

## **Memory, social mobility and historiography. Shaping noble identity in the Bruges chronicle of Nicholas Despars († 1597)**

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### **1. Introduction: memory and the social structure of nobility**

The past decades have seen an overwhelming flood of studies on remembering, the construction of individual and collective memory and the functioning of memory in politics and culture. In fact, memory studies have gained such prominence that some scholars have begun to speak scathingly of the “memory industry”<sup>2</sup>. Others, who are less sceptical towards the presumed benefits of giving centre stage to memory in history, sociology, linguistics, anthropology and so on, have felt the need to bring more focus to this particular field of research, by trying to clarify what can actually be understood as “memory” or “remembrance”<sup>3</sup>. Despite the considerable conceptual problems with this new leading term, it is clear that the recent emergence of memory studies is closely connected with some of the classic issues of post-war historiography. For example, social historians soon appreciated the importance of cultures of remembrance as this theme had always featured in the background of the ongoing debate on social identity in premodern society. In Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, social status was partially structured by the ways in which individuals and families were perceived by various social networks and how this appreciation was subsequently passed on to following generations.

This line of enquiry has a particular poignancy for the premodern nobility, as being noble seems to have been a form of social status that was inextricably entwined with collective memory. In the Southern Low Countries the princely state established a legal framework for the nobility only at the turn of the seventeenth century. In the preceding era, nobility was structured primarily by social consensus. The reputation of being a nobleman or noblewoman was accorded or withheld by the community, dependent of the extent to which an individual or family conformed to the customary conventions that structured nobility. Next to the possession of seigniories, military service, the use of heraldry and so on, claiming descent from persons who had enjoyed an uncontested noble status in earlier times played a pivotal role in the ascription of noble status as it concerned a form of social superiority that was thought to be rooted in bloodlines. In consequence, historians are inclined to think that the social composition of the premodern nobility was moulded to a large extent by collective knowledge of who mastered the performance of nobility and who had supposedly done so in the past. As one scholar put it rather bluntly in a monograph on the nobility of Early Modern Holland, it was “generally known” whether a particular family belonged to the group of families that were publicly considered to be noble since time immemorial<sup>4</sup>. This article intends to contribute to

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<sup>2</sup> K.L. KLEIN, “On the emergence of *Memory* in historical discourse”, in *Representations*, vol. 69, 2000, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular G. CUBITT, *History and memory*, Manchester, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> H.F.K. VAN NIEROP, *The nobility of Holland. From knights to regents, 1500-1650*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 25.

our understanding of the ascription of noble status in the Late Medieval and sixteenth-century Low Countries by focusing on this issue of nobility as a memorial practice.

Memory and remembering have never been absent in the historiography on the premodern nobility, as it is widely accepted that an ancestral culture of remembrance was one of the distinctive characteristics of noble identity. A noble house defined itself as such by the shared patrilineal descent from a real or imagined noble ancestor, the latter usually situated in the mists of time. Nobles conceived of themselves first and foremost as the successors of the preceding generations, from whom they not only derived their biological existence, but also their social pre-eminence. The reverse side of the medal was the obligation to guarantee the continuity of the noble line in the future by producing male heirs and by providing those heirs with sufficient wealth and power to maintain the august position that the family had hitherto enjoyed in society. This sense of being part of a noble lineage was constantly propagated vis-à-vis the community by using noble titles in charters, epitaphs or letters and by depicting the heraldic emblem of their house in shields, on their clothing and that of retainers, portraits, horsecloths, stained-glass windows and so on. The marriage networks of the noble house also figured largely in this enactment of nobility. Nobles tended towards social endogamy, and in the long run, the remembrance of earlier marriage ties between different noble houses must have contributed strongly to the fixation in the public opinion of specific families as belonging to the group of established noble houses<sup>5</sup>. Gerard Triest, for example, a Flemish nobleman who died in 1489, stipulated funeral arrangements of his will, including that during the wake, the walls had to be adorned with heraldic shields that showed his family tree. As such, all present could see how Gerard and his family were related by marriage with nearly every important noble family in that part of the county of Flanders<sup>6</sup>.

It is clear that the nobility as a social group was, to a large extent, centred around the sharing of a particular culture of ancestral remembrance. Nobles and would-be nobles tried to convey this to others in various aspects of material culture. The various material and epigraphic constituents of this memorial practice were meant to be visible to everyone, as they usually functioned in highly public settings. As such, they must be seen as distinctive elements in the configuration of the social landscape. The lower segments of society, who had little or no access to the social networks of the nobility, must have relied largely on those markers to “know” the nobility, that is, the perception that someone claimed to belong to a noble lineage and the subsequent evaluation of that claim. In fact, even if one was noble himself and lived out one’s life in the social networks of the established nobility, it was impossible to be personally acquainted with all other nobles of the region. The county of Flanders, for example, had a nobility that usually consisted of approximately 250 noble houses. This suggests that the noble population of the county might easily have counted more than thousand individuals on a given moment, while recent research suggests that the social network size of a human individual is biologically limited to something close to 150 individuals<sup>7</sup>. As such, nobles may also have needed markers of noble ancestry, as there were too many of them to know the entire

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<sup>5</sup> F. BUylaert, *Eeuwen van ambitie. De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*, Brussels, 2010 (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België. Klasse der Letteren), chapters 1 and 2 (in press) and S. OSTKAMP, “Symbolen van huwelijk en familie op de materiële cultuur van de hoogste adel (ca. 1400-1525)”, in P. Woltering, W. Verwers & G. Scheepstra, eds., *Middeleeuwse toestanden. Archeologie, geschiedenis en monumentenzorg*, Amersfoort, 2002, p. 305-37.

<sup>6</sup> GHENT STATE ARCHIVE, “Fonds Moerman d’Harlebeke,” nr. 1164.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular S.G.B. ROBERTS, R.I.M. DUNBAR, T.V. POLLET & T. KUPPENS, “Exploring variation in active network size: constraints and ego characteristics” *Social networks*, vol. 31, 2009, p. 138-46.

nobility on a personal basis. The importance of the propagation of noble descent was also explicitly recognized by Erasmus van Brakel, lord of Varembeke (° 1532), a Flemish nobleman who wrote a history of his own house at the dawn of the Dutch Revolt. He consciously included descriptions of the typical landmarks of the memorial culture of the noble houses of Flanders, because he deemed it to be the best line of defence against the increasing devolution of nobility by ambitious commoners he perceived in his time.

*Combien que pour le jourd'hui voyons l'estat de la noblesse par nonchalantes et mauvaisses conduits tant bas et derrye que a grandt peyne en on le puisse decerner du mechanicque et que samble quasi a ung chascun estre licite de suggerer es rancx des nobles, se forger des armes et sa poste, usurper et rober secretement leurs privileges. Ce neantmoins ce doit estre chose bien agreable a tout homme aymant la vertu de ses predecesseurs, de trouver par les histoires conservees leurs preudhommes, de veoir les eglises parees de leurs belles sepultures, et anchiens lettres et inscriptions et les fenestres remplus de leurs quartiers et alliances, d'autant que de nous mesmes. Samblons naturellement estre inclus a cognoistre et estimer les faicts nobles, vies exemplaires, dictes, et aultre choses notables des Grecqz, Romains ou autres nations estrangieres, pourquoy a plus forte raison ne conserverons nous les exemples domestiques advenus es personnes de noz anchestres propres. Lesquels nous propose la presente deduction, genealogie ou histoire de la maison de Courtreij, et nous monstrent a l'oeil de degre en degre l'affection que les personaiges de ladite maison ont tousiours eult envers nostre religion Catholique par leurs fondations d'abbayes, cloystres, cappelryes, messes, anniversaires etc. Item leurs faicts d'armes, alliantes et plusieurs autres actes et exemples nobles dignes de recit pour leur posterite. Ilz declairent assés a leurs continuelz portages faicts a leurs descendants passe d'eulx rend aux successivement jusques au jour present 1569 le vertueux song qu'ilz ont eult de conserver leur maison et maintenir leurdites hoir et successeurs en toute paix, union et concorde ...*<sup>8</sup>

In short, the memorial culture that focused on the expression of noble ancestry must have been of paramount importance for the public perception of an individual or a family as being part of the established nobility. However, as ancestry was pivotal to noble status, nobles and would-be nobles often succumbed to temptation, and tried to provide themselves with a more glorious past. The cultural framework of nobility included by definition a highly functional approach towards the past<sup>9</sup>. Erasmus van Brakel, for example, wrote his rather bulky work to depict his own family as a continuation of the house of Courtroisin, an highly aristocratic family extinct in the early fifteenth century (referred to in the quotation as "*la maison de Courtreij*"), a claim that seems to deserve utmost caution<sup>10</sup>. However – and that is the key contention of this article – it would be a mistake to interpret such embroideries or falsifications as the isolated actions of particularly vain individuals or unusually successful social climbers<sup>11</sup>. Instead, they must be seen as the exponents of a structural characteristic of the premodern nobility that continues to exert substantial influence on the present-day historiography on the Late Medieval Low Countries.

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<sup>8</sup> GHENT CITY ARCHIVE, "Fonds Familiepapieren," uncatalogued annex to nr. 800, fol. 34 r.- 35 r.

<sup>9</sup> For a theoretical introduction to this issue, see in particular J. FENTRESS & C. WICKHAM, *Social memory*, Oxford, 1992, p. 25-6, 47-51, 51-59 and 87-126.

<sup>10</sup> See in particular A. VAN CAUTEREN, "De heerlijkheid Brakel," in *Het Land van Aalst*, vol. 11, 1959, p. 85-119.

<sup>11</sup> In this respect, it is typical that some scholars tend to speak of the emergence of the so-called field of "impostor studies." P. BURKE, "Performing history : the importance of occasions," in *Rethinking History*, vol. 9, 2005, p. 40.

It is important to appreciate that there was a field of tension between the noble ideology of ancestral remembrance and the social reality of nobility. In the later Middle Ages, the nobility set so much store by noble ancestry that they very often cultivated the ideological fiction that being noble was strictly a matter of being born into a noble house<sup>12</sup>. They were supported in this attitude by scholarly treatises, in which the nobility was often defined as the group of families that had been both blessed and burdened with the duty to assist the prince in the governance of the realm since the divine ordering of human society<sup>13</sup>. As such, the nobility as a social group were portrayed as eternal and unchanging, while its composition was in fact in perpetual flux. A noble house could migrate, lose its noble status because of impoverishment or die out through lack of male heirs to continue the name. The nobility of Late Medieval Flanders, for example, tended to lose on average 14 percent of its members per quarter century. As a social institution, the Flemish nobility did not disappear because its ranks were constantly replenished by the immigration of nobles and the ennoblement of commoners, but the overall rate of renewal should not be underestimated. Of the approximately 255 Flemish noble houses at the end of the fifteenth century, only 106 had belonged to the Flemish nobility in the second half of the fourteenth century (41,6 percent) and only 27 noble houses could retrace their lineage to the nobility of twelfth-century Flanders (10,6 percent)<sup>14</sup>.

For all that nobles tended to stress the immutability and the antiquity of the nobility of their own day, contemporaries were fully aware that the nobility was not immune to social mobility<sup>15</sup>. Of course, no-one was as aware of the historicity of the nobility as those who tried to join its ranks, or who had recently succeeded in doing so. Those families were confronted with a particular challenge, as they had to carve out a place in the collective memory as an established noble house to secure the recently obtained social promotion for future generations. The apex of ennoblement was to inscribe the family name in the pantheon of families whose reception in the noble order was lost in the mists of time. In a cultural setting in which nobility was usually defined as a form of social superiority rooted in bloodlines, an ennobled commoner was something close to a contradiction in terms. Albeit a social reality, it was also to a certain extent an ideological impossibility<sup>16</sup>. In this setting, many nobles and would-be nobles were structurally pushed towards a highly aggressive memorial strategy so that other nobles would not consider them as upstarts and to convince lower strata in society to accept their social ascendancy as a given.

