Ancestral Monuments, Iconoclasm, and Memorial Culture in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries

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Abstract

This contribution assesses the impact of the Protestant Reformation and iconoclasm on the memorial culture of tombs, epitaphs, and rituals in the Low Countries (c. 1520-1585), and analyses the consequences these events had on ancestral remembrance. Demonstrating how Protestant critiques and iconoclastic attacks fundamentally endangered the archival function of churches, it argues that this imminent threat to memory provoked a heightened awareness of the ancestral past in the later sixteenth century. Most significantly, it shows that this precarious situation led to the genesis of a new type of commemorative manuscript, the *épitaphier*, in which heraldic, genealogical, and other information on various types of memorial monuments in churches was recorded. In tracing the production and dissemination of these *épitaphiers*, the article casts new light on the pan-European heraldic and 'genealogical craze' in this period: while English scholars have emphasized social dynamics as explanation, this essay puts forward the religious debates as a hitherto neglected factor, and demonstrates how the two interlocked.

Keywords: funeral monuments, memory, iconoclasm, Protestant Reformation, archives, genealogy, épitaphier

DOI 10.51750/emlc10007 - URL: http://www.emlc-journal.org
Publisher: Stichting EMLC

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Sometime over the course of the year 1560, an anonymous observer visited the church of Saint Rumbold in Mechelen, and sat down in the ambulatory to draw the ancient tomb of Franco van Halen *alias* de Mirabello (d. 1375) and his wife Maria van Gistel (d. 1405). The visual information in the resulting drawing was complemented with some notes beneath, describing the monument's heraldry (fig. 1). Twenty-two years later, on 12 March 1582, the draughtsman returned, but found the tomb in a severely disfigured state:

> Now I have found this beautiful tomb all damaged by the iconoclasts, who thought that the two [*gisants*] were saints and that the *pleurants* were holy figures. They have smashed it all up to pieces, and broke off Lord Franco van Halen's face and hands.[1]

This vandalism, which had followed the Calvinist seizure of Mechelen in April 1580, demonstrates how zealous iconoclasts treated the effigies of the deceased in the same way as the controversial images of saints, thus blurring the distinction between the common and the 'very special dead'.[2] The observer, for his part, was evidently shocked, but not daunted. Instead, the attacking of the tomb urged him to pursue his earlier investigations even further and to engage in detailed genealogical research. 'Now I have inquired who this Lord Franco van Halen was, who has such a triumphant tomb', he added to his sheet of paper. What follows is an account of the man's noble descent from the counts of Flanders, his glorious career, which culminated in his position as governor of Mechelen, and his posterity and their marriage into the Brabantine nobility.[3]

While the iconoclasts aimed to deactivate the figures' ritual potency, the destruction clearly incited the draughtsman to record the memory materialized in the tomb. In word and image, the anonymous sheet of paper thus reflects a memorial landscape in full

1 Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium (hereafter KBR), MS II 6447, fol. 380r-v: 'Dan dese schoone sepulture weder gevonden soo die nu a° 1582 den xii maert heel gescheynt door de beltstormers, die meynden dat twee heijligen waeren ende Raumannekens santens, hebben die selve al onstucken geslaghen ende heer Franck van Halen het aensich ende handen afgeslaghen.' On this now lost tomb, see Le Maire, 'Le mausolée'.

2 The phrase is borrowed from Brown, *The cult of the saints*, 69-85. On the iconoclasm in Mechelen, see Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind*, 145-146, 162, 227-229.

3 KBR, MS II 6447, fol. 380: 'Nu hebbe ick ondersocht wie was desen heer Franck van Halen, die soo treonfante sepulture heft.'

Fig. 1 Anonymous, Tomb of Franco van Halen alias de Mirabello and Maria van Gistel*, 1560 and 1582, pen and ink on paper, Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium.*

transition, and calls attention to the precarious situation of the dead and their memory in Reformation Europe. Considered alongside other Netherlandish examples from the period 1520-1585, this article assesses the impact of the Protestant Reformation and iconoclasm on the memorial culture of tombs, epitaphs, and rituals, so abundantly present in every church, and maps the consequences of these upheavals on ancestral remembrance. I will demonstrate how Protestant critiques and the iconoclastic attacks fundamentally endangered the established archival function of churches, and argue that this imminent threat to memory provoked a heightened awareness of the ancestral past in the later sixteenth century.

Most importantly, it will be demonstrated that sheets such as that of the anonymous draughtsman in Mechelen were, in fact, typical and highly significant products of the Reformation: the precarious situation gave rise to the genesis of a new type of commemorative manuscript, the *épitaphier*, in which heraldic, genealogical, and other information on various types of memorial monuments in churches was recorded. Tracing their production and dissemination, I will cast new light on the pan-European heraldic and 'genealogical craze' in this period.[4] Putting forward the religious and confessional debates as a hitherto neglected factor, I will suggest that they actually interlocked with the social dynamics that English scholars have emphasized as the explanation for this genealogical 'gaze and craze'.

Building on important insights from various recent studies, this article particularly seeks to interrelate, and contribute to, two distinct historiographical themes. First, it addresses the fundamental question of the societal place of the dead and their relationship to the living – an issue raised by the Reformation, but only recently taken up by scholars. Throughout the medieval period, the dead retained their social and legal status, and thus remained present in society. Otto Gerhard Oexle famously demonstrated how this *Gegenwart der Toten* was realized through both liturgical services that commemorated the deceased, and their representations on tombs, paintings, and stained-glass windows. Both groups constantly interacted: while the deeds of the living were crucial for the salvation of the souls of the dead roaming in purgatory, the latter did not hesitate to intervene on earth as ghosts.[5] Yet the Protestant Reformation fundamentally questioned this association. Scholars have argued that the alternative theologies it proposed drastically 'fractured the community of the living and the dead'.[6] The existence of purgatory was rejected and intercession for the souls of the dead claimed to be impossible, entailing a spiritual disruption. Death became an irreversible threshold, and the dead evolved into a helpless group existing outside of the society of the living.[7] As a result, this unlinking had far-reaching implications on memorial practices in general, and on the commemoration of dead ancestors in particular. No longer perceived to be taking part in present society, the relationship of the dead to their living progeny had to be

4 This term was coined by Plumb, *The death of the past,* 27-29.

5 Oexle, 'Die Gegenwart der Toten'; Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, 67-68.

6 Gordon and Marshall, 'Placing the dead', 9-10. See also Oexle, 'Die Gegenwart der Toten', 69-70; Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 8 and passim; Oexle, 'Das Ende der Memoria', 318-319.

7 Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*; Tingle and Willis (eds.), *Dying, death, burial and commemoration*.

redefined, leading to what has been called 'a revolution in memory during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'.[8]

While other, long-term narratives have nuanced such assessments by emphasizing persisting continuities in memorial cultures and the treatment of the dead, scholars have predominantly looked at territories that officially converted to Protestantism.[9] Yet Protestant ideas found an equally receptive audience in regions that – with hindsight – remained Catholic, but where the eventual outcome of the mounting religious tensions remained unclear throughout the sixteenth century. The Southern Low Countries are a case in point, and are therefore the focus of this paper.[10] Adopting a short-term perspective will reveal the uncertainties brought about by the circulation of all sorts of Protestant thought – from Lutheran to Calvinist – and the intensive reflection that accompanied it. While the tensions between Catholic and Protestant funerary rituals and space have received detailed attention recently, the related issues of tombs and memorial culture are still unexplored.[11] However, as will become clear, the thorny issue of the place of the dead and the function of memory was fiercely debated: the case of Franco van Halen is just one of many examples demonstrating the urgency of the question in the Low Countries, to which – as will be shown – the opposing acts of mutilating and recording both were recurring responses. Furthermore, this focus on ancestral monuments allows us to descry individual lay reactions to the iconoclastic destructions, alongside the better-studied institutional or communal responses.[12]

Second, this article also contributes to the recent field of the history of archives and memory. In a pioneering contribution, Alexandra Walsham has pointed to the 'spread of archival consciousness' as one of the Reformation's important side-effects, and David van der Linden has demonstrated this direct link between an 'upsurge in archive fever and confessional conflict' in a case study of seventeenth-century France.[13] While it has now been convincingly established that the loss of textual documents led to archival innovations, I argue that these conclusions should be extended to similarly endangered *material* sources. Studies of antiquarianism have already identified the religious upheavals and the accompanying destructions as important stimuli for early modern scholarly investigation of the material remnants of the past.[14] Here, a particular focus on memorial monuments and the development of their paper counterparts in *épitaphiers* will allow us to trace the movement of the knowledge of the genealogical, heraldic, and other information contained in tombs

8 Sherlock, 'The reformation of memory', 30. Compare with Koslofsky, 'From presence to remembrance'; Van Bueren et al. (eds.), *Reformations and their impact*.

