

Mechelen's Jubilee Indulgence and 'Pardon' in Burgundian Political Culture

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Historians have vigorously discussed the political and symbolic communication of the Duke of Burgundy and the cities of the Low Countries. They have, in particular, explored the ritualistic or symbolic exchanges of political messages and expressions of political intentions between these two parties. Emotion and its manifestation have become focal points in this discussion. For example, M. Boone argues that the dukes effectively employed a policy of destruction against rebellious cities in order for princely centralization to undermine urban particularism and autonomy¹. This study shows that politically calculated anger played an important role in communication between the Burgundian rulers and cities. However, Boone also suggests that the rulers held the option of pardoning cities. L. Smagghe also points out that expression of the dukes' love for and pardon of their subjects were often seen in the discourse and practice of the time and considered as a counterpart of the anger to show princely clemency². My discussion of the Duke of Burgundy's 'Politics of Pardon' in the revolt of Ghent of 1467 and the papal indulgence deals with the same aspect from a religious perspective, taking the town's actions into consideration³. Here, in considering the Jubilee indulgence of Mechelen in the middle of the fifteenth century, I indicate that the Duke of Burgundy and the town tried to utilize 'pardon' as a medium by which to communicate, to control urban society, and to shape or reshape urban identity. In particular, the duke took advantage of this occasion to manifest his authority, even when the main issue was 'religious' pardon. In a broader context, the analysis of 'pardon', the opposite of 'anger', in political culture sheds new light on the politics of emotion in the late Middle Ages⁴.

1. Religion and Urban Identity

¹ Boone, M., "Destroying and Reconstructing the City: the Inculcation and Arrogation of Princely Power in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands (14th-16th centuries)", in: *The Propagation of Power in the Medieval West*, ed. M. Gosman, A. Vanderjaagt and J. Veenstra (Groningen, 1997), pp.1-33.

² Smagghe, L. "Plaisir de châtier, joie de pardonner: discours amoureux du prince aux villes rebelles du pays de Flandre à l'époque bourguignonne (XIV^e-XV^e siècle)", in: *Amour et désamour du prince du haut Moyen Âge à la révolution française*, ed. J. Barbier, M. Cottret and L. Scordia (Paris, 2011), pp. 81-93; *Idem, Les émotions du prince. Émotion et discours politique dans l'espace bourguignon* (Paris, 2012), pp. 167-212.

³ Aotani, H., "The Papal Indulgence as a Medium of Communication in the Conflict between Charles the Bold and Ghent, 1467-69", in: *Political Order and Forms of Communication in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Y. Hattori, (Roma [in press]).

⁴ See also some articles in *Emotions in the Heart of the City (14th - 16th century)*, ed. E. Lecuppre-Desjardin & A.-L. Van Bruaene (Turnhout, 2005).

The Holy Jubilee dates back to 1300, when the pope Boniface VIII proclaimed that a plenary indulgence, which proffered the remission of penance, would be granted to pilgrims to Rome in the prescribed period if they carried out certain pious acts. The Holy Jubilee was supposed to be announced every hundred years, but the cycle was gradually shortened. Since 1475, it has been proclaimed every twenty-five years⁵.

Since 1390, this Jubilee indulgence became obtainable in local cities in Europe other than Rome. Those who could not go on a pilgrimage to Rome in the Holy Jubilee year obtained it on condition that they went on a pilgrimage to the designated local cities in the extended period of the Jubilee year and fulfilled the same religious duties as required of pilgrims to Rome. In regard to the Low Countries, the extension of the Jubilee was declared in Liège in 1391 and in Ghent in the next year⁶. However, detailed information is only available about the Jubilee in the cities of the Low Countries from the middle of the fifteenth century. Of these cases, the most important was Mechelen's Indulgence of the late fifteenth century.

