

# Godefroid Kurth and Henri Pirenne

## An improbable friendship

JEAN-LOUIS KUPPER<sup>1</sup>

Professeur ordinaire – Université de Liège

At the start of their relationship little if anything seemed to link the two Belgian historians Godefroid Kurth (1847-1916) and Henri Pirenne (1862-1935). The former was an enthusiastic romantic soul, taking an intense part in the infights between Catholics and liberals in the small kingdom of Belgium. Profoundly Christian, Kurth promoted religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, to a fundamental, even primordial role in the development of Western civilisation.

Pirenne may have been Christian by upbringing; his political stance was clearly with liberalism. For him production forces, economics, were the driving force behind history and, on top of that, he refused to accord to religion and faith any role whatsoever in scientific research.

Remarkably, these two characters so different in outlook were not only to meet but also to link up and to develop a profound friendship.

At the end of a study entitled *Godefroid Kurth et Henri Pirenne*, Léon-E. Halkin (1960, 385-390) observed that these two historians had been the founders of the scientific method of history in Belgium.

This remark seems a bit *principautaire*, especially seeing that Pirenne, and Kurth as well, came from the University of Liège.<sup>2</sup> How, indeed, could he pass over such personalities as Paul Fredericq, Léon Vanderkindere or Léon Van der Essen, to cite only three examples? On the other hand, the fact that the paths of Pirenne and Kurth crossed for one year was one of the major events of Belgian historiography. It also came at a crucial moment in the destiny of Henri Pirenne, who was and still is the most famous historian of the Realm, without debate either at home and abroad.

Within the scope of this paper, we discuss three points.

The first of these, perhaps the least original but still the most indispensable, is to examine briefly the circumstances of the meeting between Kurth and Pirenne and consequences of that connection for Pirenne's career.

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jean-Louis Kupper: jean-louis.kupper@ulg.ac.be

<sup>2</sup> We explain, for the non-initiated, that the adjective *principautaire* in Belgium means any form of patriotic spirit and connection with the memory of the old Episcopal principality of Liège (Demoulin, 2002, 226-229).

Secondly, we will try to clarify the nature of the friendship between the two men.

Lastly, we will offer some reflections on a book of Godefroid Kurth (1886), *Les origines de la civilisation moderne*, which has been strangely forgotten.

## 1. GODEFROID KURTH, HENRI PIRENNE AND THE UNIVERSITY WORLD

Enrolled at the University of Liège in 1879, Henri Pirenne began to study law, which in its first year was then, and until recently, the same course of study as Philosophy and Letters. He was a student of Godefroid Kurth, who taught a course *ex cathedra* on the History of the Middle Ages, and since 1874 had taught a practical course on History – a great innovation at that time – modelled on the seminar that the German historian Leopold von Ranke had instituted at the University of Berlin.

When he registered at the University of Liège, Henri Pirenne discovered an appalling atmosphere in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters.

Rather curiously, this climate, which was so unpropitious for scientific flourishing, originated mainly from the philosophical ideas of Godefroid Kurth, who was a very committed Catholic, so to speak. We note that the Kurth's Catholicism was also coloured by very intense social concerns: the historian from Liège was, moreover, one of the founders of the Christian Democratic movement.<sup>3</sup>

At this time, a political storm provoked by the School Law enacted in June 1879 by the Frère-Orban liberal government, broke out over the intellectual and academic world.<sup>4</sup> It was in this context that the University of Liège, whose rector, Louis Trassenster, was a true liberal, created a second course of

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<sup>3</sup>. G. Kurth was concerned with social questions from 1886 onwards. Going through medieval sources, especially the corporation archives, he had been sensitised by the principles of charity, brotherhood and justice which governed the organisation of the 'guilds'/trade associations of the Middle Ages. Kurth was also very close to the priest Pottier and the Liège School whose social doctrine was one of the principal foundations of Christian Democracy. In addition, Kurth was anti-liberal, hostile to Free Masonry, and strongly attached to the protection of the Church and the Papacy, which earned him a solid reputation as an ultramontane among his adversaries. On all these questions, see the noted pages in Gérin (1958, 81-101, 129-134). On Father Antoine Pottier (1849-1923), see the summary in Fontaine (1997, 218-222), with a mention of the works by Jadoulle (J.-L.), Gérin (P.) and Delville (J.-P.).