9 Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, 47-49, 58-61, 68-75, 98-105; Marshall, 'After Purgatory'; Spicer, 'The early modern parish church', 18. Compare with Kroesen, 'De storm doorstaan'; Spaans, 'Een herinnerd religieus landschap'.

10 Soen, 'Which religious history'.

11 Bousard, 'Aan de rand van het graf'; Deschryver, 'You only die once'.

12 Jonckheere, *Antwerp art after iconoclasm*; Spicer, 'After iconoclasm'; Bauwens, 'Under construction?'.

13 Walsham, 'The social history of the archive', 22-23; Van der Linden, 'Archive wars'. On memory, see Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*.

14 Aston, 'English ruins and English history'; Woolf, *The social circulation of the past,* 186-187; Lindley, *Tomb destruction and scholarship*; Walsham, *The Reformation of the landscape,* 211-212, 275-283.

and epitaphs to private archives, and in doing so distinguish the often very personal and familial issues at stake. Thus, to paraphrase Eric Ketelaar, it will be argued that a 'genealogical gaze' transfigured cultural patrimony into family archives.[15]

Churches as Archives

The churches that iconoclasts entered throughout sixteenth-century Europe were veritable palaces of memory production, filled as they were with monuments and inscriptions referring to the lives and deeds of deceased elites. Because material culture was amply deployed to transmit information to posterity, memory was still explicitly tangible and visual in nature.[16] Tombs and epitaphs were the visible and enduring material pivot around which commemorative rituals were continually staged, and they provided biographical and genealogical particulars on the dead and their kin through texts and heraldry. In Mechelen, for instance, the tomb of Franco van Halen and Maria van Gistel not only recorded their dates of death and seigniorial titles in the inscription, but also their lineage by identifying their parents and great-grandparents through heraldic codes. The full suit of armour decorating Van Halen's *gisant* furthermore identified him as a knight, and the garters depicted on his sculpted tunic revealed his membership of the eponymous order. At a glance, observers of the tomb were provided with essential information on the illustrious figures it preserved.

If memorial monuments functioned as material encyclopaedia entries, carved in stone or brass, the church buildings that hosted them have understandably been interpreted in terms of archives or as 'repositories of local memory'.[17] Such categorizations stand on firmer historical ground than might at first seem to be the case. Many examples are known of text tablets, hung on church walls, that publicly disclosed the contents of foundation charters hidden away in the institutions' archival chests, either by summarizing the main points of the text or by repeating it entirely verbatim (figs. 2-4).[18]

Such tablets evidently functioned as a double control mechanism: they reminded the officiating clergy of their duties, but they could also be referred to by heirs of the founders or by the community in cases of negligence. Individual monuments in churches were even used as legal arguments in lawsuits. In 1475, for instance, two noblemen took their dispute over the seigniory of Herseaux to the Council of Flanders, where each tried to justify his claims by submitting drawings of tombstones of their respective ancestors as evidence.[19] A century later, in October 1574, the Council of Brabant was asked to pronounce a judgment in a conflict that revolved around the rightful carrying of coats of arms. Drawings had again been submitted, and this time the prosecutors even led two councillors to the actual

15 Ketelaar, 'The genealogical gaze', 10.

16 Lundin et al., 'Memory before modernity', 107; Dumolyn and Moermans, 'Distinctie en memorie', 334-336; Van Bueren, 'Care for the here and the hereafter', 14, 27.

17 Vandamme, 'Een passie', 46; Sankovitch, 'Intercession, commemoration and display'; Spicer, 'The early modern parish church', 18.

18 Brine, *Pious memories*, 42-46, 162-177, 197-199.

19 Ghent, State Archives, Fonds Raad van Vlaanderen, Processen *par escript*, 23704.

Fig. 2 Anonymous, Cenotaph of Bishop George van Egmond, inscribed with the text of a foundation charter of a monthly Mass for the Holy Sacrament, *c. 1548-1549, various types of stone, 410 × 225 cm, Utrecht, Cathedral. Photo: Matt Kavaler.*

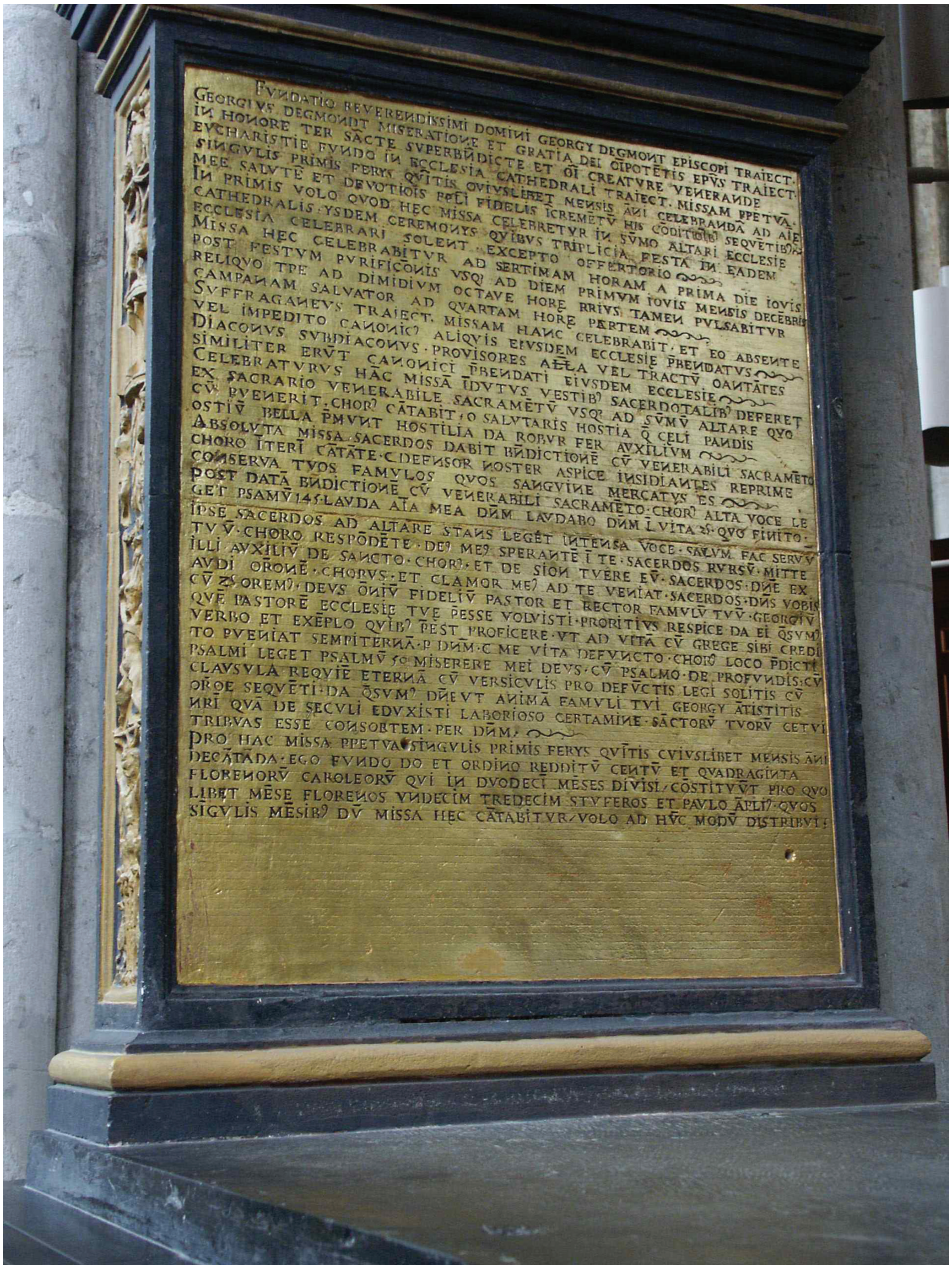

Fig. 3 Detail of Fig. 2. Photo: Stichting Kerkelijk Kunstbezit in Nederland.

