

"Ceci n'est pas un historien"

Construction and deconstruction of Henri Pirenne

WALTER PREVENIER¹

Professor Emeritus – Universiteit Gent

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

1. FIRST THESIS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF PIRENNE AS A PROMINENT HISTORIAN AND AS THE 'FOUNDING FATHER' OF THE GHENT HISTORICAL SCHOOL IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A SUCCESSFUL MYTHOLOGISATION

The American historian Gray Boyce (1940, 449-464), from Berkeley, a student of Pirenne in the 1920s, conferred the paternity of the Ghent school international brilliance in his study on "The Legacy of Henri Pirenne" from 1940. In fact he corroborated a format and an image that had been constructed by Pirenne's students and colleagues in the "*laudationes*" on the occasion of each of the honorary meetings, from 1926 on.² A strong symptom of the aim of defining Pirenne as their iconic father is the collective oath by all his alumni at Pirenne's funeral in 1935 to prepare a '*liber alumnorum*' and two solid volumes of '*hommages*' and memories³, but, even more importantly, to reject firmly the edition of a similar '*liber*' for themselves in the future, a decision that most of these alumni indeed respected. Hans Van Werveke, however, remembered in 1966 that Pirenne's paternity of the Ghent school was not the original concept. In the 1880s it was commonly held opinion that

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Walter Prevenier: walter.prevenier@telenet.be

² *Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Henri Pirenne* (1926).

³ Indeed published as: *Études d'histoire dédiées à la mémoire de Henri Pirenne* (1937); and as: *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938).

Paul Fredericq had the ambition to become the *numero uno* in Ghent.⁴ Fredericq was indeed in a position to claim the status of creator of the Ghent historical school, since some years before Pirenne, he introduced the new methodologies and the format of the historical seminar, first in Liege, then in Ghent, when he came over in 1883. It was probably Fredericq, and not Pirenne, who was first invited by Karl Lamprecht in 1896 to produce a "History of Belgium" for his German collection of national histories. Fredericq claims, in his Diary, that he suggested Lamprecht to ask Pirenne for this honourable task, and so it happened (Van Werveke, 1979, 49, 54; Tollebeek, 2008b, 335-336).⁵ In this case, like in many others, Fredericq ceded his priority to his younger colleague. He certainly realised that he lacked the synthetic '*Schwung*' Pirenne had the right to be proud of. Jo Tollebeek (2008a, 152-158) revealed the backgrounds of this professional and psychological resignation in his magnificent recent 'anthropological' analysis of Paul Fredericq. Fredericq was innovative as a pedagogue and a teacher, but missed creativity and inventiveness as a writer. Like Pirenne he was a net-worker, but on a geographically limited and thematically one-sided scale.

Pirenne had everything to develop into a mythological icon. Around 1900 academia visibly allowed a university professor to demonstrate, without risk, a flamboyant social behaviour, and to enjoy colourful and uninhibited discussions with friends and colleagues in joyful Ghent *brasseries* and coffeehouses (Lyon, 1974, 289-290, 411). Pirenne made a great impression at All Souls in Oxford when, after savouring several glasses of a strong British beer, he was still being capable of presenting a perfectly lucid and brilliant discourse (*Ibid.*, 413-414). Apart from a significant IQ, Pirenne definitely displayed equally well-developed emotional intelligence. He had a talent to make more friends than enemies. One other positive quality was his capability to assume critical remarks from his students and colleagues. Van Werveke, in his "Memoirs" reminds Pirenne's remarkable variant on Claude Bernard's *boutade* "Démolissez-moi":

"Si dans 25 ans mon 'Histoire de Belgique' est encore debout, c'est que mes élèves auront mal travaillé" (Van Werveke, 2000, 113).

I presume two backgrounds for his professional and social successes. First, Pirenne's permeability for a large variety of '*choses de la vie*', for many

⁴. Van Werveke's memoirs were written in 1966, but published in 2000 (Van Werveke, 2000, 104-105).

⁵. It is in fact not completely clear if the invitation first went to Paul Fredericq or to Pirenne (Tollebeek, 1996, 408).

cultures and languages. Pirenne was not a single-minded professional. In his *Apologie pour l'histoire* Marc Bloch (written in 1941) recalls the anecdote that, after the international historical congress of 1928 in Oslo, he made a trip to Stockholm with Pirenne. Walking in the streets of Stockholm, he asked Pirenne "Qu'allons-nous voir d'abord?". The answer was:

"Il paraît qu'il y a un Hôtel de Ville tout neuf. Commençons par lui".

Bloch showing some astonishment, Pirenne added that he was not an antiquarian, but a historian: "C'est pourquoi j'aime la vie".⁶ The second factor is the home-made tolerance within Pirenne's familial biotope. He was the son of a businessman, a cloth manufacturer from Verviers, who was also a freemason of Protestant descent, and active on the local scale in the liberal party (Lyon, 1974, 5-25). His mother came from a pious, conservative-catholic background. In a sociological perspective, this double track brought Pirenne into an intriguing pluralistic niche. At the University of Liège it gave him the ability to show empathy for the classes of the very catholic Godefroid Kurth, with a German-speaking background, as well as for those of the liberal, moderate Flemish activist Paul Fredericq. It is by the support of the catholic Kurth that the 'liberal' young graduate Pirenne could be appointed at the University of Liège in 1885, and at the University of Ghent in 1886. The longstanding friendship with Fredericq in Ghent and in the German camps, during World War I, may explain Pirenne's tolerance of the Flemish emancipation movement. In the 1920s Pirenne switched, influenced by his less tolerant son, to a lesser understanding, particularly on the plans for 'Dutchifying' the Ghent *alma mater*, but in those days Fredericq was no longer alive.⁷

We should not underestimate the knowledge of languages as a key for a successful career. In the case of Pirenne it led to interest in foreign cultures, and to readiness to leave Liège for postgraduates in France as well as in Germany. The knowledge of German allowed him to develop a direct dialogue with prominent German scholars, such as economic historians Alfons Dopsch and Gustav Schmoller, and very intensely with Karl Lamprecht, a friend for many years. It gave him a chance to read Max Weber in the original and to become, at least before 1914, one of the most prominent

⁶ See Bloch (1959, 13) (the quote is used to illustrate the chapter: "Comprendre le passé par le présent"). Bloch must have been highly impressed by the Stockholm trip, for which he thanks Pirenne in a letter of August 30, 1928 (Lyon & Lyon, 1991, 105-106).

