

Political Ideology and the Rewriting of History in Fifteenth- Century Flanders

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Medieval views on rulers from the past were often politically instrumentalised in the service of contemporary interests. In the recent historiography on medieval Flanders, the reconstruction of how ‘historical truth’ changed over time to cater for topical needs has primarily been examined from the perspective of ‘social’ or ‘communicative’ memories, which were orally transmitted over a short period of time. This line of research followed the dominant ‘communicative memory’ – paradigm. However, historians have paid far less systematic attention to the question how urban elites and state officials used histories that went farther back in time and dealt with the ‘high politics’ of princes and rulers to assert (rebellious) political ideologies of the moment. In this vast topic of research, historians are dealing with histories that were transmitted through manuscripts and not through oral communication. Instead of relying on the ‘communicative memory’ – paradigm, which allows historians to consider how the recent past has been ideologically reconstructed, this article examines how late fifteenth-century Flemish urban elites rewrote, interpolated, deformed and manipulated histories from a more distant past to shape a functional ‘cultural memory’ (in the sense of Jan Assmann’s definition) that influenced a society’s ideological vision on history. Taking the political speech of Willem Zoete (1488) and the late fifteenth-century popular and widespread Flemish historiographical Middle Dutch corpus, the *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen*, as a starting point, this article shows how rulers from the past served as a vehicle to express contemporary rebellious ideas against the regency of Maximilian of Austria, and how ideological

motives and discursive strategies were deployed to advocate the ideology of the 'political contract' between the prince and his subjects, as well as the idea of the 'natural prince'.

Middeleeuwse opvattingen over vorsten uit het verleden werden vaak politiek geconstrueerd in functie van eigentijdse belangen. Uit de recente historiografie over middeleeuws Vlaanderen blijkt dat historici de manier waarop de 'historische waarheid' door de eeuwen heen werd ge(re)construeerd voornamelijk vanuit het perspectief van 'sociale' of 'communicatieve' herinneringen hebben onderzocht. Deze benadering past binnen het dominante theoretische model van 'communicatieve herinnering', waarbij de focus ligt op herinneringen die binnen de korte tijdsspanne van enkele generaties en voornamelijk mondeling werden overgeleverd. Tot nu toe is er veel minder aandacht besteed aan hoe stedelijke elites geschiedverhalen over de politieke daden van vorsten uit een verder verleden hebben gebruikt om actuele (opstandige) politieke statements te maken. In dit onderzoeksdomein staan geschiedverhalen centraal die veeleer schriftelijk dan mondeling werden overgeleverd. Anders dan in het heersende model van 'communicatieve herinnering', onderzoeken wij in dit artikel hoe de laatmiddeleeuwse stedelijke elite in Vlaanderen de geschiedenis uit een ver verleden herschreef, vervalste, vervormde en manipuleerde in functie van de constructie van een 'culturele herinnering' (in de definitie van Jan Assmann), die van invloed was op de eigentijdse ideologische visie op het verleden. Aan de hand van een analyse van de politieke redevoering van Willem Zoete (1488) en het bekende, laat vijftiende-eeuwse Middelnederlandse historiografische corpus, de *Excellente cronike van Vlaenderen*, wordt getoond hoe geschiedverhalen over vorsten uit een ver verleden werden ingezet om zich tegen het actuele regentschap van Maximiliaan van Oostenrijk te verzetten, en hoe ideologisch geladen discursieve strategieën daarbij werden ontplooid om de gangbare opvattingen over zowel het 'politieke contract tussen de vorst en zijn onderdanen' als ook over de 'natuurlijke vorst' te verdedigen.

Introduction

'As has happened many times among the people of Israel', the Flemish jurist Willem Zoete stated in his speech in front of the Estates-General in Ghent on 28 April 1488, 'as well as among the Romans, the Greeks, the French, the Germans and any other nation', subjects had the right to depose their rulers when they did not treat them well. As a former city clerk who had served in Bruges between 1483 and 1485, and by 1488 as the senior administrative officer of Ghent, master Zoete not only employed arguments derived from Roman and canon law as well as from scripture and theology, but he also

appealed to natural law.¹ To do so, he invoked historical arguments based on examples of princes from the past. He mentioned rulers like Jeroboam of the Israelites, Emperor Nero, Childeric III of the Franks, Frederick III the Fair of Germany, Arnold the Simple of Flanders and Robert of Normandy. Although they had been ‘natural princes’, they were all deposed because of the harm they had inflicted upon their subjects.²

Zoete’s speech in 1488 was pronounced before the Estates-General of the principalities of the Burgundian Low Countries, where a full-scale civil war had broken out during the final quarter of the fifteenth century. On 28 June 1485, Maximilian of Austria had forced the Peace Treaty of Bruges upon the county of Flanders. He obtained guardianship over his son, Philip the Fair, still a minor, and was thus able to act as a regent in all the former possessions of the Valois Burgundian dynasty (except the Duchy of Burgundy proper, which had been conquered by the French). Three years earlier, in 1482, Maximilian’s wife Mary of Burgundy, who since the death of her father Duke Charles the Bold in 1477 had been the sole heir of all his principalities, had died in a horse accident.³ The subjects of the Netherlandish regions considered the young Philip their true ruler, not his father Maximilian, as the Habsburg archduke had merely been a consort of Mary and never their ‘natural prince’ as Duke of Brabant, Count of Flanders, Count of Holland, etc. However, supported by his father Emperor Frederick III of the Holy Roman Empire, Maximilian regained control over the rebelling county of Flanders after almost three years of civil war, during which the major Flemish cities of Bruges, Ghent and Ypres had installed their own regency council (1483-1485).⁴ Maximilian’s rule was characterised by political repression and authoritarian regime changes in the cities of Flanders and Brabant, and was therefore strongly contested by the town-dwellers and an important part of the nobility.⁵

1 Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, “‘Les bonnes causes du peuple pour se révolter’”. *Libertés urbaines et luttes de pouvoir aux Pays-Bas méridionaux (1488)*, in: François Foronda (ed.), *Avant le contrat social. Le contrat politique dans l’Occident médiéval XIIIe-XVe siècle* (Paris 2011) 327-346.

2 Isidore L.A. Diegerick, *Correspondance des magistrats d’Ypres députés à Gand et à Bruges pendant les troubles de Flandre sous Maximilien, duc d’Autriche, roi des Romains etc.* (Bruges 1853-1856) xxxvi.

3 Jelle Haemers, *De strijd om het regentschap over Filips de Schone. Opstand, facties en geweld in Brugge, Gent en Ieper (1482-1488)* (Ghent 2014) 167.

4 Jelle Haemers, *For the Common Good. State Power and Urban Revolts in the Reign of Mary of Burgundy (1477-1482)* (Turnhout 2009); Wim

Blockmans, ‘Autocratie ou polyarchie? La lutte pour le pouvoir politique en Flandre de 1482 à 1492, d’après des documents inédits’, *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis* 140:3 (1974) 257-368.

