Abandoned in Brussels, delivered in Paris: Long-distance transports of unwanted children in the eighteenth century

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Abstract

The study uses examinations and other documents produced in the course of a large-scale investigation undertaken by the central authorities of the Austrian Netherlands in the 1760s on the transportation of around thirty children from Brussels to the Parisian foundling house by a Brussels shoemaker and his wife. It combines the rich archival evidence with sparse indications in the literature to demonstrate that long-distance transports of abandoned children were a common but historiographically neglected by-product of the ambiguities of foundling policies in eighteenth-century Europe, and provides insight into the functioning of the associated networks and the motives of parents, doctors, midwives, transporters and local officials involved.

Keywords: Motherhood, child abandonment, child transports, foundling institutes, social policies

Article

In the 1760s, a large-scale investigation in the Austrian Netherlands laid bare the existence of an export enterprise of abandoned children from Brussels to the Parisian foundling hospital. To the dismay of the central authorities, a Brussels shoemaker and his wife, Jean-Baptiste Bassanet and Elisabeth Quoquidez, turned out to have transported up to thirty newborn infants to the Maison de la Couche pour les Enfants Trouvés in Paris for payment, in close collaboration with a number of Brussels doctors, midwives, and lodging-house keepers, and with the support of local officials in both Brussels and Paris. Why were these children transported all the way to Paris if foundling support existed in Brussels? And why did their parents pay a considerable sum of money to send them off to quasi certain death?
The practice of transporting surplus children to distant foundling institutes, has received only very limited treatment in the literature on child abandonment and foundling support in eighteenth-century Europe. Indirectly, the existence of long-distance child transport has been attested by the wide recruitment range of certain foundling institutes in this period, including that of Paris, and by isolated references in archival and literary sources. Yet because of the scarcity of direct evidence, insight into their modes of operation and raison d’être has so far remained limited and speculative. The exceptionally rich evidence on the Bassanet case is therefore singularly instructive in furthering our understanding of the how and why of the semi-illegal networks that conveyed many thousands of abandoned children to the doors of distant foundling hospitals in eighteenth-century Europe.

The case study will help to demonstrate how child transports such as that of the Bassanets developed out of the limitations and ambivalence of policy responses to the growing numbers of abandoned children in the eighteenth century, which created an objective competition between cities over the liberality of their foundling policies. At the same time, a detailed analysis of the different actors and motivations involved also furthers our understanding of personal and public attitudes towards the abandonment of children, and helps to appreciate the international appeal of the Parisian foundling hospital in this period. To develop the argument, I will first sketch the background to the policy dilemmas over foundling support in the eighteenth century, with particular reference to the Parisian Maison de la Couche and its voituriers, before going into greater detail on the Brussels transport activities in the third and fourth sections of this article.

**Child abandonment and policy dilemmas in the eighteenth century**

Child abandonment was a phenomenon that was significantly on the rise in eighteenth-century Europe. While institutional provisions already had a long history in many places, foundlings’ institutes from Madrid to Moscow saw the number of children left to their care grow to unprecedented levels in the second half of the eighteenth century.\(^1\) The causes of this stark increase have been the subject of considerable historical debate, and are often brought into connection with an overall rise in illegitimacy ratios. Many children presented to foundlings’ institutions, as far as can be gathered from the available evidence, were indeed born out of wedlock. Limited income opportunities, impaired marriage prospects, and social stigma contributed to the plight of single motherhood that made many unmarried mothers turn to child abandonment in the event of pregnancy.\(^2\) The rise in the number of illegitimate children has in turn been attributed to changes in sexual norms and courtship practices on the one hand, and to frustrated marriage promises due to
growing economic hardship and social isolation on the other hand. Not all children presented to foundlings’ institutions, however, were born out of wedlock. While significant regional variations existed in the ratio of legitimate to illegitimate children, a considerable proportion is estimated to have come from families unable to cope with one more mouth in times of economic difficulty. That both single mothers and married couples frequently testified to their hopes of retrieving the abandoned child in better times, attests to the intricate ways in which, in the words of Louise Tilly, foundling homes “were used by needy parents as a welfare system to tide families over hard times”, and illustrates how the general impoverishment of broad segments of the European population represented a major force behind the increase in child abandonment in the eighteenth century.

The growing numbers of abandoned children presented relief institutions with a fundamental dilemma as to which policies to adopt. On the one hand, by reason of their ‘innocence’, deprived children represented some of the most deserving poor in contemporary terminology. Together with the ample possibilities of moral improvement through education and instruction, poor relief to abandoned children was an exceptionally worthy cause of charity, attracting both public and private initiatives. Yet on the other hand, benefactors and relief administrators also had reasons to limit foundling support and restrict the possibilities of child abandonment. Childcare represented a particular expense for most relief authorities: not only did abandoned children require maintenance until they were old enough to make a living, but they often involved the local community in a relief responsibility that extended into adulthood. Provisions that were too liberal could encourage parents to evade responsibility for their offspring and, it was feared, stimulate a loosening of sexual norms, further driving up the number of foundlings and the associated relief costs. Restricting the possibilities of child abandonment, however, risked driving up the incidence of infanticide. The issue was confounded further by the spreading of theories of populationism, which equated the strength of a state to the density of its population, and of utilitarian schemes for the use of foundling manpower, which added a political interest to the preservation and expansion of child support. Charitable aspirations to save innocent children from destitution and infanticide, were thus counteracted by moral, political and financial considerations that sought to limit the scope of foundling support – a dilemma that would continue to haunt relief initiatives right into the twenty-first century.