⁷ See Van Werveke (2000, 109); similar opinion on Pirenne, as not being a typical '*fransquillon*', in Verhulst (1975, 1252-1253).

intermediaries between German and French historical erudition.⁸ Pirenne's sufficient knowledge of Dutch gave him access to the sources of medieval Flanders, but was no less helpful, after his move from Liège to Ghent, for socialising outside the small world of the university and the '*charme discret*' of the French-speaking Ghent bourgeoisie (Prevenier, 1987, 25-26). Van Werveke has some memories of his master, buying his cigarettes in 'Flemish' in a shop in the Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat where he lived (Van Werveke, 2000, 108). His good though less well-developed knowledge of English led to the great success in talks in Oxford, Princeton and Harvard, and lively discussions with British and American colleagues. He even studied Russian with the help of some Russian fellow prisoners in the German camps of World War I (Lyon, 1974, 247).

The reputation of Pirenne already acquired mythical proportions at a relatively early age, as the result of a legendary talent as a fascinating pedagogue and conversationalist. In a revealing caricature Jacques Ochs, an eye-witness, represented Pirenne as a vivid and engaging teacher.⁹ Pirenne had a type of personality that constantly needed an audience to which he could sell his ideas. Even during his imprisonment in Germany, in 1915, he could not refrain from giving his fellow prisoners an introduction class on the past of Europe (Tollebeek, 2003, 12). The myth has been greatly encouraged by his talent as a tireless 'network-tiger', as Jo Tollebeek (2008a, 154-158; 2008b, 336-337) qualified him. Networking should not be identified as politically incorrect, as long as its methods remain respectful. It was and it is an extremely efficient technique, not only for the networker himself, but no less for his professional environment. Most of Pirenne's alumni achieved an impressive cosmopolitan curriculum just because of the master's international contacts and recommendations. I never heard my Ghent teachers Ganshof, Van Werveke and Verlinden ever complain of the powerful backing they received from their supervisor. In 2011 any reference to the connection with Pirenne is still a marvellous introduction for Ghent alumni outside Flanders.

Irony on the phenomenon 'Pirenne as a scientific hero' came from Wim Blockmans (1975, 27-38) and Marc Boone (2006, 3-19). But the sharpest statement came from Pirenne's most disrespectful grandson Jan Dhondt

⁸. Particularly during the last part of his stay in German imprisonment, in Creuzburg, the German officials allowed him to borrow books from the University Library of Jena, more specifically works by Max Weber (*Die Protestantische Ethik*, from 1904-1905) and by Werner Sombart (*Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*, from 1911). In his *Réflexions* he rejects most of Weber's theses on the origins of the capitalistic spirit (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 168-170, 213).

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

(1966, 81-129), in a merciless analysis of 1966, in which he ironised on the many *honoris causa* doctorates, memberships of academies, knighthoods, Francqui and other prizes so generously awarded to Pirenne. I could not very well contextualise this criticism in 1966. Jan Dhondt was without doubt the most brilliant of my teachers, and the only one who introduced us to the methodology of the *Annales*, and other 'prohibited literature' in Ghent in those days. And let Pirenne have been the Ghent historian who was the closest of all to the *Annales* school. The best proof is that in 1921 Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre tried, without result however, to convince him to accept the directorship of their new planned journal (Lyon & Lyon, 1991, 2-19). I also remember that when it came out, Dhondt's cruel analysis was perceived by Pirenne's alumni and my teachers as brutal '*paternicide*'. As is often the case, this sharp critical statement says more about the personality of the critic than about the subject of the analysis. The non-conformist Dhondt was perfectly allergic to all forms of establishment, to academies and awards, in civil society as well as in his academic *Umwelt*. I have a strong feeling that Dhondt's arrows were directed at those who composed the mythological Pirenne rather, than at the man himself. When I reread his discourse after 40 years, it is no longer the irony and the sarcasm that is striking, but rather the great admiration for the signs of genius in Pirenne, an empathy that should never have been amazing to me.

Pirenne did not achieve his high status gratuitously. All the '*éloges*' on him would never have happened without a long prehistory of unsuspected respect and recognition of his talents. An early sign of positive perception was Lamprecht's invitation in 1896 to the "*Geschichte Belgiens*". And the most significant one the proposal in 1921 of the directorship of the *Annales*. But Pirenne's image as serious professional also came from intrinsic elements: his credibility as a '*pur sang*' historian of challenging synthetic constructions was based on a second credibility as a solid technician, mastering the whole toolbox with the same level of conviction as the most traditional German positivist. Raoul Van Caenegem (1994, 166) called him

"an erudite savant: even after launching himself into very broad themes and interpretations, he never stopped publishing detailed critical studies".

Pirenne moved with great ease as a fish in many waters, those of the critical study of sources, as well as the general lines of world history. Thanks to the aureole of his education at the two Meccas of the auxiliary sciences – the *École des Chartes* in Paris, the seminars of palaeography and diplomatics in Leipzig – the reviewers of the time had nothing but sincere admiration for his critical edition of Galbert of Bruges (Pirenne, 1891) and the collection of

facsimiles of his *Album belge de diplomatique*, so useful for the teaching of the practical seminars on medieval sources (Pirenne, 1909). At the fundamental reform of historical studies in Belgium in 1890 he was, without any competition, considered by his peers as the unchallenged pace-setter and ghost-writer of the texts of the Minister of Education introducing the doctoral thesis, and the new Seminar system that definitely replaced the Romantic by the modern scientific approach (Gérin, 1987, 64-103). Also in the same 1890s he was the ultimate innovator for new spheres of interest in history, by publishing the first studies on demography, social revolts, working class conditions, and international business in Belgium.

The second face of the mythologisation process, as the father of the 'Ghent school', is much more problematic. No doubt this was in many ways construed by his direct alumni (Van Werveke, 2000, 104-113). The idea and the existence of a school is partly real, partly fake. Each of Pirenne's former students went his own very personal way, on the level of themes and of methodology. It was even not a real Ghent school. Pirenne's alumni were teaching in Ghent, but also in Brussels, Liège, Antwerp, Geneva, South Africa and at five to six American campuses. The expression of Boyce, "Pirenne legacy in Ghent", is indeed more appropriate than the 'father of a school' qualification. 'Legacy' is the perfect term for the 125-year long continuity of an impressive cluster of teachers and researchers in the medieval department at Ghent University. One additional legitimisation of the thesis is that they continuously respected the essence of Pirenne's approach of the historian's craft, the cultivation of erudition on the one hand, of creative synthesis on the other. A decisive step in the consecration of the mythological Pirenne is the enthusiastic study from 1974 by Bryce Lyon, a student of Carl Stephenson, one of Pirenne's American alumni in 1924-1925 (Bachrach & Nicholas, 1990, IX-XIV). It was an extremely sympathising biography, full of empathy and exhaustive heuristic. When we read the book today, 35 years later, many pages sound excessively dithyrambic:

"a remarkable man ... the spirit of Pirenne ... brilliant, charming, indomitable, sturdy, adventurous, curious and yet simple, natural, unassuming and disarming, Pirenne was born to conquer. Whoever knew him ... rejoiced in his achievements and triumphs. ... No wonder that he was loved. No wonder that he was the subject of tales that have since become legend" (Lyon, 1974, 414).