As the example of Late Medieval Flanders shows, the majority of the nobility at any given moment could only retrace that position within this social elite for two or three generations. Whether those families had joined the Flemish community of nobles by immigration or by ennoblement, they always had to conquer and cement a place in public consciousness as one of

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<sup>12</sup> E. PERROY, "Social mobility among the French *noblesse* in the later Middle Ages," in *Past and Present*, vol. 23, 1962, p. 36 and Ph. CONTAMINE, "France at the end of the Middle Ages: who was then the gentleman?," in M. Jones, ed., *Gentry and lesser nobility in late medieval Europe*, New York, 1986, p. 211-2.

<sup>13</sup> K. SCHREINER, "Religiöse, historische und rechtliche Legitimation spätmittelalterlicher Adels Herrschaft," in O.G. Oexle & W. Paravicini, eds., *Nobilitas. Funktion und Repräsentation des Adels in Alteuropa*, Göttingen, 1997, p. 376-430

<sup>14</sup> BUYLAERT, *De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*, op.cit., chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> K.B. MCFARLANE, *The nobility of later medieval England*, Oxford, 1973, p. 145-6 and J.S. BOTHWELL, *Falling from grace: reversal of fortune and the English nobility*, Manchester - New York, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> See also P. JANSSENS, *L'évolution de la noblesse belge depuis la fin du Moyen Age*, Brussels, 1998, p. 496. An exception was of course the uncontested right of princes to grant noble status to commoners. However, recent scholarship is inclined to think that its impact on the social renewal of the nobility was still rather modest in the later Middle Ages. See in particular G. FOUQUET, "Zwischen Nicht-Adel und Adel. Eine Zusammenfassung," in K. Andermann & P. Johanek, eds., *Zwischen Nicht-Adel und Adel*, Stuttgart, 2001, p. 432.

those families of whom it was “known” that they belonged to the nobility. Far from being isolated anomalies, activities that pushed or transgressed the accepted boundaries of the memorial culture of Late Medieval elites were intrinsically connected with the highly fluid nature of the premodern nobility. As the composition of the nobility was subject to a considerable rate of renewal, historians ought not to underestimate the considerable social agency that underpinned the anchoring of the nobility in collective consciousness.

This memorial practice deserves our attention not only for its obvious importance for the definition of the nobility as a social group, but also for other themes. The highly functional attitude of nobles towards the past was so firmly ingrained into their memorial culture, that it exerted considerable influence on the written sources for the history of the Late Medieval Low Countries. I will illustrate the functioning of those memorial power plays and their impact on present-day historiography with a case study, namely the so-called *Chronicle of the county of Flanders*, written by the nobleman Nicolas Despars in the second half of the sixteenth century.

## **2. In death as in life: the propagation of status by a sixteenth-century nobleman**

The “*Cronijke van den lande ende graefschape van Vlaenderen*” was composed between 1562 and 1592 and consists of two volumes covering the history of Flanders from 405 to 1492<sup>17</sup>. Despite the considerable time gap between its redaction and the described events, this work is frequently used as a source for the history of Late Medieval Bruges, the hometown of its author, and to a lesser extent for the entire county of Flanders. This is remarkable, as Nicholas Despars never had the ambition to write an original chronicle. Instead, he only wanted to provide an abridged translation of a very old and extremely protean historiographical tradition, the so-called “*Flandria Generosa C.*” The origin of this tradition is a history of the county of Flanders that came into existence in the 1260s and which would enjoy a remarkable popularity. In consequence, various adaptations and continuations of the original chronicle had cropped up in the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth century<sup>18</sup>. When he took up his pen on the first of October 1562, Nicholas Despars intended to provide a synthesis in Dutch of the three important offshoots of this historiographical tradition available to him<sup>19</sup>. The first one had appeared in print in the preceding year, namely the “*Annales Flandriae*” of Jacobus Meyerus († 1552), a parish priest and schoolmaster for young noblemen in Bruges. In fact, as Nicholas Despars had been born in 1522 and undoubtedly attended school in Bruges before he left in 1539 for the University of Louvain to obtain a law degree, he may very well have been a former pupil

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<sup>17</sup> The location of Despars’ manuscript is currently unknown. The only available edition is of a rather poor quality, but supposedly based on the original manuscript. J. DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke van der lande ende graefschape van Vlaenderen (405-1492)*, Bruges-Rotterdam, 1840-1842, 4 vols. According to the editor, the first volume consists of 375 folios and covers the period 405-1482, while the second volume covers the period 1482-1482 in 139 folios.

<sup>18</sup> See A. KELDERS, “De geschiedenis van Vlaenderen herzien en aangevuld. Recyclage en tekstuele innovatie in de laatmiddeleeuwse Flandria Generosa-kronieken,” in *Milennium*, vol. 19, 2005, p. 157-60.

<sup>19</sup> As Nicholas Despars described it himself in his introduction: ‘... toverlezen ende confereren van alle die latijnsche, walsche en vlaemsche Cronijcken, gheprent ofte gheschrevene, die ic yewers hebbe connen ghevindene, eenichsins van dier materie sprekende ofte vermanende, ende hebbe daer uyt met grooter aerbeyt ende diligentie [...] ghetrocken ende by een ghebrocht ...’ (DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., I, p. ii. For an extensive analysis of the sources of this chronicle, see V. FRIS, “La Cronyke van den lande ende graefschape van Vlaenderen de Nicolas Despars,” in *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis/Bulletin de la Commission Royale d’Histoire*, vol. 70, 1901, p. 545-65.

or acquaintance of Meyerus<sup>20</sup>. The second source of Despars' chronicle concerned the printed edition of the "*Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen*," a Dutch version written by the Bruges rhetorician Anthonis de Roovere († 1482)<sup>21</sup>. Last but not least, Despars relied on a highly informative continuation written between 1482 and 1492 by Rombout de Doppere, a Bruges canon. As most expressions of the "*Flandria Generosa C*"-tradition end in 1477, Despars had to rely largely on De Doppere's description of the civil war that had torn the county of Flanders apart in the 1480s<sup>22</sup>.

The continued relevance of the sixteenth-century synthesis of Nicholas Despars for historians of Late Medieval Flanders is, first and foremost, rooted in the fact that only fragments survive of the original eyewitness account of Rombout de Doppere<sup>23</sup>. In consequence, historians have to rely largely on the paraphrases provided by Despars. Secondly, Nicholas Despars seems to have used his highly privileged position in late sixteenth-century Bruges to consult the archives of various political and cultural institutions while writing his chronicle, regularly interspersing his synthesis of the older chronicles with information from archival sources. As much has been lost since Despars' death, his *Chronicle of the county of Flanders* contains unique information on various aspects of the social and political organisation of fifteenth-century Bruges. However, caution is needed while mining this data. Its inclusion in his chronicle was not only inspired by a humanistic interest in the past, but also by an ardent desire to fixate the august position he and his family enjoyed in Bruges society.

Despars' chronicle was at the heart of his self-image, as can be seen from his epitaph. After his death in 1597, he was interred in a conspicuous elevated tomb, situated in an alcove next to the altar of the chapel of the almshouse of Our Lady of the Pottery in Bruges, of which he had been tutor from 1580 onwards (see Annex 1). It is very likely that the tomb, the gisant and its epitaph are of Nicholas' own design: the monument was erected by the executors of his testament and it was customary in this period to include instructions for one's funeral and grave when writing a will. As funerary monuments of the elite were usually situated in the public space that was a church, it provided an individual with one last chance to profile oneself vis-à-vis the community in which one had lived<sup>24</sup>. Nicholas Despars fully exploited this opportunity, as illustrated the huge cost of his marble tomb; more than 48 lb.gr. To set this figure in context, at that time, an estate of 57 ha. fetched an annual lease sum of 78 lb.gr.<sup>25</sup>. The Neo-Latin epitaph which Nicholas composed to inscribe himself in the collective consciousness of posterity, reads as follows:

<sup>20</sup> For his registration as a student at the university of Leuven, see A. SCHILLINGS, ed., *Matricule de l'université de Louvain. IV. Février 1528 – Février 1569*, Brussels, 1961, IV, p. 199.

<sup>21</sup> J. OOSTERMAN, "De *Excellente cronike van Vlaenderen* en Anthonis de Roovere," in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, vol. 118, 2002, p. 22-38. This chronicle was first printed in 1531.

<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of Despars' views on the civil war, see J. HAEMERS, "Un miroir à double face: les chroniques de Jean Molinet et de Nicolas Despars. La lutte discursive entre centralisme et constitutionalisme dans le cadre de la révolte brugeoise de 1488," in *Le Moyen Age*, vol. 116, 2010 (in press).

<sup>23</sup> See J. DE MEY, "Doppere (Rombout de)" in *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek*, vol. 16, 2002, p. 301-5.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of the use of testaments in the later medieval Low Countries, see P. GODDING, *Le droit privé dans les Pays-Bas du 12<sup>e</sup> au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Brussels, 1987, p. 377-401. For the practice of including instructions on one's funerary monument in the testament, see also M. BOONE, "Un grand commis de l'État burgundo-habsbourgeois face à la mort: le testament et la sépulture de Pierre Lanchals (Bruges, 1488)," in F. Daelemans & A. Kelders, eds., *Miscellanea in memoriam Pierre Cockshaw (1938-2008). Aspects de la vie culturelle dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux (XIV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Brussels, 2009, p. 84-5.

<sup>25</sup> OCMW-ARCHIVE BRUGES, "Fonds Sint-Janshospitaal, F. Pachtresoluties", nr. 1 (1607-1617) The expenses pertaining to Despars' tomb are partially published in W.H.J. WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," in *La Flandre. Revue des monuments d'histoire et d'antiquités*, vol. 2, 1868-1869, p. 390.

*Hic iacet nobilis vir Nicolaus Despars  
Filius Cornelij literis et armis  
Clarus Reipublicae Brugensis strenuus  
Fautor iustitiae et aequitatis observator  
Nec non antiquitatis indefessus  
Indagator pariterque huius  
Xenodochij curator qui obiit Anno  
A Nativitate Domini M.D.XCVII  
Die XX mensis novembris*

Here lies the nobleman Nicolas Despars,  
son of Cornelis; illustrious with sword and pen;  
vigorous dispenser of justice  
and equity in the republic of Bruges;  
indefatigable investigator of the past;  
tutor of this almshouse; who died on  
the 20<sup>th</sup> day of November in the year  
of Our Lord 1597

This is heady stuff in modern eyes and it is more immodest than the description he provided in his chronicle (there, he limited himself to '*Nicolaes Despars, poortere ende inboorlinck der stede van Brugghe, bacelier in die rechten*'), but it is certainly not out of step with the funerary practices of the sixteenth-century nobility. First and foremost, Nicholas presented himself as a nobleman. Not having a knightly title, he could only claim the term of address '*ioncheer*' (esquire)<sup>26</sup>. In the epitaph, he explicitly described himself as '*nobilis vir*.' Next to this, Nicholas was keen to show that he had the necessary noble credentials. As did many of his noble contemporaries, he stressed the patrilineal conception of nobility in his epitaph by mentioning his father, Cornelis Despars († 1537). Nicholas' tomb also showed his four heraldic quarters with the shields of the families Despars – Strabant – De Louf – De Costere (respectively his own family, that of his mother, paternal grandmother and maternal grandmother, the latter belonging to an old noble house), as well as his device "*Tout vient Despaers*." With this epitaph and the accompanying heraldic programme, Nicholas Despars displayed the affinity with noble parentage typical for fifteenth and sixteenth-century nobles. In fact, many nobles deployed more aggressive strategies to propagate their social status. By the turn of the sixteenth century, examples are known of men and women who deployed not four, but sixteen heraldic quarters in their funerary monument to stress their belonging to the marriage networks of the established nobility<sup>27</sup>.

