: Request of the Nivelles tobacconists to the Council of Brabant (*Raad van Brabant*), 26 November 1787.

Demonstration effects probably played an important role in the transfer of taste for snuff from the elite to the middle-class: it was part of the French cultural expressions that were regarded as civilised behaviour.³⁰ But was this also the case for 'rude' farmers? Traditionally, the period roughly between 1725 and 1775 is considered as a period of prosperity for the countryside. A rise in agricultural productivity, growing commercialisation of agriculture and the spread of proto-industrialisation caused an increase in living standard. But also contacts between farmers and city-dwellers must certainly have become more frequent in this period, for example over a pint of beer in a tavern, after a day of selling agricultural surplus on one of the numerous weekly markets. The villagers' pursuit of a more sophisticated life-style was not only made possible by their increased purchasing power, but probably also by the low price of snuff. Snuff was the most important manufacture of the inland tobacco industry because the inland tobacco leaf, sometimes mixed with Virginia leaves, was particularly suited for the production of snuff.³¹ Consequently, it probably was cheaper than smoking tobacco. The 1764 industrial census even mentions the production of a very cheap snuff from the stems of tobacco leaves, which was sold to the lower classes.³²

Conclusion

The time-series under scrutiny here start relatively late. By 1730, the diffusion of tobacco was already past its first phase(s): the urban middle class was by now probably well acquainted with pipes and snuff boxes (probate inventory research could definitely confirm to this these), and in the majority of rural communities tobacco was sold on a modest scale. But many interesting things remained to be discovered. Apparently price indeed played an important role in the diffusion of non-vital, stimulant commodities in a pre-industrial society. It was not until the decline in prices after the Treaty of Aachen (1748) that demand in rural areas rose. In this period, tobacco consumption probably also became available for the urban lower class. Perhaps the quick spread of tobacco consumption was triggered by the pursuit of taste. Taking snuff was previously reserved for the wealthy and powerful, but increased purchasing power and the decline in price made it available for the less well-to-do. Eager to pursue the more sophisticated life-style of the elite, they quickly accepted the habit of snuffing. Tobacconists generally profited from the rising demand and were able to increase their turnover, although concentration also augmented. As tobacco prices rose due to the American War of Independence, demand probably held up relatively well because the use of tobacco had become a habit for many.

³⁰ On this subject, see Ilja Van Damme, 'Zotte verwaandheid. Over Franse verleiding en Zuid-Nederlands onbehagen, 1650-1750', in: Raf De Bont en Tom Verschaffel (eds.), *Het verderf van Parijs* (Leuven 2004) 187-204.

³¹ Roessingh, *Inlandse tabak*, 457; Moureaux, *La statistique*.

³² Moureaux, *La statistique*, 713: "*Que dans le nombre de ces manufacturiers quelques uns font réduire les côtes provenant des feuilles de tabac en poudre, et les vendent à des pauvres particuliers qui n'ont point la commodité d'en user de l'ordinaire*".

Appendix 1: Table of compound annual growth rates

(1) Revenues in the Quarters Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven (1730-1786)

(2) Number of tobacconist in agreement with the Estates in the Quarters of Antwerp and Brussels (1730-1786)

(3) Revenues in Walloon-Brabant (1730-1786)

(4) Revenues in the rest of the Duchy (1730-1786)

(5) Revenues in rural areas in the Quarters of Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven (1730-1786)

(6) Revenues in cities with more than 5,000 inhabitants in 1784 in the Quarters of Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven (1730-1786)

(7) Tobacco imports in the Austrian Netherlands (1738-1791)

Period	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1730-1743	1.71 % (*)	0.26 %	6.66 % (*)	-0.77 % (*)	0.64 % (*)	5.18 % (*) (**)	6.43 % (1738-1743)
1743-1761	4.49 % (*)	2.08 %	5.2 % (*)	4.51 % (*)	5.07 % (*)	2.79 % (*)	3.55 %
1761-1774	0.58 %	0.57 %	-0.14 %	0.96 %	1.24 %	-1.24 %	-0,48%
1774-1786	-2.23 %	-2.90 %	-1.78 %	-2.5 %	-1.68 %	-4.31 %	-0,09%

(*): Figures based on information only available for the Quarters of Antwerp and Brussels.

(**): Caused by the leap in revenues in Nivelles between 1735 and 1736. Without Nivelles, there was a decline of -2.82 % *per annum*.

Sources:

(1)-(6): See footnote 7.

(7) Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture*, 453.

Appendix 2: 1735 and 1765 compared

	1735	1765	CAGR
Number of tobacconists	620	1014	1,65
Total revenues (in guilders)	895,05	3016,25	4,13
Average redemption fee (in guilders) (*)	1,44	2,97	
Median redemption fee (in guilders) (*)	1	1,5	
Coefficient of concentration (*)	0,343924	0,518368	

(*) calculated using P. Wessa, *Free Statistics Software*, Office for Research Development and Education, version 1.1.23-r3 (URL <http://www.wessa.net/>, consulted 29 December 2008).

Sources: SAA, Kwit., nrs. 1177 and 1200.