For Wim Blockmans and most others of his generation this biography was too heavily coloured from the viewpoint of the construed hero. It is certainly true that Lyon was in some ways under the spell of over-enthusiastic members of the family and of the direct *discipuli* of Pirenne. But we should

not underestimate the still unbroken usefulness of Lyons masterpiece, as a monument of erudition, as an incredibly rich source of information on the slightest action, discourse and opinion of the historian, and as an excellent mirror of the perception of Pirenne by the generation of Ganshof and Van Werveke.

2. THE SECOND THESIS: PIRENNE AS THE ICON *PAR EXCELLENCE* OF THE NATION-STATE BELGIUM IS ONLY PARTLY CORRECT

The enforced imprisonment of Pirenne in Germany during World War I led to understandable, but rather virulent and fanatic anti-German discourses in his inaugural speeches as a rector of Ghent University in 1919-1921. These statements displayed even some dark edges, such as the many years of boycott of German historians at the meetings of the International Congress of Historical Sciences (Lyon, 1974, 292-298). Raoul Van Caenegem (1994, 176-177) suggested that this prejudice might explain why Pirenne, in *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1937), left the role of the German component largely undiscussed, or even worse, considered it as pure barbarism. It could be that Pirenne exaggerated the role of Islam to be able to minimise the German factor. Pirenne's view remains a curious statement for a historian being so indebted to German historical science, and representing his country, before the war, as a binding force between German and Latin cultures (Schöttler, 1998, 875-883; Sproemberg, 1971, 375-446; Toubert, 2001, 317-320). This dearth of scientific objectivity, explicitly mentioned by Van Caenegem and Blockmans, can be ascribed without a doubt to his personal emotions and disillusionment by the imperialistic collaboration of his former German friends.¹⁰

But it is also true that Pirenne could never become the symbol of '*la Belgique martyre*' if there had not been the *Histoire de Belgique*. On this second construction of Pirenne as a Belgian icon and as an advocate abroad of the Belgian establishment, Jan Dhondt produced some marvellous cynical phrases. As early as 1912 Paul Fredericq (1912, 11), during a homage, declared that they came together "pour fêter notre historien national". Yet before the war the *Histoire* was essentially a scientific success story. Through the war it suddenly acquired the colour and the tone of a political statement.

¹⁰. On the origins and the ending of his longstanding friendship with Karl Lamprecht, see Van Werveke (1972, 39-60).

Pirenne appeared on the public stage with lectures on *La Belgique est-elle un pays artificiel?*¹¹ He published a contribution to a special issue of the Times (London), in 1920, on this theme, and mentioned

"l'étonnante vitalité dont ce pays a donné des preuves éclatantes à toutes les époques" (Pirenne, 1920, 98).

For the media he was no longer a historian but rather a public figure, a 'Famous Belgian', the 'brightest man', who knew where Belgium came from and would be going, at least should be going. The Belgian Establishment broadly involved Pirenne on the international scene, more specifically in the United States in 1922. He gave lectures at almost all first-class American universities, and was also officially received by the then secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the former architect of the 'Commission for Relief in Belgium', and by the American president Warren G. Harding (Lyon, 1974, 298-302; Pirenne, 1923a, 151-176). The trip had a significant intellectual spin-off: several young American historians came to Pirenne in Ghent for a post-graduate (Boyce, 1940, 449-464).

The Belgicists were not the only ones to make use of Pirenne's theses. Pirenne was usable for many political and ideological strategies, of liberals, of socialists, even for New Order figures. For the Flemish socialists Pirenne happened to be an ally in the battle against the Flemish-nationalist body of thought. Socialist leader Edward Anseele quoted him during his July 11 speech in Kortrijk in 1902, while arguing that 1302 was very close to the phenomenon of class struggle, and that the 'racist' reading by the Flemish militants was a complete mistake (Elias, 1971, 268, 279). In 1910 the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* again used Pirenne's *Histoire* to elucidate that in 1302 'national feelings' were absolutely out of the question, and that the clericals used this myth for no other reason than to distract the attention of people from the real social problems (*Ibid.*, 273). Such a reading of the *Histoire* was only possible because Pirenne used a social-economic rather than a political discourse on the events of 1302. In a letter of October 1934, the Belgian New Order supporter Léon Degrelle applied for authorisation to reprint the *Histoire* in the collections of his political movement Rex, but without expressing what he had in mind as a goal or motivation (Despy-Meyer, 1988, 87). Pirenne, who refused of course, probably had in mind what he wrote to Heinrich Sproemberg three years before:

"le parti qu'on en a tiré en politique s'est développé tout à fait en dehors de moi. Je n'ai voulu que faire œuvre d'historien" (Lyon & Lyon, 1976, 20-21, note 12).

¹¹ *Henri Pirenne, hommages et souvenirs* (1938, 81-84).

Icon or not, one cannot pretend that Pirenne started his *Histoire de Belgique* premeditatedly. It was not his own initiative, but an invitation by his then friend and kindred spirit Karl Lamprecht for a German series of national European histories. The *Geschichte Belgiens* was published in 1899 (Pirenne, 1899-1913), and was followed in 1900 by a French edition (Pirenne, 1900-1932). Can we call the *Histoire* a construction or not? In an unguarded moment and blunt mood Pirenne himself called his work "un essai de construction historique" (Pirenne, 1900-1932, I, XIV). Indeed, from the start a 'political' thesis was interwoven in his discourse.

"Il existe donc, en dépit des apparences, une histoire de Belgique"

says the *preface* of volume 1 (*Ibid.*, I, XIII). In volume 2 Pirenne (1900-1932, II, 170) claims:

"Il a été donné aux ducs de Bourgogne d'achever l'œuvre d'unification commencée bien avant eux".