5 Jelle Haemers, ‘Un régent “qui est à l’origine de tous les maux et du désordre du pays” ou “Das ungetreu volck zur Flannrenn”? À propos de la politique d’un prince “étranger” dans des pays “infidèles”. Maximilien d’Autriche aux Pays-Bas bourguignons, 1477-1492’, in: Michel Pauly (ed.), *Die Erbtöchter, der fremde Fürst und das Land. Die Ehe Johanns des Blinden und Elisabeths von Böhmen in vergleichender europäischer Perspektive* (Luxemburg 2013) 241-262 (Publications du CLUDEM 38).

Zoete's speech clearly illustrates how medieval views on rulers from the past were often ideologically and politically instrumentalised in service of contemporary interests.⁶ Obviously, this was not only the case in the legal rhetoric of a lawyer such as Willem Zoete, but also in those texts that modern scholars have considered as belonging to the historiographical genre of 'annals', 'chronicles' or 'histories'. Historical events could serve as moral or pragmatic *exempla* in the same way that 'mirrors of princes' or other didactic genres did. In the search for pragmatic forms of medieval political ideologies, medieval historical writing as a genre, however, has been far less researched than legal or theological works.⁷

In the recent historiography on medieval Flanders, the reconstruction of how 'historical truth' changed over time in order to serve the needs of the moment has primarily been examined from the point of view of the 'social memories' fostered by specific groups of people. Craft guilds or patrician and noble lineages constructed and reconstructed their social identities by adapting popular songs, town chronicles, genealogies or 'memory books' to their current needs.⁸ In this line of research, it was stated that shared experiences of rebellious artisans that had come down orally in the form of songs and tales were manipulated to serve present-day politics. The heroic deeds of an ancestor would have been exaggerated to contribute to the standing of a patrician family or to claim noble descent.

During the last few decades, this social memory-paradigm has become the dominant framework for historians who focus on how the past has been socially and ideologically reconstructed.⁹ However, to speak really of

6 Gabrielle Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990) 59-86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2864472>.

7 See for instance Joseph Canning, *A History of Political Thought 300-1540* (London 1996).

8 Jelle Haemers, 'Social Memory and Rebellion in Fifteenth-Century Ghent', *Social History* 36 (2011) 443-463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2011.610631>; Frederik Buylaert e.a., 'Politics, Social Memory and Historiography in Sixteenth-Century Flanders: Towards a Research Agenda', *Publications du Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes (XIVe-XVIIe S.)* 52 (2012) 195-215. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.PCEEB.5.100787>; Frederik Buylaert, 'Memory, Social Mobility and Historiography. Shaping Noble Identity in the Bruges Chronicle of Nicholas Despars (+1597)', *Belgisch tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 87

(2010) 377-408; Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, 'Political Songs and Memories of Rebellion in the Later Medieval Low Countries', in: Éva Guillorel, David Hopkin and William Pooley (eds.), *Rhythms of Revolt: European Traditions and Memories of Social Conflict in Oral Culture* (London 2017) 43-63.

9 From 'collective memory' to 'social memory': Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris 1950), English translation by Lewis Coser (Chicago 1992); Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, 'Social Memory Studies: from "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices', *Annual review of Sociology* 24 (1998) 105-140. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.105>; Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: a Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41:2 (2002) 179-197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00198>;

'memory', Jan Assmann argued, implies a relatively recent past. What he called a 'communicative memory' is transmitted through at most three generations (or approximately eighty years), while, also in Assmann's terminology, a 'cultural memory' develops once the historical remembrance of events is not passed down orally anymore but exclusively through written texts or iconographic and monumental signs.¹⁰ How histories that went farther back in time and dealt with the medieval 'high politics' of princes and rulers, and which were transmitted through manuscripts rather than orally, were used by members of the urban elites and state officials like Willem Zoete to assert political ideologies, is a vast topic of research that has received less systematic attention than medieval social memories of more recent events.¹¹

To meet this lacuna, this article proposes a diachronic approach that allows for the study of more long-term processes of ideological and social memory construction. Therefore, we examine a corpus of late fifteenth-century historiographical texts written at the time of Willem Zoete. Rulers and events from a distant past are amply discussed in these constantly rewritten texts. These late medieval chronicles are then compared with their previous textual traditions, as well as with other historiographical texts stemming from the time when the discussed rulers actually lived, so when the narrated events took place. In the next section, we explain how we used this comparative method, and why the textual corpus of the *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen* in particular constitutes an excellent starting point for the analysis of how a 'cultural memory', in the sense of Assmann's definition, was constructed among the Flemish political elites.

The Excellent Chronicle of Flanders

Apart from the more transient, ephemeral or local forms of 'memory' (or in a broader sense: 'historical culture'), the most popular and widespread Flemish historiographical corpus of texts at the end of the fifteenth century

Jacob Climo and Maria Cattel, 'Meaning in Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives', in: Idem (eds.), *Social Memory and History. Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek 2002) 1-36.

10 Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in: Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin, New York 2008) 109-118; Idem, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich 1992); Astrid Erll,

Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen. Eine Einführung (Stuttgart 2005).

11 For the central medieval period there is the exemplary work of Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton 1994). Works on later medieval historiography certainly often tend to consider this question but mostly in passing. See for instance for the Duchy of Brabant: Robert Stein, *Politiek en historiografie. Het ontstaansmilieu van Brabantse kronieken in de eerste helft van de vijftiende eeuw* (Leuven 1994).



▲
Miniature depicting an equestrian portrait of Mary of Burgundy and the seventeen principalities of the Low Countries in the *Excellent Chronicle of Flanders*.

© Brugge, Public Library, 437, fol. 361v.

was the so-called *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen* (*Excellent Chronicle of Flanders*). Although it finally appeared in print in 1531¹², this was never a chronicle with a standard text, but rather a group of often considerably diverging manuscripts. In medieval times, such textual *variance*, to paraphrase Bernard Cerquiglini, was of course the rule rather than the exception, and each manuscript should thus be considered a separate and autonomous text and not just a ‘version’ of a so-called ‘standard text’.¹³ It is exactly the dynamics of a process of rewriting history, that is, of adding, interpolating, deforming and manipulating the text of a chronicle, that provides a starting point for the study of medieval ideologies. In this respect, a historiographical corpus could form a cultural memory that influenced a society’s ideological vision on history. The late-fifteenth-century *Excellent Chronicle of Flanders* manuscripts, which were contemporary to Willem Zoete’s speech, were themselves the product of a much older Latin historiographical tradition, usually referred to as the *Flandria Generosa*, going back to the twelfth century. In 1164, the *Flandria Generosa A* (also referred to as the *Genealogia comitum Flandriae*) was composed by a Benedictine monk of Saint Bertin’s abbey in Saint-Omer. During the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this genealogical text dealing with the origins and development of the comital house of Flanders was continued and rewritten in monastic contexts. Before the Dutch texts were created, versions of this corpus of Flemish history had already been translated in Old French and are known as the *Ancienne Chronique de Flandre*. Some of these manuscripts can be connected with the comital court around 1300.¹⁴

With at least forty manuscripts conserved for this succession of continuations and rewritings in three languages, the *Flandria Generosa / Excellente Cronike* gradually became the most widespread and authoritative body of historical texts in medieval Flanders. Even though this monumental textual tradition was first composed for noble and clerical audiences associated with princely circles and major ecclesiastical institutions, from the fifteenth century onwards, at the latest, it also began to circulate in urban milieus. One continuation of the *Genealogia comitum Flandriae* was made around 1340 by some Cistercian monks, among whom was a certain Bernard of Ypres of the Clairmarais abbey near Saint-Omer. In the early fifteenth century, this redaction found its way to what seems to be the clerical environment in Bruges, although it clearly addressed an intended audience

12 *Dits die Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen*
beghinnende van Liederick Buc den ersten
Forestier tot den laesten die door haer vrome
feyten namaels Graven van Vlaenderen ghemaect
worden, achtervolghende die rechte afcomste des
voors. Graven tot desen onsen doorluchtigsten
Hooghgeboren keyser Karolo, altijd vermeerder des
Rijcx (Antwerp, Willem Vorsterman 1531).