The localized basis of relief provisions added an important geographical dimension to this dilemma. As relief was organized and funded on an essentially local basis throughout early modern and early industrial Europe, access to relief provisions was generally reserved – implicitly or explicitly – for one’s ‘own poor’. Throughout the different conceptions that abounded, geographical origins of
oneself and one’s parents were important criteria in determining one’s local community. When the parents were unknown or contested, as in the case of foundlings and bastard children, place of birth or exposure generally functioned as proxy. Hence, the costs for foundling care were the responsibility of the communities or authorities of the place where the children were found. Local communities frequently sought to avoid relief responsibilities for such children by ousting pregnant women or single mothers, and restricting the possibilities of anonymous child abandonment. Places where control was less rigid and support more liberal in turn ran the risk of attracting surplus children from elsewhere.

These considerations were particularly true for cities, as institutional care for foundlings and abandoned children was an almost exclusively urban phenomenon, and the opportunity for anonymous abandon was much greater in cities than in villages. The urban tendency to produce significantly higher rates of illegitimacy and child abandonment than the countryside – primarily attributable to the demographic, social, economic and perhaps cultural characteristics of urban populations – was therefore exacerbated by the pull which urban foundling support exerted on pregnant women and unwanted children from elsewhere. In the absence of sufficient funding, growing numbers of abandoned children in turn aggravated the problems of hygiene and surplus mortality that haunted most foundling institutes, driving up not only the financial, but also the human costs involved.

The eighteenth-century dilemma on foundling support, then, was essentially an urban dilemma, oscillating between the risk of driving up the number of foundlings and the risk of encouraging infanticide. The various aspirations, motives and considerations at play presented urban authorities and foundling institutes with a number of policy options: to be selective in the types or numbers of children that were to be accepted, to restrict the possibilities of disposing of a child anonymously, or to pursue an open entry policy, accepting all the children presented without further ado. Different policy choices in turn created spatial differences in urban support provisions. I will argue that the existence of long-distance transport of surplus children like those undertaken by the Bassanets, responded to a set of push and pull forces that were shaped by these spatial differences in foundling policies between different cities. Examining such transport activities in their proper context, therefore requires a comparative view on the foundling policies pursued at both ends of the transport line.

The Parisian Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés
Let us start at the destination where many child transport lines like those undertaken by the Bassanets converged. The Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés in Paris, established by Saint Vincent in 1638 and joined to the Parisian Hôpital Général by royal decree in 1670, was one of the most famous foundling institutes in eighteenth-century Europe that propagated an open entry policy. It accepted all children without restriction, and without engaging in any investigation as to the identity of the parents. Contrary to what the name suggests, only a minority of all children in the hands of the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés, the older ones, were actually housed in the foundling hospital proper, which was located in the faubourg Saint Antoine. Young children and infants, who made up the large majority of all those cared for by the institute, were placed with wet nurses and foster parents in the countryside.17 The Maison de la Couche, located in the Rue Neuve Notre Dame in the city centre, functioned as the redistribution centre of the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés, and the main reception centre for abandoned children in Paris, most of whom were abandoned shortly after birth. La Couche housed a number of wet nurses, who nursed the infants in anticipation of a place with foster parents in the countryside.18 As was the case with many foundling institutes, the mortality among children taken into the care of La Couche was extremely high: in the Maison itself it exceeded 80 percent, and it is estimated that only one child in ten ever reached the age of ten. Many historians argue, however, that contemporaries were largely unaware of this massacre des innocents. On the contrary, they maintain that the Parisian foundling institute enjoyed an excellent reputation, and that many contemporaries were convinced that children left in its care faced a favourable future.19

In the early days of the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés, most Parisian foundlings had literally been found in a variety of public spaces, from streets and market places to the entrances of churches and wealthy citizens’ houses. It was the responsibility of the police officer of the district where the child was found to draw up a report and to take the child to the Maison de la Couche. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, direct delivery had become widespread: ever more children were delivered directly to the police office, by midwives, nurses, or even the parents themselves.20 This was also a time of ever increasing numbers of entries. Between 1760 and 1769 alone, more than 56,000 children were taken into the care of the Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés, which was almost two thirds of the total number of entries between 1640 and 1719. By the 1770s, the number of children entering La Couche was twenty-five times that of the 1670s, and in 1772 the number of yearly admissions would reach a peak of 7,676 children.21

Although importing children from outside Paris was forbidden by a number of ordinances of the Parisian Parlement, many contemporaries and historians attributed the strong increase in the
number of entries at least in part to a growing influx from provincial France. A detailed analysis of the geographical origins of entrants in the 1770s confirms that the recruitment area of the Maison de la Couche was indeed very large: between 30 and 40 percent of all foundlings admitted between 1772 and 1778 had been born outside Paris, coming from as far as Lyon, Périgueux, Liège, or indeed Brussels. When corrected for high mortality rates during transport, this suggests that in this period up to a staggering 8,000 children were transported to Paris each year. The Parisian foundling hospital was not alone in exerting a wide geographical pull. Similar evidence on the incidence of long-distance child transport has for instance been attested for the foundling hospital of London and its northern Italian counterparts in the same period.

We know very little on the transport modalities by which these thousands of children were conveyed to the doors of distant foundling institutes. Some popular imagery on the so-called voituriers or faiseurs d’anges who carried children to distant foundling hospitals has survived in the literature, stressing their poverty, the abysmal conditions of travel, and the disastrously high death toll among their human cargo. Isolated references for Versailles, Rouen, Reims and Liège in turn hint at the existence of elaborate networks, in which midwives, lodgers, and voituriers cooperated to provide lodging and delivery facilities for pregnant women, and transport facilities to Paris for their unwanted children – sometimes with the official support or tacit consent of local authorities.