A second ideological component is that of Belgium as a "microcosme de l'Europe occidentale", or as

"une sorte de syncrétisme, où l'on retrouve les génies de deux races" (*Ibid.*, I, IX).

The formula is no construction by Pirenne himself. He borrowed it from a sentence in Karl Lamprecht's *Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte* in 1895 (Tollebeek, 1996, 407-408). Inspiration also came from one of his teachers at the University of Liège, Auguste Stecher, in a publication of 1859 (Stecher, 1859), and from Alfons Prayon Van Zuylen, in 1896 (Prayon van Zuylen, 1896), both considering Belgium as an osmosis of German and Romance cultures. Pirenne, as a social-economic historian, was more tempted to find the *longue durée* in social and economic than in cultural, intellectual and political factors. But in most of his discourses, as early as 1899, on *La Nation belge*, he used a variety of factors as elements of a "nécessité historique" and "un aboutissement inévitable".¹² And there is no doubt that in the emotional aftermath of World War I Pirenne did not take much trouble to disclaim that the *Histoire de Belgique* was in essence a political story.

¹² "Les différentes provinces ... tendaient inconsciemment à l'unité. La maison de Bourgogne n'a fait que recueillir les résultats du travail commencé bien avant elle. ... Si elle a réuni nos divers territoires en un État commun, c'est parce que ceux-ci possédaient d'ancienne date une civilisation commune. Ils formaient ... une seule région de culture intellectuelle, comme de solidarité économique" (Pirenne, 1899).

I am inclined to descry a second paradox: Pirenne did not primarily have a nationalistic, but a cosmopolitan perspective in mind.¹³ Marc Boone (2008, 294-295) observed that he opposed the idea of "l'âme belge" of Edmond Picard (1897). But the commission by Lamprecht, going back to 1896, forced Pirenne inevitably to make choices, the choice of a political and geographical framework, the choice of a thematic line of approach, the choice of methodological accents. As an Enlightenment cosmopolite he preferred to have nothing more to do with the Romantic and nationalistic approach of Jules Michelet and George Macaulay. Jo Tollebeek insisted how he privileged the cultural-historical and economic outlook of Lamprecht:

"What Pirenne wanted to reconstruct before all is the 'social life' that the various principalities already shared with each other in the middle ages" (Tollebeek, 2003, 9).

In fact, the most vigorous criticism of the *Histoire de Belgique* referred to the Belgian political and geographical frame. Pieter Geyl firmly cut down this perspective in the first volume of his *Nederlandsche Stam* of 1930 (Geyl, 1930). No less violent was the revealing reply of Pirenne's alumnus Hans Van Werveke to this book in 1931 (Van Werveke, 1931, 5-13). It shows that both Ghent historians were most of all shocked in their liberal Enlightenment ideology, because they considered Geyl's thesis on "language as a nation making factor" to be a perfume of racist theory, linked in those days to the fascist movements in the Europe of Hitler and Mussolini. Geyl's theory indeed totally collapsed with World War II.

3. THE THIRD THESIS: PIRENNE WAS SIMPLY SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE THE HISTORICAL COMMUNITY PERCEIVED HIM AS A BRILLIANT, PROVOCATIVE AND USEFUL HISTORIAN, MORE THAN AS A CLASSICAL ERUDITE

Pirenne was more successful than Paul Fredericq, because his colleague was more of a classical erudite. Pirenne was a rather complex and sophisticated personality. He had some efficient secret weapons, which we know quite well, as he often allowed us to look behind the scenes of his craft. The most

¹³. Pirenne quite often used the notion of cosmopolitanism, like in: Pirenne (1920, 103). Pirenne's cosmopolitan view is explicitly noticed by De Schaepdrijver (2004, 39).

revealing case to observe Pirenne's technique is *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, one long fight with the angels. It all started with a flashing intuition in a Ghent classroom. In October 1889 two law students, G. Würth and Victor Maistriau (later mayor of Mons in Hainaut), wrote down the following words from their teacher, independently, in their respective handwritten notes. I quote Würth:

"L'empire avait des ports, Marseille et Bordeaux, qui maintenaient une situation économique. Le premier a disparu par suite de la prise de la Méditerranée par les Arabes. Alors disparut tout commerce au 7ème siècle".¹⁴

Maistriau wrote: "La Méditerranée, lac musulman" (Dhondt, 1966, 97, note 23). There is a real chance that the words of Pirenne were literally rendered. They actually reflect the typical Pirennean elliptic style, provoked by the needs of a classroom. After 1889, and for a fairly long time, we could not learn so much anymore in Pirenne's publications on the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages. Not before his forced exile to Germany in 1916-1918, isolated, far away from his books and notes, Pirenne unwittingly was given time for reflection and hypotheses. Fellow Russian prisoners challenged him to consider the impact of Eastern Europe, the Byzantine Empire and Islam on Western European history (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 145; Van Caenegem, 1994, 174). After the war Pirenne came to the third phase of the conception: the confrontation with the scientific forum. In 1922 he published an article with the title "Mahomet et Charlemagne" (Pirenne, 1922, 77-86; Pirenne, 1923b, 223-235). The reactions, as could be expected, were extremely divergent. Marc Bloch insisted in each of his letters to Pirenne on the completion of the book. Economic historian Alfons Dopsch ventilated sharp grievances at the International Congress at Oslo in 1928 (Lyon, 1974, 327). The conclusion of Pirenne's *opus magnum* had to give in to other urgent duties. Only several years after his retirement from Ghent University in 1930, Pirenne was able to write down the last sentences of his masterpiece on May 4, 1935 (Dhondt, 1966, 108). *Mahomet et Charlemagne* was published posthumously in 1937 (Pirenne, 1937; translated in English as Pirenne, 1939).

The real secret weapon of Pirenne was his talent for audacious synthesis and for one-liners, such as *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. This behaviour made him more vulnerable than needed. In a letter to Johan Huizinga, with a

¹⁴. Notes by G. Würth in a manuscript entitled: *Cours d'histoire politique de moyen-âge, donné par Mr. Pirenne, Gand, le 16 octobre 1889*, vol. 2, p. 9, and vol. 3, p. 20 (Archives University of Ghent, 7G 1470).

discussion on their highly divergent views of the Burgundian period, Pirenne wrote a revealing sentence:

"L'essentiel est de faire réfléchir" (Tollebeek, 1996, 429).