Pope Nicholas V proclaimed the Jubilee of 1450. Mechelen's indulgence of 1451 was its extension. The town was the capital of the indulgence in the Burgundian territories from 23 April to 23 August, when the period was once more extended to 31 October. Moreover, Mechelen was again transformed into a 'little Rome' from 1455 to 1465. The plenary indulgence was obtainable by pilgrims who visited the town from 1 October to the Advent in the first year and during the forty days following the Good Fridays of the following years. It is worth noting that this Jubilee could be regarded as the extension of the one of 1451; however, strictly speaking, an aspect of the crusading indulgence, that of the treatment of donations, was added to it during these periods⁷.

The papal bull prescribed that those who hoped to obtain the plenary indulgence in Mechelen should confess, visit the seven parish churches of the town, and contribute the same amount of money as pilgrims to Rome. Many of the faithful from all over the Burgundian territories headed for the town to perform these duties. According to a chronicle that described the town in 1451, more

⁵ Paulus, N., *Geschichte des Ablasses am Ausgang des Mittelalters*, vol. 3 (Paderborn, 1923), pp. 155-165 ; Remy, F., *Les grandes indulgences pontificales aux Pays-Bas à la fin du Moyen Age, 1300-1531. Essai sur leur histoire et leur importance financière* (Louvain, 1928), pp. 29-39.

⁶ Remy, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-66; Herwaarden, J. Van, "Medieval Indulgences and Devotional Life in the Netherlands", in : J. Van Herwaarden, *Between Saint James and Erasmus. Studies in Late-Medieval Religious Life: Devotion and Pilgrimage in the Netherlands* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 86-122, particularly pp. 101-110; Caspers, 'Indulgences in the Low Countries, c. 1300-1520', in *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits. Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. R. N. Swanson (Leiden, 2006), pp. 65-99; Kuys, J., "Secular Authorities and Parish Church Building in Late Medieval Towns in the Netherlands", in: M. De Smet, J. Kuys, and P. Trio, *Processions and Church Fabrics in the Low Countries during the Late Middle Ages. An Inquiry into Secular Influence on Ecclesiastical and Religious Matters on a Local Urban Level* (Leuven, 2006), pp. 111-135, particularly pp.124-126; Houseley, N., "Indulgences for Crusading, 1417-1517", in: *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits*, pp. 277-307.

than one hundred thousand people visited Mechelen per day, and the town magistrate had to divide the gates into two sections to control those coming into and going out of the town⁸.

The town authorities tenaciously negotiated with the papacy to realize this event, for money was needed to renovate Mechelen's churches. Half of the contributions of 1451 and one-third of them from 1455 onward could be used for this purpose, with the remainder sent to the papacy⁹. A campaign to obtain the Jubilee event started in 1443, although documentary evidence for it stops and does not resume until the late 1440s. Almost a hundred years had passed since a devastating fire consumed one-third of the town and damaged many churches. St. Romboud, collegiate church, the most important in the town, was seriously harmed. In 1367, no fewer than 1999 citizens donated money for a new reliquary of St. Romboud. Renovating the church of the patron saint of Mechelen was critical for the town's identity¹⁰.

The relic of St. Romboud that was revered by the citizens played an important role in the religious rituals which helped to create civic identity. The *Peisprocessie*, a peace procession, began as a penitential and supplicatory ceremony when the town was besieged by the Duke of Brabant in 1302¹¹. This largest procession, in which the relic of St. Romboud was carried, took place on the Wednesday after the Easter. Citizens formed and confirmed their urban identities by gathering under the patron saint and praying for peace or offering thanksgiving for it. The relic also occupied the central place in the *Kermisprocessie*, a ceremony decreed by Pope John XXII in 1332, on the first Sunday in July¹². After 1322, an indulgence of one year was granted to participants in the *Peisprocessie* and, after 1439, one of ten years to the participants of both processions¹³. Moreover, the papal bull of 1 April 1451, the Jubilee year in Mechelen, prescribed that an indulgence of seven years and seven *quadragenas* was given to those who visited St. Romboud church and made donations on the days of these processions¹⁴. Thus, urban religious culture was formed in Mechelen around St. Romboud, his church, and indulgences already before the Jubilee year. This urban religious culture lay behind the procession of the shooting guilds, which carried the relic of St. Romboud on the last day of the Jubilee indulgence in Mechelen in 1451¹⁵. Rebuilding the tower of St. Romboud by contributions for indulgences led directly to the formation of the town's urban