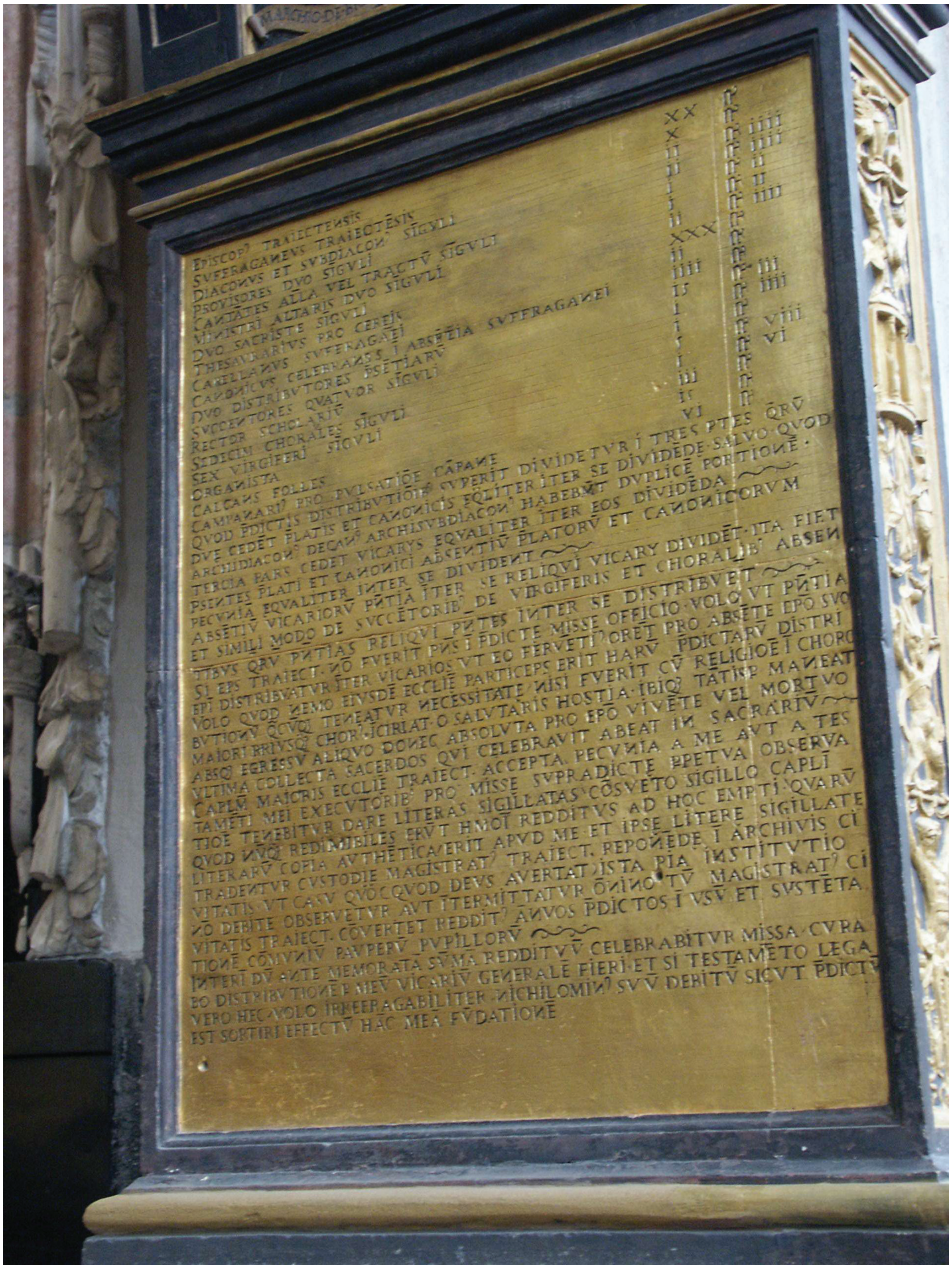

Fig. 4 Detail of Fig. 2. Photo: Stichting Kerkelijk Kunstbezit in Nederland.

tombstones and hatchments in the nearby Brussels church of Saint Gudula to verify the heraldic claims for themselves.[20]

The hosting churches often took care of the objects they archived. After all, the people who chose burial places inside churches mostly paid for the eternal concession of the tomb, which meant that the corpse and the monuments were to remain in place until the end of time. Yet institutions are also known to have occasionally violated such agreements for financial benefit, because the burial spaces could be sold again, just like the brass or stone of the accompanying monuments.[21] This practice gave rise to interesting conflicts. In 1560, for instance, the surviving relatives of Jan de Witte (d. 1424) forced the churchwardens of Our Lady in Bruges to install a new epitaph, following their discovery that the wardens had removed the original. And in 1562, Joos vander Vlamincpoorte sued the churchwardens of Saint Giles in Bruges for having moved the 'costly slab' of his ancestor Jan vander Vlamincpoorte (d. 1350) and selling the brass inlays to the church of Saint Salvator.[22] Neither of the prosecuting parties could have personally known the men commemorated in the monuments in question, which pays eloquent testimony to the continued importance later generations attached to the material memory of their remote ancestors. Significantly, these extended far beyond the maximum of three generations to which the oral memory within families was generally limited.[23] Material culture essentially sustained ancestral interest, and vice versa.

Reformation Critique

The Reformation unsettled this archival function of churches, by questioning the pillars of Catholic memorial culture. Rooted in both spiritual and social concerns, Protestant critique opposed the ample investments for the dead to the acute needs of the living poor. The only group said to benefit from the traditional situation were the clergy, who were increasingly accused of making a business out of the dead. In German polemical poems of the early 1520s they were scornfully referred to as *Totenfresser* ('death-eaters'), while the Calvinist minister Pierre Viret insulted them in a 1552 publication as flayers, living from human skin.[24] These critiques went hand in hand with theological discourse. Protestant theologians refuted purgatory as a papal invention and believed that the fate of the human soul was fully dependent on God's mercy. As a consequence, intercession for the dead was rejected as a spiritual impossibility: the living were entirely incapable of procuring salvation for the dead. Good works or praying for the souls of the dead during expensive Masses were therefore not only entirely obsolete, but also a waste of money that was better given to the poor.[25] At the same time, funerary rituals focused less on the deceased person

20 KBR, MS G 1566, 30.

21 Despodt, *'Dat du best'*, I, 108-109; Goudriaan, 'Ownership of graves'.

22 Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten,* I, 79, 86; II, 43.

23 Kuijpers, 'Between storytelling and patriotic scripture', 185.

24 For the *Totenfresser*, see Ozment, *The Reformation*, 111-116. For Geneva, see Viret, *Disputations chrestiennes*, 20-21. Compare with an Italian example in Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms*, 26.

25 Buck, 'The Reformation, purgatory, and perpetual rents'.

and more on Christ, and thus evolved into edifying events for the community of the living. As Peter Sherlock has aptly observed, 'the *ars moriendi*, or art of dying, was translated into the art of living well'.[26]

In territories where Protestantism was adopted the cyclical anniversary and memorial Masses for the souls of the dead were thus abolished.[27] Yet the same ideas that underpinned these measures soon circulated in the Low Countries too, spread through prohibited books by writers such as Viret, and through clandestine sermons.[28] In 1527, for instance, the renegade priest Claes van der Elst tried to convince an audience in Brussels that 'good works cannot save our souls', and in a popular polemical treatise from 1554, Jan Gerritsz Versteghe (Joannes Anastasius Veluanus) noted that the money set aside for memorial foundations was better spent on the poor. The latter text also argued for the abolishment of anniversary and memorial Masses because the practice of 'monthly and yearly praying [for the dead] is heretical and improper'.[29] While the theological subtleties varied between the different confessions, it is significant that, throughout Europe, all major reformers on the wide Protestant spectrum agreed on these points.

The consequences for the material counterparts of the dismissed memorial rituals were the subject of a greater debate that also prompted reflection beyond Protestant communities. Luther, on the one hand, was very accommodating, categorizing memorial monuments as *adiaphora*, things that in themselves are neither good nor bad. In 1542, he even recommended the installation of epitaphs because the combination of text and image provided meditational aids for passers-by.[30] However, the critical Christian humanist Erasmus strongly condemned the installation of commemorative monuments as early as 1522:

> This strikes me as a thirst for glory, not charity. Rich men covet a monument for themselves in churches where formerly there was not room for saints. They take care to have their likenesses carved and painted, with their names and an inscription about their gift added. And with these things they fill up a large portion of the church. The time will come, I suppose, when they'll insist on being buried at the very altars![31]

The fact that Catholics very soon felt obliged to counter critiques of expensive tombs and other monuments is illustrative of the issue's scope. In 1531, for instance, the humanist Johannes Faber started his funeral sermon for Margaret of Austria by scorning those who 'condemned tombs, monuments, and funerary ceremonies', and who instead wished 'that the bodies of the deceased [should be] devoured by animals and beasts'.[32] Yet, in the years to come, opposition to funeral monuments would only grow fiercer with the rise of Calvinism. Reformed theologians took a more aggressive stance on the matter, and virtually

26 Sherlock, 'The reformation of memory', 34. Compare with Vogler, 'La législation sur les sépultures'.

27 On memorial Masses in the Low Countries, see Trio, 'Moordende concurrentie op de memoriemarkt'.

28 Deschryver, 'You only die once', 40-41.

29 Decavele, 'Vroege reformatorische bedrijvigheid', 22: 'dat ons goede wercken ons nyet salich maken en mochten'; Cramer and Pijper (eds.), *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, IV, 273-274: 'alle maint unde iarlicks wederom bidden, is ongelovich unde onbehoirlick'.

