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The impact of the suppression of the guilds in a rural town, Virton (1795-1814)
An economic and social approach

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On 8 May 1796, the Central Administration of *Forêts*, one of the nine new provinces attached to France and corresponding approximately to present-day Luxembourg (Belgian and Grand Ducal), issued a proclamation threatening prosecution following the insurrections that had taken place a month earlier in several villages, including a small town, Virton. The proclamation describes the events in which the republican tricolor cockade was trampled, cries of "Long live the Emperor and death to the Republic" were shouted, and an armed crowd threatened the municipal officers showing black imperial cockades. However, researchers as Louis Lefèbvre, André Blaise, and Pierre Hannick have shown that this revolt was merely an outburst by a population exhausted by three years of war, and that there was no intention to overthrow the regime. Among the factors explaining this discontent, there was undoubtedly the **abolition of the guilds**.

Indeed, a month before the riot, between 3 and 5 March 1796, the municipal administration of Virton had abolished the six guilds of the town, in application of the French laws that had come into force when these territories were annexed to the republic.

Virton, capital of a cultural region called Gaume, is today a small town of 11,000 inhabitants, located in the south of Belgium, only a few kilometers from the French border and about 50km west of Luxembourg City. Its population was only around 1,400 at the end of the 18th century, yet its urban craft industry was highly developed and organized, notably through its separation into seven guilds. These **urban, self-managed economic associations under the public law of the Ancien Régime established a collective discipline for their members in order to exercise a profession, of which they had a monopoly**. Accused of interfering with the freedom of trade, guilds were abolished in Europe during the second half of the 18th century, a period when liberalism was spreading. This abolition - and the replacement of the corporative system with the purchase of a *patente*, giving the right to practice a trade - took place in France during the Revolution, and was applied from 1795 in the nine "Belgian" departments attached to the Republic in which Virton was located.

But how did the abolition happen in practice? The poster will address this question: it starts with a visit. The deans of the six guilds were visited by Deprez de Barinoy, departmental commissioner for the abolition of guilds, and Jean-Jacques Burton, receiver of the national estates, to proceed with the abolition of the guilds. At the end of these visits, an inventory of the property was drawn up. This gives us information on the financial situation of the guilds, but also on the names and surnames of their members, who sometimes left written records of their activities. Using the archives preserved of these craftsmen, but also from the French administration, we have digitized the sources produced by the commissioners and produced a graph showing the (meager) assets owned by the corporations. We also made a comparative table of the individual trajectories of guild deans, using the inventories of the *patentes*. These achievements show the contrasting evolution of the craft industry after the suppression of the

guilds : indeed, this operation gave rise to both career abandonment and professional reconversions.

In some cases, correspondence, or diaries of craftsmen were also kept (although none have been found for Virton at the moment), allowing us to examine the impact of the abolition on an individual level by studying the socioeconomic trajectories of former members of suppressed corporations. Individual strategies and perceptions of strengths, weaknesses, threats, or opportunities, and even expressions of feelings such as worry, hope, joy, or anger in the face of a new economic situation, are elements likely to explain the craftsmen's decision-making during a key moment in the economic history of the future Belgium. This is certainly an objective that we wish to pursue by continuing our research, both in Virton and in other cities of the "Belgian" space.

