



Gresham and Antwerp

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In 1567, the Florentine Ludovico Guicciardini published his *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* - a description of the Low Countries. His detailed portrait of the Antwerp metropolis illustrates remarkably well the cosmopolitan character of the city on the river Scheldt. He wrote that "it is a wonderful thing to see such a great coming together of so many people and nations. It is even stranger to hear the many different languages: as a result, without the need to travel, one can discover, or even follow the nature, habits, and customs of many nations. It is because of this accumulation of strangers that there are always new tidings from all over the world". Around the same time, the Venetian merchant Giovanni Zoncha, who resided in Antwerp from 1563 until 1566, praised the city for the air of freedom. He noticed that foreigners enjoyed as much respect as the gentlemen of the city. You could take your friend by the arm and speak of whatever you wished. In terms of freedom, Antwerp was like a kingdom of Cockaigne. One of these foreigners was Thomas Gresham, the agent of the English Crown.

The Antwerp scene

Before analyzing Gresham's role at Antwerp, I think it may be useful to tell something about the Antwerp context. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Antwerp became a centre of world trade thanks to the coming together of Portuguese spices, South German copper and silver, and English cloth. An English historian wrote about the booming Antwerp metropolis: "Antwerp was a city which held a position such as has never been held before or since by any other town. For nearly a century this cosmopolitan city controlled exclusively the money market of the known world, and the whole varied interchange of goods and wealth. Every nation had its concessions within the walls, every important loan in Europe was negotiated here." As a consequence, foreign merchant firms played a crucial role in the growth of the Antwerp market. From the 1530's and 1540's onwards, Antwerp's own merchants more and more took centre stage. The leading position Antwerp acquired in international trade is for instance clear when we look at figures relating to port traffic. During prosperous years around 2500 ships transporting a 250.000 ton entered the Antwerp port, being four times as much as the volume processed by the London harbour.

The commercial expansion had a far-reaching effect on the city's demography. The economic growth attracted indeed a massive inflow of immigrants. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Antwerp city walls harboured ca. 40,000 inhabitants. This number more than doubled within 70 years. In 1566, there were indeed 100.000 inhabitants. A census of October 1568 offers more precise information. At that moment, there were 89,996 resident people. The 14,085 extra people were described as 10.263 "foreign merchants daily coming and going", and 3.822 soldiers with their wives, children, and servants.

The share of the foreigners in the total population is difficult to pinpoint. Most of them belonged to the floating population while a minority stayed at Antwerp for a long period or even permanently. Economic historians estimate that at mid-sixteenth century there resided about 1000 foreign merchants in Antwerp, forming part of a foreign nation. The southerners were in the majority, with 300 Spaniards, 150 Portuguese, and 200 Italians. There were 150 easterners or Hanseatics, 150 High Germans and 100 Englishmen. The nations of foreign merchants constituted separate entities within the urban fabric with specific rules and privileges. They all had, for instance, a fixed place in the secular and religious processions that wound through the streets of the city. The joyous entry of Crown Prince Philip in 1549 offers a good example.

It is certainly useful to have a closer look at the position of the English Nation. I just mentioned there were about 100 Englishmen in Antwerp, but this figure undoubtedly refers to those who stayed permanently at Antwerp. The number of English merchants trading on Antwerp and staying in the city for a shorter period was much higher. It was especially during the fairs - there were two fairs each year - that their number peaked. The economic historian Oskar De Smedt, who published in the 1950's a two volume book on the English Nation at Antwerp, counted 600 merchants belonging to the English Nation and trading on Antwerp around 1550. Many of these merchants belonged to the Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers of England - the so called Merchant Company which monopolized the English wool and cloth trade on Antwerp.

The Anglo-Antwerp wool trade had its ups and downs, suffering from tensions between both countries and from war. The first half of the sixteenth century was, however, a prosperous period for the Merchant Adventurers. The London cloth exports rose at an annual rate of 2.7 percent. But in the 1550's, these exports stagnated at levels substantially below those reached during the boom period of the 1540's and early 1550's. The Merchant Company tried to find a solution by strengthening their government-backed monopoly position. They wanted to restrict the wool trade to members of their company and to bar those who were not exclusively overseas traders. For the English Crown and government, a prosperous merchant community could offer an unrivalled source of financial support by granting loans and paying taxes on trade.

The fellowship of Merchant Adventurers disposed at Antwerp of their own buildings. In the first half of the sixteenth century, the Company administration housed in the Wolstraat (the Wool Street), close to the English Bourse and the Great Market, but in 1558, they moved to a more spacious building, the House of Liere, built by the Antwerp patrician Van Liere family at the beginning of the sixteenth century in early renaissance style. [see pictures]. The famous painter Albrecht Dürer who visited Antwerp in 1520 did not conceal his admiration for the Van Liere House. He finished his description by saying that "In sum, I didn't see such a marvellous house in all of Germany". Already at the middle of the century, the Van Liere family sold the magnificent house to the city of Antwerp and in 1558, the Antwerp city fathers put the building at the disposal of the English Merchant Company. Henceforth, the governor and the officers of the Company's court resided in the House of Liere or the English House as it was now called. Thomas Gresham was undoubtedly one of its regular visitors.