30 Luther, *Werke*, XXXV, 480. Compare with Christensen, 'The significance of the epitaph'; Vogler, 'La législation sur les sépultures'.

31 Erasmus, *The colloquies*, 70.

32 Cited in Bass, 'The *transi* tomb', 173.

Fig. 5 Philips Galle after Maarten van Heemskerck, Destruction of the altars in Bethel, from the History of Josiah, *c. 1569, engraving, 20,2 × 25 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.*

encouraged the destruction of memorial monuments. In 1552, for instance, the fugitive Ghent polemicist Maarten Micronius called upon his readers to pray for their sovereigns, 'that they may have the spirit of Ezekiel, Jehoshaphat, and Josiah to destroy all idolatrous Masses, altars, images, and graves'.[33]

While much of the critique focused on the visual and material expressions of memory in churches, these ideas in fact amplified an existing tradition of criticism of ancestor worship in itself, one which identified the cult of the dead through formalized rituals as the root of all idolatry. The relevant *locus classicus* was the biblical story of the mourning father who had his untimely deceased son commemorated by a statue and gradually lapsed into idolatry by imposing its ceremonial veneration on his subjects (Wisdom 14:15). Services for the memory of the dead – be they saints, sovereigns, or a commoner's deceased father – were understood to be distractions from the community's attention to the one true God, and the monuments that depicted them not only broke the biblical prohibition on the

33 Cramer and Pijper (eds.), *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, I, 522: 'dat si mogen den geest Ezechie, Josaphat ende Josie hebben, om alle afgodische missen, outaren, beelden, ende graven te vernielen'.

making of images, but also risked being worshipped as idols themselves.[34] Polemicists in sixteenth-century Europe propagated these ideas anew: Calvin famously requested that he be buried in an unmarked grave to prevent himself from being venerated as a saint, and, in the Low Countries, Veluanus emphasized that any posthumous service for the deceased (even 'kings or other persons who had done something special on earth') was pure idolatry.[35] The topicality of such discourse is demonstrated by the circulation of a print series, designed by Maarten van Heemskerck, that illustrated biblical stories of iconoclasm such as the ones referred to by Micronius.[36] One of these prints depicts the breaking of graves in a highly explicit and particularly morbid way, showing the exhuming of decaying corpses with skin and hair still partly intact (fig. 5). The narrative may be set in historical Judah with an antique strigilated sarcophagus broken open on the right, but the smashed tombstone depicted right in the centre of the image, inscribed with the typical Dutch incipit *Hier Leit* ('Here lies'), reveals its unabated relevance for the mid-sixteenth-century Low Countries.

Iconoclasm

The largescale Iconoclastic Fury or *Beeldenstorm* of 1566 would take the Reformation's theoretical contentions about the dead to their dramatic implementation.[37] Just like any other type of imagery in churches, many tombs and epitaphs fell prey to the iconoclasts' hammers, much to the horror of Catholic observers. Relating the destructions in Tournai and Valenciennes, for instance, the moderate Catholic Pontus Payen lamented how the breakers 'assailed the images, without sparing the sepulchres of princes and great lords'.[38] While for convinced Calvinists memorial monuments were just another idolatrous example of prohibited religious images that had to be swept away, to many a bystander the attacks were gross expressions of disrespect for the dead that undermined the social order. The letters sent in the wake of the events in the Low Countries by the vicar Maximilien Morillon to his absent archbishop cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle exemplify the widespread feeling of distress and incomprehension.[39] Writing about the iconoclasm in Breda, he perplexedly added that '*even* the tombs for the lords [of Polanen and Nassau] are demolished and violated'.[40] Unsurprisingly, the mutilations meted out onto the famous tombs of members of the Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty particularly horrified him. 'One shudders to say more', he added after reporting the reputed – yet erroneously

34 Oexle, 'Die Gegenwart der Toten', 30, 47-48; Camille, *The Gothic idol,* 50-57; Aston, 'Art and idolatry'; Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, 44-49.

35 Cramer and Pijper (eds.), *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, IV, 361: 'kunningen unde ander personen, die op erden wat bysonders gedain hadden'. For Calvin, see Marshall, 'After Purgatory', 32.

36 Saunders, 'A commentary on iconoclasm'; Bredekamp, 'Maarten van Heemskercks Bildersturmzyklen'.

37 Van Bruaene, Jonckheere, and Suykerbuyk (eds.), 'Beeldenstorm'.

38 Payen, *Mémoires*, I, 183: 's'attachèrent aux imaiges sans espargner les sépultures des princes et grands seigneurs'.

39 Compare with van Campene, *Dagboek*, 9, 13-14, 16; Balau (ed.), *Chroniques*, II, 522; Van Gelder and Arend (eds.), *Correspondance*, II, 325.

40 Poullet (ed.), *Correspondance*, I, 441: 'mesmes les sépultures des seigneurs abbatuez et violéez' Emphasis added.

assumed – destruction of the tomb of Charles V's sister Isabella of Austria in Ghent. The violation of Isabella of Bourbon's monument in Antwerp elicited the bitter remark that 'even the Turks and the barbarians would not have been able to treat the churches worse than has happened in Flanders, Brabant, and Holland'.[41]

For an ecclesiastical observer like Morillon, attacking the graves of queens and duchesses came close to lese-majesty. In France, similar destructions have understandably been referred to as 'virtual regicide'.[42] But the tombs and epitaphs of local elites were attacked in very much the same way. Furthermore, the abundance of available examples throughout the Low Countries makes clear that these particular iconoclastic acts were not merely political statements, but also conveyed crucial religious meaning. Material evidence of focused attacks on effigies' faces and hands – perceived as the organs of speech and expression (fig. 6) – is confirmed by contemporary descriptions like that of the anonymous observer in Mechelen. In 1566, Marcus van Vaernewijck described the mutilation of the tomb of François Van der Gracht (des Fossez, d. 1552), Lord of Schardau, and his two successive wives, whose effigies in the church of Saint James in Ghent were hammered in the faces and stripped of their noses.[43] Traditionally, tombs and epitaphs were the material focal point of memorial rituals, and the representations of the deceased that they carried served as proxies for the commemorated individuals during these ceremonies.[44] Disfiguring faces and hands, therefore, did not just temporarily disturb the eternal rest that the dead were promised in their funeral Masses, it attempted to definitively deactivate the monuments' ritual and idolatrous potential. As such, the effacement of funerary monuments made a clear statement about the place of the dead in society: blurring out their individual features materially accentuated the idea that they had definitively left the world of the living.[45]

This was iconoclasm at its most personal. In a local context, the breaking of effigies of deceased community members, the relatives of whom were often still alive, was of an entirely different order than attacking biblical imagery or statues of saints. In several instances there is ample evidence to suggest that the iconoclastic acts were deliberate attacks on the memory of particular individuals and that the targets were carefully headhunted.[46] The aforementioned mutilation of the tomb of François Van der Gracht in Ghent, for instance, was far from an act of accidental vandalism. As Peter Arnade has demonstrated, the course of the *Beeldenstorm* in Ghent was, to a large extent, informed by the painful memories of the 1540 suppression of the city's revolt that led to the humiliating

41 Poullet (ed.), *Correspondance*, I, 444: 'Horret animus plura dicere'; 461-462: 'et certes les Turcqz et barbares ne sçauroient piz traicter les églises de ce que at este faict en Flandres, Brabant et Hollande'. Isabella of Austria's tomb would only be destroyed in 1578: Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 130-131, 149; Van den Vivere, *Chronycke*, 272.

42 Greengrass, 'Les Protestants', 40-49.

43 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 148. Other examples on 141-142, 161, 165-166.

44 Gilchrist, *Medieval life*, 196-198.

45 Compare with Constabel, 'Faith and fury', 142-154.

46 For the Low Countries, see Arnade, *Beggars, iconoclasts, and civic patriots*, 115, 117-118, 160; De Boer, 'Picking up the pieces', 61. Compare with Sherlock, 'The reformation of memory', 33; Solignat, 'Funérailles nobiliaires', 120-121.

Fig. 6 Arnt van Tricht, Epitaph for the Ros family from the Grote Kerk at Wageningen, *1548 (with later additions), sandstone, 144 × 104 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.*

Caroline Concession.[47] As then bailiff of Ghent, Van der Gracht represented the Habsburg authority against which the guilds rebelled. He must have personally felt endangered, as he temporarily fled the city when the situation got out of hand. But he soon returned, and after Charles V had restored order, he was made responsible for the prosecution of the convicts, and thus became the face of the much-hated repression.[48] Defacing his reportedly opulent monument, therefore, must have been a deliberate personal attack on the figure of Van der Gracht and on the controversial memory it materialized.