13 Bernard Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante. Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris 1989).

14 Jean-Marie Moeglin, ‘Une première histoire nationale flamande. L’ancienne chronique de Flandre (xiiie – xiiiie siècles)’, in: Dominique Barthélemy and Jean-Marie Martin (eds.), *Liber Largitorius. Études d’histoire médiévale offertes à Pierre Toubert par ses élèves* (Genève 2003) 455-476.

of laymen and burghers who understood Latin as well. In this stage, the genealogy was rewritten into a coherent narrative.¹⁵ It was renamed the *Catalogus et chronica principum Flandriae*, also known as the *Flandria Generosa* c. Circulating within a Bruges milieu where clerics and rich burghers interacted, the text was translated into Middle Dutch already in the first half of the fifteenth century. From then on, several versions of the text were written and rewritten throughout the county of Flanders, albeit mostly in the largest Flemish cities of Ghent, Bruges and Ypres.¹⁶

Nineteen manuscripts containing the Middle Dutch text of the *Chronicle of Flanders* – most remain unedited so far¹⁷ – have survived, and they all particularly appealed to an urban audience. Seven of these manuscripts were produced in fifteenth-century Bruges, at that time the principal artistic and literary centre of the Burgundian Netherlands. Since these manuscripts were all composed within a short time span (1485-1495), and given that their scribes and owners were members of the same religious confraternity as Willem Zoete (Our Lady of the Snow in Bruges) and shared common political views on the Flemish civil war, they constitute the perfect basis for an analysis of their underlying ideological discursive strategies used to make political anti-Habsburg statements.¹⁸ Furthermore, only the Bruges cluster of manuscripts incorporated the specific continuation on the *Chronicle of Flanders* by the famous Bruges rhetorician, Anthonis de Roovere. These versions, which have survived in their complete form in only two manuscripts¹⁹, narrated Flemish history from its mythical origin in the seventh century until the death of the last Burgundian duchess, Mary of Burgundy, in 1482. This ending was obviously not randomly chosen, nor was it innocent when considered within the political context of the end of the fifteenth century. As it was written by, and destined for, a network of people related through familial, political, economic and cultural ties, the Bruges *Excellente Cronike* tradition spread a clear ideological message. Taking into account their context of production,

15 Although not under scrutiny here, the *Rijmkroniek van Vlaenderen*, written at the end of the fourteenth century by a Ghent citizen, should be considered part of this *Flandria Generosa* tradition as well. George Declercq, 'Rijmkroniek van Vlaenderen', in: Graeme Dunphy (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (Leiden, Boston 2010) 1280-1281.

16 Lisa Demets, 'The Late Medieval Manuscript Transmission of the *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen* in Medieval Flanders', *The Medieval Low Countries* 3 (2016) 123-173. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.MLC.5.112393>.

17 Some pre-critical nineteenth-century editions are available: Constant Philippe Serrure and Philip Marie Blommaert, *Kronyk van Vlaenderen van 580 tot 1467* (Ghent 1839-1840); Jean-Jacques Lambin, *Dits de Cronike ende Genealogie van den prinsen ende graven van den foreeste van Buc dat heet Vlaenderlant van 863 tot 1436* (Ypres 1839).

18 Lisa Demets and Jan Dumolyn, 'Urban Chronicle Writing in Late Medieval Flanders: The Case of Bruges during the Flemish Revolt of 1482-1490', *Urban History* 43:1 (2016) 28-45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926815000152>.

19 Bruges, *Public Library* (hereafter BPL) 437 and Douai, *Municipal Library* (hereafter DML) 1110.

their circulation and their consumption, previous research has demonstrated how these texts functioned as instruments to express the political aspirations of a specific Bruges anti-Habsburg faction, including commercial elites and leading members of the craft guilds, major religious confraternities and literary chambers of rhetoricians.²⁰

Building on the previous conclusions on the authorship and audience of the late fifteenth-century *Excellente Cronike* manuscripts, in this article we will focus on how Flemish history was ideologically manipulated into an anti-Habsburg story during the revolt against Maximilian of Austria from a more diachronic perspective. By comparing specific text passages from two late fifteenth-century Middle Dutch *Excellente Cronike* manuscripts from Bruges, we will retrogressively move to the Latin *Flandria Generosa c* series from the early fifteenth century. At times, we will also invoke other narrative sources dealing with the history of Flanders, such as the *Antiquités de Flandre* of Philip Wielant²¹, as well as narratives from a more distant past. We start from the basic assumption that if a later ‘author’, ‘continuator’, ‘compiler’ or ‘copyist’ – terms which are hard to distinguish within a medieval context – had altered passages in the historiographical text(s) he was using as an example, he normally would have had a conscious ideological reason to do so. Following up on Zoete’s argument that Maximilian’s rule was illegitimate, we will show how rulers from the past served in the major Flemish chronicle tradition as a vehicle to express contemporary rebellious ideas, by looking at ideological motives and discursive strategies similar to those used by Zoete. To this end, we will analyse the *Excellente Cronike* by confronting it with two ideologically framed narrative strategies which were the most relevant at the end of the fifteenth century: (1) the ‘natural prince’ versus the foreign consort, and (2) the inherently vicious nature of regents.

The ‘natural prince’ and the foreign consort

In the Middle Dutch *Excellente Cronike* manuscripts, the rebels seized upon an important fifteenth-century political concept, *le prince naturel*. It would become a key concept in the historical narrative that was constructed in order to deal with the political relations between the Flemish princes and their subjects. This notion was initially established by French court intellectuals to reinforce the unity of their realm during the Hundred Years War.²² Soon, the Burgundian dukes applied it to justify their own territorial expansion.

20 Demets and Dumolyn, ‘Urban Chronicle Writing’.

21 *Recueil des chroniques de Flandre*, ed. by Joseph-Jean De Smet, in: *Corpus chronicorum Flandriae* (Brussels 1856) 8-431.

22 Jacques Krynen, ‘Naturel, essai sur l’argument de la Nature dans la pensée politique à la fin du Moyen Âge’, *Journal des savants* 2 (1982) 169-190, 173. <https://doi.org/10.3406/jds.1982.1450>.



▲
Miniature depicting the marriage of Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian of Austria in the Excellent Chronicle of Flanders.
© Brugge, Public Library, 437, fol. 384r.