As a result he has not been spared of criticism on that point. From 1922 on, he provoked reactions of countless colleagues. As regards content these polemics dealt with economic aspects (Lopez, 1943, 14-38), with monetary *realia* (Grierson, 1959, 123-140)¹⁵, with early urban development (Verhulst, 1989, 1-35), and with the precise role of Islam (Frank, 1993, 371-383). But most of all archaeologists brought new material (Havighurst, 1958; Hodges & Whitehouse, 1983). The mere fact that all of their collective volumes bear the title *Mahomet et Charlemagne* shows that Pirenne's provocation was effective. Hardly one sentence of *Mahomet et Charlemagne* remained upright after the erudite criticisms. "Et alors?"

The weapon was effective. There is no expiration date yet on his most contested book. The thesis still has the best chances of survival, as a thesis. The simple observation that a military event, the conquest of North-Africa by the Arabs, provoked new urban economic dynamics in agrarian Europe was a refreshing discovery, after Edward Gibbon's thesis on decline (Lyon, 1971) and Arnold Toynbee's civilisation determinism (Toynbee, 1934-1961; Somervell, 1960). In 1993 Islamist Kenneth Frank gave a perfect explanation for the vitality of Pirenne's book. On the one hand he pointed out that Pirenne did not use various Arabic sources, on the other he refined Pirenne:

"The evidence against the Pirenne thesis implies that there was no single 'ancient world' to be conquered by the Muslims".

But most of all he explained why he is so grateful to Pirenne:

"What I appreciate about Pirenne is to remind us that the history of the West must be seen in global perspective, alongside the history of the Arabs and the Byzantines" (Frank, 1993, 379).

In other words: 'without Mohammed no Charlemagne', but also 'without Pirenne no Kenneth Frank'. Or as Marc Bloch summarised in 1935:

"Tout grand livre, en même temps qu'une leçon, est un point de départ" (Bloch, 1935, 79-80).¹⁶

¹⁵. Another critique on the monetary aspects: Morisson (1963, 402-432).

¹⁶. In fact a review on Pirenne's *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge* (1933).

4. THE FOURTH THESIS: PIRENNE WAS SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE HE VOICED IDEAS MANY CONTEMPORARIES WERE WAITING FOR

John Mundy argued in 1977 that Pirenne's analysis of the medieval past was completely coloured by his personal liberal bourgeois premises on economic growth as the ultimate goal, and as a guarantee for parliamentary democracy and personal freedom (Mundy, 1977, 476). This body of ideas was brought to the surface in its most radical form in "Les périodes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme" from 1914 (Pirenne, 1914, 258-299).¹⁷ This contribution is an explicit ode to the optimism of permanent progress and to the manufacturability of society by the creative individual. It must have been music to the ears of his affluent fellow citizens. The thesis explains that late-medieval capitalism shows no linear evolution, but a cyclical curve. Each phase of economic growth and increasing freedom was followed by a period of stagnation and strict regulation. This second generation of conservative businessmen is immediately challenged by *homines novi*, putting new cards with progressive ideas on the table. Briefly, the merchant-entrepreneurs of a first generation are invariably succeeded by heirs with less talent, who on their part abandon the field for another new, more dynamic generation. Until 1914 Pirenne, as a child of the Enlightenment and of 19th-century liberalism, believed unconditionally in this story. It even drove Pirenne to project the idea of political democracy into the Middle Ages in a book of 1910 (//Pirenne, 1910). Raymond Van Uytven (1962, 373-409) admonished him firmly for this, and expressly preferred the term 'plutocracy'. Marc Boone (2007, 187-228), more recently, published a powerful revision of Pirenne's notion of "démocraties urbaines".

The inspiration for this point certainly did not stem from the romantic historiography, but from historical determinism and cyclical theories. Edward Gibbon already believed in cycles. Auguste Comte developed his determinist theory between 1830 and 1842, Karl Marx and Hippolyte Taine went on in the same vein. Pirenne was made familiar with Hegel and the Marxist analyses by Lamprecht during his German postgraduate time (Lyon, 1974, 129-134). Lamprecht also convinced him to recognise anonymous and economic factors as driving forces in history. Pirenne's convictions are also a tribute to Max Weber's *Idealtypen*. But he considered Weber's famous thesis on the link between early modern capitalism and Calvinistic morals from

¹⁷. Translated as: "The stages in the social history of capitalism" (Pirenne, 1914, 494-515).

1905 as an aberration, and he recycled it into the mechanism of the alternation of traditionalist and young dynamic capitalists (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 168-170).

Pirenne was a full-blood 19th-century liberal, but one with affinity for a progressive liberalism, as emerges from his understanding of the motivations of the revolting workers around 1900 and in the 19th century. He admired the capitalist elites of 1300 for their economic courage, but he swiped "ces orgueilleux patriciens" for their social ignorance. This relative progressive perception of the social mechanisms could well be the inheritance of his Marxist discussions with Lamprecht. John Mundy (1977, 478), a rather critical admirer of Pirenne, decoded with high perspicacity the double empathy of Pirenne, on the one hand

"the town, and its entrepreneurs or merchants, were the principal generative agents of human advancement",

on the other

"Pirenne had a certain sympathy and even love for workers".

This combination perfectly reflects Pirenne's social-liberal world view.

I think that it is an interesting question to check if the change in course in Pirenne's work before and after World War I coincided with and may be explained by an analogous change in the political liberalism in Belgium in the same period. Pirenne not often expressed his party political views. But on the basis of the tenor of his historical analyses it is plausible to presume that, before 1914, he stood close to the progressive-radical purport of Paul Janson, the ideological cradle of the Belgian Socialist party, and not to the conservative and doctrinary trend of Jules Bara (Lefevre, 1996, 35-40; Janson-Delange, 1962-1964; Vercauteren, 1969, 383-404; De Paepe, 1977-1978, 476-531). After the war the appeal of political liberalism markedly decreased (Van Caenegem, 1994, 164). Democracy got a heavy blow. It is surprising that we then face a relativising and demoralised Pirenne, who is trading in his confidence in determinism for belief in the notions 'accident' and 'role of the individual'.¹⁸ Even more crucial was that he gave up his belief in the parliamentary system for a pessimism in the line of Oswald Spengler and Johan Huizinga, and for fear about the discourse of the then advancing fascism in Europe. In a letter of 1931 Pirenne thanks Hans Van Werveke for his virulent

¹⁸ First statement in 1918 (Lyon & Lyon, 1994, 233). Pirenne (1931) developed the idea in his article "La tâche de l'historien".

refutation of Pieter Geyl's *Nederlandsche Stam*, with a sentence that is close to the *Shadow of Tomorrow* of Johan Huizinga:

"Par ce temps de confusion intellectuelle et morale, il est réconfortant de constater que l'esprit critique conserve des fidèles".¹⁹

Marc Boone and Sophie De Schaepdrijver traced back the aversion of 1931 for "cette funeste théorie des races" to World War I, when Pirenne's cosmopolitan conviction dramatically collapsed (Boone, 2008, 295).