The most morbid attacks on the dead and their memory occurred when the breaking of tombs was followed by the desecration of the corpses they contained. Notorious and highly illustrative is the example of Pierre de Werchin (1498-1556). As *sénéchal* of Hainaut, he had been responsible for the execution of many Calvinists in Tournai, most notably Bertrand Le Blas, who, on Christmas Day 1554, had snatched the consecrated host out of the priest's hands in the city's cathedral and ripped it into pieces while loudly proclaiming that the Mass was idolatrous. Le Blas was burned at the stake, but his inclusion in Jean Crespin's Protestant martyrology had clearly kept his memory alive, as his execution informed the equally gruesome treatment of the *sénéchal*'s corpse in 1566.[49] The latter had been buried in the Chartreuse of Chercq, just outside of Tournai, in a reportedly 'very rich alabaster tomb'. It included an extensive, rhymed epitaph that praised his office and his protection of the Holy Church, scorned the inhabitants of Tournai who followed 'false doctrine' as the devil's minions, but also kindly asked the onlooker to pray with fervour for 'the soul of the good Werchin'. Unsurprisingly, this was considered to be unadulterated provocation, and the controversial monument was violently attacked in the summer of 1566.[50] But the corpse of de Werchin was also dragged from its uncovered leaden coffin. Significantly, the baker Jehan Ruyant took his left arm – which was reportedly 'still partly covered in flesh, with the hand that smelled very bad' – in order to burn it in his oven, just as the *sénéchal* had done with Le Blas. However, as the baker's wife could not stand the stench, he abandoned this sinister reprisal and instead threw the decaying arm into the river Scheldt.[51] Dated slightly later, Heemskerck's aforementioned print is directly reminiscent of such episodes, and other documented examples confirm that this 'barbarous cruelty and vengeance against the dead' was not the only such case.[52]

Such attacks meant that the religious debates threatened the memorial landscape in Netherlandish churches with imminent loss. While the *Beeldenstorm* of 1566 saw many monuments mutilated, the short-lived Calvinist Republics in the Low Countries of the late

47 Arnade, *Beggars, iconoclasts, and civic patriots*, 148-163.

48 Gachard, *Inventaire*, II, 384-385, nos. 14121 and 14122; Gachard (ed.), *Relation des troubles de Gand*, 11, 26, 243-244, 247, 272, 364, 402, 481-482, 672-673, 692-693.

49 Compare with Deschryver, 'You only die once', 42-45.

50 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter BnF), MS NAF 25667, fols. 80-88.

51 Ruyant's sentence is in Brussels, State Archives (hereafter ARA), Council of Troubles, 6, fol. 36v. See for a contemporary account of this episode De le Barre and Soldoyer, *Mémoires*, I, 196-199. See also Moreau, *Histoire du Protestantisme*, 130-133.

52 De le Barre and Soldoyer, *Mémoires*, I, 199: 'plus que barbarre d'exercer cruaulté et vengeance contre les morts'. Other examples in Kervyn de Volkaersbeke, *Les églises de Gand*, I, 258-259; Payen, *Mémoires*, I, 183-184; De Coussemaker, *Troubles religieux*, II, 198-199.

Fig. 7 Arnoldus Buchelius, Epitaph of Gerard Numan and Cornelia van Oudheusden, *1615, pen, ink, and watercolour on paper, Utrecht, University Library.*

1570s and early 1580s posed a much more drastic threat to their conservation. Churches and their property were confiscated, and many of the brass tablets and inlays in tombstones were removed and sold.[53] This was done in a highly systematic way, which meant that whole series of commemorative inscriptions were lost forever. An illustrative example of what these sales meant to the material archives of churches is provided by the Utrecht antiquarian Arnoldus Buchelius (1565-1641). Visiting the church of Saint James on the Coudenberg in Brussels in 1615, he recorded the epitaph of Gerard Numan (d. 1500) and his wife Cornelia van Oudheusden. However, the inscription he read alerted him to the fact that what he saw was not the original, but a stone substitute installed by their grandchildren as a replacement for the brass tablet which had been taken away in 1581. Significantly, the new slab no longer provided the dates of Gerard and Cornelia's death, which suggests that the knowledge of these facts had vanished along with the original tablet (fig. 7).[54] Once more, this is illustrative of how much the preservation of memory depended on its material carriers, even within two generations of the family itself.

Reactions

The most immediate response to these threats of destruction was to protect them through the simple expedient of removing them to a place of safety. This happened in Ghent, for instance, where news of the iconoclasm in Antwerp on 20 August 1566 alerted citizens to the troubles that would arrive two days later. Apart from the many epitaphs of which Marcus van Vaernewijck deplored the loss in his account, he also mentioned several examples 'that, before the riots began, had wisely been taken off'. In the city's church of Saint James, where François Van der Gracht's tomb would be the target of violent mutilations, one such timely rescue operation was carried out by fellow confraternity members: Hugo van der Goes's famed epitaph painting of Wauter Ghautier, a former member of the guild of Saint Sebastian, was taken down by that organization's servant. In most cases, however, epitaphs seem to have been saved by relatives or heirs of the commemorated people, significantly referred to by van Vaernewijck as 'those who were entitled to [take them off]'. One of these was the 'very costly' epitaph of Simon Bette (d. 1554), Lord of Bottele, made of alabaster, marble, and touchstone, and still preserved in the cathedral of Saint Bavo (fig. 8). Moving such a delicate, composite work was no simple task, but the fact that it nevertheless happened 'as best one could' is not only illustrative of how real the iconoclastic scare was, but also of how much this monument mattered to Bette's surviving kin.[55]

53 Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, I, 76-77. For examples, see de Jonghe (ed.), *Ghendsche geschiedenissen*, I, 40, 53; Kervyn de Volkaersbeke, *Les églises de Gand*, I, 258-259; Galesloot, 'La vente publique'.

54 Utrecht, University Library, MS 1648, fol. 154. On Buchelius' antiquarian interests, see Pollmann, *Religious choice*, 46-48, 60, 86, 117-119; Langereis, *Geschiedenis als ambacht*, 69-97.

55 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 141: 'ende som van deghene, die daer recht an hadden, eer de foele ghebuerde, wijselic afdoen doen waren. Deene was zeer costelic van de Bets'; 92: 'ten besten dat men mochte'. For Ghautier's epitaph, see also Dhanens, 'Het "Memoriaalke"'. On Bette's epitaph, see Dhanens, *Sint-Baafskathedraal*, 136; Despodt, *'Dat du best'*, III, no. 1.3/088.

Fig. 8 Jan d'Heere (attributed to), Epitaph of Simon Bette and Eleonora de Waudripont, *c. 1543, alabaster, marble, and touchstone, Ghent, Cathedral of Saint Bavo. Photo: Brussels, KIK/IRPA.*

Epitaphs indeed remained a cherished part of familial property: given to churches as material documents to be stored in a public archive, they could also be reclaimed by surviving relatives when necessary. In Bruges, for instance, the wife and son of Jan de Schietere (d. 1575) temporarily took back his new epitaph of 1576-1577 during the city's Calvinist regime, and had it reinstalled after the Catholic restoration (fig. 9).[56] Other monuments never returned to their original place, however, and ended up in exile together with their rightful owners. Such was the case with the family epitaph that the Amsterdam burgomaster Cornelis Jacobsz (1512-1592) had installed in the city's Oude Kerk around 1570. When he was banned in 1578, he removed it and fled to exile in Kalkar, taking his painting with him. He eventually died there, and the painting was put in a new frame and installed above his grave in the local Nicolaikirche.[57] But not every epitaph was given a new public function after an authorized removal. The court painter Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (1500-1559), for instance, had given his own epitaph painting to the Brussels church of Saint Gorik, but when the work's fate was threatened by the city's Calvinist regime, his son Hans 'saved it in time from the desecrating hands' and took it with him to the court in Prague, where he was appointed artist to Emperor Rudolf II.[58] Thus, as it were, the material memories returned to private family archives.

Small epitaphs were of course relatively easy to move temporarily, but that was virtually impossible in the case of massive tombstones or tomb monuments, which could only survive by the grace of personal protection. Maximilien Morillon reported how the tomb of Charles II de Poitiers (*alias* Pictavia, d. 1539), councillor and chamberlain of Charles V, and his wife Jeanne Carondelet (d. 1537) was saved from destruction in the convent of the Calced Carmelites in Mechelen by two – apparently unrelated – noblemen who happened to be in the church when the riots started.[59] However, it can be assumed that such brave behaviour was rather unusual in the midst of the often violent troubles. A rare instance of the deliberate on-site protection of tombs was reported in Diksmuide, where the low number of breakages appears to have been the result of negotiations between the magistracy and a menacing gang of iconoclasts. Reportedly, they eventually happened under the supervision of the bailiff, who ensured that the most important pieces in the church were spared.[60] As the town council noted proudly in their report of these events, the pieces that were spared included not only the rood loft and the sacrament house, but also the tombs of the lords of Diksmuide.[61] Such considered supervision was absent in the majority of other churches, leaving the greater part of immovable monuments unattended and vulnerable.