When Gresham entered the Antwerp scene at the beginning of the 1550's, the city was still at its economic and commercial peak. At the same time, there were changes in the religious and political domain. Officially the Roman Catholic Church still had a monopoly position, but in practice the Protestant movement gained popularity. It was especially Anabaptist and Calvinist communities which were booming in the 1550's. Around the same time, the city had to cope with the central government's efforts to curtail local autonomy. Furthermore, the efficient suppression of heresy demanded a strengthening of the central power and a restriction of urban autonomy. Yet, until 1567 the mighty Antwerp metropolis succeeded to maintain to a large extent its autonomy and privileges, in spite of serious threats.

Thomas Gresham at work in Antwerp

It was in December 1551 or January 1552 that Thomas Gresham was appointed as royal agent or king's merchant, an office which necessitated his residence at Antwerp. This does not mean that Gresham lived uninterruptedly at Antwerp - he often returned to London and commuted in a certain way between the two cities. There were, however, periods of prolonged residence, for instance from March 1561 until (at least) February 1562. The next years, Gresham's periods of residence in Antwerp became considerably shorter. During his stay at Antwerp, he entrusted the conduct of his affairs in Lombard Street to his London factor or manager.

At the beginning of his Antwerp time, Gresham was lodged in the spacious house of Gaspar Schetz, a rich Antwerp merchant-banker who later became treasurer-general of Philip II. A letter, written by Gresham in November 1552, seems to indicate that he was since almost eight years on close terms with Gaspar Schetz. He characterized Schetz "as a man of great power and wealth, and had always been ready to do me all pleasure he could for the service of our country".

After some time, Gresham bought or hired a house for him and his family. We don't know when this happened and where the house was situated, but we have more information about the residence he bought in May 1559. The deed of sale describes the property, situated in the Lange Nieuwstraat, as "a mansion called, St-Francis, with places, a court, a summer house, stables, a well, with next to the mansion two other

houses which have been incorporated and now make one mansion". The previous owner of the mansion was a rich Portuguese merchant who had bought it six years earlier from an Antwerp patrician family. [foto Lange Nieuwstraat 43] Yet, the St. Francis mansion was not Gresham's sole property. He also had a country house a little bit out of the city. He already was in the possession of this house in September 1563 when he wrote a letter "from the suburbs of Antwerp".

At first sight, it may look somewhat strange that Thomas Gresham possessed a spacious house in and outside the city, but there were obvious practical reasons. As a royal agent, he collected commodities of different nature which were stored in his house St Francis - and maybe also in his country house - and dispatched from there to England. Furthermore, his office involved a representative function too. He regularly received bankers and friend whom he wanted to thank for their dedication. Gresham's accounts and his letters to Secretary of State William Cecil often mention that he concluded his mission in Antwerp by giving his friends a feast. For instance, his accounts from March to July 1552 stipulate at the end: "Paid for a supper and a banquet that I made to the Fugger and the Schetz and others that I have had to do with all for your Majesty - 26 pound". In his letter to Cecil of 8 September 1566, he wrote: "Sir, this week I do intend to banquet the Queen Majesty's creditors, both young and old." Some days earlier, he had received in his country house William of Orange, his wife and his brother Louis, and other relatives and friends.

It is now time to have a closer look at Gresham's activities in Antwerp. As a royal agent or king's merchant, residing in Antwerp, Thomas Gresham had to take care of several duties, as is clear from the royal instructions and his extensive correspondence, especially with the secretary of state William Cecil. The royal instructions focus upon Gresham's role as a financial agent of the English Crown, but they also deal with - often interconnected - issues such as the collecting and sending over of weapons and munitions, diplomatic or semi-diplomatic charges, and the collecting of information.

Gresham's primary role was to raise money for the English Crown and it is of course no surprise that the Antwerp metropolis was the most suited operation base for this important job. The Antwerp Bourse was in fact an institution where money might be raised at an appropriate rate of interest by anyone offering the requisite credit or security. Emperor Charles V and his son Philip II had their own financial agents at the Antwerp market and the big South-German and Italian trading firms like the Fuggers, the Welsers and the Spinola had their representatives too. Thomas Gresham was, as G.D. Ramsay wrote, a shrewd and quick agent to tap the resources of the Antwerp money market on behalf of the subsequent English rulers, from Edward VI to Elizabeth I.