⁸ *Codex documentorum sacratissimarum indulgentiarum Nederlandicarum. Verzameling van stukken betreffende de pauselijke aflaten in de Nederlanden (1300-1600)*, ed. P. Fredericq (Den Haag, 1922), n° 122, p.193.

⁹ *Codex*, n° 91, p.121; n° 141, pp. 221-223.

¹⁰ Uytven, R. Van, *De geschiedenis van Mechelen* (Lannoo, 1991), p.41.

¹¹ Uytven, *op. cit.*, p.70; Autenboer, E. Van, *Volksfeesten en rederijkers te Mechelen (1400-1600)* (Gent, 1962), pp.29-48.

¹² Autenboer, *op.cit.*, pp.49-55.

¹³ Jans, A., "Bouwstenen voor een synthese van het kerkelijke en godsdienstige leven te Mechelen tijdens de Bourgondische hertogen", *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 77(1973), pp. 59-68, particularly p. 68

¹⁴ *Codex*, n° 92, pp.121-122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, n° 90, p. 117; n° 123, p. 195.

identity.

However, six other parish churches also played an important role in the religious event of the Jubilee and benefited from renovation contributions. Furthermore, when taking these churches into consideration, the relationship between the Jubilee and urban identity becomes clearer. As I mentioned, the faithful had to visit seven churches in Mechelen, including St. Romboud, to obtain the plenary indulgence¹⁶. This prescription, seen in Bruges in 1478¹⁷, is obviously premised on the seven basilicas of Rome. Seven parish churches allowed Mechelen to be compared to Rome, especially with papal emblems hanging throughout the town¹⁸. In medieval Europe, people often tried to superimpose a representation of a holy city upon their own by constructing churches that imitated those of Rome or Jerusalem or by marking sacred signs throughout the city¹⁹. In Mechelen, the prescription for pilgrims itself may have functioned as a device to animate the holiness of the town.

Incidentally, this Jubilee indulgence was intended not only for the citizens of Mechelen but also for all the subjects of the Burgundian ruler²⁰. Therefore, many envoys and preachers were sent to various cities and bishoprics in the Low Countries and the southern parts of the Burgundian territories²¹. This is very suggestive when considering urban identity, for urban identity became salient and distinct in the contacts and cultural exchange with other towns in the urban networks formed by feasts. In the fifteenth-and sixteenth century, the *Peisprocessie* was also accompanied by many *tableaux vivants*, and chambers of rhetoricians of the Brabantine cities, such as Antwerp, Louvain, Breda, and Lier, regularly participated in the drama contest held on that occasion²². A.-L. Van Bruaene argues that Mechelen heightened its fame as a political centre and the seat of rulers through the procession that attracted the representatives of other cities from the region²³. This remark seems to refer to period after the 1470s when Mechelen was the capital of the Burgundian Low Countries, but it is also suggestive when considering not just the processions but also the Jubilee before this period. It is probable that the citizens of Mechelen were proud of their town as a religious centre or sacred place to which many persons journeyed. For this reason, the town magistrates reacted sensitively to a citizen of Louvain, John of Mechelen, who abused the pope, the

¹⁶ *Codex*, n° 76, pp. 80-82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, n° 90, pp.109, 116.

¹⁹ Hirschmann, F. G., *Stadtplanung, Bauprojekte und Großbaustellen im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert*, (Stuttgart, 1998); Lilley, K. D., *City and Cosmos: The Medieval World in Urban Form* (London, 2008).