To account for these observed networks, some historians have invoked deception by avaricious midwives, others the absence of foundling institutes in situ. Yet while large-scale institutes like the Parisian Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés, the London Foundling Hospital, or the Florentine Spedali degli Innocenti were indeed few in number, other cities and villages in principle offered some form of foundling support, for instance via placement with foster parents. Several historians have therefore argued that an important motive for the child transports was to rid local finances of the costly burden of chargeable foundlings. The executive board of the Parisian Hôpital Général in any case lamented on the growing incidence of child imports from distant provinces “by the high officers (...) and hospitals (...) who are responsible for their upkeep”, and on their detrimental effects on the health of the children concerned. When long-distance transports of chargeable children were eventually outlawed by a royal ban in January 1779, a decline in the number of children imported to Paris went hand in hand with a growth in the number of foundlings admitted to hospitals and other support institutes in the provinces. Combining the rich evidence from the Bassanet case with the sparse references and indications from the existing literature allows us to dig deeper into the functioning and underlying reasons of these child transports, and to establish their interminglement with the deadly trade-off that shaped local foundling policies in the eighteenth
century.

A network of voituriers, midwives, doctors and officials

The investigations into the Bassanets’ child transports were instigated by the ‘discovery’ of a peculiar letter brought to the attention of the Governor of the Austrian Netherlands, prince Charles Alexander of Lorraine, in November 1761. It was a letter of recommendation by the hand of a Parisian police officer named Boullanger, addressed to all priests of parishes along the route from Brussels to Paris, urging them to baptize all children brought to them by Jean-Baptiste Bassanet and his wife, “without making any difficulties as to their parents’ names”. The children in question, the letter explained, were destined for the Maison de la Couche, and refusing to baptize them would represent a serious breach of ecclesiastical law and would incur great injustice for the children, as they could die on their way to Paris. It is not clear how Boullanger’s letter had come into the possession of the highest authorities of the Austrian Netherlands, but it ushered in a large-scale investigation in the course of which twelve persons were brought in for questioning: Elisabeth Quoquidez, Jean-Baptiste Bassanet, their sixteen-year old son, a neighbour, five doctors, a midwife, and two lodging-house keepers, all residing in Brussels.

The elaborate report of the examinations does not allow us to establish each and everyone’s degree of complicity in detail, if only because several tried to minimise their involvement, and others contradicted each other as to the exact timing or context of certain events. Yet there is sufficient unanimity and clarity on a number of core elements to sketch out the contours of the transport network. Neither Elisabeth Quoquidez nor her husband denied their active role in the child export: they admitted openly to having transported between twenty-five and twenty-nine infants from Brussels to Paris over the past two to four years, in return for a more or less standard sum of two golden louis per child – the equivalent of twenty-six Brabant guilders or forty days’ wages of an unskilled male worker. The evidence indicates that they normally travelled by cart or donkey, taking along one or two children each time. In return, they brought back a ‘delivery certificate’ for their clients as proof of the fact that the child had been delivered to La Couche – or a burial certificate if the child had died along the way. The practice of bringing back certificates is also observable in the case of other presumed transport networks in the literature, while the sum demanded by the Bassanets for their services corresponds to those mentioned for child transports from Liège to Paris in the same period.

The testimonies diverge somewhat as to the precise mechanisms by which the Bassanets were
supplied with their unfortunate cargo. Elisabeth and Jean-Baptiste testified that “deceived girls” sometimes came to their house to give birth to their unwanted children, while most children were delivered to their door by persons unknown, who immediately disappeared after paying the necessary sum. Many other infants, they maintained, were delivered to them via a number of Brussels doctors and midwives, who paid the fees and accepted the delivery certificates on behalf of their patients. Most of the doctors and midwives named by the Bassanets, played down their actual role, yet admitted to having acted as middlemen on a number of occasions. Both doctors Guillelmus Rogge and Jacques François Tricot, for instance, each admitted having once supplied Elisabeth with a newborn child at the request of the child’s mother. Doctors Joseph and Charles Godecharles and Maria Gillis for their part testified that they had sent on “pregnant daughters” to the Bassanets, while they had accepted delivery certificates on their behalf. Although some of them denied active involvement, many of those questioned admitted to having informed potential clients of the Bassanets’ services. While the jury remains out on the exact role of the different protagonists, the investigations in any case indicate that the Bassanets’ activities were embedded in a broader complex of social relations dealing with unwanted pregnancies in eighteenth-century Brussels. These observations in turn correspond to the sparse indications on the existence of similar networks in for instance Versailles, Rouen, Reims and Liège, which likewise appear to have involved doctors, midwives, lodging-house keepers and voituriers.

The well-embedded nature of the Bassanets’ transport activities is also confirmed by another important characteristic of the export undertaking: its well-known and widely publicised nature. All but one of the persons interviewed, even those who denied any involvement, testified that they were well aware that the Bassanets’ undertook these kinds of transport, and that the latter had made no secret of their activities. In support of this, several testimonies indicate that Elisabeth publicly advertised her activities by repeatedly calling on doctors, midwives, and other interested parties to recommend her services, and by putting newly delivered babies ‘on show’ in the neighbourhood. Both Elisabeth and Jean-Baptiste indeed stated having undertaken their export in all openness, and to have acted “in good faith” – a claim that is corroborated by virtually all testimonies and contradicted by none. A startling complement to the publicity efforts apparently undertaken by Elisabeth Quoquidez are the newspaper advertisements in the Gazette de Liège of the late eighteenth century, in which midwives and lodging-house keepers promoted their well-equipped and discrete facilities for childbirth, while promising to “take care of the rest” or to “take care of the child’s transport”.

