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Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300-1520

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Job Weststrate

When Pero Tafur visited Bruges in 1438 he had a keen eye for the material wealth of the town and the splendor in which its citizens seemed to indulge. In his famous travel diary he noted that ‘without doubt, the goddess of luxury has great power here, but it is not a place for poor men, who would be badly received here. But anyone who has money, and wishes to spend it, will find in this town alone everything which the whole world produces’.⁽¹⁾ While Tafur was absolutely correct in observing that Bruges offered all the known world’s luxuries for those who could afford it, he failed to recognize that those with money also chose quite different ways to spend it. The elite of late medieval Bruges invested considerable amounts in activities and objects that promised rewards in the afterlife rather than on earth: liturgy, commemorative services, charity and large-scale public religious ceremonies, such as processions.

However, the religious practices of the citizens of Bruges went beyond the mere saving of souls of individual benefactors. Spending on religious festivities by lay citizens, whether they did so as individuals, as members of guilds or as part of the town government, shaped the religious and ceremonial landscape of the town. This was done in a constant interplay with local religious institutions that were depositories for the relics that played a crucial role many of the town’s public religious festivities. Moreover, the clergy was responsible for the liturgical forms that were used on such occasions. Other parties in the main ceremonial exchanges in Bruges were the town’s overlords, the counts of Flanders, who participated in public festivities in Bruges as well. Sometimes their participation took the shape of active communication between town and prince, especially during entry ceremonies (*joyeuses entrées*), yet on other occasions the princes seem to have been passive spectators, most notably during the Holy Blood Procession.

The interplay between the motives of Bruges’ wealthy citizens, its clergy and its Burgundian and Habsburg

princely overlords in matters of public religious ceremony is the main underlying theme of Andrew Brown's study *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges, c. 1300–1520*. In the introduction Brown first briefly sketches the political and socio-economic development characteristics of Bruges from the early 13th century onwards, and then moves on to an theoretical elaboration of his central analytical categories of 'civic religion' and 'civic ceremony'. The first two chapters subsequently discuss the most important religious public ceremonies in Bruges: the famous Holy Blood Procession in chapter one, and general processions in chapter two. Chapter three explores developments in the celebration of feast days and the liturgical commemoration for the souls. The role of guilds in public religious life forms the topic of chapter four, and in the subsequent chapter the connections between guilds and civic government are treated. Civic activities in the field of charity for the poor are considered in chapter six, while the ceremonies that connected Bruges and their comital overlords are the subject of the last chapter.

An important topic throughout this book is how all these public activities, and most of all the rituals involved in them, were made to work, that is, what the social function of the entire body of rituals was and how it related to the power of civic and clerical authorities. Brown discusses the two most important approaches in the historical and anthropological debates on ritual and social power. The first of these approaches draws on the work of Clifford Geertz and sees rituals as an expression of social identities; rituals seem to articulate or 'say' something about the community in which they are performed. The second approach treats rituals in a functional manner: they serve to create, alter or sustain the social order of a community. In this view, rituals 'do' something to society rather than 'say' something about it. Prof. Brown does not take sides in this debate, but carefully and critically examines the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, ending up with a rather nuanced view of what rituals in the context of late medieval Bruges might have 'said' or 'done': 'Whether treated as a process of symbolic communication or behavioural performance, the ritualized event may reflect or affect social conditions but in an indirect way. The outcome of ceremony might be uncertain: it could not automatically legitimate worldly hierarchy' (p. 27). At the end of this theoretical section Brown implicitly declares himself an empirically-orientated historian (as so many historians are) rather than a theorist: '[...] the application of particular theories of ritual to historical events cannot anyway be done so rigidly. What a ceremony said or did differed depending on its particular social and political context' (p. 28).

The rest of the book shows Brown from his empirical side and from his empirical side only. Based on an impressive knowledge of the archives of the civic and religious institutions of Bruges, he sets out to describe the development of virtually every single ritual phenomenon he encountered in late medieval Bruges. Whenever possible he underpins his argumentation with quantitative data. For instance, when discussing general processions in Bruges, Brown is able to point out, through the use of a simple figure (fig. 2.1., p. 76) that the number of general processions rose steadily throughout the 15th century. The peak came in the 1470s and 1480s, years of war, pest and famine which needed divine intervention, and thus processions, to stave off these evils. Another example is the rise in the number of feast days from the late 15th century onwards. Appendices three and four provide a solid quantitative fundament for the further exploration of that particular topic. Combined with Brown's somewhat terse style, this approach does not always make for a compelling read, but that is amply compensated for by the overview it provides.