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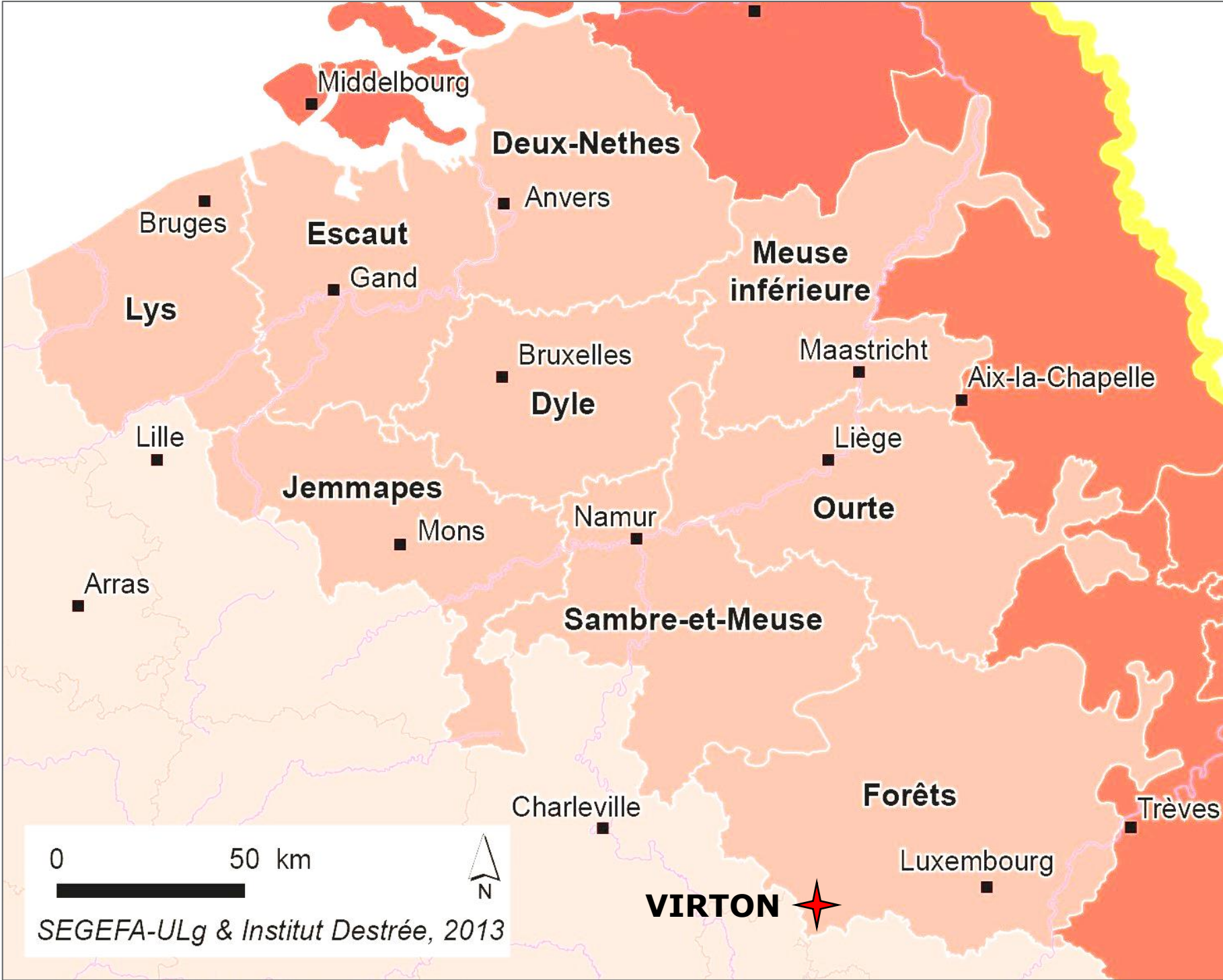
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The Abolition of Guilds in Virton (Belgium) 1795-1814

An Economic and Social Approach

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Location of Virton in the departments attached to France in 1795