Because of that particular stress on noble kinship, nobles usually included their spouses in the epitaph, even if they were buried at different locations. However, Nicholas' epitaph does not mention any of his three marriages. He certainly did not refrain from doing so because of marital strife or indifference. The elaborate dedication of his chronicle to his first wife, Anne van Avezoete-Claeysson, suggests that they were bound by a strong mutual affection<sup>28</sup>. It is also unlikely that there was a problem of misalliances. There is evidence to suggest that his first wife, whom Nicholas married in 1549, was a noblewoman. Anne van Avezoete-Claeysson did not belong to a family that was already noble in the fifteenth century, but her father had somehow acquired the lordship of Ryckvelde (an estate near Sijsele, approximately five kilometres from Bruges) and her mother was Anne de Baenst, a scion of one of the oldest and most high-ranking noble houses of Late Medieval and sixteenth-century Bruges<sup>29</sup>. Nicholas' third wife, Catherine van Zomergem, whom he married

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas received this title of address on a commemorative panel that accompanied the tomb. WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 391 (footnote 54).

<sup>27</sup> S. BOSSUYT, "Dood en begraven. De mogelijkheden van middeleeuwse grafinscripties in het historisch onderzoek," in *Trajecta*, vol. 10, 2001, p. 105-6.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Despars addressed her as '*mijn zeer lieve ende wel beminde huysvrouw*.' DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., I, p. i-iii.

<sup>29</sup> For a synthesis of the available data on the Claeiszone family, see J. DUMOLYN, *Staatsvorming en vorstelijke ambtenaren in het graafschap Vlaanderen (1419-1477)*, Antwerp-Apeldoorn, 2003, biographical file on cd-rom 'Claeiszone, Omaer.' For Anna de Baenst, see F. BUYLAERT, "Sociale mobiliteit bij stedelijke elites in

After the death of Anne van Avezoete in 1570, Nicholas Despars had married with Anne de le Duely. Little is known of her, except that she was the daughter of a secretary of William of Orange, the high nobleman who led the opposition against Philip II of Spain from 1564. As such, this marriage is indissolubly connected with the ambiguous position of Nicholas Despars in the Dutch Revolt. Following the footsteps of his forebears who regularly sat on the Bruges bench of aldermen from the end of the fifteenth century, Nicholas started a career in urban politics in 1548. In the first years, he was a background figure, but he came to the fore in March 1578, when the city of Bruges was conquered by William of Orange. Nicholas Despars now became the first of the so-called “Council of Eighteen,” an interim government that allowed protestant worship in Bruges. In April, he was appointed commander of the urban militia and in September, he became burgomaster of the new bench of aldermen. However, it is important to appreciate that Despars was not a revolutionary. The new governance did not consist of diehard protestants<sup>33</sup>. Some members were Catholic, among which Nicholas Despars, who refers in his chronicle to a personal pilgrimage to Rome<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, the new regime did not openly disavow its allegiance to the Habsburg monarchy, instead trying to reconcile Philip II with the opposition. Nicholas himself was not a full-blown rebel but he must have been highly critical of the Habsburg policy, as he frequently included veiled barbs on autocratic princes in his *Chronicle of the county of Flanders*<sup>35</sup>. Overall, the religious and political leanings of

<sup>35</sup> A typical example is his judgement on the French king Louis XI, whom he deemed to have pushed his nobles into a justified revolt in the 1460s by governing his kingdom ‘... *zonder tgoet advijs van zijne edelen yewers inne meer te respecterene, in zulcker wijs dat hy ze zelve in alder maniere zochte, deene voren ende dandere naer, alsints te suppediterene ende serf te maken, omme voorts te bet zijnen wille metten ghemeente te doene ende als een monarck alleene al tlant duere te dominerene, tal welcken fine hy van als nu diversche hertochdommen, graefscpen ende andere heerlicheden gheweldichlick themwaerts bleef houdende, jegahens alle rechten ende*



Nicholas Despars seem to have corresponded closely with those of William of Orange, who had become the leader of the opposition perforce and who did not excel in protestant zeal. Nicholas' second marriage within the entourage of William of Orange probably took place in this period to cement the contact between the Bruges regime and the rebels.

This ambiguous period ended in the last months of 1579, when the radical protestants seized power in Bruges and spurned all contacts with the Habsburg government. Nicholas, whose mandate as a burgomaster had ended in September 1579, refrained from further participation in the urban government until May 1584. At that moment, the city had surrendered to the Spanish armies, and Nicholas became burgomaster in the new city council. In the first years after the restoration of Habsburg rule in Bruges, protestant worship was still tolerated, but soon, the supremacy of Catholicism became more strictly enforced. Confronted with the Counter-Reformation, many Bruges protestants left for the increasingly independent and protestant northern provinces of the Low Countries<sup>36</sup>. When Nicholas Despars composed his epitaph shortly before his death in 1597, he must have thought it imprudent to refer to his marriage ties with William of Orange, who soon after his murder in 1584 became idolized as the first national martyr of the young Dutch Republic.

Given the stormy nature of the Bruges political arena, it is unsurprising that Nicholas Despars described his own career in rather general terms, claiming to have been a 'vigorous dispenser of justice and equity in the republic of Bruges' ("*Reipublicae Brugensis strenuus fautor iustitiae*"). However, there might be more to this phrase than a deft touch for political sensitivities. By stressing the judicial aspect of his many mandates as a Bruges councillor, alderman or burgomaster rather than its administrative side, Nicholas Despars also seems to have mobilized his political career to underline his noble status in his epitaph. The distribution of justice was a crucial element in the conception of nobility, as this particular form of social status was pre-eminently associated with seigniorial lordship. Above all, it seems to have been the possession of a seignior and the implied mastery over its inhabitants that set them apart from other large landowners<sup>37</sup>. However, Nicholas Despars did not possess a seignior (cfr. *infra*) and stressing that he had sat in judgement over the Bruges citizens for many years of his life must have been the next best thing. Contemporaries of course knew the distinction between the lordship of a village seignior and the exertion of justice as a part of a one-year mandate, but the frequent participation in the enforcement of the rule of law as a member of an urban magistracy seems nonetheless to have provided a certain association with nobility. The proclamations of the city of Ghent, for example, were in this period issued in the name of 'my noble lords aldermen' ("*van weghen mijne edele heeren schepenen*"), even if not every member of the Ghent city council was a nobleman in the strict sense of the word<sup>38</sup>.

In a similar vein, Nicholas Despars clearly wanted to stress his martial prowess. The effigy on his tomb shows him in full armour and he described himself in his epitaph as being highly skilled 'with sword and pen' ("*litteris et armis clarus*"). He was obviously referring to his captainship of the Bruges militia in 1578 and perhaps to earlier military service to the Habsburg dynasty. This was in keeping with the funerary monuments of many other sixteenth-century nobles. In the second half of

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*redenen ...*' The aristocratic opposition supposedly took up arms '*... ter conservatie ende ghemeener welvaert van der franscher republicque ...*' DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars. Cronyke*, op.cit., III, p. 564-5.

<sup>36</sup> E. STRUBBE, "Het verval van het protestantisme te Brugge na 1584" in *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge*, vol. 67, 1924, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> R. FOSSIER, "Seigneurs et seigneuries au Moyen Age," in *Seigneurs et seigneuries au Moyen Age (actes du 117<sup>e</sup> congrès national des sociétés savantes. Clermont-Ferrand, 1992)*, Paris, 1993, p. 14-5.

<sup>38</sup> F. BUYLAERT, *De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*, op.cit., chapter 6.

the sixteenth century, military service ceased to function as one of the cornerstones for the social composition of the nobility, but in an ideological sense nobility was still strongly connected to a military ethos<sup>39</sup>. From this perspective, underlining his military activities also contributed to the propagation of Nicholas Despars' self-image as a nobleman and a Bruges dignitary.

### 3. Redefining the house of Despars in the *Chronicle of the county of Flanders*

Although most elements of Despars' funerary monument were neither incomprehensible nor unusual for a sixteenth-century nobleman, one element was rather singular: his deliberate profiling as a historian. He had, as he put it himself in his epitaph, used his prodigal skill with the pen to study the past. There was certainly more at stake than showing his adherence to the Renaissance humanism that bloomed in Bruges in this period<sup>40</sup>. In fact, it was tied up with his elaborate strategy to guarantee his commemoration. This is made clear in his introduction of his chronicle, in which he expressed his intent to present his wife Anne van Avezoete-Claeysson with a work in which he would include all events pertaining to the history of Flanders which he deemed worthy to be remembered by posterity ("*wel weerdich van eeuwegher memorie*"). With this statement, Nicholas Despars continued a classical tradition in lay historiography. The leading chroniclers of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century Low Countries, such as Froissart, De la Marche, Monstrelet and so on, had considered it to be their main duty to conserve and promulgate the glory and honour accumulated by the various members of their aristocratic target audience for future generations. Despars not only adhered to this "memorial function of writing,"<sup>41</sup> but he also expressly inscribed himself in this nexus of remembrance when he dedicated his chronicle to his wife:

*... wel betrouwende in u, dat ghy die niet alleene met ghelijcker joonste ende affectie tmywaert ontfanghen ende menechwarf overlesen zult; maer boven dien ooc zeer zorchvuldelick bewaren te mijnder ghedinckenesse, indien u Godt almachtich langhere leven verleende dan my; latende die voort successivelick commen naer uwer aflijvicheit in die handen ende bewarenesse van Cornelis ende Jacques, onzer beeder kinderen, die welcke die almoghende Heere altijts bewaren ende bescermen wille van alle quaet, ramp ende ongheluck, verleenende hemlieden eenen goeden godvruchtighen voortganck ende perseverance in duechden*<sup>42</sup>.

... having good faith in you that you will not only accept [the chronicle] with equal affection and appreciation and read it many times over, but also keep it with utmost care for my remembrance if God would grant you a longer life than me; subsequently bequeathing it to the keeping of Cornelis and Jacob, our children, who God almighty will hopefully keep from all evil, disaster and unhappiness, granting them a good and pious development and perseverance in virtue.

As Nicholas Despars seems to have refrained from rewriting the first parts of his chronicle after the death of his first wife and two sons, his dedicatory introduction still testifies of his wish to be remembered by the surviving members of his family and his hope for a prosperous future for his

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<sup>39</sup> JANSSENS, *L'évolution de la noblesse belge*, op.cit., p. 109-10.

<sup>40</sup> See L. VANDAMME, ed., *Een stad vol boeken. Bibliotheken en leescultuur in Brugge in de 16de eeuw*, Bruges, 1998, and A. DEWITTE, "Leeslectuur te Brugge in de 16de eeuw," in *Biekorf*, vol. 98, 1998, p. 281-5.

<sup>41</sup> P.F. AINSWORTH, *Jean Froissart and the fabric of history. Thruth, myth, and fiction in the Chroniques*, Oxford, 1990, p. 70-3. See also F. BUYLAERT & J. DUMOLYN, "Beeldvorming rond adel en ridderschap bij Froissart en de Bourgondische kroniekschrijvers," in *The Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 123, 2008, p. 628-30.

<sup>42</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., I, p. iii.

children. However, much suggests that he wished not only to be remembered as a husband and father, but also as a social persona for the generations yet unborn.