In general, chronicle writers in the Netherlandish principalities tended to interpret this concept of the ‘natural prince’ in three ways.²³ The first cornerstone was origin. A ‘natural prince’ was born in the county, duchy, or realm over which he was expected to rule, while other candidates were considered as ‘foreign’. Second, the ‘genealogical’ or ‘lineage’ understanding of the term ‘natural’ meant hereditary legitimacy. Dynastic lineage was the most ‘natural’ way of succession, simply because that prince was the most direct heir of the dynasty. Jean de Gerson and Christine de Pisan proposed a third interpretation, which was primarily ideological in nature: a ‘natural’ prince also guaranteed peace and unity. He would bring peace and stability because his subjects had natural feelings of affection and obedience towards him as their prince.²⁴

The urban elite who composed the *Excellente Cronike* used a similar conception of the ‘natural prince’ as a leitmotiv to rewrite the political situation during the reign of an earlier countess of Flanders, Joan of Constantinople (1212-1244). In 1212, as her liege lord for Crown Flanders, the French king Philip Augustus, approved her marriage to the much older Portuguese Prince Ferrand, son of Sancho I, King of Portugal. This theme of a young countess and a foreign prince was highly relevant to the late fifteenth-century political context, and produced an excellent opportunity to articulate the ideology of the ‘natural prince’. The Flemish chronicles chose the 1212 Entry of the new princely couple Joan and Ferrand into Ghent, the principal city of the county, as the most suitable *locus* of this narrative to insert a perspective on the legitimate authority of the count-consort.²⁵ Following the Latin text of the early fifteenth-century Latin *Flandria Generosa c*, which in its turn was based upon the older thirteenth-century *Continuatio Claromariscensis* of the *Flandria Generosa A* branch, the late fifteenth-century Middle Dutch *Excellente Cronike* narrated that, in 1212, the young married couple returned to Flanders to receive homage from their cities and noblemen after their wedding ceremony in Paris. During their journey to Flanders, Joan fell ill and had to stay behind in the city of Douai. Arriving in Flanders without the princess, Ferrand was well-received in Bruges and Ypres. However, when he reached Ghent, the gates were closed, and the inhabitants refused to let him enter the city.

According to the *Flandria Generosa c* tradition as well as some early thirteenth-century contemporary narratives, including the *Continuatio*

23 Robert Stein, ‘Natuurlijk Filips de Goede. De Bourgondische erfopvolging in de Nederlanden’, in: Mario Damen and Louis Sicking (eds.), *Bourgondië voorbij. De Nederlanden 1250-1650. Liber alumnorum* Wim Blockmans (Hilversum 2010) 15-29, 16.

24 Krynen, ‘Naturel, essai sur l’argument de la Nature’, 184-186.

25 On the Entry: Theo Luykx, *Johanna van Constantinopel, gravin van Vlaanderen en Henegouwen. Haar leven (1199/1200-1244), haar regering (1205-1244), vooral in Vlaanderen* (Antwerp, Utrecht 1946) 92-102; Erin Jordan, *Women, Power and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York 2006) 29-30.

Claromariscensis and the Old French *Chronique rimée* of Philip Mouskes, the conflict was instigated by two powerful Flemish noblemen and comital confidants, Razo of Gavere and Arnulf of Oudenaarde. These nobles were displeased with the count and countess because, unlike the powerful castellans of Bruges and Ghent, Jean de Nesle and Siger of Ghent, they had not been invited to the wedding ceremony in Paris. They had not been consulted about the choice of Ferrand as a potential spouse for Countess Joan as well.²⁶ In the late fifteenth-century Dutch *Excellente Cronike*, however, Razo of Gavere and Arnulf of Oudenaarde did not seem to act any longer in their own right as proud noblemen. They now merely functioned as representatives of ‘those of Ghent’ in the negotiations with the new count at Courtrai. The suggested parallel with members of the Burgundian high nobility some 250 years later – including Adolf of Cleves, a member of the Burgundian dynasty, and Louis of Gruuthuse, the high-ranking Bruges nobleman who had been one of the pillars of Burgundian rule in Flanders and who supported the urban rebels against Maximilian – is striking. In the late fifteenth-century Middle Dutch versions, the thirteenth-century conflict acquires the character of an urban uprising initiated by the people of Ghent as a community, rather than being a controversy initiated by two individuals. Therefore, it exemplifies a constructed cultural memory serving very contemporary ideological needs.

Several early thirteenth-century chroniclers inform us of other reasons that may have caused the cold reception of Ferrand in Flanders in 1212, reasons which seem to have been omitted, or only partly adapted, in the late fifteenth-century Middle Dutch tradition. First, according to the Clairmarais continuation, the condition for the inhabitants to accept Ferrand as their new count implied that they would be able to see him with their own eyes in the presence of his wife Joan, the new Countess and heiress of the county, as a proof of their actual marriage.²⁷ Second, a number of other chronicles written independently from the *Flandria Generosa* corpus, such as the ‘Anonymous chronicler of Béthune’; the ‘Anonymous canon of Laon’; the ‘Anonymous minstrel of Reims’ and the chronicles by Philip Mouskes, William of Andres and Baldwin of Avesnes, all emphasise an additional incident, though they do not link this explicitly to a possible rebellion, namely the loss of territory in the western part of Flanders to the dauphin of France.²⁸ As they travelled

26 *Catalogus et cronica principum et comitum Flandrie*, ed. by Joseph-Jean De Smet, in: *Corpus chronicorum Flandriae* (Brussels 1837) 142-143; Luykx, *Johanna*, 98-102; *Genealogiae Comitum Flandriae*: vi. *Continuatio Claromariscensis*, ed. by Ludwig C. Bethmann, in: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH), *Scriptores* (SS) 9, 326-334, 331; *Ex Philippi Mousket Historia Regum Francorum*, ed. by

Adolf Tobler and Oswald Holder-Egger, in: MGH, SS 26, 721-821, 748.

27 *Continuatio Claromariscensis*, 331.

28 *Anonyme de Béthune, Chronique française des rois de France*, ed. by Léopold Delisle, in: *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* (Paris 1904) 754-775, 761-764; *Chronicon Andrensis*, ed. by Johannes Heller, in: MGH, SS 24,

through Peronne on their way to Flanders, Joan and Ferrand were suddenly stopped by the French Dauphin Louis VIII. He forced them to cede to him the towns and castellanies of Aire-sur-la-Lys and Saint-Omer.²⁹ Although the invasion of Louis of France and the enforced alienation of Aire and Saint-Omer were still picked up in the early fifteenth-century *Flandria Generosa* tradition, the scribes of the Middle Dutch *Excellente Cronike* may have considered this less ideologically relevant in making their point against Maximilian of Austria. Instead, one of the Bruges *Excellente Cronike* manuscripts offers an alternative explanation to justify the behaviour of the burghers of Ghent, which did resemble the feelings of the rebels during the revolt against Maximilian: 'And because Jeanne had taken a foreign man as her husband without (the presence of) the representatives of those of Ghent, they did not want to receive him, because he did not speak or understand Dutch, which they regretted, and they did not consider him one of them'.³⁰