The royal instructions issued by these three monarchs display a remarkable similarity in explaining Gresham's role as a financial agent. Let us, for instance, have a look at the instructions of 12 March 1558, formulated on behalf of the late Queen Mary, and the instructions of 20 December 1559, given by the early Queen Elizabeth. The Queen Mary instructions stipulate that "the said Gresham shall with all diligence repair to Antwerp, again travelling according to his accustomed good diligence and wisdom, both for the speedy receipt to our use of 100,000 pound bargained for by the said Scyolle [a German banker] and for the borrowing to our use of 100,000 pound more for one year at such favourable interest as he may, foreseeing that he exceed not to charge us with more than 14 percent for the interest." Gresham was commissioned to bargain 200,000 pound with other bankers on the same conditions, in case the deal with the German banker would not work out.

The instructions issued by Elizabeth I mention that Gresham should borrow a similar amount of 200,000 pound for one year at an interest "as low as you can bring it". He was asked to consider as soon as possible the state of things among the bankers in Antwerp and to certify by letter what hope there was to obtain "any greate sommes of money". During the first months of 1560, Gresham was very active on the Antwerp money market, but he had to cope with great scarcity of money. In a letter to William Cecil, 8 March 1560, he complained about rumours among the merchants and the commons of Antwerp, namely that he wanted to rob them of all their fine gold and silver. Furthermore, the Italian and Spanish merchants decided to submit a supplication at the Regent in which they protested against Gresham. Apparently, the resentment took such a shape that Gresham did not feel safe and only left his house during Bourse time.

At the same time, the Queen's creditors wanted to be paid back. In a letter to Cecil of 19 April 1560, Gresham wrote: "To be playne with yow, every man sekcs to be paid." He added that there was no other remedy than to have patience and to wait for six months. In spite of all these problems, he still succeeded to send large quantities of gold and silver to England. He even voiced some optimistic notes in his letter of 8 March, saying that "finally thereby, Her Highness honour and credit is so augmented in all parts of Christendom that no King or Prince is the like".

We may conclude that there was similarity of content between the instructions of Mary and Elisabeth, but it is undeniable that the circumstances in which Thomas Gresham was operating had changed. This is also clear when we look at another charge articulated in the royal instructions: the duty to collect and send over weapons and munitions. This job was much easier to accomplish during the reign of Queen Mary because Gresham was on friendly terms with the king and the central government in Brussels. The marriage between Queen Mary Tudor of England and Charles V's son and heir Philip in 1554, had indeed created a new political constellation in north-west Europe. In 1557 England followed Philip's lead and declared war on France and Scotland. The next year, we see a very busy Thomas Gresham buying weapons for the English Crown. In April 1558, he got permission from Emanuel-Philibert, duke of Savoy, and Regent of the Netherlands, to export a large quantity of munitions, weapons and armour "without paying any rights or customs". A few months later, on 6 June 1558, Gresham informed Queen Mary that he had a conversation with the Regent about the sending of a new lot of weapons. The Regent consulted the king who did not grant a general but a specific permission for the export. Gresham also spoke directly to the king. In May 1558, he wrote the Queen that he was back from Brussels where he had met King Philip three times in order to speak about the sending of money and weapons. He added that "the King conducted himself as good as the heart of the Queen could desire". Gresham also acted as a service-hatch for presents. In October 1558, he reported the Queen that he had given King Philip the ring she had sent over.

This ring was presumably the last present handed over by Gresham because the next month Queen Mary died childless and the English Crown passed to her half-sister Elizabeth. It was soon clear that Elizabeth wanted to turn England into a Protestant state again. These intentions conflicted with Philip II's religious conviction and put the relationship between England and the Spanish monarchy under tension. This important change had, of course, consequences for Gresham's working conditions. In passing, we must remind that Gresham had fallen from his high office once the new regime was established. Yet, he was found indispensable and had been reinstated before the end of the year as agent of the English Crown at Antwerp.

At the beginning of December 1558, he already received instructions about the bargaining of loans at the Antwerp money market. The royal instructions of 20 December 1558 clearly refer to the new political context. It was expected that henceforth the sending over of weapons would meet serious problems. There just had been a new inquisition in the custom houses by order of the Regent in order to find out what armour and munitions had been passed to England's use. Gresham was recommended to further and speed things "by friendship of the customs officers" and the instructions added "you shall distribute in reward to the same officers for their favour in expedition such several sums of money as you shall think meet, so you exceed not the sum of 500 crowns."