<sup>4</sup>. This law instituted secular primary education under the control of the State.

the History of the Middle Ages with the avowed aim of competing – on liberal principles – with Kurth-the-Catholic's course!

Henri Pirenne, a moderate Catholic whose family ties gave him solid affinity with the liberal party, was a disillusioned witness to the pathetic hubbub: "What should happen did happen", he wrote,

"while the 'Catholics' flocked to the reprobate course, the 'liberals', with the same discipline, deserted it en masse" (Pirenne, 1924, 205).<sup>5</sup>

Pirenne, at first intrigued by and then more and more interested in Kurth's teaching, slipped into the congregation of the 'Calotins' (skullcap-wearers), where he soon became a dutiful guest. It was worth it to him to be dishonoured by his liberal comrades, even though he would have to tolerate the suspicion of the Catholic students. Ghibelline by origin, he became a Guelph to the Ghibellines, while the Guelphs, of course, took him for a Ghibelline...<sup>6</sup>

Be that as it may, it was in those somewhat fantastic circumstances that respect was born and established between the master Kurth and the student Pirenne. It was even very great respect – all the more so because the intellectual qualities of the student were promising.

This mutual respect, soon to be transformed into friendship, never faded; it lasted, vigorous and intact, until the unexpected death of Godefroid Kurth in 1916.

This special bond generated a 'university' collaboration, which, all things considered, principally benefited Henri Pirenne.

The correspondence exchanged between the two historians<sup>7</sup> sheds light on the decisive role that Kurth played in the successive stages of Pirenne's brilliant ascension within the scholarly world. The principal stages of this wonderful success story were as follows:

- Pirenne's stay at Paris (1883-1884), where he studied with Marcel Thévenin (who greatly influenced Pirenne)<sup>8</sup>, Gabriel Monod<sup>9</sup>, Auguste Longnon<sup>10</sup>, and Arthur Giry.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pirenne's father was liberal; his mother, in contrast, Catholic. See notes 19 and 20 below.

<sup>6</sup> Pirenne might have been inspired by Erasmus' expression (cf. Margolin, 1965, 1).

<sup>7</sup> Published in Rion (1986, 147-255).

<sup>8</sup> We also still use today his *Textes relatifs aux institutions privées et publiques aux époques mérovingienne et carolingienne* (1887).

<sup>9</sup> Monod was one of the initiators of the critical method in history in France; he founded *La Revue historique* (1876).

<sup>10</sup> In France, Longnon was the creator of toponymy and historical geography.

<sup>11</sup> Historian and archivist, author of the famous and frequently used *Manuel de diplomatique* (1894).

- Pirenne's sojourn in Germany, in Leipzig and then in Berlin (1884-1885), where he observed the teaching of Wilhelm Arndt<sup>12</sup>, Gustav Schmoller<sup>13</sup> and Harry Bresslau.<sup>14</sup>
- The appointment of Pirenne as part-time lecturer at the University of Liège; this was in 1885, when he was almost 23.<sup>15</sup>
- Pirenne's appointment as professor at the University of Ghent in 1886 (Ganshof, 1959, 676-677)<sup>16</sup>; he remained in this position for the rest of his university career, until its end in 1930 (Prevenier, 1987, 22-34).<sup>17</sup>
- Member of the Royal Commission of History in 1891; he became the secretary-treasurer, that is the 'kingpin', in 1907.
- Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium in 1898; he was 36 years old (Ganshof, 1959, 680).

From then on, with Godefroid Kurth – and thanks to Godefroid Kurth – Henri Pirenne held highly strategic positions within the structure of education and historical research in the Realm.

From then on, indeed, the 'tandem' Kurth-Pirenne was in a position to burst through obstacles, to win each stage of the competition, and even blow through some of them, as "he was so rich in possibilities and influence". These two extraordinary intellectuals were actually poised to operate multiple levers: in the university world of Liège and Ghent, within the Academy, and in political circles, whether Catholic or liberal.

Another observation must be made at this point. In my opinion, it is fundamental.