Although several of the chronicles mentioned above already displayed a suspicious attitude towards male consorts in a more indirect way, by the end of the fifteenth century in the Bruges *Excellente Cronike* the role of male consorts stood out as one of its major ideological *topoi*. Examples of this were, again, to be found in the history of the Flemish Counts and their relationship to their subjects. According to the *Excellente Cronike*, three points justified the attitude of the citizens of Ghent. The first assertion was the implicit and explicit dichotomy between the 'foreignness' of a new count who was not familiar with the customs of the county on the one hand, and the 'natural' princess on the other hand – an idea which was especially troubling to the larger Flemish cities of Ghent and Bruges as they depended on the 'goodwill' of the counts to respect their customary law and privileges.³¹

The second assertion was that the new prince did not understand or speak Dutch. This is a remarkable argument as, unlike the great majority of the Flemish, the counts of Flanders and most of the Flemish nobility had always been francophone. The point is accentuated a few folia earlier in two manuscripts of the *Excellente Cronike*, where the texts make explicit that Count Baldwin IX spoke Dutch, which allowed him to communicate with the German merchants.³² However, linguistic demands on the part of

690-773, 754; *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims*, ed. by Oswald Holder-Egger, in: MGH, SS 26, 526-555, 538; *Chronicon Hanoniense quod dicitur Balduini Avennensis. Chronique dite de Baudouin d'Avesnes, Le trésor des histoires*, ed. by Johannes Heller, in: MGH, SS 25, 419-467, 449; *Ex chronico universalis Anonymi Laudunensis*, ed. by Georg Waitz, in: MGH, SS 26, 442-457, 455; *Ex Philippi Mousket*, 748.

29 Léopold Warnkoenig, *Flandrische Staats- und Rechtsgeschichte bis zum Jahr 1305* (Brussels 1835-1864) 47-48, n. 21.

30 BPL 437, fol. 98r.

31 This discourse was also clearly present in political tracts written during the Flemish revolt. See for instance: Haemers, 'Un régent', 246-250.

32 BPL 437, fol. 96v and DML 110, fol. 85r.

the Flemish subjects were not new. As the Dutch-speaking and bilingual commercial and craft guild elites gained authority in the Flemish cities, the demand for a Dutch governmental and legal system grew more persistent in the Late Middle Ages. It had already been broached in 1405 and on various other occasions under Burgundian rule.³³ Also in 1477, the privileges issued by Mary of Burgundy included a provision for governance and jurisdiction conducted in the Dutch language.³⁴

The final charge was that the city of Ghent had not been informed about the marriage and that the matrimony had been finalised without the consent or presence of any city representatives. With this argument, the *Excellente Cronike* manuscripts alluded to and historically legitimised the desire of the major Flemish cities to be involved in the marriage arrangements of an unmarried Flemish countess and the search for an ‘ideal’ count-candidate. This passage on the reign of Countess Joan may again allude to the wedding arrangements of Mary of Burgundy in 1477. As Mary was in a weak negotiating position and needed military support in the war against France, the Three Members of Flanders (Ghent, Bruges and Ypres) interfered in her marriage arrangements. Unsurprisingly, they supported a marriage with the French dauphin, which would end the war and the economic decline.³⁵

Interestingly, in the final chapters of the Bruges *Excellente Cronike*, a contemporary passage is reminiscent of the failed Entry of the thirteenth-century Count Ferrand of Portugal in Ghent: a revolt in Brussels before the Joyous Entry of Maximilian of Austria and the heiress Mary in 1478. According to the *Excellente Cronike* text, the commune of Brussels, one of the main cities in the neighbouring Duchy of Brabant, feared that Mary had already left the city and Maximilian was about to make the Joyous Entry into the city on his own, without the presence of the legitimate heir.³⁶ To allay rumours that she was gone, Mary had to show herself physically in the middle of the night to the commune gathered at the Coudenberg princely residence.³⁷ Similar to this late medieval incident in Brussels, the *Excellente Cronike* narrated that in 1212, the people of Ghent admitted their mistake when they actually saw Countess Joan with their own eyes. According to the *Excellente Cronike*, the heiress’s presence was not the only reason for the people of Ghent to accept Ferrand as their prince: ‘And those of Ghent seeing this (i.e. Joan in the company of Ferrand), knew that they were wrong and they realised

33 Marc Boone, ‘Langue, pouvoirs et dialogue. Aspects linguistiques de la communication entre les ducs de Bourgogne et leurs sujets flamands (1385-1505)’, *Revue du Nord* 91:379 (2009) 9-33.

34 Haemers, *De strijd*, 121-122.

35 Idem, *For the Common Good*, 18-19.

36 In the period 1488-1489, the city of Brussels joined the Flemish cities in the revolt against Maximilian

of Austria. Valerie Vrancken, ‘Opstand en dialoog in laatmiddeleeuws Brabant. Vier documenten uit de Brusselse opstand tegen Maximiliaan Van Oostenrijk (1488-1489)’, *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis* 181 (2015) 209-267.

37 DML 1110, fol. 366v.

that Ferrand was a virtuous prince and that Joan, his wife, was by his side.³⁸ This last narrative is not mentioned in the thirteenth-century chronicles but it was adopted in the *Recueil des Antiquités de Flandre*, an institutional history of the county written by the late fifteenth-century Ghent jurist, Philip Wielant.³⁹ Being a man with a social and intellectual profile similar to that of Willem Zoete, Wielant was another supporter of the uprising against Maximilian of Austria.

Furthermore, it is striking that the scribes of the Bruges manuscripts did not seize the opportunity to demonise Ferrand and use him as a negative *exemplum* to comment on Maximilian of Austria. On the contrary, according to the *Excellente Cronike*, the city of Ghent seemed to have accepted Ferrand's authority under specific conditions. The first requirement was that he could rule through marriage in the name of the heiress, Joan, but only when she was 'by his side'. In the late medieval context, this directly censured the plans of Maximilian of Austria to become regent after the death of Mary of Burgundy. The second condition was that Ferrand was a 'virtuous prince', one of the fundamental characteristics of a 'natural prince' as determined by authors such as Jean Gerson and Christine de Pisan.⁴⁰ Legitimising a count's rule by his just actions as a ruler, informed by the cardinal virtues, was a common tenet which urban political ideology shared with a more general medieval political thought, as found for instance in 'mirrors of princes', but also in the ideological expressions used during negotiations in parliamentary institutions.⁴¹

A similar revision is to be found in the positive representation of Joan's second husband, Thomas of Savoy, even though he was barely mentioned in the thirteenth-century contemporary chronicles.⁴² Two *Excellente Cronike* manuscripts also point out that Thomas of Savoy, a 'good and peaceful count', left the county after the death of his wife (and after having received a considerable sum of money) and did not challenge the inheritance right of the countess's sister Margaret. This last passage is another delicate reference to the political aspirations of Maximilian in Flanders after the death of