An important factor that confirmed the Bassanets in their belief that they carried out a “good
work”, was the official sanctioning and encouragement they received. At the Parisian end, Boullanger’s letter was considered by the Bassanets to be the equivalent of an official permission to carry out their transports. Similarly, all representatives of the Brussels administration whom they had encountered, they maintained, had been informed of the purpose of their journeys, and had not only consented but also applauded and encouraged their undertaking. This was particularly true for the lieutenant-amman, a royal judicial officer, who had repeatedly assured the Bassanets that they “undertook a good work that was to the advantage of the city”. In addition, his clerk Waegemans had provided the Bassanets with the necessary travel documents claims that were corroborated among others by Charles Godecharles. The official correspondence that ensued from the investigations later confirmed that the Brussels magistracy as a whole appears to have been aware of the transports undertaken by the Bassanets.

It is very implausible that the Parisian Maison de la Couche in any way benefited from the import of children from Brussels. On the contrary, the strong increase in the number of foundlings in this period led to severe financial and organizational problems, of which the high levels of surplus mortality were only the most acute. Yet while official laments on the growing number of ‘imported children’ multiplied, historians have noted how Parisian police practices actually facilitated their delivery, for instance by the use of pre-printed ‘receipt notes’. In the case of Boullanger, support apparently even went so far as the writing of an official reference letter on behalf of the Bassanets. It is likely that personal advantage played a role here. In return for his role as de facto gatekeeper to the Maison de la Couche, Boullanger demanded half a crown for every certificate of delivery – the equivalent of one and a half guilders or two days’ wages of an unskilled labourer. If this police officer coordinated and encouraged more such transport undertakings from places other than Brussels – which he probably did – these child imports may have together yielded him a considerable sum of money.

There are no indications that personal gain was as important a factor in provoking the complicity of local authority representatives at the other end of the transport chain. Yet, the Brussels authorities had other good reasons to look favourably upon the Bassanets’ undertaking. As in most other regions, the relief responsibilities for foundlings fell on the place where they were found. As the parochial relief institutions in Brussels had long refused to take on responsibility for abandoned children, the costs for their upkeep were borne directly by the urban finances. Residential care for foundlings was absent in eighteenth-century Brussels, and abandoned children fell under the responsibility of two maîtres des enfants trouvés, appointed by the treasury. The latter organized the children’s placement with foster families in the surrounding countryside, who received between six
and twenty-five guilders per year in return for boarding. Foundling support was an important and rising cost in the urban budget of the eighteenth century. By the 1760s, there were around 600 foundlings at the charge of the Brussels’ authorities, adding up to a total yearly expense of more than 22,000 guilders. Local officials attributed the growing number of foundlings in Brussels mainly to the influx of unwanted children from the countryside. This argument was in turn invoked by the lieutenant-amman and his clerk to justify the ‘re-export’ of some of the children in question.

While local officials supported the Bassanets’ transports, their sentiments were not shared by the higher authorities. The central authorities of the Austrian Netherlands were appalled by the facts brought to light by the attorney-general’s investigations. One of the major royal officials in the Duchy of Brabant, Conseiller-fiscal De Cock, was particularly virulent in his condemnation of the Bassanets’ “infamous transport”, which he denounced as damaging to “the well-being of the state, of which the population is the first nerve” and contrary to “all civil and natural laws”: it promoted the spread of “vice and libertinage”, encouraged “the feeble and vicious sex to live loose without reticence”, and deprived children of “all their birth rights” – a range of moral and populationist arguments that were typical of the reactionary side of contemporary elite opinion. While De Cock maintained that all those involved should be severely punished, the Conseil Privé and the Governor adopted a milder stance. Although they denounced the export as “illegal by itself and contrary to the well-being of the state”, they conceded that the Bassanets, doctors, and midwives had all acted in good faith – which was all the more forgivable since there existed no decrees or laws that explicitly forbade the export of children. These mitigating circumstances did not apply to local officials, however: by reason of their function they should have known that they were acting against the “civil laws”. While the criminal investigations were eventually aborted, the lieutenant-amman was to face a disciplinary procedure, and the Conseil Privé engaged in designing a royal decree that would prohibit similar export activities in the future – a decree that was eventually promulgated on 20 December 1762.

The discussion so far has helped to understand why local officials at both ends of the transport line supported the Bassanets’ activities, and has demonstrated that their transports were well embedded in a wider network dealing with unwanted pregnancies in Brussels, in ways that correspond to the other indications we have on such networks of this period. Yet, it is insufficiently clear why the clients of the Bassanets paid for their children to be transported all the way to Paris when they could have left them to the care of the maîtres des enfants trouvés in Brussels. Exploring this question requires a more detailed analysis of the available evidence on the backgrounds and motives of the
Brussels versus Paris: clients’ motives

Establishing the actual motives of clients in making use of the Bassanets’ services, requires exploring two different questions: one is why they wanted to dispose of a child in the first place, the other is why they wanted it to be transported all the way to Paris. The testimonies are unfortunately silent on the identities of the clients, of whom most witnesses claimed to know neither the name nor the address. Given that they had found their way to the Bassanets via a range of different established doctors and other channels, it is however unlikely that most of them would have been rural outsiders who came to the city only to give birth – as local officials like the lieutenant amman maintained. While up to half of the Bassanets’ clients are simply described as “unknown persons”, the social imagery used to describe the other half on which we have a little more information, was relatively homogeneous. With only two exceptions, Elisabeth Quoquidez referred to her clients as “servants” or “(poor) girls”. The clients whom Joseph Godecharles had redirected to the Bassanets, so he stated, had wished to “preserve the reputation of pregnant (...) daughters and ensure the conservation of the children, whom due to their poverty they could not keep.” His brother likewise referred to “girls without means nor opportunity to maintain their infants”. Most interviewees, then, referred to the Bassanets’ customers as poor and unmarried girls, earning their keep as domestic servants, which was the commonest occupation of young, single women at the time. The dominant image was one of passive female sexuality, with references to seduction and deception, and in one case even to sexual assault, as the main explanations for the unfortunate state of the “girls” in question.