²⁰ *Codex*, n° 91, pp. 119-121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, n° 90, pp. 105-108.

²² Autenboer, *op.cit.*, pp.29-48, particularly, pp.47-48.

²³ Bruaene, A.-L. Van, *Om beters wille. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp.209-210.

duke, and the Jubilee itself; they pilloried and banished him for a year on 26 June 1451²⁴. Furthermore, other cities, such as Antwerp and Ghent, also were jealous of Mechelen's success²⁵. It is easy to speculate that such jealousy stimulated and intensified the pride of Mechelen's citizens.

2. The Jubilee and the Duke of Burgundy

When analysing the religious event held in Mechelen, we must consider the duke in addition to the pope, since this lay lord's signature on the petition to the papacy and support were indispensable to a late fifteenth century town that hoped to gain the privilege of the Jubilee. They were needed to make the negotiation with the pope easier and to prevent other towns from obtaining the same right. However, the duke was not a mere intermediary between the town and the papacy. For example, three letters of Wouter Storm, Mechelen's envoy, of 1449–50 reveal that he was engaged in repeated negotiations with the duke and his courtiers and that the lay power held the initiative²⁶. Moreover, the town had to send envoys to the bishop of Cambrai—John of Burgundy, half-sibling of the duke, Philip the Good—whose support was also necessary because Mechelen belonged to his see²⁷.

The duke's involvement with the event continued after he signed the petition to the papacy. A secretary of the duke was sent to advertise the event²⁸. When the copy of the papal bull was published in local areas, the ducal seal was needed, in addition to the signatures of two public notaries²⁹. Furthermore, in response to the town's request, Philip the Good ordered his bailiffs to maintain the security of roads for pilgrims to Mechelen³⁰. Even in September, the town asked for ducal support in persuading the papal legate, Nicholas Cuzanus, who was in Germany, to visit Mechelen to celebrate the Jubilee Indulgence in the closing days of the event³¹.

The communication of town and the duke was also more direct. Philip and his courtiers visited Mechelen on 27 March 1451 and witnessed the publication of the papal bull³². Perhaps in August, he revisited the town³³. The Duchess Isabel and the future duke, Charles, the Count of Charolais, also came to Mechelen, with or without Philip. In particular, Charles visited the 'little Rome' in the Burgundian territories not only in 1451 but also in 1457–58, 1458–59, 1460–61, and 1461–62³⁴. Subsequently, the duke, his family, and the courtiers were also welcomed with presents,

²⁴ *Codex*, n° 95, pp. 124.

²⁵ Remy, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁶ *Codex*, n° 71, pp. 76-77; n° 74, pp. 78-79; n° 75, pp. 79-80.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n° 90, pp. 107, 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, n° 90, p. 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, n° 91, p. 121.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, n° 94, p. 123-124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, n° 90, p. 118.

³² *Ibid.*, n° 90, p. 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, n° 123, p. 194.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, n° 90, p. 113; n° 110, pp. 165, 169, 174, 175.

particularly wine. A recent study by J. Piens, focusing on these gifts from 1467 to the early sixteenth century, indicates that wine was used to construct and strengthen the town's political relationship with those outside its walls, with particular attention paid to the ducal court; in comparison, Ghent employed gifts to form social networks within the town, and Leiden and Haarlem utilized them in tax negotiations with princely officials³⁵. In this regard, it appears that the Jubilee event in Mechelen functioned both as the means to create a relationship between the ducal court and the town through gifts or as the symbolic representation of an already existing association, although more research on this assertion is needed.

3. The Duke of Burgundy and Civic Religion

Thus, the Duke of Burgundy and the town, in close contact with each other, made the Jubilee event successful. Actually, such a relationship can be illustrated by another religious incident, the reform of the Franciscan order and the division in the town induced by it³⁶.