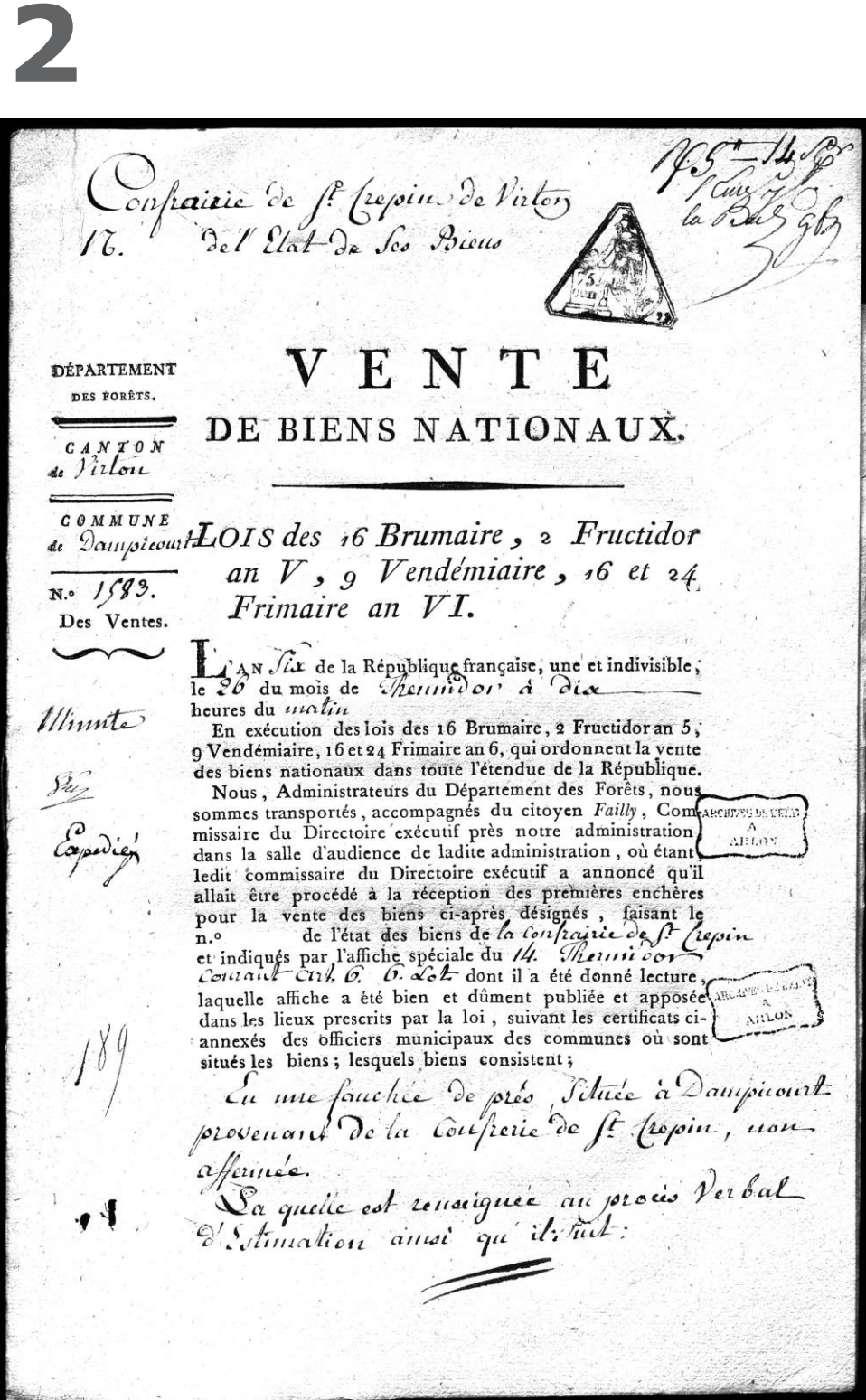
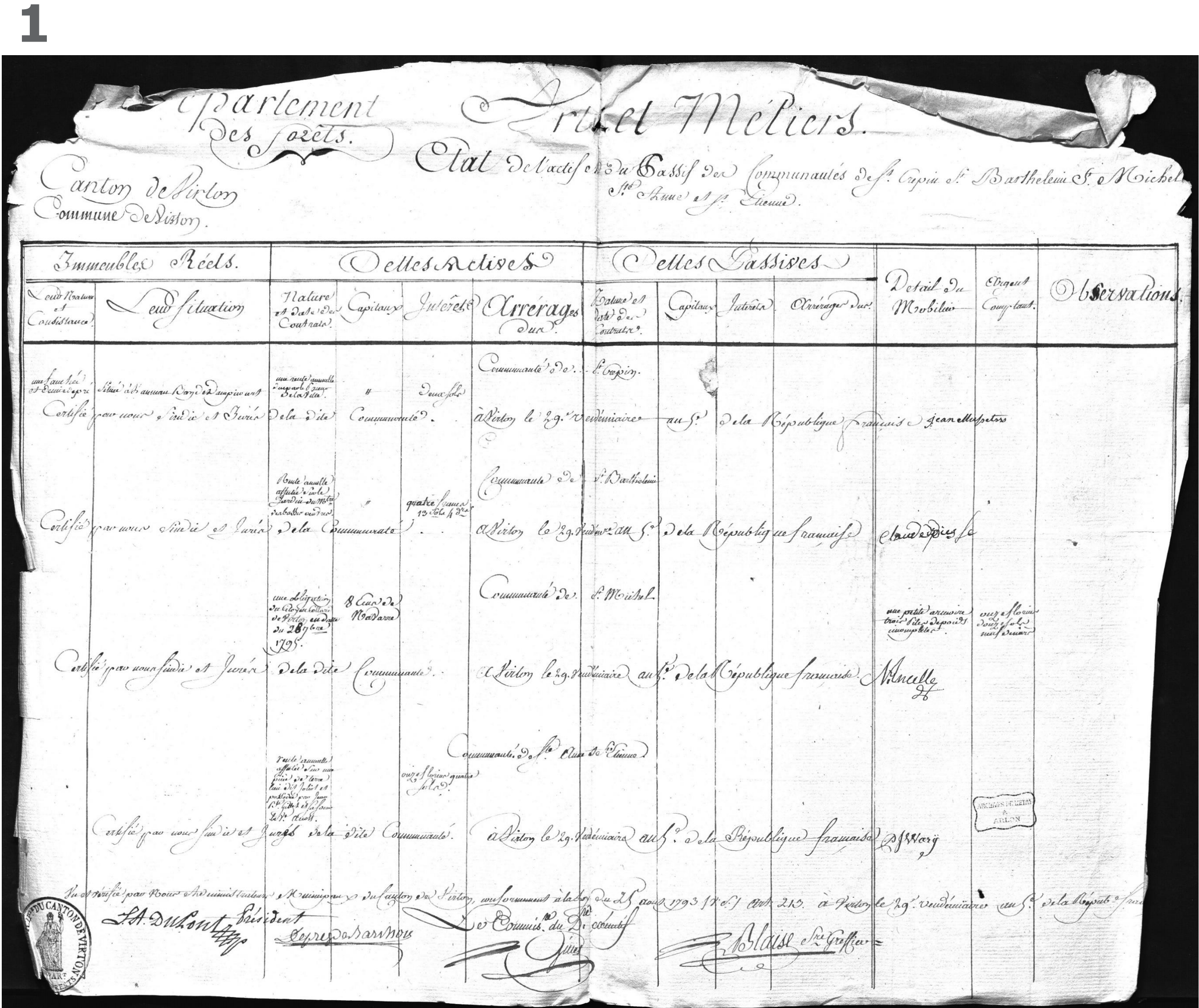