It is impossible to treat all of Brown's findings in detail in this review – the book is simply too full of them. However, a few general points stand out. In the first place, the author convincingly shows throughout how the grip of the magistrate of Bruges on public religious ceremonial and ritual grew tighter throughout the period of investigation. In the 13th century it was largely the terrain of the town's most illustrious religious institutions, most notably the collegiate churches of St. Donatian and Our Lady's and the parish church of St. Saviour. However, from the late 13th century onwards, and all throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, Bruges' secular elites became ever more involved with these public religious events, in parallel to their growing commercial successes and correspondingly rising political power in Bruges itself and within the county of Flanders. They did so as part of the town council: the 14th century saw a steady rise in public expenditure on large scale ritual ceremonies, most of all on Holy Blood and other processions. They did so as members of the most important guilds and fraternities: all craft guilds were involved in the religious life

of their members, and in this capacity financed their own altars, paid for masses, co-funded processions, benefited charitable institutions and so on. More prestigious were the purely devotional guilds. Some of these, such as the Holy Blood, Holy Trinity and Dry Tree guilds, were socially exclusive fraternities encompassing mainly the very same men that made up the town's council. The devotional guilds by nature spent substantially on divine service, pilgrimages and processions. And finally, Bruges' magistrates became involved with public religious ceremonial as individual citizens, spending lavishly on obits, religious works of art and charity. But despite growing civic involvement in religious matters, the role of the town's religious institutions was not entirely marginalised. As mentioned, they were responsible for the liturgy on festive occasions and kept the relics that were central to the larger public spectacles – without the consent of the clergy of the chapel of St. Basil's, the Holy Blood procession could not be undertaken.

The reasons laymen became involved with public religious events were manifold. On the individual level honour, prestige and pure piety all played their part, but Brown argues quite rightly that on a more abstract level this civic intervention also had to do with the need of the town magistrate to assert its authority. The prime example of this was the Holy Blood procession (and to a lesser extent other processions). On Holy Blood day the hierarchical order in which the various participating social groups were to proceed was carefully orchestrated. Closest to the relic were the town councilors and the members of the fraternity of the Holy Blood (consisting of magistrates). Members of the clergy and of the towns' guilds followed in a sequence that suggests a decreasing social position – this way the social order was not only established but also divinely confirmed. The procession then took a route along the most important religious and secular sites of town. It encircled all the town walls of Bruges, thus symbolically incorporating the whole urban community. The procession and its associated festivities enabled the town magistrate to impose civic order and to underline the divine character of their own rule. But not all participants shared this agenda. Brown points out that the relic of the Holy Blood, allegedly brought from Jerusalem by the Flemish count Thiery d'Alsace after the Second Crusade, might have meant different things to different people. Nevertheless, he does stress the possibility that the Holy Blood served as an agent of unification: 'A symbol with many potential meanings was perhaps inherently better equipped to bring together a complex and divided community than one whose meaning was too narrow and easily fixed' (p. 64). While this may very well be true, this argument would have been much more persuasive if the Bruges' case had been set off against the models and theories on symbolic communication that are treated in chapter one.

The Holy Blood procession seems to have been the summit of the deliberate involvement of the magistrates in religious ceremony. While lay influence was large in the phenomena that are described in the rest of the book, the effect on the Bruges urban community were more ambiguous. Yet the evidence provided by Brown convincingly shows the construction, growth and intensification of a 'civic religion' during the late middle ages. This 'civic religion' manifested itself in several ways. On the one hand, the town itself and town government were sacralised through the participation in and appropriation of certain religious rituals, and the deliberate instrumentalisation of them. As a consequence public worship intensified: throughout the whole period under investigation a marked increase in a large variety of divine services can be discerned. But Brown is quick to remark that this by no means reflected a secularization of civic society, or a large scale encroachment on clerical fields of activity by the lay magistrate. This illustrates the careful reasoning of the author, who shuns all too simple or black-and-white interpretations of the developments he encounters. This is one of the strong points of the book, as far as I am concerned.

This book thoroughly explores all aspects of Bruges' 'civic religion'. This should lead to further debate, especially on the interpretation of the ceremonies surrounding the visits of the counts of Flanders. Such a debate will not revolve around the facts, as Brown has comprehensively and impressively unearthed data from the archives of Bruges. As such this book is an invaluable tool for the study of (religious) rituals and events within the late medieval town. Yet the strong focus on the situation in Bruges does carry the risk of distortion. In many senses the town was far from average. It was, for instance, more commercialized than any other town in Northwestern Europe, which meant that the citizenry had a lot of capital at their disposal for investment in civic ceremony and religious ritual. One wonders how the development of Bruges' civic religion and public ceremony differed from that of Ghent, which had an entirely different relationship to the

counts of Flanders, or of Tournai, which housed a bishop. Moreover, the question arises as to whether the manifestation of civic religion in Bruges had a regional character, or if it might be compared to other large commercial towns, such as Cologne or those of North Italy. Admittedly Brown occasionally does refer to the latter, and he does give briefly place Bruges in a wider urban context in his concluding chapter, but the author would have been able to make a stronger case from the results of this study if he had pursued a more rigorous comparative approach using other towns both inside and outside Flanders.

Notes

1. Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures, 1435-1439*, translated by Malcolm Letts (Oxford, 2004), p. 200.

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