Gresham was still expected to maintain contacts with the central government in Brussels, but the "diplomatic" constellation was a new one. In July 1559, Philip II and his court had left the Low Countries for Spain. As a consequence, there was a shift of political power from Brussels to Madrid, and therefore, the English government decided at the end of 1559 to replace the English ambassador. Henceforth, there was an English ambassador in Madrid and a Spanish ambassador in London. The diplomatic representation in Brussels was maintained at a lower level since it was Gresham who, as financial agent of the Queen, was charged with the diplomatic contacts with the central government. The royal instructions of December 1559 stipulated that Gresham was commissioned to go to the Brussels court and to communicate with the Regent about all relevant matters. In case these consultations did not lead to a solution, for instance for the sending over of munitions, than Gresham was advised to solicit the assistance of the English ambassador in Spain. Everything seems to indicate that Gresham infrequently appeared at the Brussels court and that he did not play a significant role in international diplomacy.

His core business remained indeed the collecting of money and weapons and he kept in mind the instructions given by Queen Elizabeth. In May 1560, he admitted in one of his letters that he had bribed two of the main Antwerp customs officers. It was a dangerous business since the officers risked their life and it was the more remarkable because the Antwerp customs officers had a good reputation. Richard Clough, who was Gresham's factor in Antwerp, complained about the inefficiency of the London customs officers. They were, he wrote to Gresham, "men known to be men that will be corrupted for money." The English situation stood in sharp contrast to the efficiency in Antwerp. There were less officers in the Antwerp metropolis, but Clough pretended that "there is more custom stolen in London in one month than is here in Antwerp in one whole year, which comes because they here do the things in order, and we out of order." Yet, the evidence from Gresham shows that the Antwerp officers were not completely untouchable. Money could open doors, also in Antwerp.

Thomas Gresham's room for manoeuvre was greatly facilitated because he could rely on influential friends. After several years of activity in Antwerp, he had built up an extensive network of people active in the political and commercial milieu. Gaspar Schetz was undoubtedly one of his most powerful connections. Gaspar's father Erasmus Schetz was a big merchant-banker and an important creditor to Charles V. His three sons - Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar - continued the Schetz-enterprise. Gaspar, who offered Gresham hospitality for several months, was well connected in the city government. He had married Catharina van Ursel who belonged to one of the leading patrician families in the town council. Gaspar's brother Melchior acted as city treasurer and alderman in the 1550's and 1560's. Gaspar himself was appointed in 1564 as treasurer-general of the Netherlands and henceforth was a key political figure in the central government circles. Gresham regularly received information from Schetz about the political problems in the Netherlands, for instance about the unwillingness of the States to vote money for the king. Queen Elizabeth expressed her gratitude for the services rendered by Schetz and sent him - through Gresham - a chain worth 500 crowns and a sum of 500 crowns "for further testimony of our good will, requiring him to continue his good will to the furtherance of our service and to the maintenance of the amity between both countries". In the Summer of 1562, Gresham was secretly informed, through Schetz, that cardinal Granvelle - at that moment the dominant politician in the Council of State - kept a sharp eye on his whereabouts and that he did everything to discredit him and Queen Elizabeth at the Antwerp Bourse.

It was equally through Schetz that Gresham got in touch with leading persons of the central government. In January 1564, when the relations between England and the Low Countries were particularly strained, Gaspar Schetz arranged Gresham's access to the Regent, Margaret of Parma. Still in the same month, Schetz invited Gresham for dinner, together with the head of the Antwerp branch of the German Fugger firm. Also Philippe de Montmorency, a noble man of the Council of State, was present, and to Gresham's surprise even Cardinal Granvelle showed up. Gresham told William Cecil that he wanted to leave upon Granvelle's arrival but Schetz convinced him to stay. He reported that Granvelle spoke friendly with him and that he offered his services.

Next to Schetz, Gresham had still other influential friends in the Antwerp commercial milieu. One of them was Christopher Pruynen. He was a treasurer of the Antwerp city government, a rich merchant associated with the Schetz family, and a major creditor of the English Crown. He too supplied Gresham with interesting information. On the other side, Pruynen more than once asked Gresham's assistance, when the latter could further his commercial interests, for instance by mobilizing his contacts in the political or commercial circles of London.

Another friend was Paul van Daele, also a big Antwerp merchant, a creditor to the English Crown, and a supplier of information. Gresham called him in one of his letters "a man of moche onnestye and of welthe". All these features also apply to Gillis Hooftman, who was a friend of William of Orange too. Hooftman headed a big merchant company which focused on the London trade and had ramifications elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

It is very likely that Gresham got acquainted with all these people through his activities as a financial agent. There is, however, another aspect we may not overlook. Wealthy merchants or bankers like Schetz, Pruynen and Hooftman were well-educated men with contacts in the humanist and semi-humanist circles. Gillis Hooftman was a lover of literature, science and art. He acted as a patron for the Antwerp cartographer Abraham Ortelius and was well-known by the printer Christopher Plantin and his circle. Gaspar Schetz' father Erasmus was a friend and correspondent of the famous humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. Ludovico Guicciardini praised Gaspar Schetz in his *Descrittione* as a learned man and a great poet who was well versed in Latin and Greek. We know that such Antwerp merchants, but also foreign ones, acted as patrons for writers and artists. It is very well possible that Gresham played a similar role although I did not find contemporary evidence for this assumption - at least not in Antwerp. Maybe future research will shed new light on this intriguing aspect.