There were only three references that explicitly diverged from this picture. In one attested instance, the children transported had not been infants, but two five-year old orphan boys, who according to Elisabeth had been delivered to her because their foster family could no longer take care of them. Secondly, a reference to a “danseuse ou figurante” in the testimony of doctor Tricot and the fact that one of the implicated midwives resided at the heart of the capital’s red light district, might signal that some of the Bassanets’ clients were involved in prostitution. Thirdly, Doctor Cremmens mentioned a young couple who had considered sending their child to La Couche until the demise of the man’s parents, because the latter opposed their marriage – however, they had eventually decided to keep the child. While the latter example confirms the role of pre-marital courtship practices in producing untimely pregnancies, it also indicates that not all mothers-to-be
who turned to the Bassanets were necessarily single.

The possibility that the Bassanets’ services might have been used to dispose of the products of adultery or of legitimate children, was a prime concern of investigators on the case – but repeatedly denied by the protagonists. However, the investigators’ preoccupations might at the same time have been a reason for the interviewees to exaggerate the stereotype of the poor, single, and abandoned mother, which renders any interpretation as to the underlying reality speculative. Furthermore, the patchy indications on social background pertain to only half of the Bassanets’ clients at best, as many children were delivered to Elisabeth by “unknown persons”. At best, the imagery conveyed indicates that unmarried motherhood was considered a justifiable reason for child abandonment by the doctors and midwives examined. The rhetoric employed was one between pity and apology, in which acceptable motives for child abandonment centred on poverty and reputation, and which corresponded to the contemporary stereotype and historical archetype of the poor, deceived, and abandoned single mother – but in reality, the overall picture may well have been more varied. The suggestion that the Bassanets’ clients were very poor, is in any case out of tune with the prices charged for their services. While housemaids in permanent employment might in favourable instances have been able to save up this kind of money, it was a sum beyond the reach of many urban residents. If most of the Bassanets’ customers were indeed “poor girls and servants” it is therefore likely that they relied on other persons’ help to amass the necessary sum. This might have involved family, friends, or even sympathetic employers – but could equally well involve the child’s father and his family, intent on avoiding marriage or preventing a family scandal.

The relatively high prices charged by the Bassanets to transport a child to Paris add even more weight to the second question with regard to motive: why did clients pay that kind of money to have their children brought to Paris, if they could simply have left them to the care of the Brussels maîtres des enfants trouvés? The doctors Joseph and Charles Godecharles provided a first clue when they justified their collaboration by portraying the transport as the only alternative to infanticide: it “prevented infants being killed or thrown into latrines”. The central authorities proved sensitive to the suggestion that the Bassanets’ export might have represented “the least criminal means” to dispose of a child, and gave orders to investigate whether the capital’s foundling institutes and policies were functioning properly. Charged with investigating the issue, Conseiller-fiscal De Cock, assured them that the foundling masters of Brussels “accepted without difficulty all abandoned children or foundlings that were presented to them”. Furthermore, he maintained, no member of the Brussels Magistrate could remember that “the penalties envisaged
As the last remark indicates, the normative context of foundling policies in Brussels was, as in many other cities at the time, rather ambivalent. According to customary law, child abandonment was a criminal offence. In response to the rising numbers of foundlings, many urban authorities had in the early eighteenth century complemented this general law with ordinances that sought to restrict the opportunities for child abandonment – but their implementation remained half-hearted for fear of driving up the incidence of infanticide. Hence a Brussels ordinance of 1698, re-emanated in 1733, specified penalties for child abandonment and established measures to facilitate the detection and identification of foundlings’ parents, such as providing rewards for informants, and regulating the activities of midwives and doctors. De Cock’s observations, however, suggest that the punitive measures remained dead letter in practice. The criminal records conserved for the period indeed corroborate his contention that no criminal prosecution for child abandonment had taken place in living memory.

However, the absence of criminal persecutions does not rule out the existence of another type of investigation, i.e. administrative efforts to trace and identify foundlings’ parents. When a child’s parents could be identified, local responsibility for his or her maintenance fell under the provisions of general settlement legislation, which meant that it was transferred either to another local community (if the parents were immigrants) or to the parochial Tables of the Holy Spirit (if they were from Brussels). In either case, the child’s upkeep ceased to be the responsibility of the foundling’s institute, which meant that the urban finances would be discharged from their relief costs. Hence, the urban authorities had good reasons to engage in administrative investigations as to the foundlings’ origins, and there are two important indications that they actually did so. The first is provided by a kind of ‘epilogue’ to the Bassanet inquiry, when in 1770 the then widowed Elisabeth Quoquidez was again arrested, this time for depositing a baby on the steps of one of the city’s foundling masters. Her arrest shows that Elisabeth remained a central rallying point for unwanted pregnancies even though she had by then abandoned her export undertakings, but also demonstrates that at least some local officials and police officers in Brussels did live up to the 1733 restrictions, and plainly arrested persons who were suspected of having abandoned children – probably less with an eye to criminal persecution than to administrative recognition.