It has been written, correctly, that:

"Godefroid Kurth [was] the last of the romantic historians and the first of the 'technical' historians in Belgium" (Halkin, 1966, 166).

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<sup>12</sup> Palaeographer and editor of texts in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.

<sup>13</sup> Schmoller was one of the promoters of economic and social history.

<sup>14</sup> Historian and palaeographer; author of the irreplaceable *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre für Deutschland und Italien*, 2nd ed., 1912-1931.

<sup>15</sup> On the beginning of Pirenne's career, see the noteworthy entry by Ganshof (1959, 671-676) (which curiously reverses the chronology of Pirenne's terms in Paris and Germany); Halkin (1987, 13-22) and Lyon (1974, 46-48).

<sup>16</sup> He was assigned to teach *Histoire du Moyen-âge*, *Histoire de Belgique*, *Géographie historique* and *Exercices pratiques d'histoire*. Later he added: *Institutions du Moyen-âge*, *Diplomatique*, *Critique historique (Moyen-âge)* and the *Encyclopédie de l'histoire (Moyen-âge)*.

<sup>17</sup> In 1931, under the title of 'professeur agrégé' of the University of Brussels, Pirenne taught a public course on *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Ganshof, 1959, 683).

Actually, history as Kurth conceptualised it is romantic; the narrative is passionate and enthusiastic, the style is consciously literary, lively, and flamboyant; his work is meant as a message, and often seems to be a hearty panegyric for Christianity. More of this later. However, Kurth's version of history is also notably technical; it is founded on rigorous principles of historical criticism, extensive mastery of philology and profound knowledge of the sources and other works.<sup>18</sup> Without doubt, in his profession as a historian, Pirenne owes a great debt precisely to this rigorous technique and solid scientific methodology.

We add that the student – who learned very quickly – also had the privilege of refining this precious toolkit in Paris, Leipzig and Berlin, with the masters discussed above. This exceptional though astonishingly rapid training was catalysed by the individual genius of Henri Pirenne who was, to use a sports metaphor, an 'all-round' historian. Pirenne's fine ability for synthesis is often highlighted, and with reason. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that he was also the author of excellent analytical works and the editor of important documents. In the end, Kurth was a romantic and a technical historian, whereas Pirenne, one must say, was a technical and 'Pirennean' historian...

## 2. A FRIENDSHIP

Using Paul Robert's (1971, 134) definition that friendship is a

"feeling which connects two people together and which is not based on ties of blood or of the flesh, as love is",

what we already know makes clear that the history of the friendship between Kurth and Pirenne is an episode worthy of interest. This case is not merely a sojourn in the abode of the more or less picturesque anecdote or in pleasant pseudo-scientific nonsense.

Analysing this friendship will also better situate and explain the two first-rank scholarly personalities, which in itself is not immaterial. Far from it.

In his *Introduction to La Correspondance entre G. Kurth et H. Pirenne*, Pierre Rion (1986, 155) observed that the

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<sup>18</sup>. As a result, a number of Kurth's books and articles remain indispensable reference works up to the present day. This is the case with, for example, *Clovis* (1895), *Notger de Liège* (1905), *La cité de Liège au Moyen-âge* (1909-1910) and of course his critical editions of narrative and diplomatic sources.

"two historians went no further than essential scholarly ties, founding their friendship on a mutual interest in history and its promotion within the university".

Rion based his assertion on analysis of the letters that he edited and on evidence from Pirenne himself, who, in 1924 in the *Annuaire de l'Académie*, wrote this curious phrase:

"I have been the student, the colleague and the friend of Godefroid Kurth, and the gratitude I have toward him is only equalled by the esteem and affection which surround my memories of him".

Then he added:

"I was not involved in his private life at all, and we belonged, he and I, to milieus too different for me to be able to know him or to describe his tireless activity in all its forms. If he opened all of his heart to me, he did not open all of his mind ... Our friendship was as sincere and cordial on his side as it was respectful on mine. But I had come to him by the route of scholarship and it was scholarship that always determined our relationship" (Pirenne, 1924, 193-194; Rion, 1986, 155).

In reading these lines, the initial striking feature is this strange assertion: Kurth and he, according to Pirenne, belonged to "too different milieus". What could this be about?