As a royal agent, charged with the raising of money, it was of utmost importance to be very well informed. Events and developments of different nature could influence the conditions of the Antwerp money market, such as the availability of money, the exchange rates of the moment, the willingness to grant new loans or the demand to pay back old debts. Furthermore, efficient and up to date information was equally important when Gresham was looking for weapons and munitions. The Antwerp metropolis was by definition a centre of information. Merchants were constantly coming and going, bringing with them new tidings. But Gresham could also rely upon a network of agents and friends who send him regular intelligence from different parts in Europe. Gresham passed the relevant information to William Cecil who certainly endorsed the motto that adequate information entailed power. So, we hear in Gresham's letters to Cecil information about the

politico-military conflict in France, the raising of troops by Protestant princes in the Holy Empire, and, of course, about the situation in the Low Countries.

This information could be very precise or more general in nature. For instance, in a letter to Cecil, dated 19 April 1560, he wrote about the general atmosphere towards Philip II and Queen Elizabeth. Philip's plans to help the French King in order to subdue the Scots caused negative sentiments everywhere: "Which matter is so taken by all nations to the great dishonour of the King's Majesty that, if any breach of war should chance, I believe the Queen's Majesty should be more assured of friends here [in the Netherlands] than he. As also they say plain here that the States of the land will never consent to have war with England, and that this is the practise of the Spaniards and the priests, as well in England as other ways: which matter had clean altered the credit of the Queen's Majesty and of all our nation."

I told at the beginning of this lecture that Thomas Gresham's activities in Antwerp were multi-faceted. He undoubtedly spent most of his time at his core duties, such as contracting loans and collecting and dispatching weapons. There are, however, activities in the margins which deserve some attention. During his stay in Antwerp, Gresham often collected precious commodities which were sent over to England. Most of these commodities belonged to the world of learning, fine arts or luxury. A frequent recipient was Secretary of State William Cecil. Gresham sent him books poured from the Antwerp printing press and maps and plans.

But far from all items received by Cecil had an intellectual flavour. In May 1560 Gresham sent Cecil "two pair of black silken hosen and one pair for my Lady your wife". One year later, Gresham shipped chairs in leather and others in velvet, destined for Cecil's wife. Gresham also rendered Cecil specific services. In April 1560, he reported to the Secretary of State that the man who made his clock was out of town, but he hoped to send it over within ten days. From time to time, Gresham also shipped materials for the building of Cecil's house - I assume it concerns Burghley House at Stamford. In the summer of 1561, he mentions in a letter to Cecil the sending over of five columns of marble. Five years later, in September 1566, Gresham gave Cecil details about paving stones which he hoped to send to England very soon. These two examples are just an illustration of the many building materials dispatched by Gresham, not only for Cecil's House, but also for the Royal Exchange at London.

I just mentioned the silken hosen sent to the Cecils. These items seem to confirm Gresham's eye for exquisite textiles and clothing. Already during the first months of his stay in Antwerp as royal agent, Gresham started to collect precious textiles. On 16 May 1552, two Antwerp craftsmen declared before the Antwerp town clerks that they had packed two trunks and one little barrel on behalf of Thomas Gresham. The clerks carefully wrote down the packed items:

- 50 or 60 ells of velvet, of various colours
- 30 ells of linen
- a piece of mock-velvets
- 6 pieces of ticking
- some cloths
- 14 cloths of velvet for horses

The trunks and barrels were marked with Gresham's mark and the Antwerp clerks were so kind to draw it in their register. (See picture!)

One year later, on 28 July 1553, the same clerks noted that Gresham's Antwerp factor Richard Clough had asked to pack two packs with 80 pieces of velvet of various colours, belonging to his master. The packs were put on a cart which left for Calais. Customs officers were asked to allow the export free of taxes.

As a financial agent of the English Crown Gresham maintained intense contacts with the English Merchant Company at Antwerp. This company dominated the export of English wool to Antwerp - one of the pillars of Antwerp's economy. The Antwerp city fathers were well aware of Gresham's position as a political and economic power broker and they did not hesitate to make use of his influence and contacts. This became particularly clear at the occasion of the embargo on English wool. In 1563, the relations between Queen Elizabeth and the Netherlands had been deteriorating for some time. In December of the same year, the Brussels government imposed a temporary embargo on the importation of certain English goods. Elizabeth reacted by transferring all the wool and cloth exports to Emden in north Germany. The consequences for the Antwerp economy were disastrous. Richard Clough reported to Gresham that "here [in Antwerp] is such

misery within this town like hat not been seen". Robberies and housebreakings rose disturbingly and the Antwerp city fathers feared for an insurrection. In April 1564, the Merchant Adventurers terminated the lease on their Antwerp warehouse, which heightened fears that the disruption of trade might become permanent. Many English merchants left Antwerp during the summer, but a minority continued their residence at Antwerp. Among them were John Fitzwilliams, the Deputy Governor of the Merchant Company, and George Gilpin, its secretary.