A second indication of the restrictiveness of the Brussels foundling policies at the time of the Bassanet transports is provided by ulterior developments in this domain. Partly as a result of Elisabeth’s second arrest, in 1771 the central authorities of the Austrian Netherlands formally forbade the Brussels authorities to apply the 1733 decree and its restrictive provisions concerning
child abandonment. After having been relatively stable for several decades, the yearly number of children entering the custody of the *maîtres des enfants trouvés* increased rapidly in the following years: from 106 in 1770, to 200 in 1774, 300 in 1778, and 578 in 1784, while the costs associated with their upkeep more than tripled from an average of 25,000 guilders in the 1760s, to more than 80,000 guilders per year in the early 1780s. Irony of history, the Brussels authorities in turn repeatedly complained about the 1771 decision on the grounds that it turned the city into the main reception centre for unwanted children from the whole of the Austrian Netherlands, but to no avail.75 As with the Bassanet transports, the position of the central authorities on the 1771 decision was inspired mainly by enlightened and populationist concern over the survival of the exposed young, while the local authorities were concerned primarily by the financial burden their maintenance implied for the urban budget – a difference in priorities that was not unrelated to the uneven distribution of the associated costs.76 Whether or not the increase in the expenses after 1771 was due to local or imported foundlings, it is in any case clear that prior to the formal revocation of the 1733 decree important restrictions to child abandonment were in force in the Brussels context.

The available evidence suggests, then, that restrictions in the policies towards child abandonment in Brussels were an important element of the *raison d’être* of the Bassanets’ enterprise in the 1750s and 1760s. While criminal persecutions were indeed very rare, investigations of an administrative type were probably more frequent. While the latter’s main purpose was to relieve the urban finances of the spiralling costs for foundling support, it also entailed a risk of being identified as a foundlings’ parent. This was a problem for poor parents who felt unable to bear the costs of an additional child, but was an even greater inconvenience when the motives for child abandonment pertained to the preservation of one’s reputation and marriage chances, or the avoidance of a family scandal. Even if they were infrequent and inefficient, the operation of certain detection mechanisms therefore jeopardised the anonymity with which one could dispose of a child in Brussels – much as they did in many contemporary French cities.77 Such mechanisms and ambiguities were in turn absent in the Parisian case, which according to all available evidence practised very liberal policies towards child abandonment. Hence, greater anonymity was probably a major comparative advantage of Paris over Brussels from the perspective of the Bassanets’ clients.

In addition, the perceived qualities of the capitals’ foundling institutes might also have been a relevant consideration. Because most of the Brussels foundlings were boarded out in the vicinity of the capital, it is possible that the many defects in their treatment – including undernourishment, abuse and high death rates – that would be established by a report in 1787, were common knowledge with the local population.78 While conditions in *La Couche* were no better, a number of
historians have maintained that the Parisian foundling institute nevertheless enjoyed a good reputation. In the Bassanets’ case, this might have been complemented by recommendations on the part of the doctors, midwives and voituriers involved. Joseph Godecharles for instance testified that during his apprenticeship in Paris he had himself experienced that foundlings there were “raised very well and provided with all the necessities”. Cremmens’ reference to the couple who had considered temporarily placing their child in La Couche, likewise indicates that they in any case expected their child to survive, and to receive good treatment – as did many other parents abandoning their children to the care of the Parisian foundling institute. The delivery modalities were another qualitative difference between Brussels and Paris in this respect: while in Paris babies could be delivered safely in the hands of a police officer, in Brussels children could only be abandoned by actually exposing them, which of course entailed higher risks for their survival. Hence the idea that the children in question faced better prospects when transported to Paris than when abandoned in Brussels, could have been an important consideration for the Bassanets’ clients.

Next to the quality of the care provided in Paris, that of the transport activities themselves might also have been an element of persuasion in attracting clients. Several of the examinees mentioned the existence of a similar transport enterprise undertaken by two women from the French border town of Valenciennes, who had secured child transports from Brussels before the Bassanets entered the scene. According to Elisabeth, they lost customers because they neglected the children placed in their care, which resulted in a very high death rate. We know little of the material conditions of the Bassanets’ transport activities, nor of its death toll. In the investigations, there is only one reference to the demise of a child on the way to Paris – but this does not preclude a higher death rate in reality. At the same time, both Boullanger’s letter and other testimonies confirm that Elisabeth made sure that non-baptized babies entrusted to her received a baptism, which suggests concern for their spiritual well-being. Although the evidence is too biased to make any conclusive statements in this regard, it is possible that the children transported by the Bassanets received relatively good care, especially when compared to the staggeringly high death rates that according to all available evidence characterized the activities of most voituriers. This could in turn have been an additional consideration in convincing abandoning mothers that their children would be in good hands. The high prices paid for the transport services suggests that clients assumed a fair chance of survival: why would they have paid such considerable sums if they knew the children were heading for a virtually certain death? It is therefore likely that one reason for having their babies transported to Paris was because that was where they thought care was best.
Conclusions

The child exports undertaken by Elisabeth Quoquidez and Jean-Baptiste Bassanet from Brussels to Paris in the second half of the eighteenth century, were the product of the inherent ambiguities of local policies towards foundlings in the capital of the Austrian Netherlands. While foundling support existed and even expanded throughout the eighteenth century, the Brussels authorities at the same time sought to restrict the possibilities of anonymous child abandonment in order to relieve the growing pressure of foundling support on the urban finances. This ambivalence was attributable to the fundamental dilemma that dominated all urban policies towards foundlings in this period, between economic considerations to bring down costs on the one hand, and moral responsibilities to preserve the wellbeing of abandoned children on the other hand. The various policy outcomes of this dilemma produced an objective competition in terms of local foundling policies, in which the most liberal ones ran the risk of attracting unwanted children from elsewhere, which is exactly what was happening in the Parisian Maison de la Couche.