Was it a difference in social class?

As is well known, Pirenne was the son of a Verviers industrialist, a linen manufacturer, who held the posts of communal councillor and alderman in the city.<sup>19</sup> His mother, a Duesberg, was also from the industrial bourgeoisie of Verviers.<sup>20</sup> As for Kurth, he was the orphan son of a police superintendent in Arlon. His mother, a widow supporting four children, only received a small survivor's pension.<sup>21</sup>

Pirenne spent his youth – and all the rest of his life – in material comfort, while Kurth had spent his early years 'living from hand to mouth', as the saying goes.

Nevertheless it is difficult to accept that in this case Pirenne cared about origins and different social situations. Not only would that have been

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<sup>19</sup> On Henri-Lucien Pirenne (1837-1899), who was a liberal-progressive, see Zumkir (1997, 37, 138, 143-144, 146, 156, 168-169, 213).

<sup>20</sup> Marie-Virginie Duesberg, who came from a Catholic family. See Lyon (1974, 48-49).

<sup>21</sup> On Kurth's youth see Gérin (2005, 212); On Godefroid Kurth the historian, see the fine synthesis by Vercauteren (1948, 3-12).

insensitive, but also it was totally beside the point and outside the context of equal relationships in an academic and fraternal mission.<sup>22</sup>

It is even less likely that the difference was in intellectual capacity. If Pirenne became, to use Walter Kienast's expression, "ein Fürst im Reiche der Geschichte" ("a prince in the Empire of History") (Kienast, 1938, 537; Ganshof, 1959, 772), it was largely the support and networking of Kurth, as we have seen, that made Pirenne a 'prince' of the science, as Kurth was himself. In the beginning the young historian really did not know anything about the university and academic milieu in which his master was already entrenched. In 1888, when he had already been a professor at the University of Ghent for two years, Pirenne did not yet know of the existence of the very prestigious Baron de Stassart prize awarded by the Academy (Rion, 1986, 197-198)! We think it hardly legitimate to judge him severely; Pirenne was then only 26.

It was not a difference in professional or intellectual milieu; the professors Kurth and Pirenne were both employees of the Belgian state.

In reality, when he called their milieus so different, Pirenne was probably alluding to their respective positions in the political-ideological realm. As everyone knows, Kurth was Catholic. Many do not know that Pirenne was also Catholic; his funeral was held on October 28, 1935, at the church of Saint-Pierre in Uccle.<sup>23</sup> But Kurth, as Pirenne (1924, 203) humorously noted, "had the soul of a crusader". Moreover, Kurth loved to repeat that he had been taken for a notorious 'ultramontane' and that his enemies saw him gladly teaching in Leuven.<sup>24</sup> Under the meaningful pseudonym Victor Chrétien, Kurth composed characteristically 'Catholic' poems in honour of Pope Pius IX.<sup>25</sup> In an astonishing publication dedicated to Sitting Bull, he ardently defended the case of the American 'redskins' decimated by the haughty and brutal Protestant republic of the U.S.A. (Gérin, 2005, 216; Gaier, 1986-1989, 121-174). We will save for the end some information related to the religious ideas about History developed by Pirenne's master. We must say now that these ideas are truly incredible from our present vantage point.

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<sup>22</sup> This text was published in Pirenne (1924, 193-261).

<sup>23</sup> Announcement of the death of Henri Pirenne. Université de Liège, archives du *Service d'Histoire du Moyen-âge*. Cf. Lyon (1974, 391-395).

<sup>24</sup> A letter of G. Kurth to his brother-in-law Alexandre Delmer (30 May 1874) (Michaelis, 1961, 96).

<sup>25</sup> Gérin (2005, 214). It was Pius IX who proclaimed the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility; he went through the annexation of the Papal States by the Kingdom of Italy.

Were there other factors of difference apart from the important difference in religious intensity? The answer is yes.

First, let us attend to three facts.