The Antwerp city magistrate was seriously disappointed by the central government's policy which conflicted with the vital economic interests of the city. The city fathers launched several diplomatic initiatives in order to bring about a restoration of trade. They sent delegates to the Regent in Brussels and also a delegate to London. It goes without saying that Thomas Gresham played a role in this process of negotiation and persuasion. Already in December 1563 the Antwerp city fathers sent letters to Gresham, asking for his assistance. They even tried to foster his goodwill by delivering presents. On 10 January 1564, Gresham wrote to Cecil that he received from the city magistrate "a present of wine, of the value of 10 l.s., desiring me that I would be their mean to the Queen's Majesty to be good to their town, as her ancestors had been heretofore." It was the first time he received a gift from the city and therefore he wanted to report it to Cecil.

In the meanwhile, Gresham had already taken some initiatives to further the Antwerp interests. In a letter to the Antwerp city magistrate of 11 January 1564, he wrote that he had conferred with the governor of the Merchant Company and that he had solicited the assistance of Secretary of State William Cecil who was "of all the lords of the Privy Council the most inclined to do you a pleasure." He added that they had decided by common agreement to transport their merchandise to Antwerp again and to keep their residence there. This was undoubtedly a communication which was too optimistic because the conflict and the embargo dragged along for several months. In letters of May and June 1564, the Antwerp city fathers asked Gresham to continue his good affection for the city. Yet, the problem was difficult to resolve and it was only in January 1565 that the English government reversed their decision.

In any case, in the conflict about the trade embargo, Thomas Gresham had proved to be a useful intermediary for the Antwerp city magistrate. I would now like to continue on this aspect by focusing on one specific case which took place in 1565. I just said that the embargo caused misery within the Antwerp city walls. There was large scale unemployment and social discontent. To make things even worse, the winter of 1564-1565 was one of the coldest of the sixteenth century. The bad weather continued and ruined in several parts of Europe the harvest of 1565. Grain became scarce and bread prices peaked. The Netherlands were especially hit since war circumstances in the Baltic area seriously hindered the so important Baltic grain export.

In England, on the contrary, the grain harvest of 1565 was quite successful so that there were enough grain supplies. The Antwerp city fathers decided to send their town pensionary Jacob van Wesenbeke to England in order to buy large quantities of grain for the city. The Antwerp town pensionaries were university trained lawyers and fluent in several languages. Thanks to their expertise and the permanence of their mandate, the pensionaries had a real influence on the political decision-making. This is especially true for Jacob van Wesenbeke who had defended the interests of the city in several delicate questions. We are exceptionally well informed about Van Wesenbeke's mission to England since the correspondence with the city magistrate, the accounts and a journal kept by Van Wesenbeke are still conserved at the Antwerp City Archives. All these documents make clear how a delegate of the Antwerp city government approached the highest government circles in London and they offer a good insight in the diplomatic culture of the time. Gresham, who was in England during Van Wesenbeke's mission, played a crucial role in the negotiation process.

Van Wesenbeke left Antwerp on Friday night 16 November 1565. His instructions stipulated that he should go to the court and present his letters to the Queen, asking her a licence for the export of grain. He was also advised to present the same request to Secretary of State Cecil and royal agent Thomas Gresham. The Genoese brothers Pasqual and Benedicto Spinola had to play a role too. The Spinola's were rich merchants who resided since a long time in London. They were very well known to most members of the Privy Council. Another Spinola brother, who was well connected with the Antwerp city fathers, headed the Spinola firm in Antwerp.

Van Wesenbeke arrived at London on Wednesday morning 21 November after nearly five days of travelling. He had a meeting with the Spinola brothers who had already conferred with William Cecil about the Antwerp request. On Friday 26 November Van Wesenbeke went to Thomas Gresham's house outside London. They considered the grain-issue and the next day, they both returned to London. On Sunday 27

November Van Wesenbeke planned to see William Cecil and Queen Elizabeth and to present his letters of credence, using Gresham as an intermediary. Van Wesenbeke and Gresham went in fact to the court and had lunch with William Cecil. Cecil was afraid that the Queen could not receive the Antwerp pensionary during the current week, but promised to do his best. During the afternoon Wesenbeke and Gresham stayed at the court, speaking with the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Admiral and Lord Cobham. At night, when Queen Elizabeth went to the Vespers, Van Wesenbeke eventually got his audience.