Long-distance transports such as those undertaken by the Bassanets, were no exception in a time when up to 40 percent of all the Parisian foundlings were imported from outside the French capital. On a structural level the existence of these transports can be attributed to the push and pull forces emanating from different degrees of liberality and restrictiveness in local foundling policies, yet concrete evidence on these child transports has remained indirect and speculative at best. The rich archival materials produced by the Bassanet case allow us to gain an insight into the functioning and attitudes surrounding the activities of the voituriers undertaking these transports, demonstrating how they were embedded in a broader network of doctors, midwives, and lodgers centred on dealing with unwanted pregnancies in eighteenth-century Brussels, and involved the active support of local officials at both ends of the transport chain, motivated by private gain and the possibility to rid themselves of chargeable children respectively. The references by various examinees to a competing transport enterprise based in Valenciennes, and the select evidence from the existing literature, confirm that similar supply chains to the Parisian Maison de la Couche radiated in many directions.

The Bassanet case has also helped to highlight the role which reputation could play as a pull factor for foundling institutes like the Parisian Hospital des Enfants Trouvés, however unfounded this reputation may have been in fact. This observations tally with Semichon’s argument, who in 1880 contemplated: “maybe it would be correct to attribute the rapid progression [in the number of imported foundlings presented to the Maison de la Couche in the eighteenth century] to the creation of roads and other means of communications” in combination with “the facilities and guarantees
offered by (...) the sisters of Saint-Vincent de Paul [who] took much better care of the children than (...) in the hospitals.”

Networks like that of the Bassanets are in any case revealing for the spatial inter-connectedness of foundling policies in distant local settings of eighteenth-century Europe, in which decisions on organization of relief in one place could have profound consequences for cities and villages situated many kilometres away.

Although direct evidence on the social background of the Bassanets’ clients is patchy, their profiles and motives appear to have shown many resemblances to the image of the poor, deceived and abandoned single mother, for whom employment and the preservation of reputation were important factors preventing her from keeping her child in the case of an unwanted pregnancy. The relatively high prices charged by the Bassanets suggest that other factors might have been at play too, or at least that some of the “poor girls” received help from family or friends. Overall, the greater anonymity and better reputation of Parisian institutes were the most likely motives for the Bassanets’ clients to have their children transported to Paris rather than to abandon them in Brussels. At least those with sufficient means to cover the transport costs, then, appear to have operated in a wide spatial market for childcare when contemplating the options to dispose of their children – a spatial market in which both discretion and repute were important concerns.

Notes


10 For a contemporary controversy over the existence of a foundling “tour” – where children can be deposited anonymously – in the Belgian city of Antwerp, see for instance “Michael De Kleine”, in Flanders Today, 29 July 2009, 16.
13 Bonenfant, Le problème, 130-131; Hufton, The prospect before her, 268-269; Snell, Parish and belonging, 67, 137-143.
14 J. F Terme and J.-B. Monfalcon, Histoire statistique et morale des enfants trouvés, suivie de cent tableaux (Paris, 1837), 100.
17 In addition, small numbers if children were also cared for in the Salpêtrière, Pitié or other Hôtels Dieu: Léon Lallemand, Un chapitre de l’histoire des enfants trouvés: La maison de la couche, 17e-18e siècles, Extrait d’un mémoire couronné par l’académie des sciences morales et politiques (Paris: H. Champion, 1885); Isabelle Robin and Aignès Walch, “Géographie des enfants trouvés de Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles,” Histoire, Economie et Société 6, no. 3 (1987): 344-347; Terme and Monfalcon, Histoire, 96-103.
22 Da Molin, “Les enfants abandonnés,” 189, 192-3; Gérando, De la bienfaisance publique, 154; Lallemand, Histoire, 159-161, 238; Ernest Semichon, Histoire des enfants abandonnés depuis l’Antiquité jusqu’à nos jours (Paris: Plon, 1880), 134; Terme and Monfalcon, Histoire, 100.
Childcare, health and mortality at the London Foundling Hospital, 1741-1800, 2007, 26-27. For the case of London, the evidence pertains to the period of the “Great Reception” (1757-1760), when a temporary liberalization of entry conditions – previously restricted by a ballot system and a screening for health – allowed for a surge in the number of children admitted to around 4,000 per year (as against between 20 and 200 in the preceding years).

Like the description by Louis-Sebastien Mercier of a voiturier to Paris: “it is a man who carries on his back the newborn children, in a padded box that can contain three of them (…) The man stops only to eat and to give them a bit of milk. When he opens the box, he often finds one is dead; he continues his long voyage with the two others, impatient to drop them off at the depot. When he has deposited them at the hospital, he returns immediately to resume the same trade which is his living”, cited by Delaselle, “Les enfants,” 193. See also: Kertzer and White, “Cheating,” 458; Lallemand, Histoire, 162; Levene, “The origins,” 216-217; Robin and Walch, “Géographie,” 358.


The registre des délibérations du bureau de l’hôpital général observed in December 1772 that the “barbarian treatment” of imported children on their long journey to Paris caused many to die a premature death along the way or after arrival, so that “on top of the overburdening of the Parisian hospitals and the depopulation of the provinces (…) also public order and humanity suffer (from these transports)”, cited by Lallemand, Un chapitre, 36-37, n.2.


The correspondence, investigations and other documents produced in the wake of the Bassanet case are kept in the National Archives in Brussels (Algemeen Rijksarchief – ARA), Conseil Privé Autrichien – Cartons (T460), 951.