"*Ceci n'est pas un historien.*" This variation on the famous pre-post-modern adagio of René Magritte is certainly not appropriate for the Pirenne of before 1914, but it certainly is for the post-war Pirenne. It is still unclear whether it was Pirenne who invented "*la Belgique éternelle*", or "*une certaine Belgique*" that construed "un certain Pirenne". If Pirenne were still alive today there is no doubt that he would write a column in *The New York Times* every week, or more probably in the French *Libération* or the Belgian *De Morgen*. He certainly was "*un intellectuel gourmand*", with a strong view of the past, but no less on the actual "*choses de la vie*". Pirenne was, like most if not all historians, the prisoner of his environment and his time. His time was the optimistic 19th century as well as the depressing *interbellum*. That is why I agree so fully with Jan Dhondt's final statement on Pirenne:

"Nos postulats de base, nous les subissons, nous ne les choisissons pas, même quand on est Pirenne. Et nul n'a le droit de nous le reprocher" (Dhondt, 1966, 114).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sources

Archives

Ghent, University Library, Rozier 9, 9000 Gent

Archief Van Werveke, Map Pirenne

Archives University of Ghent, Oud Rectoraat, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 25, 9000 Gent

¹⁹. Letter of Pirenne of October 1931 to Hans Van Werveke, thanking him for his reaction to Geyl in *De Vlaamsche Gids*: "Je viens de lire avec un véritable plaisir intellectuel votre réfutation de Geyl" (Ghent University Library, Ms. III, 88, Archief Van Werveke, Map Pirenne); see also, Huizinga (1935) (translated: *In the shadow of tomorrow*, 1936).

Literature

- BACHRACH (B.S.) & NICHOLAS (D.), "Bryce Lyon: an Appreciation", *Law, Custom, and the Social Fabric in Medieval Europe, Essays in Honor of Bryce Lyon*, Kalamazoo, 1990, pp. IX-XIV.
- BLOCH (M.), "Les techniques, l'histoire et la vie", *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, VII, 1935, pp. 79-80.
- BLOCH (M.), *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*, Paris, 1959 (3rd ed.).
- BLOCKMANS (W.), "Mandarijnenhulde en wetenschapsgeschiedenis", *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent, Nieuwe reeks*, XXIX, 1975, pp. 27-38.
- BOONE (M.), "Henri Pirenne (1862-1935). Godfather van de Gentse historische school?", *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent, New series*, LX, 2006, pp. 3-19.
- BOONE (M.), "'Les anciennes démocraties des Pays-Bas'. Les corporations flamandes au bas moyen âge (XIV^e-XVI^e siècles): intérêts économiques, enjeux politiques et identités politiques" in: Centro italiano di studi di storia e d'arte *Tra economia e politica: le corporazioni nell'Europa medievale, Pistoia, 13-16 maggio 2005*, Pistoia, 2007, pp. 187-228.
- BOONE (M.), "Henri Pirenne. Pinda-kaas, vakidiotie en 'belgitude': een Belgische held?" in: H. BRINKMAN, J. JANSEN, & M. MATHIJSEN (eds.), *Helden bestaan! Opstellen voor Herman Pleij bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar Historische Nederlandse Letterkunde aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 2008, pp. 291-299.
- BOYCE (G.C.), "The Legacy of Henri Pirenne", *Byzantion*, XV, 1940, pp. 449-464.
- DE PAEPE (J.-L.), "Paul Janson", *Biographie Nationale*, Brussels, XL, 1977-1978, pp. 476-531.
- DE SCHAEPPDRIJVER (S.), *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*, Brussels, 2004.
- DESPY-MEYER (A.), "Le fonds de Henri Pirenne aux Archives de l'Université libre de Bruxelles", *Archives et Bibliothèques en Belgique*, LIX, 1988, pp. 79-90.
- DHONDT (J.), "Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines", *Annali della Fondazione Italiana per la Storia Amministrativa*, III, 1966, pp. 81-129.
- ELIAS (H.), *Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse gedachte, 1780-1914*, vol. 4, Antwerp, 1971.
- Études d'histoire dédiées à la mémoire de Henri Pirenne*, Bruxelles, 1937.
- Études d'histoire dédiées à la mémoire de Henri Pirenne*, Bruxelles, 1938.
- FRANK (K.W.), "Pirenne Again: A Muslim Viewpoint", *The History Teacher*, XXVI, May 1993, no. 3, pp. 371-383.
- FREDERICQ (P.), *Manifestation en l'honneur de M. le professeur Henri Pirenne, Bruxelles 12 mai 1912*, Mons, 1912.
- GÉRIN (P.), "La condition de l'historien et l'histoire nationale en Belgique à la fin du 19^e et au début du 20^e siècle", *Storia della Storiografia*, XI, 1987, pp. 64-103.
- GEYL (P.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam, I*, Amsterdam, 1930.
- GRIERSON (P.), "Commerce in the Dark Ages: A Critique of the Evidence", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, IX, 1959, pp. 123-140.
- HAVIGHURST (A.F.), *The Pirenne Thesis: Analysis, Criticism and Revision*, Boston, 1958 [2nd ed., Lexington, 1962; 3rd ed., Lexington, 1976].
- Henri Pirenne. Hommages et souvenirs*, Brussels, 1938, 2 vols.
- HODGES (R.) & WHITEHOUSE (D.), *Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe: Archeology and the Pirenne Thesis*, Ithaca (New York), 1983. [French revised edition: Paris, 1996].