The first fact: Kurth was born in 1847 and Pirenne in 1862. They were only separated by 15 years. For Pirenne, Kurth was a master, of course, but a young master. This distinctive feature was no doubt likely to generate not only admiration and esteem but also friendship. Pirenne himself recognised this feature when he wrote:

"I have been the student, the colleague and the friend of Godefroid Kurth".<sup>26</sup>

The second fact: The 15 years which separated Kurth from Pirenne correspond to what can be called a short generation. They naturally made a kind of fatherly sentiment form in Kurth's mind towards his especially brilliant student. To his master, Pirenne was first a spiritual son; but perhaps he was also the son that Kurth never had himself, as the Kurths had no children.<sup>27</sup>

The third fact: Kurth was always rewarded for the support he gave to Pirenne during the building of his scholarly career. Not only did Pirenne become Pirenne, something that would have been a source of satisfaction in itself, but also, until the end of his master's life and even beyond, Pirenne never failed to express forcefully his loyalty, friendship and deep gratitude to Kurth. Sentiments such as "steadfastly devoted" and "profound attachment" which flowed from Pirenne's pen when he wrote to Kurth were, all things considered, meticulously chosen from epistolary formulas and consistent with sincere feeling. In the private journal he kept during the war from 1914-1918, Pirenne wrote of Kurth's death, which had occurred on January 4, 1916:

"This is a blow, and a part of my life departs with him. Surely, he had a just and noble heart. I loved him, I owed him a lot, and I believe that he loved me also ... This is not the time or place to speak of him as the historian. It is the man that I miss, the old master and the old friend that I will not see any more".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, these are the first words of his *Notice* published in the *Annuaire de l'Académie* (Pirenne, 1924). We think that this special position is a sign of the importance Pirenne attached to them.

<sup>27</sup> For the dream of Kurth and his wife was to live "surrounded by a small family", the letter of Eva Kurth-Lavaux to her sister (Michaelis, 1961, 143-144).

<sup>28</sup> Cited by Lyon (1974, 223). To weigh this statement correctly, it must be known that two years earlier, on 3 November 1914, Pirenne had lost his son Pierre at the battle of the Yser.

I will add to this evidence some data which belongs, it might be said, to the domain of diplomatic science, which has always been extremely attentive to redactional processes and formulas used in acts and letters. The 'initial protocol' of the letters exchanged between Kurth and Pirenne is quite interesting from the diplomatic point of view.

All the letters from Kurth to Pirenne, from the first (1881) to the last (1913), begin with the same formula: "Mon cher Pirenne".

The letters from Pirenne to Kurth involve one change of formula, with only two formulas in total covering two strictly-truncated chronological periods.<sup>29</sup> From 1882 until May 16, 1887, Pirenne addressed Kurth with the words, "Mon cher professeur". Then, from May 16, 1888 to September 25, 1913, he adopted the formula "Mon cher Monsieur Kurth" (Rion, 1986, 162, 197, 252).

It seems clear that this abrupt change of formula – as well as the rigid maintenance of the second formula for the next 25 years – was not due to chance. We see here a deliberate choice which had a specific meaning. Besides, the initiative for the change in all probability belonged to Kurth; it is hard to see Pirenne the student who had shown his master, in his own words, a "respectful friendship", abruptly adopting a formula which was more intimate in the sense that it dropped all academic connotation (*Ibid.*, 155).

What happened between the months of May 1887 and May 1888 that might explain the change of formula?

As curious as this might be, we think that the answer to this question is an event which took place on December 19, 1887: that year, Pirenne married Jenny Vanderhaegen, daughter of a high magistrate of Ghent (Ganshof, 1959, 677).

Henri Pirenne had then begun a family and in the eyes of Godefroid Kurth, impregnated, so to speak, with very deep Christian values, the new social situation of his dear student naturally brought them even closer.<sup>30</sup>

The new formula, "Mon cher Monsieur Kurth", was at the same time respectful, warm and even affectionate, and beyond all doubt, full of sincerity. Pirenne then made it his exclusive usage for a quarter of a century to address the person whose "student" he had been, whom he was "proud" to

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<sup>29</sup> In his first two letters to Kurth, dated 1881, Pirenne addressed him with the formula "Monsieur le professeur": Rion (1986, 161, no. 3 and 4).