On 1 February 1447, Pope Eugene IV issued a papal bull that ordered the Franciscans in Mechelen to reform their own life or to leave their monastery within six days. Their property was to be seized by the town authorities and canons of St. Romboud, if they chose to leave³⁷. The pope subsequently sent a letter to the Duke Philip requesting that he use the secular power to carry out the reform. Philip as a 'Catholic prince' accepted it, and ordered his official to support the reform³⁸. The Franciscans complained to the town magistrates, criticizing ducal interference in Church matters as 'tyrannical' and put up accusatory posters on doors of churches. Speaking of princely ideals, such as defence of public order and of Christian belief, Philip reacted and pressed the reform³⁹.

The Franciscans rejected the order and finally left the monastery. However, a truly serious conflict then began, for the Conventuals were harboured by citizens and began to agitate by preaching and satirical songs. Quite a few urban people did not sympathize with the newcomers at the monastery, the Observants, and supported the Conventuals. The town authority sought to root out

³⁵ Piens, J., *Mechelse giften. De relatie tussen de stad en de vorstelijke entourage in de Bourgondische en Habsburgse periode (1467-1503)*, Master's thesis: Catholic University of Leuven, 2009-2010. Cf. Boone, M., "Dons et pots-de-vin, aspects de la sociabilité urbaine au bas Moyen Age. Le cas gantois pendant la période bourguignonne", *Revue du Nord*, LXX (1988), pp. 471-487; Damen, M., "Giving by Pouring: The Function of Gifts of Wine in the City of Leiden (14th-16th Century)", in: *Symbolic Communication in Late Medieval Towns*, ed. J. Van Leeuwen (Leuven, 2006), pp. 83-100.

³⁶ In general, for the development of the incident, see Schaap, M., "Een gevecht met twee zwaarden? Machtstvertoon en geweldpleging bij de hervorming van franciscaanse kloosters rond het midden van", *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 118(2005), pp. 448-463.

³⁷ Ceyskens, L., "Les ducs de Bourgogne et l'introduction de l'Observance à Malines (1447-1469)", *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 30(1937), pp. 391-419, particularly p. 394 ; Withof, J., "De Hervorming der Minderbroeders te Mechelen", *Bulletin du Cercle Archéologique, Littéraire et Artistique de Malines*, 35(1930), pp. 37-55, particularly p. 46.

³⁸ Ceyskens, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-401.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 410-412.

the satirical songs; on 3 November 1450, they thus banished one Katheline Goblijns from the town for two years⁴⁰. On 1 August 1447, the duke ordered his officials to protect the Observants, and the gates and doors of the monastery were decorated with the ducal emblems⁴¹. However, the situation got worse in 1449. In the summer of this year, Nicolaas Roelants, who had been the sole member of the Conventuals to join the Observants, re-joined the old company, and turned out of the monastery and beat two of the Observants⁴². On the night from 15 to 16 December, the Conventuals, with the support of Jean de Warda, the rector of the town's schools, and four citizens, attacked the monastery and a bloody fight took place there⁴³. It is the town magistrate that appointed Jean de Warda as the rector⁴⁴. The town government gathered to discuss the matter on the same night. Envoys were sent not only to Philip the Good, asking for his help, but also to the bishop of Cambrai, who was in Brussels, imploring that the town not be placed under interdict. It seems that the town did not succeed in persuading the bishop. On 14 January, the envoy, Wouter Storm, went to Brussels to gain the bishop's concession in exchange for money. On 8 February, the bishop pardoned the attackers⁴⁵.

Until at least 1455, the Conventuals continued to agitate the townsmen and annoy the Observants⁴⁶. This opposition created a serious antagonism among the citizens, so an urban flashpoint existed even in 1464⁴⁷. In this circumstance, the town must have expected the Jubilee to reintegrate urban society. In this respect, M. Schaap's remark is important. According to her, citizen anxiety about personal salvation was the main reason why some did not accept the Observants and supported the Conventuals; those who donated their property to the Conventuals for prayer of supplication worried about their salvation after death, since it is probable that the Observants did not maintain their access to the benefits of such contributions⁴⁸. In her argument, Schaap does not speak of the papal indulgence. However, if she is right, one may suppose that the town authority sought to appease the anxiety of the citizens and to restore the unity of the town through the Jubilee.