- HUIZINGA (J.), *In de schaduw van morgen, een diagnose van het geestelijk lijden van onze tijd*, Haarlem, 1935 [Translated as: *In the shadow of tomorrow*, New York, 1936].
- JANSON-DELANGÉ (L.), *Paul Janson, 1840-1913*, 2 vol., Brussels, 1962-1964.
- LEFEVRE (P.), "L'organisation du parti libéral de 1846 à 1914" in: [Centre Paul Hymans], *Les libéraux de 1846 à 1996*, Brussels, 1996, pp. 35-40.
- LOPEZ (R.S.), "Mohammed and Charlemagne: A Revision", *Speculum*, XVIII, 1943, no. 1, pp. 14-38.
- LYON (B.), *The origins of the Middle Ages: Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon*, New York, 1971.
- LYON (B.), *Henri Pirenne. A biographical and intellectual study*, Ghent, 1974.
- LYON (B.) & LYON (M.) (eds.), *The Journal de guerre of Henri Pirenne*, Amsterdam/New York/Oxford, 1976.
- LYON (B.) & LYON (M.) (eds.), *The birth of Annales history: the letters of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch to Henri Pirenne (1921-1935)*, Brussels, 1991.
- LYON (B.) & LYON (M.) (eds.), "'Réflexions d'un solitaire' by Henri Pirenne", *Bulletin de la commission Royale d'Histoire*, CLX, 1994, pp. 143-257.
- Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Henri Pirenne par ses anciens élèves et ses amis à l'occasion de sa quarantième année d'enseignement à l'Université de Gand 1886-1926*, 2 vol., Brussels, 1926.
- MORRISON (K.F.), "Numismatics and Carolingian Trade: A Critique of the Evidence", *Speculum*, XXXVIII, 1963, pp. 402-432.
- MUNDY (J.), "Henri Pirenne: a European Historian", *Journal of European Economic History*, VI, 1977, pp. 473-480.
- PICARD (E.), "L'âme belge", *Revue Encyclopédique Larousse*, July 1897 [Reprinted as: *Essai d'une psychologie de la nation belge*, Brussels, 1900].
- PIRENNE (H.), *Histoire du meurtre de Charles le Bon, Comte de Flandre (1127-1128)*, Paris, 1891 (Collection de textes pour servir à l'étude et à l'enseignement de l'histoire, 10).
- PIRENNE (H.), *La Nation belge, discours prononcé lors de la distribution des prix au lauréats du concours universitaire et du concours général de l'enseignement moyen en 1899*, Brussels, 1899.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Geschichte Belgiens*, Gotha, 4 vol., 1899-1913.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Histoire de Belgique*, Brussels, 7 vol., 1900-1932.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Album belge de diplomatique. Recueil de fac-similés pour servir à l'étude de la diplomatique des provinces belges au moyen-âge*, Jette/Brussels, 1909.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Les anciennes démocraties des Pays-Bas*, Paris, 1910 [translated as: *Belgian Democracy*, Manchester, 1915; and later as: *Early Democracies in the Low Countries*, New York, 1963].
- PIRENNE (H.), "Les périodes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme", *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres*, V, 1914, pp. 258-299 [Translated as: "The stages in the social history of capitalism", *The American Historical Review*, XIX, April 1914, no. 3, pp. 494-515].
- PIRENNE (H.), "L'avenir de la Belgique", *The Times. Numéro spécial consacré à la Belgique [Collection du Flambeau]*, Brussels, 1920, pp. 98-104.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Mahomet et Charlemagne", *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, I, 1922, pp. 77-86.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Les universités américaines", *Le Flambeau*, 1923a, pp. 151-176.
- PIRENNE (H.), "Un contraste économique: Mérovingiens et Carolingiens", *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, II, 1923b, pp. 223-235.
- PIRENNE (H.), "La tâche de l'historien", *Le Flambeau*, Août 1931, pp. 5-22.
- PIRENNE (H.), *Histoire économique et sociale du moyen âge*, Paris, 1933.

- PIRENNE (H.), *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, Brussels, 1937 [Translated as *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, London, 1939].
- PRAYON VAN ZUYLEN (A.), *Charybdis en Scylla: verfransching of verduitsching?*, Ghent, 1896.
- PREVENIER (W.), "Pirenne à Gand" in: F. BIERLAIRE & J.-L. KUPPER, *Henri Pirenne de la cité de Liège à la ville de Gand, Actes du colloque organisé à l'Université de Liège le 13 décembre 1985*, Liège, 1987, pp. 23-44.
- SCHÖTTLER (P.), "Henri Pirenne, historien européen, entre la France et l'Allemagne", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, LXXVI, 1998, no. 4, pp. 875-883.
- SOMERVELL (D.C.), *A Study of History, Abridgement of Vols I-XI in one volume* (with a new preface by Toynbee and new tables), Oxford, 1960.
- SPROEMBERG (H.), "Pirenne und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft", *Mittelalter und demokratische Geschichtsschreibung. Ausgewählte Abhandlungen*, Berlin, 1971, pp. 375-446.
- STECHER (A.), *Flamands et wallons*, Liège, 1859.
- TOLLEBEEK (J.), "Au point sensible de l'Europe. Huizinga en Pirenne", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, LXXIV, 1996, no. 2, pp. 403-434.
- TOLLEBEEK (J.), "Henri Pirenne", *Kritisch Denkerslexicon*, [aanvullend nummer 32], Alphen aan de Rijn/Brussels, 2003, pp. 1-20.
- TOLLEBEEK (J.), *Fredericq & Zonen. Een antropologie van de moderne geschiedwetenschap*, Amsterdam, 2008a.
- TOLLEBEEK (J.), "Pirenne en Fredericq: over historiografische ambities omstreeks 1900", *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 2008b, LXII, pp. 327-347.
- TOUBERT (P.), "Henri Pirenne et l'Allemagne (1914-1923)", *Le Moyen Age*, 2001, no. 107, 317-320.
- TOYNBEE (A.), *A Study of History*, 12 vol., Oxford, 1934-1961.
- VAN CAENEGEM (R.), "Henri Pirenne: Medievalist and Historian of Belgium" in: L. MILIS D. LAMBRECHT, H. DE RIDDER-SYMOENS, & M. VLEESCHOUWERS-VAN MELKEBEEK (eds.), *Law, History, The Low Countries and Europe*, London/Rio Grande, 1994, pp. 161-178.
- VAN UYTVEN (R.), "Plutokratie in de 'oude democratieën der Nederlanden'", *Handelingen Koninklijke Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*, XVI, 1962, pp. 373-409.
- VAN WERVEKE (H.), "Een geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Taalgemeenschap", *De Vlaamsche Gids*, XX, October 1931, pp. 5-13.
- VAN WERVEKE (H.), "Karl Lamprecht et Henri Pirenne", *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, CXXXVIII, 1972, pp. 39-60.
- VAN WERVEKE (H.), *Paul Fredericq in de spiegel van zijn dagboek. Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren*, XLI, vol. 1, 1979.
- VAN WERVEKE (H.), *Herinneringen uit kinderjaren en jeugd*, Ghent, 2000.
- VERCAUTEREN (P.), "La place de Paul Janson dans la vie politique belge de 1877 à 1884", *Res Publica*, XI, 1969, no. 2, pp. 383-404.
- VERHULST (A.), "Henri Pirenne", *Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, vol. II, Tiel, 1975, pp. 1252-1253.
- VERHULST (A.), "The Origins of Towns in the Low Countries and the Pirenne Thesis", *Past and Present*, CXXII, 1989, pp. 1-35.