<sup>30</sup> About family, Kurth (1903, XXXIV) once wrote: "Without the family, man would only be a savage. The first oasis of civilisation in the desert of barbarism, the family is a blessed refuge where the human personality blossoms in the spirit of tenderness and affection. The laws which regulate this providential institution should not be at the mercy of the perverse will of the strong, or the irreparable error of legislators. This is why the Church has defined them itself with the sovereign authority it holds from God".

have as "a friend" and to whom he expressed "from the depths of my heart" his "sentiments of sympathy and affection" (Rion, 1986, 204).

The friendship between Kurth and Pirenne was not a daily affair; the student lived in Ghent, and the master lived in Liège, then moved close to Brussels, and later to Rome.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the sentiment was as deep and sincere as the circumstances of life and the social conventions of the time allowed. In the end, it seems certain that this friendship was not exclusively 'scholarly', having as its only backdrop the same passion for historical research and same concern for promotion in university education, as some might assert (*Ibid.*, 155).

In our eyes this view would be not only reductionist but inaccurate. There was too much warmth in the two personalities for their amity to be confined to the domain of professional life.

We do not know if historical criticism, which uses the voice of reason, could one day by itself give birth to such strong feelings of friendship which are the privilege of the heart.

In the somewhat sibylline phrase that we cited earlier, Henri Pirenne, we think, did not at all intend to introduce a flat note into the friendship which tied him to Godefroid Kurth. He probably wanted to emphasise that the master-student relationship had not entirely faded and that, in this very delicate situation, the student should be reserved. It was a matter of good manners and delicacy.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. TO THE ORIGINS OF OUR CIVILISATION

Published in 1886, Kurth's book entitled *Les origines de la civilisation moderne*<sup>33</sup> was this historian's first great work, the one which gave him an international reputation.

Of all his books, it was without a doubt the most controversial. Let us see why.

Kurth defended the idea that there was a close association between the "civilising principle" and "Christian policy" which was unquestionably "the most vibrant of all realities".

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<sup>31</sup>. Advanced to the emeritus status in 1906, Kurth left Liège and settled in Asse, near Brussels, but later in the year became director of the Belgian Historical Institute of Rome (Gérin, 2005, 214; Pirenne, 1924, 230-232).

<sup>32</sup>. We understand that this state of mind can be difficult to understand in our time. Mentalities change, along with the attitudes and the words that express them.

<sup>33</sup>. We used the 5th ed., 2 vol., Paris, 1903.

"Denying this characteristic of modern civilisation", Kurth added,

"would be denying the evidence. Refusing to honour the Christian principle would be true blindness. If we trace the frontiers of civilisation on a world map, we see that we have traced the frontiers of Christianity".

There was quite obviously a "(intimate) solidarity between the Church and civilisation". Finally after covering the period from the Late Roman Empire through the reign of Charlemagne, Kurth drew a decisive conclusion:

"The coronation of Charlemagne was the birth certificate of modern civilisation. By then a Christian society had finally come into being! ... The Christian idea, the most sublime social idea that men had ever formed, began to be realised".

The last words of the book, which, according to Kurth, was like "the hymn of Christian civilisation", rung with this prayer:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men" (Kurth, 1903, I, xxix, xxxi, xxxvi; Kurth, 1903, II, 275-277).

This incantation is directly followed by particularly copious bibliographical notes (filling almost 70 pages), which are a critical inventory of sources and useful works. Here he shows himself, in the might of his erudition, as the great 'technical' historian.

The theories developed by Kurth in the *Origines de la civilisation moderne* were not of the sort that would fill his student Pirenne with enthusiasm.

Everything leads us believe that the account of the book that Pirenne published the following year in the *Revue de l'Instruction publique en Belgique* was one of the most painful reviews he ever wrote. At least, the student, who was then 25 years old, forced himself in this perilous exercise to distinguish as much as possible between his own historical conceptions and the debt of gratitude and respect that he owed to his master.