Van Wesenbeke reported to the Antwerp city fathers: "The Queen received me in her secret chamber - as they called it here and which they take for a special favour - and she gave me a good, long audience, save when I called the quantity of the grains I wanted to export - 15.000 quarters - . She said - a little bit bringing her mouth at laughing - that this was an excessive large quantity." Van Wesenbeke explained his arguments and the Queen answered that she wanted to help the city but that she could not bring her own people in need. She promised to deliberate about the matter with her Council and to communicate the answer through a councillor or her secretary, pointing to Cecil who was present during the audience. I can not judge how exceptional it was for a delegate of a foreign city to be received by the Queen in person - may be it was and Van Wesenbeek voiced in his letter to the Antwerp city fathers some feelings of pride. In any case, the Queen's answer did not look very promising.

In the meanwhile, Van Wesenbeek did continue his efforts. The next day, Monday 26 November, he went together with Gresham to Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester who gave them a fine audience. On Wednesday 28 November, Van Wesenbeke went back to the court but did not succeed to speak someone. He heard from one of the Spinola brothers that the Queen was not yet inclined to give a positive answer. It was now Gresham who wrote letters to Cecil and to the Queen. The next day, Van Wesenbeke returned to the court where he eventually could speak Cecil who communicated a negative decision. Van Wesenbeke now travelled to Gresham's house and on Friday 30 November they both returned to London where they reconsidered the situation. Van Wesenbeke elaborated, together with Spinola, new tactics and he wrote in his journal "that they wanted to try all ways, ways which he wanted to keep secret and which he could not put on paper." It is clear that he considered bribery, an option which was explicitly mentioned in his instructions.

The next days, Gresham and Spinola negotiated at the court, apparently about the price of the requested grain. On Wednesday 5 December, the Privy Council approved the export of a quantity of grain and Gresham and Van Wesenbeke signed two obligations. The Queen and the Council urged to keep everything secret. Van Wesenbeke was asked to leave immediately and to simulate that there was no agreement. Obviously, the export of large quantities of grain was still a sensitive issue. Van Wesenbeke left London on 8 December and arrived in Antwerp one week later on 15 December. Van Wesenbeke had reached a partial success, but on Monday 17 December, the Antwerp city magistrate decided to cancel the two contracts conditionally signed in London. The Antwerp city fathers judged that the negotiated price was too high and that cheaper grain could be imported through Amsterdam and Spain.

For this lecture, however, the final outcome of Van Wesenbeke's mission is less important. His particularly well-documented mission makes clear how Thomas Gresham could play an important role for the Antwerp metropolis while being outside Antwerp. In England, Gresham's influence and experience could indeed open many doors. He was of invaluable importance for Van Wesenbeke. He was a key figure, perhaps the key figure by excellence whose contacts - and particularly his close relationship with Secretary of State Cecil - gave access to the highest government circles, including the Queen. One may wonder why Gresham was prepared to put so many steps in such a delicate matter. His good contacts with several Antwerpens belonging to the leading political and commercial milieu certainly can't explain everything. Equally important was the awareness of a mutual interest. A supportive Antwerp city government could greatly enhance Gresham's operations in the Low Countries. At the same time, the Antwerp city fathers found in Gresham an extremely useful intermediary in their delicate relationship with England, especially in the years 1564-1566.

I now come to a last aspect. I already mentioned in my introduction that the Low Countries experienced a process of political and religious change. These developments reached a first climax during the so-called Wonderyear or annus mirabilis. This is the period from April 1566 until April 1567 with the presentation of the Request by the nobility, the mass open-air preachings, and the iconoclastic riots, a year of growing opposition to the Habsburg policy and of expansion of the Protestant movement. Thomas Gresham only resided briefly in Antwerp during this time span, in September 1566 and again in March 1567. In both cases, he was a shrewd and privileged observer. It is therefore interesting to see how he perceived the political and religious turmoil.

Gresham arrived in Antwerp on 29 August 1566. At that moment the situation was particularly tense. Nine days earlier, the Calvinists had smashed the images in the main church of Our Lady and in most other churches and convents. On 2 September, William of Orange, who acted in Antwerp as a kind of governor, proclaimed an accord which granted Calvinists and Lutherans proper places for their worship. Gresham thought it was the beginning of more troubles. In his letter of 1 September 1566, he wrote to Cecil: "I fear this business do now but begin, which here is much doubted that it will grow to much slaughter without God's help." He added that many Englishmen planned to leave the city, as many other wealthy merchants had already done.