56 Parmentier, *Documenten*, 70-72, 91-92; Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, III, 756-760.
57 Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt*, 1-3, 168-169; Dudok van Heel, 'De memorietafel'.
58 Van Mander, *Schilder-boeck*, fol. 224v: 'dit stuck was in tijts uyt de Kerck den scheyndighe handen ontnomen'.
59 Poullet (ed.), *Correspondance*, I, 430.
60 Suykerbuyk, 'De sacra militia contra iconomachos', 19-21, 30-31
61 ARA, Council of Troubles, 55, fols. 52v, 59, 60v, 62.

Fig. 9 Gillis de Witte, Epitaph of Jan de Schietere and Catharina de Damhoudere, *1576-1577, various types of stone, 350 × 190 cm, Bruges, Cathedral of Saint Salvator. Photo: Brussels, KIK/IRPA.*

The Genesis of the Épitaphier

If monuments for the dead could not be secured materially, the possibility remained of recording on paper the memory that they encapsulated in stone, brass, or paint. This is indeed what happened in a type of manuscript now referred to as *épitaphier*, but which, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was generally referred to as *recueil d'épitaphes*. This terminology is slightly misleading, however, because their focus, accuracy, and detail are subject to great variations: while the most basic examples merely summarize or transcribe funerary inscriptions, most also include drawings of coats of arms (with or without colour) on tombs, epitaphs, or other carriers of memorial data such as stained-glass windows. Furthermore, the most elaborate contain, in varying levels of detail, descriptions of the monuments in question, their materials and their localization, and some even include drawings.[62]

This type of manuscript is frequently mined by scholars for its often unique information on lost objects, heraldry, and genealogy, but it has received strikingly little attention as a source type. While it is generally acknowledged that the *épitaphier* originated in the mid-sixteenth century, its initial function, use, and the reasons for its genesis have been completely neglected.[63] It cannot, however, be accidental that the sudden appearance of the *épitaphier* coincides with the impending largescale disappearance of the monuments recorded in it. In the Low Countries, the earliest preserved examples date to the 1550s and 1560s.[64] As has been demonstrated, this was the moment when various strands of Protestant critiques on traditional memorial practices resounded ever louder, became increasingly more violent, and eventually erupted in actual attacks. Moreover, stories about earlier iconoclastic campaigns elsewhere in Europe had circulated widely, creating an iconoclastic scare in the Low Countries well before the *Beeldenstorm* of 1566. A notorious example that caused a continental stir was the 1534-1535 Anabaptist rebellion in Münster, where all tombs, epitaphs, and stained-glass windows disappeared.[65] The separately preserved sheet of paper documenting the tomb of Franco van Halen in Mechelen, which might very well have been part of an entire *épitaphier*, beautifully illustrates this dynamic process between threat and recording: while the making of the first drawing in 1560 happened in an increasingly hostile climate, the actual mutilation sparked the addition of even more elaborate notes in 1582. Buchelius's oeuvre, too, clearly was the result of such concerns: his notebooks reveal a striking preference for recording monuments in the churches that had suffered the most from iconoclastic attacks, and in the preface to one of his manuscripts he voiced his motives for compiling it by relating how, 'lately,

62 The most exceptional example is probably the volume compiled by Anthonio de Succa between 1601-1615, by order of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella: Comblen-Sonkes and Van den Bergen-Pantens (eds.), *Memoriën*.
63 Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, I, 18; Favreau, *Épigraphie médiévale,* 310; Despodt, *'Dat du best'*, I, 10; Bossuyt, 'Dood en begraven', 97, 101-102; Vandamme, 'Een passie'.
64 KBR, MS G 1655, is one of the earliest extant examples and must have been compiled in the 1550s, probably by Jacques Le Boucq. See Dhanens, *De kwartierstaat*, 9-12.
65 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 206-207. For the iconoclastic scare in the Low Countries, see Suykerbuyk, *The matter of piety*, 138-141.

[he had] looked sorrowfully upon the loss of many funeral monuments [...] all over the Low Countries'.[66]

The best-known examples of *épitaphiers* in the sixteenth-century Low Countries were compiled by heralds and kings of arms, but they do not seem to have been direct products of their office, nor were they their exclusive producers. Among the earliest instances are the manuscripts by the elusive Cornelis Gailliard (or Gaillaert, c. 1520-1563) from Bruges, now mostly known through later copies. A rather adventurous career serving as, among other things, chamberlain to Cardinal Reginald Pole and soldier in the papal army, took Gailliard to Italy and the Holy Land, but in 1549 he returned to his hometown in the Low Countries. There, he applied himself to heraldic and genealogical research, and was soon considered an expert. Reportedly, Charles V eventually appointed Gailliard king of arms of the County of Flanders, but this remains unconfirmed. Nevertheless, he was consulted for genealogical advice in matters of state, such as the design of the tomb for Charles the Bold in Bruges (1559-1562). Gailliard also seems to have undertaken his investigations at his own initiative, rather than simply acting on official command, however. Travelling around the county, he filled manuscript after manuscript with the information he found on the memorial monuments held in various churches. Thus, he assembled a vast collection of memorial data to which he would subsequently turn for his many genealogical and heraldic writings that traced the descents of various lineages.[67] The same goes for the painter Josse de Becberghe (fl. 1564-1613), who was appointed king of arms of Brabant in 1578, but who had been working on his personal *épitaphiers* from at least 1564 onwards.[68] Eventually, he became lieutenant to the king of arms of the Order of the Golden Fleece and thus served as head of the Heraldic Chamber, a department at the Habsburg court that grew out of the office of herald at the end of the sixteenth century, and that supervised heraldic issues and claims.[69] In this capacity, Becberghe would produce certified copies of tombstones (fig. 10), for which he doubtless drew on his personal expertise and collection of *épitaphiers*.

There was evidently a market for such memorial data, as suggested by the large number of surviving copies of these manuscripts. The oeuvre of the painter Jacques Le Boucq (d. 1573) from Valenciennes, another early compiler, provides more clues to the interested clientele. Le Boucq served Charles V and Philip II as herald and lieutenant to the king of arms of the Order of the Golden Fleece. Between 1555 and 1572, he assembled various manuscripts containing information on church monuments found throughout the

66 Cited in Langereis, *Geschiedenis als ambacht*, 87: 'Aegris n. oculis tot nuper sepulcrorum [...] deperdita [...] per totum Belgium'. See also Pollmann, *Religious choice*, 60. Impending destructions similarly led Marcus van Vaernewijck to inventory the religious material culture of Ghent churches in his publications: Kleine Deters, '"Paintings that can give great joy"', 98-99.

67 Van Hollebeke, 'Corneille Gailliard'; Vander Meersch, 'Gailliard (Corneille)'; Béthune de Villers, *Épitaphes et monuments*, I, iii-vii; Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, I, 18-19; Smolderen, 'Le tombeau', 48-49; Van den Bergen-Pantens, 'L'*Armorial universel*'; Donche, 'Opmerkelijk commentaar'; Couhault, *L'étoffe*, 163, 231.

68 KBR, MS G 1515, is a complete manuscript from his hand. Fragments of his other manuscripts are now dispersed throughout later *épitaphiers*. See for instance KBR, MS G 1544, MS G 1566, and MS G 1569, all of which contain drawings made by Becberghe. See also Couhault, *L'étoffe*, 145, 406-409, 422.

69 Duerloo, 'Heraldische Kamer'.

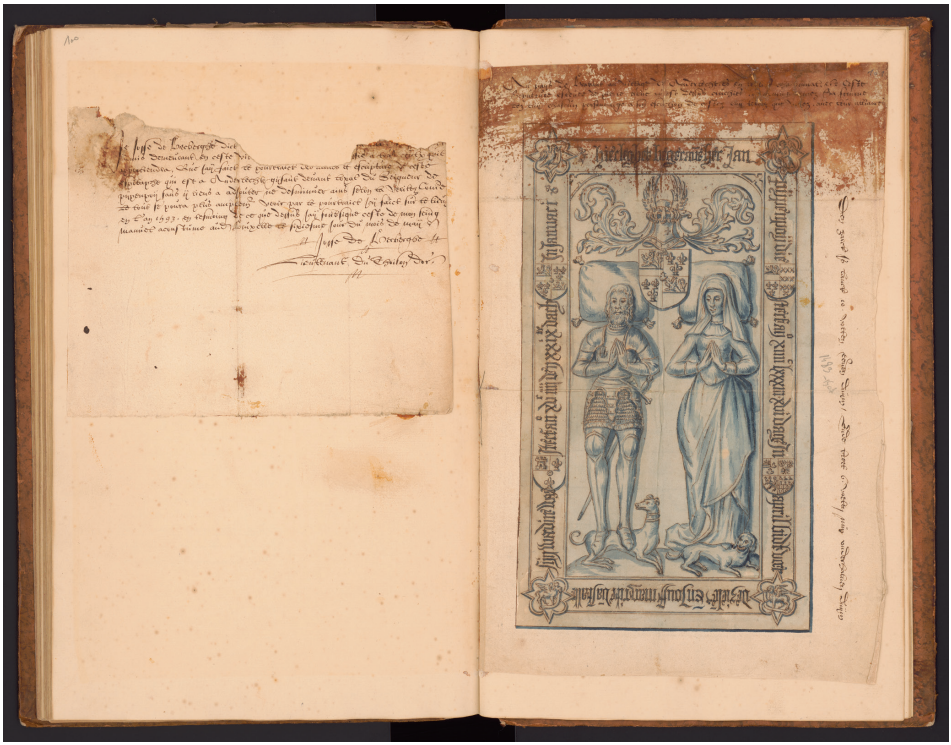

Fig. 10 Josse de Becberghe, Certified copy of the tombstone of Jan Pipenpoy and Margriete van Stalle in Anderlecht's church of Saint Peter*, 1593, pen, ink, and watercolour on paper, Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium.*