It is clear that Despars had a far broader audience in mind for his chronicle than his own nuclear family. Despite his contention that he had started writing his chronicle because his wife had expressed the desire to read a history of Flanders in Dutch, he continued to work this project for another 22 years after the death of Anne van Avezoete-Claeysson in 1570. The explicit reference to his chronicle in the epitaph, further indicates that it circulated in the elitist networks of Bruges and the surrounding countryside to which Nicholas belonged. To retrace the reception of manuscripts is never easy, but in this case, it is quite certain that it was not strictly intended for personal pleasure<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, his chronicle was partially a vehicle to manipulate the public perception of himself as a nobleman, thus sharing to a considerable extent the purpose of his funerary monument. Historians usually assume that Despars' chronicle is a servile copy of Meyerus' work until 1477, only granting significance to his description of the civil war of the 1480s, but this view is too narrow<sup>44</sup>. The chronicle is interspersed with highly significant side remarks, clearly intended to convince the reader of the ancient nobility of the house of Despars and of Nicholas in particular.

In his chronicle, Nicholas Despars dealt with some delicate issues concerning his own noble status, the first of which was his lack of seigniorial lordship. He lived and died in the rather imposing castle Ten Berghe, approximately two kilometres north of Bruges<sup>45</sup>. However, contrary to what is often suggested, Ten Berghe was not a seignior<sup>46</sup>. In his epitaph, Nicholas did not refer to himself as 'lord of Ten Berghe,' while the use of this particular seigniorial title of 'lord of ...' was one of the most widespread elements in the funerary culture of the premodern nobility<sup>47</sup>. Also, when this property was acquired in 1485 by Nicholas' grandfather, Jacob Despars († 1500), it is not described in primary sources as a seignior, but only as a fief with a surface area of approximately 6,4 hectare in the parish of Koolkerke<sup>48</sup>. Last but not least, the sum of 120 lb.gr. paid by Jacob was far short of the usual purchase price for a seignior in fifteenth-century Flanders<sup>49</sup>. In short, Nicholas Despars' main estate was not a seignior and it never became one either. While a large feudal estate such as Ten Berghe undoubtedly conferred a considerable social pre-eminence to its owner, it did not entail any legal rights over its inhabitants as a seignior did. Therefore, it did not provide its owner with the aura of lordship, the cornerstone of noble identity. Indeed, the possession of a fief was certainly not

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<sup>43</sup> According to the editor's note (d. 1842), several pre-nineteenth century copies existed and the original showed signs of having been frequently copied (DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., IV, p. 539).

<sup>44</sup> See FRIS, "La Cronycke van den lande ende graefsepe van Vlaenderen," op.cit., p. 552. An exception to this opinion will be discussed later on in this article.

<sup>45</sup> WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 390.

<sup>46</sup> This estate is already described as a seignior in 1868-1869 by WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 376, a statement that is repeated in nearly every subsequent publication on Despars.

<sup>47</sup> J. DUMOLYN & K. MOERMANS, "Distinctie en memorie. Symbolische investeringen in de eeuwigheid door laatmiddeleeuwse hoge ambtenaren in het graafschap Vlaenderen," in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, vol. 116, 2003, p. 332-49.

<sup>48</sup> BRUSSELS STATE ARCHIVE, "Fonds Rekenkamers", nr. 17399, fol. 1 v., 101 v. and BRUGES STATE ARCHIVE, "Burg van Brugge", nr. 64, fol. 123 r. See also WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 376.

<sup>49</sup> Seigniories usually changed hands for a manifold of that sum. For some examples see J. DUMOLYN, "Pouvoir d'État et enrichissement personnel: investissements et stratégies d'accumulation mis en œuvre par les officiers des ducs de Bourgogne en Flandre," in *Le Moyen Age*, vol. 119, 2008, p. 80, 87-88.

exclusive to the nobility in Late Medieval Flanders<sup>50</sup>. Lewis of Rode, for example, who sold this property to the Despars family, was not a scion of an old noble house, as has been suggested<sup>51</sup>.

In fact, there probably was not even a castle when the Despars family came to possess Ten Berghe at the end of the fifteenth century. The feudal sources of the 1480s state only that there were buildings on the fief; little in the description of Ten Berghe hints at a fortified residence<sup>52</sup>. This seems to confirm the suggestion of Andries Van den Abeele that the edifice was little more than a stout hunting lodge on slightly elevated terrain<sup>53</sup>. In his chronicle, however, Nicholas Despars did what he could to provide his residence with a more glorious past. He made it the site of a fierce battle in October 1490, when the rebellious city of Bruges finally had to surrender by force to the Habsburg armies. According to Nicholas' narrative, the moated castle of Ten Berghe ("*tcasteel Ten Berghe*") had been garrisoned by the urban militia who succeeded in repelling no less than three all-out assaults by the enemy troops, only surrendering after the castle's destruction with artillery fire. Afterwards, so writes Nicholas, the castle was rebuilt by Jacob Despars (who had been absent during the siege) and subsequently inherited by Nicholas' father and older brother, before passing on to himself in 1569<sup>54</sup>. In reality, the presumed restoration of the castle to its former glory in the 1490s was probably the first construction on this fief of an edifice deserving of the name of castle. In sum, Despars depicted himself as the owner of a centuries-old castle of great military importance. Despite the fact that he did not own a seignior, Nicholas Despars now could claim a sense of lordship because of his mastery of a site of geopolitical concern to the city of Bruges.

Nicholas' ploy to boost the importance of the main residence of his branch of the house of Despars was not an isolated action. It was part of a larger strategy to project his own uncontested status as a nobleman back to the generations that had preceded him. His father gave him little qualms. Cornelis Despars († 1537) was undoubtedly considered a nobleman by the Bruges community in the second quarter of the sixteenth century<sup>55</sup>. The problems started with the generation of his grandfather. Jacob Despars, who had bought Ten Berghe in 1485, was certainly no nobleman. He, as well as the other male members of the Despars family in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, received the term of address of 'lord' ("*dheer*"), which was reserved for the noted patrician houses of Bruges who did not enjoy a noble status<sup>56</sup>. It expressed social prominence, while being clearly distinct of the 'my

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<sup>50</sup> See R. OPSOMMER, "*Omme dat leengoed es thoohste dinc van der weereit.*" *Het leenrecht in Vlaanderen in de 14<sup>de</sup> en 15<sup>de</sup> eeuw*, Brussels, 1995, I, p. 115, 142-3.

<sup>51</sup> This contention can be found in A. VAN DEN ABEELE, "Zes eeuwen Gruuthusehandschrift en zijn mogelijke eigenaars," in *Biekorf*, vol. 108, 2008, p. 205. However, the last known reference to a nobleman from the old house of Van Rode dates from the early fourteenth century (see M. VANDERMAESEN, "Le droit de livrée à la cour de Louis, comte de Flandre, de Nevers et de Rethel en 1331," in W. Blockmans, M. Boone & Th. de Hemptinne, eds., *Secretum scriptorum. Liber alumnorum Walter Prevenier*, Leuven – Apeldoorn, 1999, p. 291-306, which makes it highly likely that Lewis of Rode belonged to a homonymic family of Bruges commoners.

<sup>52</sup> A. RAMANDT, *Mottekastelen en adellijke residenties in het Brugse Vrije (1350-1500)* (unpublished M.A.-thesis Ghent University, 2008), passim and in particular p. 52-3.

<sup>53</sup> VAN DEN ABEELE, "Zes eeuwen Gruuthusehandschrift," op.cit., p. 205.

<sup>54</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., IV, p. 471-2.

<sup>55</sup> A. MAERTENS, *Onze Lieve Vrouw van de Potterie*, Bruges, 1937, p. 283 provides references to primary sources dating from 1545 in which the late Cornelis Despars was explicitly described as '*weledelen heer*.'

<sup>56</sup> This term of address of 'sheer' was also used in Jacobs epitaph. WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 376. Most epitaphs of the Despars family are published in J.-J. GAILLIARD, *Bruges et le Franc, ou leur magistrature et leur noblesse avec des données historiques et généalogiques sur chaque famille*, Bruges, 1857-1864, II, p. 460-71.

lord' used to address the nobility ("*mijn here*")<sup>57</sup>. The very first noble member of the house of Despars was Jacob's brother, Walter Despars († 1515), the great-uncle of the chronicler. Walter too was referred to as a patrician commoner in fifteenth-century sources, but in his epitaph, he is referred to as a knight, and *eo ipso*, as a nobleman. At an unknown date between 1505 and 1515, Walter Despars had acquired noble status by making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There, he had been knighted by the guardians of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In theory, this honour was reserved for pilgrims who were already noble, but many rich commoners also secured this highly desired title with a hefty donation<sup>58</sup>. Next to this, Walter was invited to join the knightly order of the king of Portugal, another honour that is meticulously included in his epitaph<sup>59</sup>.

The social promotion that Walter had secured shortly before his death in 1515 would not remain limited to himself. In the following decades, not only Walters own descendants, but also those of his two brothers John and Jacob came to enjoy a noble status. This redefinition of the entire extended family as a noble house in the early sixteenth century was undoubtedly facilitated by its economic and social profile. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century, the Despars family made its fortune in international commerce and brokerage and those activities required intense cooperation between family members. After the death of their father Marc Despars in 1477, the three brothers continued the family business. This included the founding in 1499 of the "*Compangnia Lixbone*," a trading company in which Jacob and Walter Despars clustered all their economic activities pertaining to the kingdom of Portugal. Next to acting as mediators for Italian and Portuguese merchants in the economic metropolis that was fifteenth-century Bruges, the Despars brothers specialized in the export of Flemish drapery and German artisanal commodities to Portugal, while importing Madeira sugar, olive oil, fruit and other things.<sup>60</sup> A telling illustration of the scale of their trading activities is the fact that Walter Despars owned an entire ship in 1505<sup>61</sup>. His admission to the knightly order of Emmanuel I of Portugal must be seen in this context. It was undoubtedly the profits from long-distance trade that allowed the various members of the Despars family to accumulate an increasing number of residences in Bruges and landed estates in the surrounding countryside<sup>62</sup>. Next to this, the family business promoted an intense cooperation between collateral relatives, as the trade route with Portugal required the secondment of some members in Lisbon, while others maintained the Bruges department of the Despars company. This did not preclude the occurrence of familial conflicts, but it contributed to a setting in which the entire family benefited from the ennoblement of one of its members<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> BUYLAERT, *De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*, op.cit., chapter 6.

<sup>58</sup> J. VAN HERWAARDEN, "Geloof en geloofsuitingen in de late middeleeuwen in de Nederlanden: Jerusalembedevoarten, lijdensdevotie en kruiswegverering," in *The Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 98, 1983, p. 409 and IDEM, "Pilgrimages and social prestige. Some reflections on a theme," in *Wallfahrt und Alltag in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Internationales Round-Table-Gespräch, Krems an der Donau 8. Oktober 1990*, Wenen, 1992, p. 68-70.

<sup>59</sup> WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 397-8. In a trial conducted before the aldermen of Bruges in 1504-1505, he was still described as "*dher Wouter Despars*" (Mus, "De compagnie Despars," op.cit., p. 71-2). This indicates that his ennoblement took place in the last decade of his life.

<sup>60</sup> MUS, "De compagnie Despars," op.cit., passim. For an introduction to the trade networks between Flanders and Portugal, see J. PAVIOT, *Les Portugais à Bruges au XVe siècle*, Lisbon, 1999, passim and IDEM, "Les Flamands au Portugal au XVe siècle (Lisbonne, Madère, Açores)," in *Anais de historia de Alem-Mar*, vol. 7, 2006, p. 7-40.

<sup>61</sup> MUS, "De compagnie Despars," op.cit., p. 71-2.

<sup>62</sup> Further research is in order. Many purchases are discussed in WEALE, "Généalogie des familles brugeoises. Les Despars," op.cit., p. 399-400 (footnotes 68-70), but this author consequently confuses fiefs with seigniories.