A few days later, on 4 September 1566, William of Orange invited Gresham for dinner. Orange told Gresham that Philip II would not be content with the recent developments and Gresham once again expressed his fear (letter of 8 September to Cecil): "which caused me to think that this matter is not yet ended, but like to come to great mischief, and especially if the King of Spain may get the upper hand. Orange asked Gresham whether the English were inclined to leave the town or not. Gresham replied that he had not heard such things, but to Cecil he was more honest. He even wrote that Cecil "shall do very well in time to consider some other realm and place for our commodities, whereby Her Majesty's realm may remain in peace, which in this brabling time is one of the chiefest things Your Honor [Cecil] had to look unto, considering in what terms this country do now stand, in which is ready one to cut another's throat for matters of religion".

Gillis Hooftman - one of the richest Antwerp merchants and well known to Gresham - was another guest at the dinner. Hooftman, who was a committed Protestant, asked Gresham: "How do you think Mr. Gresham, for as much as the Queen's Majesty and her realm is of this religion [= Protestant religion], do you think that she will give aid to our noble men, as she did in France for the religion's sake?" As often, Gresham tried to avoid such a delicate question by asking Hooftman whether the noble men had demanded any help of the Queen. Hooftman said he couldn't tell, and Gresham added that he was "no counsellor, nor never dealt with such great matters".

It will be very clear that Thomas Gresham was pessimistic about the developments in the Netherlands. These feelings had only grown when he returned to Antwerp in March 1567. At that moment, the Calvinists and the central government, led by Margaret of Parma, were ready for an armed confrontation. William of Orange invited Gresham again for dinner. Gresham was convinced that Orange faced an impossible situation and that he could not maintain peace. The Regent, Margaret of Parma wanted to ban every form of Protestant activity, an attitude that risked to causing great revolt in Antwerp. Gresham was informed that there were more than 40,000 Protestants in the city. They were prepared to die for their religion and Gresham summarized in his letter to Cecil [9 March 1567]: "happy is the man that is out of the town. I pray God will turn all to the best".

A few days later, Gresham witnessed a major confrontation. Central government troops were a short distance from the city walls. The Calvinists, who felt themselves threatened, wanted to increase their political and military power. William of Orange reached agreements with the Calvinist leaders, guaranteeing them a share in the defense of the city and promising them not to admit an outside royal garrison without the consent of the Antwerp Broad Council. When the Calvinists remained unsatisfied, the Catholics, Lutherans, Hanseatics, Germans, and southern nations all took up arms against the Calvinist army on the Meir, one of the main Antwerp streets. Gresham thought there were six men for one Calvinist. Confronted by superior force, the disillusioned Calvinists withdrew on 15 March. Gresham praised Orange's attempts to prevent large-scale bloodshed. He reported William Cecil "that the Prince had worked very nobly, both night and day, to keep this town from man slaughter and despoil."

Yet, William of Orange could not stop the progress of the royal army. A Beggar army was crushed at Oosterweel, a few miles outside the city walls. The last Lutheran and Calvinist preachings were held on 9 April and two days later, Orange and many Protestants left the city. Gresham deplored the situation. He had already left Antwerp on 19 March. His factor Richard Clough took care of Gresham's interests and continued to inform his master until the spring of 1569. In the meanwhile, the Duke of Alva had established a repressive regime in the Low Countries. His quarrels with the English government about acts of piracy escalated and in December 1568 Alva ordered to seize all English shipping and merchandise in the Netherlands, particularly at Antwerp.

The Anglo-Netherlandish trade rupture which followed in 1569 had serious consequences for the Antwerp market. Antwerp was in fact closed for the Merchant Adventurers and the English looked for an alternative.

They found one in the German city of Hamburg. The new Deputy Governor of the Merchants Adventurers at Hamburg was none other than Gresham's former Antwerp factor Richard Clough and Gresham played some role too. His privileged relationship with Antwerp clearly belonged to the past.

Conclusion

As an agent of the English Crown, Thomas Gresham deployed activities of different nature in the Antwerp metropolis. His core business had to do with the raising of money for the English Crown, an important charge on behalf of monarchs who were constantly in need of money. Gresham's activities as a financial agent entailed contacts with leading men in the world of business and politics. Gresham was familiar with foreign merchants (as for instance the Fuggers) and with big Antwerp traders (such as the Schetz, Pruynen, and Hooftman firms).

His close relationship with the English Merchant Company and with Secretary of State William Cecil - a key political figure during the early reign of Elizabeth - gave Gresham considerable influence. Specific problems and cases, such as the trade embargo and the Van Wesenbeke mission, make clear how Gresham acted as an intermediary for the Antwerp city fathers and the Antwerp merchant community.

Gresham's residence in the Antwerp metropolis had a cultural dimension too. He frequented learned men with whom he shared a common interest in literature, arts and sciences. This is an aspect that certainly deserves further research - maybe a topic for a next Gresham lecture ...

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