ARA, T 460, 951, Informations prises par le conseiller procureur général de Bruxelles ensuite des ordres de SAR du 15/03/1762, and Letter of the Procureur Général to Charles Alexandre, 10/05/1762. A mainly descriptive discussion of some of the evidence produced in the course of the Bassanet case was published by Paul Bonenfant, “Une entreprise d'exportation d'enfants à Bruxelles au XVIIIe siècle,” Annales de la Société Royale d’Archéologie de Bruxelles 35 (1930): 6-30. and re-considered by Anne Winter, “Ongewenste kinderen op transport naar het Parijse vondelingenhuis.

Examination of Elisabeth Gaillard, 27/03/1762; Examination of Josephius Godecharles, 28/03/1762; Examination of Doctor Guillelmis Rogge, 27/03/1762; Examination of Sr Jacques François Tricot, 27/03/1762.

Examinations of Elisabeth Quoquidez, 24/03 and 02/04/1762; Examination of Jean-Baptiste Bassanet, 27/03/1762.


ARA, T 460, Examinations of Elisabeth Quoquidez, 24/03 and 02/04/1762; Examination of Jean-Baptiste Bassanet, 27/03/1762.

ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Doctor Guillelmis Rogge, 27/03/1762; Examination of Sr Jacques François Tricot, 27/03/1762.

ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Charles Godecharles, 27/03/1762; Examination of Josephius Godecharles, 28/03/1762; Examination of Marie Catharina Joseph Gillis, 05/04/1762.


ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Elisabeth Quoquidez, 24/03/1762; Examination of Guillelmis Rogge, 27/03/1762; Examination of Elisabeth Gaillard, 27/03/1762; Examination of Josephius Godecharles, 28/03/1762; Examination of
A demi-couronne de France was worth 1.5 guilders: Doursther, *Dictionnaire universel des poids et mesures anciens et modernes, contenant des tables des monnaies de tous les pays*, 299, 318-319. For wages, see above note *.

Although klerk Waegemans did receive 6 sols and two pots of beer in return for the travel documents provided.


Bonenfant, *Le problème*, 130, esp. n.3.


ARA, T 460, 951, *Extrait de protocole du Conseil Privé, 14/06/1762*. In fact, the 1292 landcharter of the ammanie Brussels did provide some prohibitive measures in this direction: Vanhemelryck, *De criminaliteit*, 172.


Although Elisabeth once refers to a maidservant who she believes was in service with a gardener living outside the city, and another time to a girl who was staying in the inn “Le Vieux Loup”, suggesting that some lodging networks for rural girls might have been in place: ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Elisabeth Quoquidez, 24/03/1762; Examination of Marie Catharina Joseph Gillis, 05/04/1762.

ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Sr Guillelmis Cremmens, 05/04/1762.

See for instance ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Elisabeth Quiquidez, 24/03/1762.

Data for an Antwerp household in 1758/59 mention yearly remunerations of forty and fifty guilders for a maidservant and kitchen maid respectively: Scholliers, “Prijzen en lonen te Antwerpen en in het Antwerpse (16e-19e eeuw),” 1042-1043.

ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Josephius Godecharles, 28/03/1762; Examination of Charles Godecharles, 27/03/1762.

ARA, T 460, 951, Extrait de Protocole du Conseil Privé, 16/12/1761.

ARA, T 460, 951, Letter of Conseiller-Fiscal De Cock to Charles Alexandre, 07/05/1762.

Georges De Ghewiet, Institutions du Droit belgique. Avec une méthode pour étudier la profession d'avocat (Bruxelles, 1758), vol. 2, 353; Vanhemelryck, De criminaliteit, 166.


Vanhemelryck, De criminaliteit, 167-169, 171.

ARA, T 460, 951, Letter of Charles Alexandre to the lieutenant-amman of Brussels, 10/07/1771.

ARA, T 460, 951, Letter of Charles Alexandre to the Magistrat de Bruxelles, 25/07/1771; Bonenfant, Le problème, 434-438; Vanhemelryck, De criminaliteit, 169. These arguments would also continue to dominate the discussion in the nineteenth century, when a system of liberal admissions by means of a tour had been established: Patricia Van den Eeckhout, “De geschiedenis van de “Vondelingenbak” te Brussel. Conflicten tussen moraliteit en administratieve zuinigheid,” Annalen van de Belgische Vereniging voor Hospitaalgeschiedenis 16 (1978): 57-87.

In the closing decades of the eighteenth century, the Brussels authorities in vain undertook repeated attempts to have at least part of the costs for foundling care covered by the central authorities: Bonenfant, Le problème, 434-442, 484.

Lallemand, Histoire, 109-120. See also Hufton, The prospect before her, 274-275.

Bonenfant, Le problème, 216-217.


ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Josephius Godecharles, 28/03/1762.

It is worth pointing out that the Bassanets’ clients did not necessarily want to sever all ties with their abandoned child, as the certificates of delivery brought back by the Bassanets might have had the same function as letters and billets in allowing for a possible reclaiming of the child in the future: cf. Robin and Walch, “Les billets,” 984-985.

ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Elisabeth Quoquidez, 24/03/1762; Examination of Jean-Baptiste Bassanet, 27/03/1762; Examination of Sr François Tricot 27/03/1762; Examination of Marie Catharina Joseph Gillus, 05/04/1762. The fact that Elisabeth Quoquidez herself originated from Valenciennes, might have helped the establishing of transport links between Paris and Brussels.

ARA, T 460, 951, Examination of Elisabeth Quoquidez, 02/04/1762.

Although this might have been motivated by the fact that a baptismal record appears to have been required when delivering a child in Paris; Lallemand, Un chapitre, 34 n.2, 36-37 n.2.

Semichon, Histoire, 134.