<sup>63</sup> For an extensive analysis of the functioning of the international trade network set up by the Despars family and the conflicts it often engendered, see MUS, "De compagnie Despars," op.cit., p. 45, 71-2, 89-90.

The changing perception of the entire Despars family, from wealthy commoners to nobles in Bruges society, was also enabled through the long-standing marriage ties with established noble houses. Given the importance of familial networks as a framework for international trade, it is unsurprising that commercial dynasties tended to intermarry<sup>64</sup>. The Despars family of the late fifteenth century cultivated marriage ties with the Metteneye family and the Van Aertrycke family. Both families not only belonged to the commercial and political elite of Bruges as early as the fourteenth century, but they had even joined the ranks of the Flemish nobility at the turn of the fifteenth century. When Walter Despars acquired a noble status in the first decades of the sixteenth century, his family had already belonged to the social networks of the Bruges nobility for nearly fifty years. As such, it is not surprising that the noble aspirations of this family were widely accepted by the various layers of society. In the sixteenth century, all three branches of the house of Despars would continue to cultivate marriages with other noble families<sup>65</sup>.

*Genealogical table 1: the house of Despars in Bruges up to and including the generation of Nicholas Despars († 1597).*

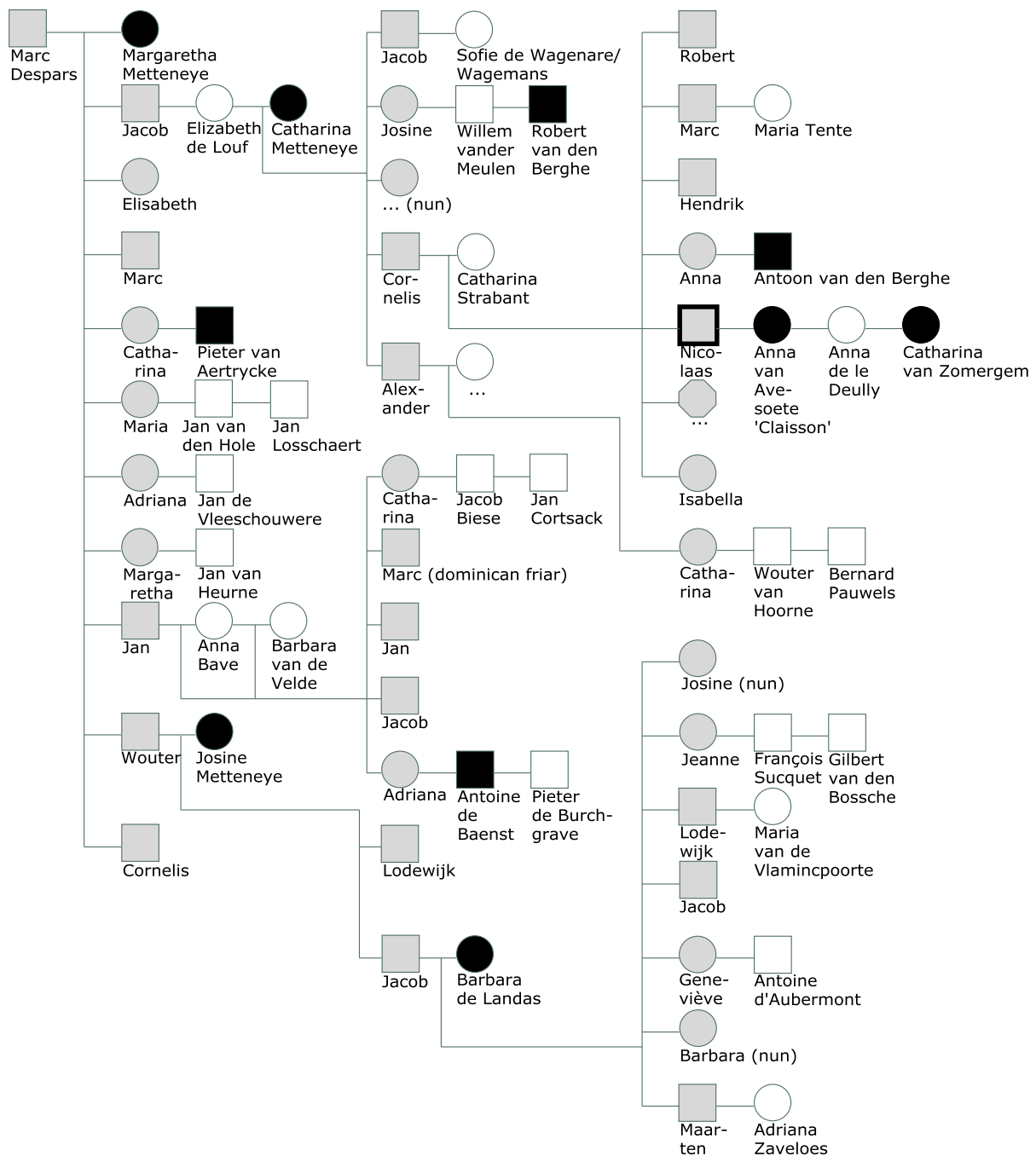
*The names are in Dutch (Jan instead of John, Walter instead of Wouter, and so on) and noble marriage partners are indicated in black. It should be noted that the social analysis of the marriage network is not exhaustive. Some marriage partners might have been noble, but further research is necessary. "Adriana Zaveloes" for example, the wife of Martin Despars, cousin once removed of Nicholas, might very well have been a member of the house of d'Aveluz, a noble family of sixteenth-century Bruges<sup>66</sup>.*

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<sup>64</sup> S. SELZER & U.C. EWERT, "Verhandeln und Verkaufen, Vernetzen und Vertrauen. Über die Netzwerkstruktur des hansischen Handels," in *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, vol. 119, 2001, p. 148-152.

<sup>65</sup> It should be noted that the commercial activities of the Despars family were not an impediment to obtain a noble status. The idea that commerce and nobility were incompatible (the French concept of 'dérogeance') seems to have been absent in late medieval Flanders (see BUYLAERT, *De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*, op.cit., chapter 3). Research is necessary to assess whether Nicholas himself was still active in commerce.

<sup>66</sup> This critical genealogy is based on the unpublished research of Ludo Vandamme (Stadsbibliotheek Brugge) and myself. For the Aveluz family, see BRUGES STATE ARCHIVE, "Fonds Brugse Vrije – Bundels," nr. 778, fol. 5 r.



Nicholas' pride in his noble status, so ostentatiously propagated in his funerary monument, must have been marred by the fact that his family had only joined the nobility shortly before his birth in 1522. In his *Chronicle of the county of Flanders*, he provided himself and his house with an alternate family history, in which the family had been noble for centuries. According to Nicholas, the progenitor of this ancient noble house was one Philibert Despars, a fourteenth-century knight, whose son Rombout, also a knight, died a hero's death in a battle near Tours in 1412 in service of John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy and count of Flanders (*regnabat* 1404-1419). One of Rombouts two sons, John Despars was supposedly married to the daughter of the high-ranking nobleman Michel de la Hamaide. His son would be Marc Despars († 1477), who fathered Jacob, John and Walter Despars,

the grandfather and grand-uncles of Nicholas himself<sup>67</sup>. The other son, master Jacob Despars, was supposedly the personal physician of king Charles VII of France (*regnabat* 1422-1461). Also, he appears in Nicholas' chronicle as one of Charles' most noble and trusted advisors:

*... in wedemaent zo zant die coninck van Vranckerijcke, die zevenste van dier name, vrou Cathelijne, zijn oudste dochtere, die bruydt van den jonghen grave Charles van Charloys, shertoghen Philips zuene van Bourgoengnen (ghelijck wy ghehoort hebben), met zeer veel edeldoms te Camerijcke waert, daer of dat die principaelste waren, die eertsbisscop Reynier van Riemen; die grave van Vendosme; die zuene van den hertoghe Charles van Bourbon, noch zeer jonck zijnde; Jacob Despars mer Rombouts zuene, docteur in de medecine, raedt sconinx ende upperste medecin; ende die vrouwe van Rutsefoort, tzamen vergheselscript met veel meer andre edelmannen, vrouwen ende joncvrouwen ...*<sup>68</sup>

'... In June [1438], the king of France, Charles VII, sent his eldest daughter, Catherine, the bride of the young Charles, count of Charolais and son of Philip, Duke of Burgundy (as I related before) towards Cambrai with many nobles, of whom the most prominent were: the archbishop Rainer of Reims; the count of Vendôme; the very young son of duke Charles de Bourbon; Jacob Despars, son of Sir Rombout, doctor in medicine, councilor and first physician of the king; and the lady of Rochefort; together with many other nobles and noblewomen ...'

Description of the return of Charles d'Orleans from English captivity in Calais in 1440: *... aldaer hem die voorzeide hertoghe van Bourgoengnen ende die hertoghinne zijn huysvrouw, metsgaders ooc eerdsbisscop Reynier van Riemen; die bisscop van Narbone; die grave van Dunoy; Jacob Despars filius mer Rembouts, docteur in de medecine, raedt ende medecijn sconinx van Vranckerijcke; ende meer andere edelen, gheestelick ende weerlick, zo blijdelick, hoofschelick ende minsamelick mencanderen onderlinghe welcommende, embrasserende, caresserende ende cusende ...*<sup>69</sup>

Description of the return of Charles d'Orleans from English captivity in Calais in 1440: ... he was welcomed [in Calais] by the aforesaid Duke of Burgundy and his wife, the duchess, the archbishop Rainer of Reims, the bishop of Narbonne; the count of Dunoy; Jacob Despars, son of Sir Rombout, doctor in medicine, councilor and physician of the king of France; and many other nobles and everyone greeted each other courteously and affably, embracing, caressing and kissing ...

Jacob Despars is not only expressly referred to as the son of a knight ("*filius mer Rembouts*", the "*mer*" being a Flemish term of address reserved for knights), but also as someone who belonged to the highest nobility of the French and Burgundian court of the early fifteenth century.

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<sup>67</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, III, op.cit., p. 231: '*... in der manieren dat mer Rombout Despaers, die zuene van Mer Philibert, zeer vaylgeantelick onder andere ter vesten doot bleef, ende wiert begraven te Stampes, int clooster van de Predickhaers, latende twee zuenen achter, te wetene: joncheer Jacob, toecommende docteur in de medecyne, metsghaders ooc caneuninck van Onzer Lieve Vrouwe te Parijs, ende caneuninck tresorier van Onzer Lieve Vrouwe te Doornijcke, die naermaels medecijn ende Raedt sconinx van Vranckerijcke bedeech; ende joncheere Jan, die te Doornijcke met Michiels dochter van der Hamayde huwde, daer Marck of quam, die vadere (by mer joncvrau Margriete Metteneye filia Wouters, zijne gheselnede) van Jacob, die by mer joncvrau Isabelle de Louf eenen zuene creech, ghenamt Cornelis, man van mer joncvrau Cathelijne Strabandt, ende vader van my Nicolaes, daer by mer joncvrau van Avezoete (ghezeit Claeysson) vervolghelick Cornelis ende Jacques of ghedescendeirt zijn.*' For the house of De la Hamaide, see P. VAN BUTSELE, "Het geslacht "de la Hamaide" of "vander Hameyden", heren van Ronse vanaf 1402," in *Annalen. Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Ronse en het Tenement van Inde*, vol. 29, 1980, p. 187-233.

