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“Read It with Fresh Wonder”: The Murder of Charles the Good by Galbert of Bruges

If one has the chance to go to the British Library in London and see the illuminated French chronicles, one should not miss the version of the Chroniques de France ou de Saint Denis known as Royal 16 G. VI. Not only does it impressively depict French kings, battles, crusades and meetings of ambassadors; the chronicle contains a very rare representation of one of Europe’s most cruel conspiracies and murders of the twelfth century. It depicts the assassination of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders, in the church of St. Donatian in Bruges (folio 266).

While Charles prayed in front of the altar, he was murdered by several noblemen. Most of them came from the Erembald clan, the head of which was Bertulf (1091-1127), provost of Bruges and chancellor of Flanders. He and some of his followers were sentenced to death or killed in the months following the murder. The chronicle depicts some of the murderers hanging from the scaffolds—the just penalty for their crime. But it does not address questions such as who the conspirators were, why and how they were persecuted or why they planned a conspiracy against Charles in the first place—a man famous for his “goodness” and judged by the poor to be an upright prince. It is probably due to the fact that the French king intervened in the conflict after the murder that a picture was painted in a French chronicle. Galbert claims to give an accurate depiction of Charles’s murder as well as ensuing events—riots and upheavals and the executions of the conspirators and of Charles’ enemies. He even dismisses possible criticisms: “If anyone tries to criticize and disparage it, I do not care very much” (p. 80). Historians today are more cautious about textual claims to infallibility. Nevertheless, Galbert’s text has been judged as accurate and reliable. Originally planning some kind of diary, Galbert made his notes on wax tablets and later copied them down on parchment. Unfortunately an autograph, even on parchment, does not survive. The text has been transmitted us in early modern copies, however, from Arras, Paris and Bruges, all varying in content. Historians of differing focus edited these texts several times in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rudolf Köpke edited one in 1856; Henri Pirenne, using the Paris and Arras manuscripts, published another in 1891.[1] Some French translations have their origins in the nineteenth century, such as those of Octave Delepierre or François Pierre Guillaume Guizot.[2] It is surprising to note that this text—which plays an important role in history of Flanders and Europe more generally, but also sheds light on the history of po-
itical conflicts and military, legal and social history—was not translated into English or a Germanic language until the middle of the twentieth century.

In 1960 J.B. Ross of Vassar College translated the text into English. His translation was well received and republished (with slight changes) in 1967. Both editions were published in the “Records of Western Civilization” by Columbia University Press.[3] Ross, known among students for his Portable Medieval Reader (1949) and The Portable Renaissance Reader (1953), also composed a remarkable introduction to Flemish society in the twelfth century, delineating the reasons behind Charles’s murder as well as depicting the life of Galbert. Ross’s annotations are more than mere footnotes, designed for specialists—instead, they give deep insights into the account’s context. Not only does Ross provide the reader with prosopographical information about the persons involved, he also notes important sources and further literature. The edition is rounded out with a bibliography, an index, different maps and a genealogy of the Dukes of Flanders and Charles’ enemies—the Erembald clan. Karl Joseph Leyser and Nicolas-Norbert Huyghebaert as well pointed out several mistakes and misunderstandings in the first edition;[4] Ross corrected only some of these in the 1967 version. This later version is now being republished by Columbia University Press in both cloth and paper. Of course, one may ask whether it makes sense to reissue a good (though not perfect) edition dating back to the middle of the last century. It might have been more appropriate to issue an electronic version of the text. However, Ross’s introduction is still great use, despite the fact that it is slightly out of date, especially in the face of changing research agendas and approaches. Some parts of the 1967 edition now seem old fashioned; moreover, some errors remain and the edition still lacks a genealogy of Charles’ other enemies, like the clan of Thankmar.

It seems the publishers took Galbert’s assertion that critique did not interest too much to heart. Criticism supposedly improves a text. It is a shame that Columbia University Press did not consider the suggested improvements on earlier versions or consult any publications or research conducted since the late 1960s in publishing this edition of the text. The bibliography, at a minimum, could have been updated with little effort. Still, it is good that this important text is being reissued, providing students and scholars with significant details of an important aspect of European history in the twelfth century. And, as Galbert himself put it, “it should still be read “with fresh wonder” (p. 80).

Notes


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