Pirenne composed a little masterpiece of scholarly compromise which very aptly mixed legitimate and sincere feelings of admiration and reasons for concern, also very legitimate and sincere.<sup>34</sup> Kurth was no fool and in a letter to his student he told himself that in the passage of the review where Pirenne affirmed that Kurth's book is written "with a deep conviction, *cum ira et*

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<sup>34</sup>. "I have not had to examine whether M.K. situated himself on theological ground rather than historical ground when he took such a position ... Everything, I repeat, was presented in very eloquent style and with the most solid scholarship (science). However, I do not know whether the last impression was really reasonable; namely, that the Church alone is the mother of modern civilisation ... Apart from this, M.K.'s book is certainly one of the most notable that historical science has produced in Belgium for a long time" (Pirenne, 1887, 40-44).

*studio*" (with anger and bias), the expression apparently exceeded the thought. And the master added:

"You know me too well to suspect that I would consider this an unworthy abuse of authority for a historian" (Rion, 1986, 196).<sup>35</sup>

Unquestionably in this case Kurth and Pirenne were not on the same wavelength, as would already have been said in their time.

Some years later, after the master's death, Pirenne returned to the theme developed in *Les origines de la civilisation moderne*. The Church, he wrote, not only appeared to Kurth

"as a divine institution indispensable for the health of men; he even saw it as the inspiration of modern civilisation. According to him, it was [the Church] and [the Church] alone which, in the decline of the ancient world, in the middle of invading barbarism, saved Europe from chaos and guided it to a new destiny" (Pirenne, 1921, 403).

Three years later, Pirenne once more addressed the grand theme:

"From the beginning to the end, without a dip, without uncertainty, [Kurth's work] was inspired by the Catholic idea. This means that it adopted a principle located outside of history. This conception derived from faith. It is applied a priori to the study of the past, independent of all knowledge and deduction. Starting with the divine origin of Christianity, Kurth came to see in it the only civilising principle ... The Church is thus the indispensable requirement for all civilisation. Apart from [the Church], it can not exist ... This philosophy of history leads to exaltation of the Church. It is not revealed by science, but by belief".

To Kurth, he added, "Faith ... invades ... the domain reserved for research". Pirenne concludes with a redemptive phrase, specifying the impact and highlighting the true extent of his master's work:

"It is by [the critical method] that Kurth's immense hard work is indisputably established" (Pirenne, 1924, 234-238).

At the least it is clear that Kurth and Pirenne did not share at all the same views on the problem of the origins of western civilisation.

However, these discordant notes did not distance them from each other; on the contrary, they paradoxically brought the two closer together in a scholarly fashion.

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<sup>35</sup>. Kurth took the expression *cum ira et studio* as a "reproach", especially since "everyone" translated it as "passion and preconception"...

We find it astonishing that to date no one has emphasised the many common points between Kurth's *Les origines de la civilisation moderne*, a work practically forgotten in our time, and the very famous *Mahomet et Charlemagne* by Pirenne (1970 [1937]).<sup>36</sup> The chronological frame is the same, the geographic space is identical, the critical method rigorous in both, but the conclusions, predictably, are totally different.<sup>37</sup>

As it happens, in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, the student – totally estranged from any type of religious predestination and guided by his own genius – surpassed the master.

*Les origines de la civilisation moderne*, the book that was crowned by the Institute of France, is no longer read today, unless from a purely historiographical perspective. In contrast, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, in our time, although 'dented' in certain points – which is quite normal for a work written in 1935<sup>38</sup> – remains a surprisingly 'living' book, which is read and reread, constantly cited, invoked, used, sometimes contradicted, sometimes partially rehabilitated in a multitude of historical works. It is, in a word, irreplaceable.<sup>39</sup> It should be realised that those who want to understand the intellectual similarities and differences which brought these two exceptional scholarly personalities, Kurth and Pirenne, closer together and drove them further apart, should first reread *Les origines de la civilisation moderne*, and then *Mahomet et Charlemagne*.

The reader will easily realise that the second book is the son of the first. He will agree that *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, with all the brilliant conceptions it conveys, is in some way the sublimated avatar of *Les origines de la civilisation moderne* or, to say it better, that Henri Pirenne's book, all things considered, is a vibrant tribute to the work of his master Godefroid Kurth.