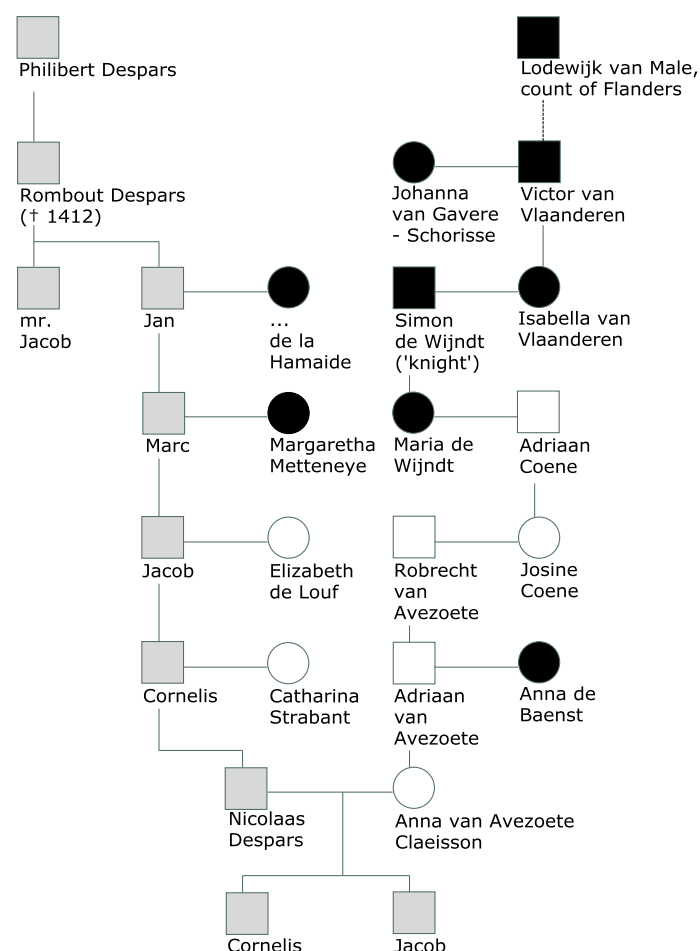
<sup>68</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., III, p. 419.

<sup>69</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., III, p. 426-7.



A similar strategy is deployed for Nicholas' first wife, Anne van Avezoete-Claeysson. Although Anne's father was the lord of Ryckvelde, her family was certainly not noble in the fifteenth century. Under Nicholas' hands however, the family van Avezoete-Claeysson came to trace its lineage to Victor of Flanders, lord of Wessegem († 1430), and Joan van Gavere-Schorisse, a daughter of one of the oldest and high-ranking noble houses of the county. Victor himself was a bastard son of Louis of Male, count of Flanders from 1346 to 1384 and father-in-law of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and heir to the county. In consequence, as Nicholas carefully points out, his own sons could claim that they descended from the old comital dynasty of Flanders<sup>70</sup>.

*Genealogical table 2: the ancestors of Nicholas Despars and Anne van Avezoete-Claeysson, according to the chronicle of Nicholas Despars. Marriage partners that are expressly indicated as being noble by Nicholas Despars are marked in black.*



At this point, it is clear that the *Chronicle of the county of Flanders* was used by Nicholas Despars to intertwine the history of his own family with that of the subsequent dynasties that had ruled the county in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. This allowed him to push the noble status of the families Despars and Van Avezoete-Claeysson no less than six generations back in time. Instead of being recently ennobled members of the sixteenth-century Bruges elite, both families appear in the

<sup>70</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., III, p. 114-5.

chronicle as established noble houses that could retrace their descent to the high nobility of fourteenth-century Europe.

Nicholas' assertions do not withstand critical scrutiny. Apart from the obvious attribution of noble status to all preceding generations, the provided genealogies are to a large extent fictitious. Firstly, the grafting of his wife's ancestors to the genealogy of the counts of Flanders is clearly an invented tradition. When Victor of Flanders died in 1430, his seignioriness fell to the prince, which makes clear that he and his wife had not produced any legitimate offspring<sup>71</sup>. Also, the family De Wijndt, which acted as a link between the princely dynasty and the family Van Avezoete-Claeysson was not noble, as Nicholas Despars would have it<sup>72</sup>. Nicholas' presentation of the Despars family tree also seems to have been a largely fictitious framework with some elements of truth. There was certainly a famous physician Jacob Despars who may have attended to king Charles VII. As this Jacob (° 1380 - † 1458/1459) was one of the leading medical scholars of his time and has occupied important positions at the University of Paris, his life is well documented. He was the personal physician of Michèle de France, the first wife of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, from 1420 to her death in 1422 and he was called to the sickbed of Philip the Good and various other members of the ducal family in 1427, 1435, 1437, 1443 and 1446. It is not unlikely that Jacob Despars combined those activities with a career at the French court, as he spent the last years of his life as a canon and university scholar in Paris<sup>73</sup>. Furthermore, Jacob did have a brother John, who fathered Marc Despars († 1477), the latter being the father of John, Jacob and Walter Despars, the founders of the three branches that constituted the sixteenth-century generations of the house of Despars (see table 1).

However, John was not married to a member of the noble house of De la Hamaide as Nicholas would have it. Instead, he was married to a certain Marie Aulette, a daughter of a rich family in the city of Tournai, a French episcopal city on the border with the Burgundian Low Countries. Indeed, the Despars family seems not to have originated in Bruges, but in Tournai at the end of the fourteenth century. The father of John and Jacob Despars was not the mythical knight Rombout Despars, but the merchant Coppart Despars († 1400) and Catherine de Holai. In the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth century, various members of the family acted as merchants in wine, herbs and spices - hence the medical orientation of one its members - and they usually married within the commercial and artisanal elite of Tournai. The Despars family was clearly already very wealthy in this period, but nothing hints at any social connections with the established nobility<sup>74</sup>.

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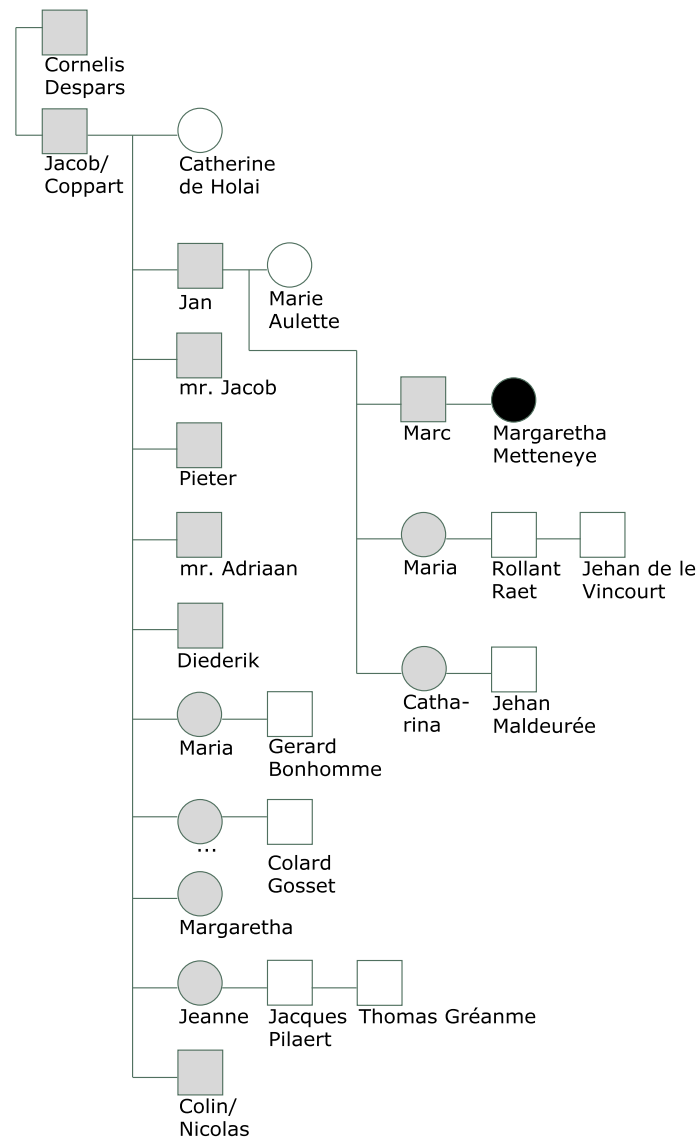
<sup>71</sup> A. VERHOUSTRAETE, "Leenroerig overzicht van Aalter," in *Appeltjes van het Meetjesland*, vol. 15, 1964, p. 224.

<sup>72</sup> This family is completely absent in the lists of Flemish nobility in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. See F. BUYLAERT, J. DUMOLYN, P. DONCHE, E. BALTHAU & H. DOUXCHAMPS, eds., "De adel ingelijst. "Adelslijsten" voor het graafschap Vlaanderen in de veertiende en de vijftiende eeuw," in *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis/Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, vol. 173, 2007, p. 47-187.

<sup>73</sup> The literature on master Jacob Despars and his writings is vast. See in particular E. WICKERSHEIMER, *Dictionnaire biographique des médecins de France (supplément par D. Jacquart)*, Genève, 1979, I, p. 326-7 and III, p. 134-5; R. BOSSUAT, L. PICHARD & G. RAGNAUD DE LAGE, *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises. Le Moyen Âge*, Paris, 1992, p. 731-2; M. SOMME, *Isabelle de Portugal, duchesse de Bourgogne. Une femme au pouvoir au XVe siècle*, Paris, 1998, p. 329-39, 352 and the source references provided by the *Prosopographia Curiae Burgundica (1407-1477)*, Id.nr. 0211 (accessible at the website of the Deutsches Historisches Institut Paris).

<sup>74</sup> P.-A. DU CHASTEL DE LA HOWARDERIE, "Les Despars à Tournai de 1380 à 1486," in *Annales de la société historique et archéologique de Tournai*, vol. 5, 1900, p. 138-54. This detailed reconstruction of the Despars family in Tournai is overlooked in nearly every subsequent publication on the Despars family.

*Genealogical table 3: the house of Despars in Bruges up to and including Marc Despars († 1477) and Margaret Metteneye, the founders of the Bruges branch of the Despars family. Marriage partners that belonged to established noble houses are marked in black.*



The integration of the Despars family in Bruges came with Marc Despars, who, in 1441, married into the Bruges house of Metteneye, a noble family of brokers and merchants. There, the Despars family continued its pursuit of wealth, power and status that would culminate in the adoption of the family into the political elite in 1474 and the eventual ennoblement of the Despars family in the early sixteenth century<sup>75</sup>. As Marc was the only male member of his generation, the Tournai branch of the family became extinct in the 1480s.

#### 4. Writing and rewriting the history of fifteenth-century Bruges

It is an important question whether Nicholas Despars himself consciously invented those elaborate genealogical constructions, or whether he simply put into writing the oral traditions that circulated within his own family and that of his first wife. Much suggests that Nicholas was not the one who

<sup>75</sup> BRUGES CITY ARCHIVES, Database of the Bruges political elite.

started this campaign to manipulate the public perception of the Despars family. His great-uncle Walter Despars, who had acquired knighthood shortly before his death in 1515, had already replaced the existing coat of arms of the Despars family (a unicorn) with a heraldic emblem that showed a striking resemblance to that of the Burgundian dynasty (see Annex 1 and 2).<sup>76</sup> Interestingly enough, this ploy caught the eye of Cornelis Gailliard († 1563), a noted herald and a fellow townsman of the Despars family. Since he spent his days with researching the history of the leading families of Bruges, Gailliard was aware of this shift in the heraldic practices of the house of Depars. In a manuscript probably composed in the 1550s, Gailliard voiced his contempt for the members of this particular family, who boasted wherever they came that they were of old noble stock, descending from the princely dynasties of Burgundy and Brittany.<sup>77</sup> This makes clear that Nicholas continued a family tradition when he took up his pen in 1562 to connect the history of his house with that of the ruling dynasties of Late Medieval Flanders. According to Gailliard, everyone was very much aware of the fact that it concerned a merchant family, but the highly successful integration of the Despars family in the marriage networks of the Bruges aristocracy as early as the 1440s, suggests that this herald stood quite alone with his disdain for their claim to nobility. Indeed, Nicholas Despars did not hesitate to integrate his views on his own familial history in a chronicle which he has undoubtedly circulated in a wider social sphere than his own nuclear family. This suggests that he must have expected it to be credible in the eyes of his target audience, that is, the upper classes of late sixteenth-century Bruges. The fact that he wrote his chronicle in the second half of the sixteenth century and that he used it to provide a new familial structure for his own family for the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, suggests that even for a group with an intense appreciation of ancestry, there were marked time-limits to the functionality of their social memory<sup>78</sup>.