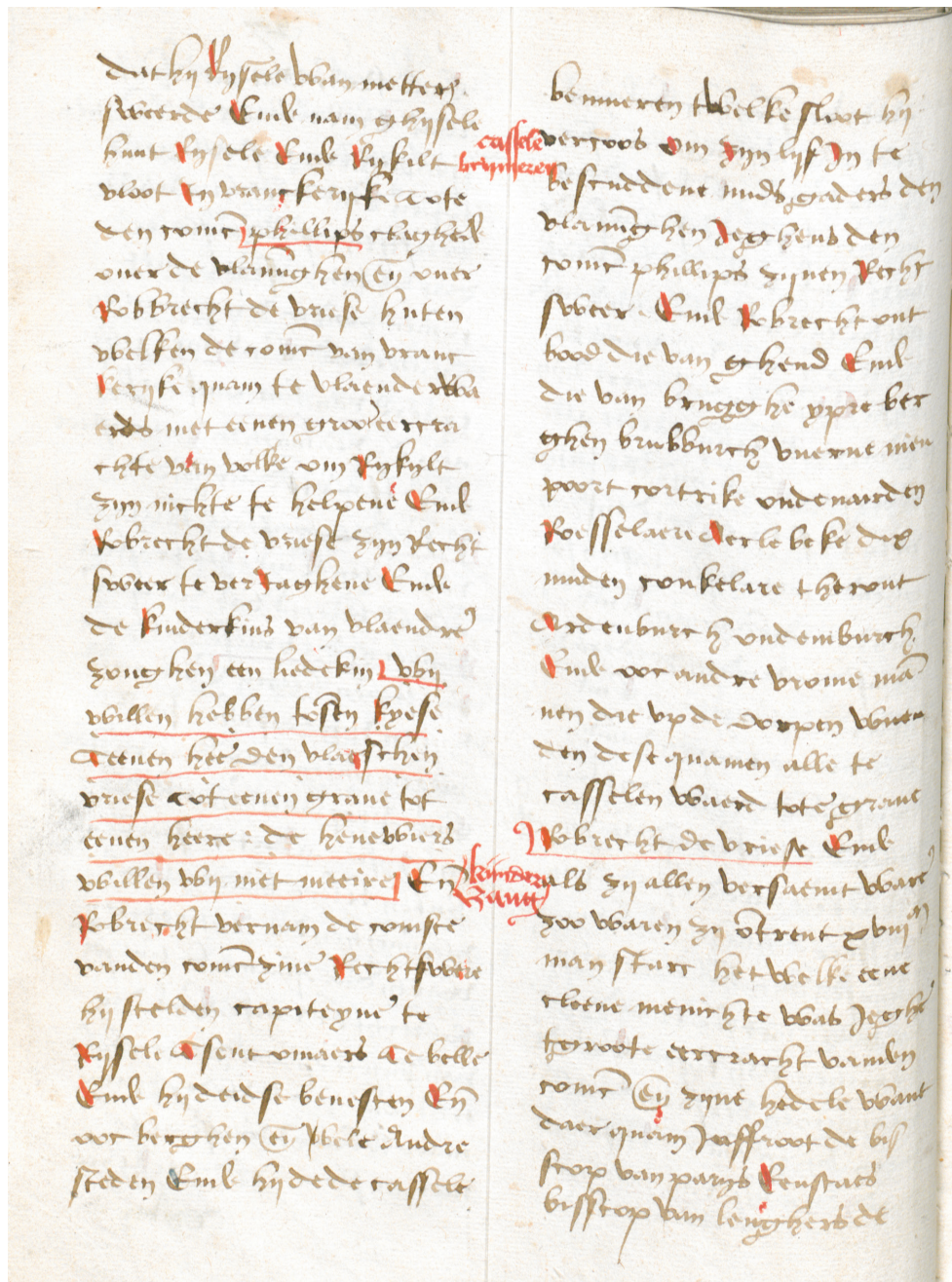
38 DML 1110, fol. 87r, and BPL 437, fol. 98v.

39 Philip Wielant, *Antiquités de Flandre*, ed. by Joseph-Jean De Smet, in: *Corpus Chronicorum Flandriae* (Brussels 1865) 286; Jos Monballyu, 'Een autograaf van Filips Wielant (1441-1520) met voorbereidende aantekeningen voor zijn "Recueil des Antiquités de Flandre"', *Lias* 10 (1983) 165-173.

40 In this case, 'vroom' should not be interpreted as 'pious', but in the Middle Dutch meaning of the word: virtuous, good, upright and honest.

41 Jan Dumolyn, 'Privileges and Novelities: The Political Discourse of the Flemish Cities and Rural Districts in Their Negotiations with the Dukes of Burgundy (1384-1506)', *Urban History* 35:1 (2008) 5-23.

42 As most chronicles only refer to his marriage to Countess Joan, Philip Mouskes also emphasises his attractive physical appearance and his noble birth, his military campaigns against rulers from the neighbouring principalities, and his journeys to England and Savoy. *Ex Philippi Mousket*, 807-821.



▲
 Fictional children's song 'Wy willen hebben tonsen kyese teenen heere, den Vlaemschen Vriese' ('We want to choose our Lord, the Flemish [Robert the] Frisian') in the Excellent Chronicle of Flanders.

Duchess Mary.⁴³ In this respect, the depiction of both Count-consorts Ferrand and Thomas served as a model for new consort rulers of Flanders through marriage, in particular Maximilian of Austria. Here, the *Excellente Cronike* text states it implicitly, though clearly, and in very a negative sense. Maximilian was not a rightful ruler as he did not follow the example of his predecessors and wiser consorts to a Flemish countess, princes who understood they could be recognised by their subjects only if they respected their customs and granted them beneficial privileges, as had supposedly always been the case in the history of Flanders, or at least in the cultural memory that needed to be constructed during this period of conflict and strife.

The inherently vicious nature of 'regents'

In his speech in Ghent on 28 April 1488, Willem Zoete thus referred to different historical moments when people rightly rebelled against their 'natural princes' because of the excesses of these rulers. Zoete's speech should be interpreted in the light of the escalation of events in the winter of 1488. On 5 February 1488, Maximilian of Austria had been imprisoned by the citizens of Bruges in the Cranenburg palace in the market place, where he was forced to watch the execution of Pieter Lanchals, a representative of the archduke's power in Bruges who was hated by the common people.⁴⁴ As for Flanders, Zoete referred to two historical actors to strengthen his case: Arnulf the Simple and Robert of Normandy. The latter person remains an enigma, as no 'Robert of Normandy' had ever been Count of Flanders. Perhaps confused about events that had happened more than three centuries before, Zoete likely meant William of Normandy, also known as William Clito, son of Robert Curthose who had also been deposed as Duke of Normandy, a fact that might have caused this confusion. William Clito briefly served as Count of Flanders after the murder of Count Charles the Good in 1127. After a revolt by the Flemish cities, William was eventually replaced as count by Thierry of Alsace, as recorded by the contemporary chronicler Galbert of Bruges.⁴⁵

'Arnulf the Simple', as he is called by both Zoete and the *Excellente Cronike*, refers to yet an earlier count: Arnulf III of Flanders, who was the eldest son of Count Baldwin VI and Richilde of Hainaut. When Baldwin VI died in 1070, Arnulf was only fifteen years old. Although he was officially of age, his mother Richilde ruled over the county as his regent. However, the younger brother of the deceased Count Baldwin, Robert the Frisian, invaded

43 DML 1110, fol. 90v and BPL 437, fol. 103v.

44 Robert Wellens, 'La révolte brugeoise de 1488', *Handelingen van het genootschap voor geschiedenis te Brugge* 102:1 (1965) 5-52.