"Ceci n'est pas un historien"
Constructie en deconstructie bij Henri Pirenne

WALTER PREVENIER

SAMENVATTING

De constructie van Henri Pirenne als *founding father* van de Gentse historische (mediëvisten)-school is het werk van zijn Gentse alumni en van een enthousiaste biograaf, Bryce Lyon. De mythevorming steunt op zijn flamboyante sociale vaardigheden, inspirerend onderwijs en pedagogische innovaties. Hij voerde in Gent de kritische historische wetenschap in, paleografie en diplomatiek, seminarie-oefeningen, verruimde de onderzoeksdomeinen met demografie, stads- en sociale geschiedenis. Zijn discipelen werkten beslist niet alle in zijn lijn, maar ze koesterden wel de interactie van eruditie en synthese als een model dat Gray Boyce de "Pirenne legacy" noemde.

De constructie van Pirenne als Belgisch-nationaal icoon en als getalenteerd pleitbezorger van het Belgisch establishment in het buitenland is het gevolg van zijn *Histoire de Belgique*, een optimistisch eresaluut aan het succesverhaal van de jonge Belgische natie. Het was niet zijn eigen initiatief, wel het gevolg van een Duitse wetenschappelijke opdracht. Na Pirennes gevangenschap in Duitsland kreeg het boek prompt de status van een politiek statement. Kritiek bleef niet uit: de groot-Nederlandse afwijzing door Pieter Geyl; de kritische reactie op het terug projecteren van het hedendaagse België tot in de middeleeuwen.

Pirennes techniek in de uitbouw van een gedurfde en grensverleggende these kunnen we stap voor stap volgen bij *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. Deze constructie was een lang gevecht met de engel. Ze startte met een flitsende intuïtie in een les. De eerste versie, in 1922, en het boek van 1937 lokten vele reacties uit over onjuiste of onvolledige analyses van de economische en monetaire realia, van de vroege stadsontwikkeling, van de rol van de Islam. Vooral de archeologen brachten aanvullende bouwstenen aan als gevolg van nieuwe opgravingen. Nauwelijks één volzin van *Mahomet et Charlemagne* bleef rechttop, maar impact en vitaliteit bleven ongeschonden.

John Mundy betoogde in 1977 dat Pirennes analyses van het middeleeuws verleden fundamenteel gekleurd werden door diens liberaal-burgerlijke premissen over economische groei als hoogste goed, en als garantie voor parlementaire democratie en toename van persoonlijke vrijheid. Pirennes werken zijn odes aan het vooruitgangsoptimisme en de maakbaarheid van de samenleving door het creatieve individu, met een dubbele empathie, zowel voor de middeleeuwse *captains of industry* als voor de revolterende arbeiders. Ze vormen het hoogtepunt van zijn geloof in het negentiende-eeuwse historisch determinisme en de cyclische theorieën. Ze zijn schatplichtig aan Karl Lamprecht die hem tijdens en na zijn Duitse studietijd vertrouwd maakte met Hegel en de marxistische analyses. Na WO I krijgen we een relativerend historicus te zien, die zijn vertrouwen in determinisme grotendeels inruilde voor de notie 'toeval'.

**"Ceci n'est pas un historien"
Construction et déconstruction chez Henri Pirenne**

WALTER PREVENIER

RÉSUMÉ

La construction d'Henri Pirenne comme père-fondateur de l'école historique des médiévistes gantois est l'œuvre de ses *alumni* gantois et d'un biographe enthousiaste, Bryce Lyon. La formation de ce mythe repose sur ses flamboyantes aptitudes sociales, son enseignement enthousiasmant et innovations pédagogiques. Il introduisait à Gand la science historique critique, la paléographie et la diplomatique, les séminaires, il a élargi les domaines de recherche avec la démographie, l'histoire urbaine et sociale. Ses disciples ne travaillaient certainement pas tous dans les mêmes secteurs, mais ils conservaient chèrement l'interaction de l'érudition et de la synthèse dans un modèle que Gray Boyce baptisait la "Pirenne legacy".

La construction de Pirenne comme un icône national belge et comme un avocat de talent de l'establishment belge à l'étranger est la conséquence de son *Histoire de Belgique*, un hommage optimiste à la réussite de la jeune

nation belge. Cette œuvre n'était pas sa propre initiative, mais le résultat d'une invitation scientifique allemande. Après la captivité de Pirenne en Allemagne le livre recevait aussitôt le statut d'une assertion politique. La critique ne tardait pas: le refus grand-néerlandais de Pieter Geyl; la réaction critique contre la projection de la Belgique contemporaine au moyen-âge.

La technique de Pirenne dans le développement d'une thèse audacieuse et ouvrant de nouvelles perspectives peut être suivie pas à pas pour son *Mahomet et Charlemagne*. Cette construction fut une lutte avec l'ange. Elle a commencé par un éclair d'intuition pendant un de ses cours. La première version, en 1922, et le livre de 1937 provoquaient pas mal de réactions concernant des analyses incorrectes ou imparfaites des faits économiques et monétaires, du développement urbain précoce, du rôle de l'Islam. Surtout les archéologues apportaient de nombreuses additions à partir de nouvelles fouilles. À peine une phrase de *Mahomet et Charlemagne* restait debout, mais son impact et sa vitalité restaient intacts.

John Mundy argumentait en 1977 que les analyses de Pirenne du passé médiéval furent fondamentalement colorées par ses prémisses libérales et bourgeoises sur le développement économique comme bien suprême, et comme garantie de la démocratie parlementaire et de croissance de la liberté personnelle. Les œuvres de Pirenne sont des odes à l'optimisme de la progression et de la faisabilité de la société par l'individu créatif, et cela avec une double empathie, d'une part pour les *captains of industry* médiévaux, d'autre part pour les travailleurs en révolte. Elles forment l'apogée de sa foi dans le déterminisme historique du 19^{ème} siècle et des théories cycliques. Elles sont tributaires à Karl Lamprecht, qui avait familiarisé Pirenne dans sa période d'études en Allemagne avec Hegel et les analyses marxistes. Après la Première Guerre mondiale il est devenu un historien relativisant, qui avait largement échangé son déterminisme pour la notion du hasard.