Further research is necessary, but the Despars chronicle seems not to have been an isolated case in this respect. For example, a similar observation can be made for the family chronicle of John, lord of Dadizele (° 1432 - † 1481). The attempt of this Flemish nobleman to write a genealogy of his own house is extensive up to and including the generation of his own grandfather, but for the fourteenth-century history of his family, he could only provide a highly sketchy family tree, partially based on the epitaphs of the preserved funerary monuments of his house in the parish church of Dadizele<sup>79</sup>. In short, the collective memory of the established nobility was consistent for the present and the recent past, but in a long-term perspective, it was certainly not immutably fixed. Of course, one knew the most illustrious noble houses of old, but before one's own generation and that of one's parents, there was no such thing as an exhaustive recall of the composition of the nobility. This provided the families that had recently entered the nobility with the necessary latitude to redefine their public image.

<sup>76</sup> For the heraldic emblem of the Dukes of Burgundy, see R. LAURENT, *Les sceaux des princes territoriaux belges*, Brussels, 1992, I, p. 584-6.

<sup>77</sup> For a discussion, see P. DONCHE, 'Opmerkelijk commentaar van wapenheraut Cornelius Gailliard op het familiewapen Despars anno 1555', in *Vlaamse Stam*, vol. 45, 2009, p. 481-94.

<sup>78</sup> See in particular the concept of "*kommunikative Gedächtnis*" as defined in J. ASSMANN, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*, München, 1997, p. 29-37, which supposedly has an average time-limit of approximately 80-100 years, that is, three or four generations.

<sup>79</sup> For an outdated edition and translation, see C. CARTON, ed., *Mémoires de Jean de Dadizeele, souverain-bailli de Flandre, haut-bailli de Gand, capitaine-général de l'armée flamande, chambellan et maître d'hôtel de Maximilien d'Autriche et de Marie de Bourgogne, ambassadeur en Angleterre etc.*, Bruges, 1850, p. 146. See also J. HAEMERS, "Le meurtre de Jean de Dadizeele (1481). L'ordonnance de cour de Maximilien d'Autriche et les tensions politiques en Flandre," in *Publication du centre Européen d'études bourguignonnes (XIVe –XVIe s.)*, vol. 48, 2008, p. 227-48.

At this point, it should be noted that offensive campaigns such as this, to conquer a place in the collective consciousness as a noble house, often implied more than tampering with one's genealogy. Nicholas Despars, for example, not only tried to convey to his reader a highly flattering view of his family history, but he also provided an extremely coloured image of the elite of fifteenth-century Bruges. Next to the unique information Nicholas Despars provides on the Flemish civil war of the 1480s, his chronicle also continues to captivate the interest of historians because he is the primary source on the so-called Order of the White Bear, the urban jousts of fifteenth-century Bruges. The archives of the confraternity are lost, but Nicholas Despars seems to have used his privileged position in late sixteenth-century Bruges to consult those archives. This allowed him to intersperse his synthesis of the older chronicles with vivid descriptions of the annual jousts organised by the Order on the Bruges town square, with lists of names of jousts and eminent spectators<sup>80</sup>. In doing so, Nicholas Despars provides historians with precious insights in an important aspect of the social and political history of Late Medieval Bruges. Before it fell into disuse in the aftermath of the civil war of the 1480s, this jousting confraternity seems to have functioned as a focal point for the Bruges urban elite, as only scions of the most prominent families of Bruges were allowed to be members. The subsequent rulers of the fifteenth-century Low Countries often resided in their palace in Bruges and many highborn courtiers seem to have participated both as jousts and spectators. As such, the confraternity also played a pivotal role in the commensality of the Bruges magistracy with the Burgundian and Habsburg court<sup>81</sup>.

Nicholas Despars' attention for this jousting confraternity was not inspired by a disinterested fascination with the history of his hometown. His first goal was to stress the integration of the Despars family in the Bruges political elite. The first of the three sons of Marc Despars († 1477) to enter the city council was John Despars, who replaced a councillor who had died in office in 1474-1475. The first to serve a full term of office was his brother Walter Despars in 1479-1480. This political debut was closely connected to the Order of the White Bear. In April 1479, Walter had become the forester of the Order of the White Bear ("*forestier*"), the annually elected president who organized the Easter tournament of the confraternity. As a rule, the forester subsequently became an alderman or councillor when the new officers of Bruges took up office in September. Indeed, Walter served as first councillor of Bruges from September 1479 to August 1480<sup>82</sup>. As such, Nicholas' recurrent descriptions of the activities of the confraternity provided him with a precious opportunity to show the reader that the Despars family belonged to the very heart of the Bruges elite in the 1470s. The star role of Walter in the joust of April 1479 also conferred a special lustre to the house of Despars because of the active participation of Mary, Duchess of Burgundy and countess of Flanders (*regnabat* 1477 – 1482), and her husband, Maximilian of Austria.

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<sup>80</sup> See the discussion of Despars' chronicle in A. VAN DEN ABEELE, *Het ridderlijk gezelschap van de Witte Beer. Steekspelen in Brugge tijdens de late middeleeuwen*, Bruges, 2000, p. 13-6, 80.

<sup>81</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see amongst others P. ARNADE, "Urban elites and the politics of public culture in the late-medieval Low Countries," in M. Carlier e.a., eds., *Core and periphery in late medieval urban society*, Louvain–Apeldoorn, 1997, p. 41-6; E. LECUPPRE-DESJARDIN, *La ville des cérémonies. Essai sur la communication politique dans les anciens Pays-Bas bourguignons*, Turnhout, 2004, p. 199-210 and J. DUMOLYN, "De sociale en politieke communicatie tussen stad en hof in het Bourgondische Brugge," in B. Hillewaert & E. Van Besien, eds., *Het Prinsenhof in Brugge*, Bruges, 2007, p. 51-6.

<sup>82</sup> BRUGES CITY ARCHIVES, Database of the Bruges political elite.

*Dies nochtans niet jeghenstaende, zo vespereyde daer tsanderdaechs, in uytnemender triumphe ende magnificentie, die forestier Woutere Despars filius Marcx, hoewel dat men noch binnen den tweeden naervolghenden daghe geen steecspel en hielt, mids obsterende zekere pregnante redenen, omme de welcke Antheunis van der Vichte daer van schoutheetenschepe verlaten, ende Willem de Wintere in zijn stede ghestelt wiert. Twelcke also ghedaen zijnde, die forestier voorzeit quam swoensdaechs, den XXVIIIe van der maent als voren, int vulle harnasch, ter ghewoonlicker bane ter marct ghereden, met Jan van Doorne, Mattheus de Brouckere, Jacob de Vos filius Jacobs, Jacob dHeere filius Jacobs, Loys de Baenst filius Loys, Jan van Nieuwenhove filius Claeys, die burchmeestere van der course, Heyndrick, die grave van Werdenburch, ende Maximiliaen die eerdtshertoghe van Oostenrijcke, bedrivende daer onderlinghe zo omsprekelicke groote veel vaygiandise ende vromichede van wapenen dater hem niemende ghenouch of verwonderen en conste, al ter presentie ende jeghenwoordicheit van der hertoghinne Marie van Bourgoengnen, gravinne van Vlaenderen, die welcke met haren edelen staet in Cranenburch ter veynstere lach, presenterende int uytende zelve metter handt Loys de Baenst den spiet, die eerdtshertoghe Maximiliaen van Oostenrijcke, haren man, den diamant, die grave van Werdenburch den hoorne ende Jooris van Cannoot, over die van Damme, den beer, in al twelcke hem die ghementioneerde eerdtshertoghe Maximiliaen zo grootelicx verblijde ende verheuchde dat hy jeghens daechs daer naer weder ter zelve platse een nieu steecspel beriep, aldaer hy ontwijffelick uytnemende veel lofs ende prijs behaelde, niet jeghenstaende dater hem Woutere Despars (hebbende alsdoen een duvelshoofd up zijn helmet, ende alle die reste naer advenante) eens zo juste ende zo wel ten propooste rencontreerde als dat hy emmers foortselinghe wat achterwaerts over zijn peerdt hellen moeste, roupende metten zelve zeer hooghe ende lude: "Wat duvele es dat?" ten upsiene van den hoofde ende habijlgiente voorscreven ...<sup>83</sup>*

This vivid description of the tournament did more than stress the integration of the Despars family into the Bruges political elite. What is most striking is Nicholas' relish in describing how Maximilian was nearly unhorsed in his fear of Walter Despars and his devil-shaped helmet crest<sup>84</sup>. Apart from underlining the prowess of his great-uncle, it was probably also an indirect gibe against Philip II of Spain. Nicholas Despars greatly disapproved of Philips' actions in the Dutch Revolt and it is clear that he saw Maximilian of Austria not only as the great-grandfather of Philip II – Philips father, Charles V, was the son of Philip the Fair, Maximilians only son and heir – but also as his ancestor in a political sense. After the death of Mary of Burgundy in 1482, Maximilian of Austria had seized control over the Low Countries as the regent of their underage son Philip the Fair. The resistance of the Flemish cities against his autocratic rule was eventually crushed in the civil wars of 1482-1485 and 1488-1492<sup>85</sup>. Indeed, Nicholas did not hesitate to interpret the Flemish Revolt of the 1480s in his chronicle as an adumbration of the Dutch Revolt against Philip II<sup>86</sup>. In describing the confrontation between his own ancestor and Maximilian of Austria in the tournament of 1479, Nicholas seems to have succumbed to the temptation not only to call into question the political sense of the Habsburg prince, but also his personal courage. As qualities such as courage or cowardice were largely hereditary in the eyes of the nobility, Maximilians behaviour reflected badly on Philip II<sup>87</sup>.

<sup>83</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., IV, p. 184.

<sup>84</sup> It is confirmed by other sources that the two opposing parties of the joust of 1479 were dressed respectively as savages and devils. A. BROWN, "Urban jousts in the later Middle Ages: the White Bear of Bruges," in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, vol. 78, 2000, p. 325.

<sup>85</sup> For a general introduction, see W. BLOCKMANS, "Autocratie ou polyarchie? La lutte pour le pouvoir politique en Flandre, d'après des documents inédits, 1482 – 1492" in *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis/Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, vol. 140, 1974, p. 257–368.

<sup>86</sup> See HAEMERS, "Un miroir à double face," op.cit., passim.

<sup>87</sup> R.MKARRAS, *From boys to men. Formations of masculinity in late medieval Europe*, Philadelphia, 2003, p. 35-7.

Last, but certainly not least, there was also a social motivation in play to give such a prominent place to the Order of the White Bear in the *Chronicle of the county of Flanders*. Nicholas Despars may have disapproved of Habsburg policy, but he was simultaneously very proud that his house had shared its social activities with the rulers of the Low Countries. Nicholas used this to shore up the noble status of his family. In his hands, the Order of the White Bear became a confraternity that was exclusively for the nobility<sup>88</sup>. In doing so, he deployed another strategy to project the noble status of the Despars family back in the past, as it implied that Walter Despars was already adopted in a nexus of the established nobility in the 1470s<sup>89</sup>. In this respect, his focus on the Bruges jousting confraternity connects to his earlier descriptions of master Jacob Despars as a highly respected member of the court nobility of Charles VII of France and Duke Philip the Good.