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Town of Virton, from : Carte de Ferraris, 1776 [online, 09/11/2022]
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Examples of sources



1 Summary table of the abolition of guilds in Virton
Archives de l'État d'Arlon, Département des Forêts 480, Tableau récapitulatif de la suppression des métiers de Virton

2 Sale of the property of the Confraternity of St Crépin (cordwainers)
Archives de l'État d'Arlon, Département des Forêts 38/7, Vente des biens nationaux - Corporations

3 List of guilds in Virton

1. Context

Virton, capital of a cultural region called **Gaume**, is today a small town (11,000 inhabitants) located in the south of Belgium, a few kilometers from the French border and about 50km west from Luxembourg City. At the end of the 18th century, with a population around 1,400, the urban craft industry of this town was highly developed and organized, notably through its separation into seven **guilds**. These **urban, self-managed economic associations under public law of the Ancien Régime** subjected their members to a collective discipline in order to exercise a profession, of which they had a monopoly. Accused of interfering with the freedom of trade, they were abolished in Europe during the second half of the 18th century, when **liberalism** was spreading, and replaced by the purchase of a *patente* giving the right to practice a trade. France, who abolished guilds during the Revolution, introduced this reform from 1795 in the nine "Belgian" departments attached to the Republic (see map) in which Virton was located.

2. Research question and goals

This research focuses on the economic and social consequences of the abolition of the guilds in a town in the *Forêts* department : Virton. We propose an **extensive approach**, which includes the social impact of this abolition and the perceptions and feelings of the craftsmen. In fact, **material life and mental life cannot be dissociated**. To do this, we used sources from the State Archives of Arlon: the archives of the municipality of Virton, of the department administration, the sale of the National Domains, as well as family archives. We have digitized the sources produced by the commissioners and did a graph showing the (meager) assets owned by the corporations. We also made a comparative table of the individual trajectories of guild deans, using the inventories of the *patentes*. These achievements show the contrasting evolution of the craft industry after the suppression of the guilds : indeed, this operation gave rise to both career abandonment and professional reconversions.

3. Results and perspectives

- In February 1796, the central administration of the Department of *Forêts* appointed a **commissioner for the suppression of the guilds** (Deprez de Barinoy). He found the former deans and made an inventory to confiscate their goods, with the *receveur des domaines nationaux* (Jean-Jacques Burton). A month later, an insurrection took place in the town, in which the son of the dean of the guild of cordwainer took part.
- Assessment of the goods (see summary table) : two guilds do not have any goods (Blacksmiths and Tailors), the four others only some small effects and rents dedicated to religious functions. The sale of the goods of the corporations takes place in August 1798, following the example of the **meadow of Dampicourt** (having belonged to the cordwainers – see the reproduction of the *acte de vente*). Measuring one *fauchée* and a half, it was estimated at a value of 160 francs, but was finally sold for 4600 francs to Pierre Bergem, a craftsman in Luxembourg, who bought it on a declaration of command for Joseph Neunhenser (1757-?), manager of a forge living in Dampicourt.
- These discoveries open the way to a very wide and stimulating **prosopographical study**. Combined with the study of **connections between towns and countryside** as regards the acquisition of raw materials by the craftsmen, the production and sale of their goods, but also their possessions (such as the Dampicourt meadow), this topic will be presented in an article (to be published).

→ CERRA L. F., "Ni meubles, ni effets, ni aucunes rentes". L'impact de la suppression des métiers dans un bourg rural: Virton (1795-1814) in *Bulletin Trimestriel de l'Institut Archéologique du Luxembourg – Arlon* [2023].