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<sup>36</sup> There is a fine synthesis of the debate by Joris (1987, 117-126); see also the excellent catalogue from the exposition (Keymeulen, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> In 1887, in his review of Kurth's book, Pirenne (1887, 44) posed the crucial question which later underlay his *Mahomet et Charlemagne*: "Was Charlemagne really the founder of modern civilisation, and was his empire, all in all artificial and vanished so quickly, a starting point rather than a culmination?". On this subject, see Keymeulen (2009, 10): Pirenne identified the Mediterranean by the expression "Muslim lake" in 1889.

<sup>38</sup> When he died on October 24, 1935, Pirenne had left on his table the first version of his book written, as was his habit, rapidly and in one burst. The final edition, which required finalising and delicate refinements, was done by his student Fernand Vercauteren and published in 1937. See the observations of Jacques Pirenne, in his *Préface* to his father's book, and of Fernand Vercauteren, in the *Avertissement* (Pirenne, 1970 [1937]), VIII-IX, XI-XII). See also the notes assembled by Ganshof (1959, 709-710) according to an oral statement by our master Fernand Vercauteren.

<sup>39</sup> Among the recent works devoted to the issue of *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, see Hodges and Whitehouse (1983) and Wickham (2005).

With his rough nature and somewhat brutal sense of expression, the Ghent historian Jan Dhondt (1976, 66) once wrote that "without Kurth, there would probably not have been Pirenne" (cf. Rion, 1986, 158-159). Consciously or unconsciously inspired by Pirenne's own phrase – "...without Mohammad, Charlemagne is inconceivable" (Pirenne, 1970 [1937]) – Dhondt was not, of course, incorrect as long as he did not intend to suggest by this abrupt remark that Pirenne was in any way a 'by-product' – outstanding, that goes without saying – of the teaching and networking of the professor from Liège.

We prefer to choose another expression, which seems to us to conform more to the truth, and above all to represent more faithfully what Kurth and Pirenne really thought of each other.

Belgian historical science ought to thank Providence, or chance, for insuring that Pirenne and Kurth's paths once crossed. The master would doubtless have invoked Providence, after having convinced himself that

"the unflagging vitality of our society was regenerated thanks to Christianity" (Rion, 1986, 193).

As for Pirenne (1936, 465), he would without a doubt invoke chance,

"that mysterious force that continuously likes to frustrate the calculations of men".<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Pirenne (1936, 22) concerning this "événement imprévu". See the observations of Ganshof (1959, 721). In a letter to Pirenne, dated May 29, 1935, Lucien Febvre recalled a "lecture on Chance", which Pirenne had to give at Paris (Lyon & Lyon, 1991, 170).

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## **Godefroid Kurth en Henri Pirenne: een onwaarschijnlijke vriendschap**

JEAN-LOUIS KUPPER

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### SAMENVATTING

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Het doel van deze bijdrage is in eerste instantie aan te tonen dat de vriendschap tussen Godefroid Kurth, de meester, en Henri Pirenne, zijn leerling, niet uitsluitend wetenschappelijk was. Kurth koesterde 'vaderlijke' gevoelens voor Pirenne, al verschilden hun meningen fundamenteel wat politiek en religie betrof. Overigens lijkt Pirenne voor zijn werk *Mahomet et Charlemagne* zijn inspiratie gedeeltelijk uit Kurths *Les origines de la civilisation moderne* geput te hebben. Desalniettemin blijkt ook hier het grote verschil tussen de wetenschappelijke opvattingen van de meester – een positivistisch en romantisch historicus – en die van zijn vernuftige leerling.

## **Godefroid Kurth et Henri Pirenne: une improbable amitié**

JEAN-LOUIS KUPPER

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### RÉSUMÉ

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L'objet de cette contribution est de montrer, en premier lieu, que l'amitié qui liait le maître Godefroid Kurth à son élève Henri Pirenne n'était pas exclusivement d'ordre scientifique: elle comportait également, de la part de Kurth, des sentiments "paternels", en dépit des différences profondes de sensibilité politique et religieuse entre les deux personnalités. Par ailleurs, il apparaît que le *Mahomet et Charlemagne* de Pirenne puise une part de son inspiration dans *Les origines de la civilisation moderne* de Kurth; toutefois, ici encore, on mesure toute la distance qui existe entre les conceptions scientifiques du maître – historien positiviste et romantique – et celles de son brillant élève.