45 Galbert of Bruges, *De multro, traditione, et occisione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandriarum*, ed. by Jeff Rider (Turnhout 1994).

Flanders with the support of the Northern region and its towns and defeated Richilde and the young count's army at the Battle of Cassel in 1071. Arnulf III died on the battlefield and Richilde was forced to flee to Hainaut with her younger son, who was also named Baldwin. The event was exceptional, as two legitimate male heirs, Arnulf and Baldwin, were overthrown by their uncle. Even before the fifteenth century, the dynastic crisis around 1070 was a recurring theme in many narrative sources, the most famous example being the adaptation of the story recorded by Galbert of Bruges, who saw the death of Charles the Good as a divine punishment for the usurpation of the county of Flanders by his great-grandfather Robert the Frisian.⁴⁶ However, in the Latin *Flandria Generosa* a tradition, the usurpation was justified by turning the reader's attention away from the rebellion of Robert against his nephew to focus instead on the terrible aspects of the regency of Arnulf's mother, Richilde.⁴⁷

At the end of the fifteenth century, chroniclers were still, or perhaps more than ever fascinated by the dynastic crisis of the rebellion of Robert the Frisian. Philip Wielant even referred to this event in his overview of Flemish revolts in the *Antiquités de Flandre* as 'the first uprising of the people of Flanders against their prince and natural lord'.⁴⁸ Both Zoete and Wielant acknowledged that the revolt that had favoured Robert happened at the expense of the natural prince, Arnulf III. Nevertheless, in Wielant's narration of the uprising the revolt was first and foremost directed against the regency of Richilde. As Richilde ruled, or rather misruled, the land instead of Arnulf, this justified the decision to turn to another blood-relative of Count Baldwin, his brother Robert. This is exactly what Maximilian of Austria was accused of by the Flemish rebels, as we can read in the first speech of Zoete on 13 March 1488: 'He (i.e. Maximilian) sought every reason to be received in Flanders as lord and not as regent, saying that he did not want to be the servant of his son.'⁴⁹

A similar discourse can be found in the Middle Dutch *Excellente Cronike*, which could likely be the very chronicle Wielant referred to as his primary source ('comme dict la cronicque').⁵⁰ In fact, both the twelfth-

46 Jeroen Deploige, 'Political Assassination and Sanctification: Transforming Discursive Customs after the Murder of the Flemish Count Charles the Good (1127)', in: Jeroen Deploige and Gita Deneckere (eds.), *Mystifying the Monarch: Studies on Discourse, Power and History* (Amsterdam 2006) 35-54, 45.

47 Jeff Rider, 'Vice, Tyranny, Violence and the Usurpation of Flanders (1071) in Flemish Historiography from 1093 to 1294', in: Noah Guynn and Zrinka Stahuljak (eds.), *Violence and*

the Writing of History in the Medieval Francophone World (Cambridge 2013) 55-70.

48 *Antiquités de Flandre*, 278.

49 Jelle Haemers, 'Geletterd verzet. Diplomatiek, politiek en herinneringscultuur van opstandelingen in de laatmiddeleeuwse en vroegmoderne stad (casus: Brugge en Gent)', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis* 176 (2010) 33.

50 *Antiquités de Flandre*, 278.

century *Flandria Generosa A* and the early fifteenth-century Latin *Flandria Generosa C* already portrayed Richilde of Hainaut as a vicious woman who destroyed abbeys and oppressed the clergy, an indication that their original audience was mostly clerical.⁵¹ Likewise, the Middle Dutch *Excellente Cronike* represented Countess-regent Richilde negatively. However, certain passages were changed to better suit the late medieval urban context, alterations that once again touched upon the ideological discourse on the relations between the subjects and their ‘natural prince’. Interestingly, the first and most important difference between all earlier Latin versions of the Flemish chronicle and the late fifteenth-century Dutch texts was a shift away from the emphasis on the charge that Richilde’s wicked government was related to her female sex, obviously a traditional, gendered *topos* in medieval narratives on female rulers.⁵² In the Latin versions, including the *Flandria Generosa C* text, all accounts allude to Richilde’s womanly flaws: ‘His (i.e. Arnulf’s) mother, Richilde, wanted to rule Flanders by force, or to phrase it more tellingly: disturb it with womanly ways’ (‘more muliebri perturbare’).⁵³ Contrary to the Latin tradition, the *Excellente Cronike* omitted these lines and condemned Richilde as illegitimate based purely on her malicious and tyrannical acts as ruler. Eliminating the attribution of ‘womanly’ vices to Richilde better highlighted the parallels between her rule and the regency of the late medieval Habsburg regent, Maximilian of Austria.⁵⁴ As the Bruges *Excellente Cronike* stated, Richilde came to Flanders, introduced her own laws and new taxes; those who had risen against her were imprisoned and beheaded.⁵⁵ The *Excellente Cronike* thus rewrote the dynastic crisis into an elaborate description of Richilde’s vicious rule with vivid new details: ‘Richilde ruled in such a way that she spoiled Flanders, and both her children too, because she wanted to rule Flanders by herself, and she did not take any council from Flemings.’⁵⁶

The late medieval chroniclers added new details to the story that were not based on additional source material but rather on their contemporary political experiences. The new tax policies of both Richilde and William Clito described in the *Excellente Cronike* are perhaps the most explicit reference to the policies of Maximilian of Austria.⁵⁷ Since Maximilian constantly needed money to pay for the war against France, he was particularly remembered for his unpopular monetary and economic policies: devaluations, sales of annuities, reintroduction of abolished tolls and leasing of offices.⁵⁸ Moreover, the *Excellente Cronike* also touches on the problem of arbitrary legal action,

51 *Catalogus et cronica principum et comitum Flandrie*, 59-62.

52 Rider, ‘Vice, Tyranny, Violence’, 55-70.

53 *Catalogus et cronica principum et comitum Flandrie*, 54.

54 *Catalogus et cronica principum et comitum Flandrie*, 56.