Netherlandish provinces of Artois, Brabant, Flanders, and Hainaut.[70] The available evidence suggests that noble families turned to the expertise and collections of such heraldic specialists for the compilation of manuscripts with a particular focus. It is known, for instance, that Le Boucq assembled a *Recueille des antiquités de la noble maison de Hennin Lietart* [Hénin-Liétard], and that he produced a *recueil d'épitaphes* pertaining to the De Jauche family in 1563-1565, presumably at the request of Gabriel de Jauche (d. 1579), Lord of Mastaing.[71] Furthermore, the stipulation in Le Boucq's last will that his books and papers were to be sold by auction was met with great enthusiasm.[72] For instance, an armorial from his collection went to Jean Lalou, a schoolmaster from Valenciennes, who furthermore copied some of Le Boucq's other manuscripts and himself also produced several *épitaphiers* and genealogical compilations pertaining to the Low Countries.[73]

70 Devillers, 'Le Boucq (Jacques)'; Campbell, 'The authorship of the Recueil d'Arras'; Boudreau, 'Les traités de blason'; Couhault, *L'étoffe*, 170, 212-214, 305-306.

71 Campbell, 'The authorship of the Recueil d'Arras', 306-307.

72 Boudreau, 'Les traités de blason', 14.

73 The armorial is in KBR, MS G 676. See for copies after Le Boucq by Lalou: KBR, MS M 34, and BnF, MS français 10469. Several of Lalou's other manuscripts include KBR, MS G 729, G 757, G 1377, G 1507, G 1679, 19103.

Other manuscripts by Le Boucq – including his famous *Recueil d'Arras* – ended up in the possession of Alexandre Le Blancq (d. 1574), Lord of Meurchin, whose inventory of books betrays an avid interest in genealogy, heraldry, and funeral culture. Le Blancq possessed several *épitaphiers*, some possibly by Le Boucq, but later copies suggest that he also compiled his own manuscripts.[74] Another nobleman with an interest in acquiring manuscripts by a specialized artisan was Christoffel van Huerne (1550-1629), Lord of Buneghem and Abeele. From around 1575 he had worked on his own *épitaphier*, but he later also acquired a manuscript that included drawings from monuments in Ghent, which had been compiled around 1560 by the city's painter Arent van Wijnendale (d. 1592).[75]

Given their genealogical and heraldic value, this noble interest in *épitaphiers* is not surprising, because the cultivation of ancestry and the continuity of lineage were among the prime concerns of this social group.[76] Knowledge and maintenance of the material culture of ancestral *memoria* played a key role in maintaining a noble identity. For instance, in his 1569 history of his own noble house, Erasmus van Brakel (1532-1593), Lord of Varembeke, explained that 'for every man cherishing the virtue of his predecessors, it is a pleasant thing to see the churches adorned with their beautiful sepulchres, and old letters and inscriptions, and the windows filled with their heraldic quarters and alliances'.[77] In 1574, Jean de Brialmont (1540-1596), Lord of Atrin, even had an act drawn up for his new-born son Otto (d. 1629). Primarily aimed at transmitting heraldic and genealogical knowledge about his family, it described several paintings 'so that his heirs will always have recollection of their good predecessors, and will be incited to live as virtuously as they did'. On the one hand, it describes four recent portraits – of himself, his two parents, and his wife – by Jean Ramey (c. 1540-1603), which in turn elicited a short family chronicle on the recent events in the Low Countries, describing his loyalty to Philip II and the Duke of Alba. On the other hand, it relates how, in 1565, he had Ramey copy an old epitaph of his predecessors, which reportedly dated to 1290, in order to replace the original in the church at Chênée, near Liège. As the document states, he wanted 'to retain the authentic piece for himself, in memory and recollection of his ancestors who [therein] are portrayed, mentioned, and armed'.[78]

The extent to which the mounting Protestant critique of traditional memorial culture formed the immediate cause for Brialmont's action remains unclear, but it is evident that the threats it posed to ancestral monuments seriously endangered the nobility's cultivation

74 Aulotte, 'Alexandre Le Blancq', 311, no. 46, and 315, no. 102; Campbell, 'The authorship of the Recueil d'Arras', 309. See also ARA, Manuscrits divers, 1762, fols. 50, 143; Boniface, 'Les armoriaux'.

75 Comblen-Sonkes and Van den Bergen-Pantens (eds.), *Memoriën van Anthonio de Succa*, I, 172-176; Despodt, *'Dat du best'*, I, 14. Van Huerne's *épitaphier* is now in a private collection.

76 Contamine, 'The European nobility'; Buylaert, *Eeuwen van ambitie*, 58-61.

77 Cited in Buylaert, 'Memory, social mobility and historiography', 379-380: 'Ce doit estre chose bien aggreable a tout homme aymant la vertu de ses predecesseurs [...] de veoir les eglises parees de leurs belles sepultures, et anchiens lettres et inscriptions et les fenestres remplis de leurs quartiers et alliances.'

78 Cited in Bormans, 'Jean Ramée', 285: 'retint pour soy et les siennes la pieche autentique en memoier et souvenance des ancestres qui sont contrefaictz et mentionez et armez'; and 298: 'affin que luy ou ses hoires ayent tousiours souvenance de leurs bons prédicesseurs, et les inciter de rendre paienne [paine] de vivre si vertueusement qui'lz ont faict'.

of continuity, heredity, and its visible manifestations. As the continuity of lineage was one of the central pillars of noble culture, the increasing need to record the memory materialized in monuments becomes understandable. After all, the practice of record-keeping itself has been identified as an 'anchor of identity […] distinctive to noble status groups'.[79] They had long kept genealogical memorials, in which, for example, they traced the histories of their illustrious families back in time for as many generations as possible, in order to demonstrate their longstanding nobility. Interestingly, in the later sixteenth century this genre of memorial texts, too, increasingly included funerary inscriptions and references to memorial monuments.[80] The family memorial produced by Hendrik van Halmale (1549-1614) from Antwerp, for instance, was followed by information pertaining to the families of the sixteen heraldic quarters of his paternal grandfather Willem (d. 1553), collected from *libri anniversariorum* as well as tomb monuments, painted panels, and stained-glass windows. Several of these material sources he briefly described, occasionally leading him, just like Brialmont, to record family stories.[81] As the fate of the rich public archives that remained in churches became increasingly uncertain, it was evidently thought wise to add the relevant records to the personal family archive.