Incidentally, ducal behaviour during the reform process discloses a desire to reveal the dignity of 'the Catholic prince' as something greater than that of mere agent of the pope, in contrast to his apology in accepting the papal request. In 1452, he thus ordered the town government to hinder the execution of the new pope's bull, which was said to have been proclaimed to favour the

⁴⁰ Withof, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

⁴¹ Ceyskens, *op. cit.*, pp. 401-403.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 412-413. Ceyskens considers that event occurred in 1452, but here I follow Schaap and Withof's interpretation that put the event in 1449. Cf. Schaap, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

⁴³ Withof, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

⁴⁴ Laenen, J., *Histoire de l'église métropolitaine de Saint-Rombaut à Malines*, vol.1 (Malines, 1919), pp. 190-191.

⁴⁵ Withof, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

⁴⁶ Ceyskens, *op. cit.*, pp. 414.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 415-417.

⁴⁸ Schaap, *op. cit.*, pp. 455.

Conventuals⁴⁹. The proximity of the duke and the town narrowed in this period; on 24 December 1439, Philip received a right to interfere in the election of the mayor and magistrates; in 1450, he gained the right of recalling of all criminals banished by the town⁵⁰. Such interference in urban politics made it possible for him to intervene in religious problems. The conflict over the reform manifests this fact in a negative way and the Jubilee event in a positive way.

However, their relationship was not always stable. In 1454, the bishop of Cambrai placed Mechelen under interdict because the town arrested and executed a cleric who attempted a robbery and escaped into a church. The interdict lasted for fourteen months, until it was terminated by papal intervention in 1458⁵¹. Therefore, the town attracted pilgrims after 1455, under the threat that religious activities, including the Jubilee, would be prohibited. Representations of the holy city stood back to back with that of the condemned one, and the two might have easily changed place, depending on the political intentions of the ducal family and the town's relationship with it.

Conclusion

Thus, the Jubilee event should not be regarded, as often argued, merely as an economic means to renovate churches in the town. It occurred at a cross point, where the town authority's desire to consolidate the urban identity of its citizens and to restore their unity coincided with the ducal intention to interfere in urban politics and society in the religious field. The social and religious divisions caused by the reform conflict directly led to disobedience to the town authority and to that of the duke. In this situation, when the faithful ruminated over their own sins in an event held on the town's initiative, the local authority functioned as an agency to guarantee the salvation of the souls. By obtaining the Jubilee, the town assured not only the identity of its citizens but also their spiritual peace. Furthermore, the duke could operate as a higher agency by controlling the privilege of the Jubilee. In this way, the Duke of Burgundy as the 'Catholic prince' influenced the urban identity.

However, this long conflict shows that these attempts were not always successful. In this respect, the 'politics of pardon', which utilized the Jubilee, lacked the dramatic political effect of the duke and town's reconciliation, which occurred in the ritual of begging pardon, the *amende honorable*, after urban revolts. Nevertheless, it is possible to grasp the unique relationship between politics and religion in the late Middle Ages through the ducal attempt to interfere with the urban identity of Mechelen through religious pardon. Much more attention should be devoted to 'pardon' in other regions or periods so as to enrich our comparative understanding of this phenomenon.

⁴⁹ Ceyssens, *op. cit.*, pp. 413-414.

⁵⁰ Uytven, *op.cit.*, p. 62.

⁵¹ Installe, H., "Weerslag van een moordzaak op de hernieuwing van de Mechelse aflat tussen 1454-1458", *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 83(1979), pp. 36-84.

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