Nicholas' view of the social composition of the jousting confraternity of fifteenth-century Bruges had a marked influence on historiography. The idea that it concerned a noble's club is still advocated in a recent monograph on the Order of the White Bear (published in 2000)<sup>90</sup>. However, in the past decade, several historians have provided an alternative interpretation. Instead of a noble bulwark, the jousting confraternity was a meeting point for the leading members of the Bruges patriciate who may have cherished the ambition of becoming noble, but who were mainly commoners<sup>91</sup>. This suggestion is convincing, as the establishment of a noble elite in Late Medieval Bruges was well underway, but not yet complete.

Fifteenth-century Bruges acted as a stage for a slow but steadily increasing number of extremely wealthy merchants and brokers who succeeded in joining the ranks of the nobility. This process was greatly enhanced through their frequent contacts with the Burgundian court in the annual joust of the White Bear. As the case of the Despars family shows, this did not stop in the sixteenth century. Over the course of two centuries, the social profile of the urban elite underwent a significant change. In 1363, there were approximately six noble families in Bruges, but in 1563, at least thirty noble families had their main residence in this city<sup>92</sup>. In this setting, it is understandable that Nicholas Despars was pushed towards an interpretation of the Order of the White Bear as a noble confraternity. Apart from his vested interest in doing so, he personally knew the descendants of the prominent jousting members as members of the established nobility of sixteenth-century Bruges. However, many of those families had only recently acquired that noble status in the later fifteenth or early sixteenth century. In short, Despars' use of his chronicle as a weapon in the battle for social prominence did not stop with rewriting the history of his own house. It also included a highly

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<sup>88</sup> DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., IV, p. 433-4: '... trudderlick ende zeer varre vermaert forestierscip der zelve stede, teeneghadere interrupt viel ende een ende nam, in stede van welcke edele ende princelicke exercitie nu ghesuccedeert zijn dobbelen, tuysschen, hoerejaghen, dronckedrincken ende veel meer andere dierghelicke brooloose consten, ja meer dan abominabele ende execrable abusen (God beteret!).'

<sup>89</sup> Nicholas Despars also explicitly described his great-uncle as a knight ("mer Wouter Despaers filius Marcx") when describing Walters participation to the tournament held in 1486, while he was only knighted after 1505 (cfr. supra). DE JONGHE, ed., *Nicolaes Despars: Chronycke*, op.cit., IV, p. 276-7.

<sup>90</sup> VAN DEN ABELE, *Het ridderlijk gezelschap van de Witte Beer*, op.cit., p. 59-65, 130-1.

<sup>91</sup> This opinion was first voiced by R. DE ROOVER, *Money, banking and credit in mediaeval Bruges. Italian merchant-bankers Lombards and money-changers. A study in the origins of banking*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1948, p. 188 and has recently gained more support. See J. DUMOLYN, *De Brugse opstand van 1436-1438*, Kortrijk-Heule, 1997, p. 118 and BROWN, "Urban jousts," op.cit., p. 320-4.

<sup>92</sup> See F. BUYLAERT, "La "noblesse urbaine" à Bruges (1363-1563). Naissance d'un nouveau groupe social?," in Th. Dutour, ed., *Les nobles et la ville dans l'espace francophone XIIIe – XVIe siècles*, Paris, 2009, p. 247-75.

distorted view on an important aspect of elite formation in Late Medieval Bruges that would enjoy a remarkably long afterlife.

## 5. Conclusions

Nicholas Despars' account of the history of the county of Flanders was clearly shaped by the social position of the author as a sixteenth-century nobleman. It was part of a multi-pronged attempt that ranged from chronicles to tombstones to elevate a family that had recently bridged the gap with the established nobility. As such, it not only provides a telling illustration of the energy and creativity with which nobles and would-be nobles tried to manipulate the public perception of themselves and their families, but also of its impact on various aspects of recent historiography of the later Middle Ages. It should not be doubted that sixteenth-century writers such as Nicholas Despars and Erasmus van Brakel are, in this respect, illustrations to the rule, not exceptions. The use of chronicles and family histories for such purposes was firmly ingrained in the genre<sup>93</sup>. The famous Flemish chronicler George Chastelain (° 1405 - † 1475), for example, added '*dict de Masmines*' to his name, to propagate the fact that his mother was a member of the august noble house of De Masmines<sup>94</sup>. Similarly, Mathieu d'Escouchy (° 1420 - † 1482), stressed in his *Chronique* that he was '*issu de par ma mere de noble generacion*'<sup>95</sup>. A last, rather entertaining example is provided by Jacob Marchantius, whose *Flandria Commentariorum* was published in 1596. In this, Marchantius usually ends his descriptions of the subsequent rulers of Flanders with lists of the Flemish nobles of that era, compiled from various primary sources of the period in question. This information was again integrated into a framework that served a private purpose. In the list for the reign of count Lewis of Male (1346-1384) he inserted a certain '*Robertus Marchantius, ob equestris ordinis ductam in uxorem filiam Principis illegitimam, fidemque et facundiam a Ioanne Froissarto historico celebratas*'<sup>96</sup>.

The manipulation of Late Medieval sources as displayed by Nicholas Despars, Erasmus van Brakel, Jacob Marchantius and many other contemporaries, was not limited to narrative sources. Many documents produced by the princely administration that pertained to the Late Medieval Flemish nobility are only preserved because they were frequently copied by sixteenth and seventeenth-century nobles and would-be nobles. Such figures used them in their attempts to convince society and the princely state of their noble ancestry, by interpolating their own family while copying those texts<sup>97</sup>. In short, our knowledge of the Late Medieval nobility and of many other related themes, are to a considerable extent shaped by the functional approach of premodern elites towards their own past. As such, much insight is to be gained by continued research in this theme. Most importantly, it must be noted that such performances of remembrance were not exceptional, but rather were rooted in the structural mutability of the nobility as a social group.

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<sup>93</sup> For a general discussion, see B. STUDDT, "Erinnerung und identität. Die Repräsentation städtischer Eliten in spätmittelalterlichen Haus- und Familienbüchern," in B. Studdt, ed., *Haus- und Familienbücher in der städtischen gesellschaft des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*, Böhlau, 2007, p. 1-31.

<sup>94</sup> G. Small, *George Chastelain and the Shaping of Valois Burgundy. Political and Historical Culture at Court in the Fifteenth Century*, Woodbridge, 1997, p. 10, 17-8, 22, 25, 27-8, 49.

<sup>95</sup> G. Du Fresne de Beaucourt (ed.), *Mathieu d'Escouchy, Chronique*, Paris, 1863, I, p. iii.

<sup>96</sup> J. MARCHANTIUS, *Flandria Commentariorum*, Antwerp, 1596, p. 258-60. The author probably belonged to the Le Marchant family from Namur, which eventually succeeded in joining the nobility. See X. DE GHELLINCK D'ELSEGHEM VAERNEWYCK, "Une famille de maîtres de forges au duché de Luxembourg. Les comtes d'Ansembourg et leurs châteaux," in *Le Parchemin*, vol. 225, 1983, p. 206 and P. JANSSENS & L. DUERLOO, *Wapenboek van de Belgische adel van de 15e tot de 20ste eeuw*, Brussels, 1992, II, p. 680-4.

<sup>97</sup> BUYLAERT e.a., eds., "'Adelslijsten' voor het graafschap Vlaanderen," op.cit., p. 56-75, 104-116, 149-50.



**Annex 1: The funerary monument of Nicholas Despars in the almshouse of Our Lady of the Pottery**



**Annex 2: Portrait of Nicholas Despars in the Bruges almshouse of Our Lady of the Pottery**



## **Abstract**

This article focuses on the issue of nobility as a memorial practice in the premodern era. It challenges the popular assumption that the nobility was largely defined by a shared social memory, that is, the collective remembering of which lineages were considered to have noble blood and who had supposedly mastered the noble lifestyle since time immemorial. In this contribution, it is argued that there was a structural field of tension between this noble culture of remembrance and the considerable rate of renewal in the social composition of the nobility. Noble ranks were constantly replenished by newcomers, who had to inscribe themselves in collective consciousness as a noble lineage. The case-study of Nicholas Despars, a sixteenth-century chronicler who belonged to a recently ennobled family of Bruges spice merchants, shows that historiographical writings were often used to influence the public perception of such families. Because this functional approach of premodern elites towards their own past often included the manipulation of archival records, the memorial practices of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century nobility has led to a distorted view on important aspects of late medieval society in recent historiography.

## **Samenvatting**

Dit artikel richt zich op adeldom als een herinneringspraktijk in de laatmiddeleeuwse en vroegmoderne periode. Hierbij wordt een kritiek geformuleerd op de historiografische opvatting dat de adel een elite was die in hoge mate werd gedefinieerd door de collectieve kennis van welke families van oudsher adellijk bloed hadden en de adellijke levensstijl cultiveerden. In deze bijdrage wordt betoogd dat er een structureel spanningsveld bestond tussen die adellijke herinneringscultuur en de snel wisselende sociale samenstelling van de adel, waarbij recent veredelde families zich actief als 'oude adel' probeerden in te schrijven in de publieke perceptie. Dit wordt geïllustreerd met een case-study van Nicolaas Despars, een zestiende-eeuwse kroniekschrijver die tot een veredelde handelarenfamilie uit Brugge behoorde en die zijn kroniek gebruikte om de statusaanspraken van zijn geslacht mee te verdedigen. Tot slot wordt betoogd dat deze functionalistische houding van vroegmoderne adellijke families tegenover het eigen verleden ertoe heeft geleid dat belangrijke bronnen voor het onderzoek naar laatmiddeleeuwse elites sterk vervormd zijn overgeleverd.

## **Résumé**

Cet article analyse la noblesse comme expression d'une mémoire collective à la fin du moyen âge et au début des temps modernes. Il existe un courant historiographique qui définit la noblesse comme une élite constituée par toutes les familles ayant une ascendance noble bien établie et qui ont maintenu de temps immémorial le mode de vie correspondant. Nous pensons qu'il convient d'insister plutôt sur la tension qui existe en permanence entre le souvenir d'une noblesse immémoriale et la recomposition sociale continue de la noblesse. Les nouvelles familles ont le souci d'acquérir au plus vite une patine ancienne auprès de l'opinion publique. Le cas de Nicolas Despars, un chroniqueur brugeois issu d'une famille de marchands anoblis, en offre un bon exemple. La rédaction de sa chronique lui offre l'occasion d'asseoir plus solidement les aspirations nobiliaires de la lignée dont il descend. En guise de conclusion, nous insistons sur le fait que le prisme au travers duquel les familles entrées dans la noblesse des temps modernes reconsidèrent leur passé a provoqué des distorsions notoires dans les sources dont nous disposons pour l'étude des élites de la fin du moyen âge.

**Keywords**

Social memory, historiography, elite history, nobility

**Sleutelwoorden**

“Social memory”, historiografie, elitestudies, adel

**Mots clés**

Mémoire collective, historiographie, histoire des élites, noblesse

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Frederik Buylaert (1981) a poursuivi des études en histoire médiévale et moderne aux universités de Gand, de Leiden et de Columbia (New-York), avant de soutenir sa thèse en histoire médiévale à l'Université de Gand en 2008. Couronnée par l'Académie de Belgique, cette thèse prenant pour objet la noblesse flamande au bas Moyen Âge a été publiée sous le titre '*Eeuwen van ambitie. De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*' (Bruxelles, 2010). Bénéficiaire d'un mandat du F.W.O.-Vlaanderen, il est collaborateur scientifique à l'Université de Gand. Il a publié plusieurs articles consacrés à la noblesse et aux élites urbaines et rurales des Pays-Bas bourguignonnes et habsbourgeoises dans des revues néerlandaises, anglaises et françaises.