Yet, for all this noble discourse about the past, a closer social characterization of the nobility in question suggests that their interests also looked ahead. The preliminary survey above seems to indicate that the earliest *épitaphiers* were commissioned and collected by the lower local nobility (the 'lords of') in particular, rather than by the higher strata of the aristocracy in the Low Countries. This readership compares well with that of heraldic treatises, the subject matter of which is evidently closely related to the contents of the *épitaphiers*. These treatises circulated among a broadening audience throughout the sixteenth century, and it has been argued that this reflected the social aspirations of lower status groups.[82] The composition and internal hierarchy of the nobility as a social entity was indeed the subject of considerable mobility, to which end ambitious individuals creatively moulded the past into a useful memory, through monuments, chronicles, or other means. Nobility has even been described as 'a memorial practice' in itself.[83] Crucially, however, the sixteenth century saw the transition of a medieval concept of nobility, based on unwritten social consensus and the enactment of *vivre noblement*, to an early modern practice of conferring titles by the sovereign, aided by his heralds and the Heraldic Chamber.[84]

This new practice evidently required official registration, but also written evidence to prove a descent and genealogy worthy of such official recognition.[85] It is precisely in this respect that the religious situation, and the Revolt in which it eventually resulted, created opportunities, because the conflict led to an unprecedented number of ennoblements as a reward for loyalty. Such was the case for the abovementioned Hendrik van Halmale,

79 Buylaert and Haemers, 'Record-keeping and status performance'.
80 Donche, 'Over genealogische memorialen'.
81 De Ghellinck Vaernewyck (ed.), *Un livre de raison*, 32-69. See also Donche, 'Over genealogische memorialen', 99-101.
82 Day, 'Primers of honor'; Thiry, *Matter(s) of state*, 17-18; Couhault, *L'étoffe*, 294-297.
83 Buylaert, 'Memory, social mobility and historiography'.
84 Janssens, *De evolutie van de Belgische adel*; De Clercq, Dumolyn, and Haemers, '"Vivre noblement"'.
85 Thiry, *Matter(s) of state*, 332-333; Couhault, *L'étoffe*, 322-324.

for instance, who was knighted in 1598 by Philip II for his fidelity to the Habsburg cause.[86] Yet the destruction of funeral monuments and their removal from the public to the private sphere also created the opportunity to falsify them, and thereby tailor the familial history they embodied to the needs of the living descendants. In 1569, Erasmus van Brakel complained that 'it seems licit nowadays for everybody [...] to forge his arms', and the abovementioned case taken to the Council of Brabant in 1574 is illustrative of the accusations this could lead to.[87] Becberghe's involvement in the latter case points to the judicial role of heralds, but even they were confronted with a chaotic reality. In a letter to King Philip II, the herald of Hainaut Guillaume Rugher (fl. 1559-1585; appointed in 1576) complained about the heraldic usurpations 'that one daily observes in churches [...] on epitaphs and elsewhere', and he ironically even requested to be bestowed with the authority 'to break or take them down'.[88] It has also been demonstrated how such falsifications were common practice in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, where even the most powerful men like Johan van Oldenbarnevelt commissioned false epitaphs to give greater distinction to their actual lineage.[89] Thus, the ruined churches of the Low Countries could serve as fertile breeding grounds for new status claims, and the *épitaphiers* were evidently considered precious sources for heraldic and genealogical knowledge by all parties.

Conclusion

Eventually, the rejection of Protestant treatments of the dead and the apparent disrespect for deceased ancestors became a strong argument in Catholic hands. As Judith Pollmann has aptly observed, 'in a society that in all other respects emphasized the importance of family bonds and ancestry, the most awkward question a Catholic could ask of Protestants was what happened with their Catholic ancestors'.[90] Catholic commentators on the *Beeldenstorm* remarked bitterly that iconoclasts 'did not realize that they condemned the daily use of images of all their ancestors'.[91] On the rebound, many noblemen pointed to the unbroken chain of commemoration in their family history and explicitly emphasized how their own ancestral piety was a clear sign of their Catholic conviction. Erasmus van Brakel, for instance, praised his ancestors' virtuousness and stated that their foundation of commemorative ceremonies demonstrated their 'affection towards our Catholic religion' – a

86 De Ridder-Symoens, 'Halmale, Hendrik van'. In general, see Janssens, *De evolutie van de Belgische adel*, 196.
87 Cited in Buylaert, 'Memory, social mobility and historiography', 379: 'combien que pour le jourd'hui [...] samble quasi a ung chascun estre licite [...] se forger des armes'.
88 Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS Chiflet 81, fols. 162v-163: 'l'on veoit journellement les abus commis [...] aux eglises [...] tant en epitaphe qu'en aultre lieux [...] scavoir si l'heraut à cause de son estat ne pourroit briser, ou rompre lesdits abus.' On Rugher, see Boniface, 'Les armoriaux', 106-108; Couhault, *L'étoffe*, 169, 409-414, 421.
89 Bok, 'Laying claims to nobility'.
90 Pollmann, 'Being a Catholic', 169. Compare with Marshall, 'After Purgatory', 37-38.
91 Duncanus, *Een cort onderscheyt*, sig. Aiii: 'niet aenmerckende datse doer haer eyghen daghelicx ghebruyck van beelden haer selven veroordelen, ende alle haer voerouders'.

pious tradition which he himself continued as scion.[92] Furthermore, in Jean de Brialmont's 1574 description of the age-old epitaph he had copied, he pointed out how his ancestors were 'portrayed on their knees before the crucifix, keeping their hands together like good Christians and Catholics, following the Roman Church, our holy mother, just like their own ancestors and good predecessors'.[93] Ancestral piety was now claimed as a confessional distinction, which became a prerequisite for social advancement in the Habsburg Low Countries.

Presented as a break with ancestral tradition, the Reformation could indeed be seen as a pressing problem, and the question of how to deal with dead ancestors unsurprisingly also occupied minds outside of the officially Catholic realm. For instance, after Buchelius had abandoned the Church of Rome to become a confessionally undefined yet critical Christian, he still criticized the Calvinist disrespect for previous generations fiercely: 'They neglect the monuments of the ancients, and do not attend to the memorial Masses of our ancestors, saying that their names have already been written in heaven, so that some of them seem more barbaric than the Goths themselves.'[94] A similar societal angst for these rapid cultural changes can be observed elsewhere in Europe, too.[95] In England, for instance, where purgatory and chantries were abolished by royal command, there was a genuine concern among the population about the religious status of their predecessors, who had lived in error as Catholics. The governing authorities recognized the difficulty of convincing the population that their parents were heretics, and a popular rebellion in 1549 even demanded the restoration of commemorative practices. The country was simultaneously swept by iconoclasm, but Elizabeth I soon recognized the problem and explicitly forbade the destruction of funeral monuments in 1560, stating that it contributed to the undesirable 'extinguishing of the honourable and good memory of sundry virtuous and noble persons deceased'.[96] That was exactly what was feared in the Low Countries, and what must have incited the draughtsman in Mechelen to make his record of the tomb of Franco van Halen.

The developments described in this article were not limited to the Low Countries but resonated throughout Reformation Europe. While the *épitaphier*'s geographical spread and its chronology remains to be charted, it does not seem to have been an exclusively Netherlandish genre. In Mainz, for instance, the vicar and cathedral archivist Georg Helwich (1588-1632) collected funeral inscriptions and heraldic data in manuscripts that served as working material for his genealogical and historical studies, and from 1600 onwards similar collections had even appeared in print in England.[97] The common denominator

92 Cited in Buylaert, 'Memory, social mobility and historiography', 379-380: 'l'affection […] envers nostre religion Catholique'.

93 Cited in Bormans, 'Jean Ramée', 287-288: 'lesquelles sont contrefeaict [...] en genoulx devant le crucifix, tenant tous les maiens jointes come bons cristiens et catholicques, ensuivant l'église romaien, nostre saincte mère, come leurs ancestres et bons prédécesseurs'.

94 Cited in Pollmann, *Religious choice*, 86.

95 For war-torn France, see Davis, 'Ghosts, kin, and progeny', 100.

96 Woolf, *The social circulation of the past*, 93-94; Walsham, *The Reformation of the landscape*, 277-279.

97 Fuchs, 'Georg Helwich'. However, Friedrich, 'Genealogy', 75, seems to suggest that this was exceptional. For England, see Woolf, *The social circulation of the past*, 95; Lindley, *Tomb destruction and scholarship*, 69-70.

that unites many of these efforts is the recording of heraldry and genealogy, a subject that enjoyed a boom in popularity all over Europe in the later sixteenth century, and which continued well into the seventeenth. English scholars have even postulated the existence of a veritable 'genealogical craze'.[98] The traditional explanation for this phenomenon has always been socially inspired, pointing to a historical correlation between the periodical emergence of new social groups and increasing genealogical interest.[99] The present study of the Low Countries, however, draws attention to the ongoing religious debates as crucial breeding ground for this phenomenon, and allows us to appreciate the intermingling of social with religious factors. Much research remains to be done on the early development of the *épitaphier*, a genre with a primarily genealogical and heraldic purpose. But given the tense religious context in which it developed, it can be argued that the *épitaphier* was at least partially a reaction to the debate brought up by the Reformation. The fear of the impending disappearance of ancestral monuments not only sparked the genesis of the *épitaphier*, but also functioned as a catalyst for the inclusion of memorial monuments in other forms of noble record-keeping, which could serve to further social status. By questioning the place of the dead and the propriety of traditional memorial culture, the religious debates that stirred the sixteenth century fostered renewed thinking about death. This not only took the form of debates about the place of the anonymous dead, but also encouraged a heightened sensitivity to one's own ancestral past. These changes, in their turn, sparked the development of a very personal kind of antiquarianism as a new commemorative practice.

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98 Woolf, *The social circulation of the past*, 105-114; Friedrich, 'Genealogy', 65-84.
99 Plumb, *The death of the past,* 31-32; Woolf, *The social circulation of the past*, 88; Hodgkin, 'Women, memory and family history', 299.

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