55 DML 1110, fols. 37r-37v; BPL 436, fol. 19v; The Hague, Royal Library, 132A13, fols. 15r-15v.

56 BPL 437, fol. 23v.

57 DML 1110, fol. 58r-59v.

58 Haemers, *For the Common Good*, 26-62.

an equally relevant issue for the late medieval audience. Incidentally, these two themes, the newly imposed taxes and legal arbitrariness, were central in an earlier speech delivered by Willem Zoete on 13 March 1488, as, according to Zoete, these went against the very heart of the privileges of the Flemish towns.⁵⁹ In 1477, after the unexpected death of the Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold, the new Duchess Mary issued a series of privileges to her dominions in the Low Countries to counter a wave of urban revolts. These privileges, which were predominantly based on petitions by subjects, reacted to and remedied misgovernment by the previous Burgundian dukes and their officials, especially in terms of excessive taxes and legal corruption. After 1480, Mary's husband Maximilian tried his best to undo these privileges, which the cities had just accepted.⁶⁰

In addition to the taxes and arbitrary legal actions of Richilde and William, the *Excellente Cronike* also emphasises the role of the 'Three Cities of Flanders' in appealing to the former count's brother, Robert the Frisian. The 'Three Cities of Flanders' referred to the three largest Flemish towns, Ghent, Bruges and Ypres, but a late medieval audience would have primarily associated the term with the late medieval institution of the so-called 'Three Members of Flanders'. By the end of the fourteenth century, the 'Three Members of Flanders', including representatives from Ghent, Bruges and Ypres, had become an established representative institution, wielding extensive influence in negotiations with the counts on taxation, justice and politics.⁶¹ During the Flemish revolt, together with some prominent Flemish noblemen, the 'Three Members' had formed a regency council on behalf of Count Philip the Fair, still a minor, to counter the regency claim of the boy's father, Maximilian, and the appearance of the 'Three Cities' in the *Excellente Cronike* is thus not fortuitous. The authors made an anachronistic use of the 'Three Cities' as an official body maintaining the balance of power and throughout the text calling for a more legitimate and just prince, a system of representation which did not yet exist in the eleventh century.⁶² At the time of the Flemish revolt, the 'Three Members' and the regency council had tried to achieve precisely this end.

59 Idem, 'Geletterd verzet', 35-36.

60 Wim Blockmans, 'Breuk of continuïteit? De Vlaamse privilegiën van 1477 in het licht van het staatsvormingsproces, met Franse samenvatting en uitgave van het privilege voor het graafschap Vlaanderen, 11 februari 1477' and 'De "constitutionele" betekenis van de privilegiën van Maria van Bourgondië (1477)', in: Maurice-A. Arnould and Willem P. Blockmans (eds.), *Le privilège général et les privilèges régionaux de Marie de Bourgogne pour les Pays-Bas 1477*

(Kortrijk-Heule 1985) 97-144, 495-516 (*Standen en Landen* 80).

61 The Franc of Bruges was officially restored as the Fourth Member of Flanders after the Flemish Revolt. Haemers, *For the Common Good*, 16; Walter Prevenier, 'Het Brugse Vrije als Vierde lid van Vlaanderen', in: *Handelingen van het xxiië Vlaams Filologencongres (Gent, 24-26 april 1957)* (Leuven 1957) 307-311.

62 Demets and Dumolyn, 'Urban Chronicle Writing', 40-44.

Finally, the manuscript of the Public Library in Bruges was the only text in this tradition to argue that Richilde was an illegitimate regent because she was Countess of Flanders only ‘by her husband’s right’, emphasising her limited role as a consort.⁶³ This charge questioned the legitimacy of a consort to rule in the name of a minor after the death of the legitimate heir, a direct attack on Maximilian’s claim. Clearly, the *Excellente Cronike* traditions omitted any gender-related impediments to Richilde’s regency because these were not relevant for the late fifteenth-century political situation. The Flemish war against Maximilian contested a male regency. However, this does not mean that the female sex of a ruler was no longer an issue in late medieval politics. The Burgundian heir, Mary, had to contend just as much for her dominions with the French King as she did with multiple revolts in the cities of the Low Countries.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the political situation after Mary’s death made it more logical to stress the point that dynastic authority passed to the heir of the county and could not be claimed by a consort. The late fifteenth-century Bruges *Excellente Cronike* thus focused on the quality of being a good or bad count, whereas the older Latin *Flandria Generosa* chronicles connected Richilde’s negative attitude towards the clergy to her female sex. In other words, the Bruges *Excellente Cronike* shows the expectation of a specific late medieval urban elite, implying that their count would govern by policies that respected the traditional balance of power between city and state.

Conclusion: Lessons from history

Political instrumentalisation of the past is now often studied in terms of (mostly orally transmitted) ‘social’ or ‘communicative’ memory that serve the needs and identities of small-scale communities. The phenomenon has rarely been systematically considered when it comes to medieval narratives dealing with events of a far more distant past. In this article, we have proposed a methodology for studying how long-term history was adapted by medieval writers from an ideological viewpoint. The so-called ‘Excellent Chronicle of Flanders’, a textual monument of which dozens of manuscripts written, extended and rewritten in three languages between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries have survived, has been an excellent case in point to demonstrate how contemporary ideological motives could lead to a reconstruction of medieval ‘cultural memory’.

By the end of the fifteenth century, several Middle Dutch variants of the *Excellente Cronike* circulated among the urban political elites of Flanders; it was the first systematic and collective attempt to construct an authoritative

63 BPL 436, fol. 19r.

64 Haemers, *For the Common Good*, 18-25.

Maurice-A. Arnould, ‘Les lendemains de Nancy

dans les “pays de par deça” (janvier-avril 1477)’, in:

Wim Blockmans (ed.), *Marie de Bourgogne 1477*

(Heule 1985) 1-83.

version of the history of the county. To reveal ideological strategies that were used during this long-term process of *ré-écriture*, we have first of all selected story lines and topoi which looked suspiciously useful for the urban elite of Bruges in their rebellion against Maximilian of Austria. The second step was to corroborate the events described – notably fifteenth-century chronicles talking about eleventh-, twelfth- and thirteenth-century events – with other sources from the epoch in which they took place, in a classical, positivist way. A third step then consisted in comparing the general ideological messages present in these stories with the discourses encountered in a wide variety of other fifteenth-century textual material.

Thus, in his speeches before the Estates-General of the principalities of the Southern Low Countries, Willem Zoete defended the ideology of the ‘political contract’ between a prince and his subjects. Already since the twelfth century, this had been the central motive in the political discourses employed by the noblemen and burghers. In this classic idea of ‘mixed government’, subjects had to be loyal and serve their prince, but the prince had to act with reason and justice, protecting his subjects and their interests. Such discourses were widespread in medieval Europe but it was particularly present in the populous and autonomous cities of the County of Flanders. It could be found in petitions formulated by guildsmen as well as in princely ordinances regulating economic matters and it was uttered during discussions in town councils and other representative institutions. This ideological motive was passed on from one generation of burghers to another; the here constructed ‘communicative memory’ guided the burghers’ political actions and the ways they perceived and represented them.

What has never been scrutinised, however, is how this ideological discourse also thoroughly influenced the later medieval models of history writing, especially as chronicles such as the *Flandria Generosa* and the *Excellente Cronike* reached larger (lay) audiences in the fourteenth and especially the fifteenth century. Stories of former princes, even those from a past so distant they could at first sight not have seemed useful for contemporary purposes, were taken out of context, reshaped and rewritten to make topical political statements. During the revolt against the regency of the Maximilian of Austria, the idea of the ‘natural prince’ became an especially prominent story. The Flemish had always served their counts well and loyally so, but they also stood up for their rights and for the common good of their land. Foreigners, consorts and regents needed to take care not to provoke the wrath of the subjects, or they might end up as the next moral history lesson about a ruler from the past who was disposed with good reason, thus serving as an example to others. The chronicles of later medieval Flanders, and especially the extensive group of marginally variant manuscripts that scholars denote as the *Excellent Chronicle of Flanders*, can only be fully understood if they are read from this viewpoint: they constructed a long-term memory, an historical and at the same time normative representation of political culture that suited the Flemish urban elites.

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