Memories and identities in conflict: The myth concerning the battle of Courtrai (1302) in nineteenth-century Belgium

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Introduction

Recent research on the problem of collective identities points uniformly to the conclusion that the identity of a group is above all the product of a collective memory.¹ In the collective memory, factual history is transformed into myth; yet this transformation does not make history unreal. Quite the contrary, it thereby becomes reality, in the sense of a normative force. The group selectively takes possession of history and imbues it with meaning, in such a way as to create a fiction of continuity that serves the group’s self-definition.² It is not only the orally transmitted myths of non-literate societies that fulfil this function; even modern historical scholarship participates in the invention or construction of such identity-forming myths.³ In fact, it was or is one of the central functions of modern historiography to bridge the gap between the premodern and the modern, between the prenationalistic and the nationalistic world, and to provide continuity. Without the myth of a shared past, a shared origin, ‘golden age’, and its heroes, it is not possible for a nation or ethnic group to survive over a longer period of time.

History is essential for the self-definition of a community; it is an interpretation of the present projected into the past. History legitimates contemporary social structures and power relations – or calls them into question. The collective memory is therefore of the utmost political significance. Political sovereignty necessarily implies control over the collective memory of the governed.
Still, collective identities and memories in modern societies are not homogeneous and monolithic; instead, modern societies comprise a multitude of identities and memories. Their members do not exist in national relationships alone, but also in regional and local ones; they belong to specific classes, age groups, professions or trades, and linguistic communities; they have a world view and a sex. All of these distinctive features can lead to the formation of specific identities and corresponding memories—although they need not always do so. These intersecting multiple identities lead, at the level of society as a whole, to a battle over memory, to a dispute over the correct interpretation of history or certain historical events. I would like to sketch out this struggle concerning the collective memory using the example of the battle of the Golden Spurs, one of the central topics in Belgian and especially Flemish collective memory.

The battle occurred on 11 July 1302, before the walls of Courtrai in West Flanders. A substantial French unit of knights was, to the great surprise of all contemporaries, soundly defeated by the militias of the Flemish artisans and peasants. The Flemish victory was the definitive stroke in extinguishing the attempts of the French crown to annex the county of Flanders, which represented the most important centre of power in the buffer zone between France and the Holy Roman Empire—a fact which has crucially influenced the political geography of the Low Countries up to the present.

The story of the Golden Spurs as a national myth

It appears that by the eighteenth century the battle of the Golden Spurs had almost completely disappeared from the collective memory. Despite intensive research on this question, only the rudiments of a popular tradition could be found. The first efforts to revive the myth occurred during the union of the northern and southern Low Countries (1815–30), whereby it was hoped that the anti-French spirit of the topos could be utilized in the development of a greater Netherlandic identity. But since the citizens of the southern Low Countries refused to identify with the greater Netherlands, the old story from the fourteenth century met with little response from them.

But when Belgium became independent, the narrative of the battle of Courtrai came to play an important role in Belgian discourse about history and nationality. Shortly after 1830, the librarian of the University of Ghent, Auguste Voisin, became interested in the local historical research on the battle of the Golden Spurs that Jacques Goethals-Vercruysse, an
industrialist and local historian of Courtrai, was carrying out. In 1834 the two jointly published an essay about the battle; this then inspired the romantic painter Nicaise de Keyser in 1836 to produce a monumental battle scene of 1302, which in turn stimulated Hendrik Conscience, who up to that point had been quite unsuccessful, to use the material as the basis for a large-scale historical novel. Thus, in 1838 De Leeuw van Vlaanderen appeared, one of the most widely read books in Flanders, a real bestseller almost to the present day. This work had the flavour of Homeric epic, with the Flemish people heroically fending off attack by the French. With his work Conscience awakened in the Flemings, or, more specifically, in the Flemish middle classes, the consciousness of a glorious past and along with it a kind of Flemish patriotism, which was simultaneously firmly linked to Belgian nationalism. Conscience's novel created a whole complex of myths and symbols, with which the nascent Flemish movement strongly identified. Most especially it popularized the symbol of the Flemish lion, which is ever ready to defend its rights and its freedom and which for this reason became the emblem of the Flemish movement. De Leeuw van Vlaanderen contributed the motif for the Flemish anthem and for the Flemish flag.

Thus, Hendrik Conscience, his novel De Leeuw van Vlaanderen and the battle of the Golden Spurs became the symbolic point of departure of the Flemish movement. Yet this did not make Conscience an opponent of the unified Belgian state. On the contrary: he was an ardent Belgian patriot – and simultaneously a Flamingant. He fought the Gallicization of Flanders and championed linguistic parity for the Flemings; but he aimed to strengthen Belgian nationalism by doing so. In this way, he was a typical representative of the Flemish movement prior to World War I.

This fact can be understood only against the background of nineteenth-century discussion regarding Belgian nationality and history, whereby the medieval county of Flanders was interpreted as a precursor to modern Belgium. The national history of Belgium was mainly built upon the history of the county of Flanders, and Belgium was represented as the legitimate heir and successor to the medieval county. Flemish language and culture were also the only distinguishing features by which Belgium could set itself off culturally from France. Research into Flemish history and culture was therefore systematically encouraged by the Belgian government.

As a result, Henrik Conscience's efforts in this direction were fully rewarded by the Belgian government. Soon after De Leeuw van Vlaanderen appeared, Conscience was commissioned by the government
Conscience was particularly appreciated for the vehemently anti-French tenor of his works; this was especially evident in 1857, when Conscience was appointed county commissioner of Courtrai, because this town was ‘on the route of periodic invasions by the French’, as the official explanation for the appointment given by the Minister of the Interior put it; Conscience was to act as a symbolic stronghold against French aggression upon the historic battlefield of Courtrai.

Conscience’s depiction of 1302 was quickly followed by numerous imitations. A wave of poems, plays and novellas about ‘1302’ appeared. Many historical investigations attempted to reconstruct the exact course of the battle. At the same time, the description of the occurrences of 1302 took on a central place in accounts of Belgian history. The story of 1302 became stylized to one of the most important events in Belgian national history. Even in the monumental Histoire de Belgique by Henri Pirenne, the first volume of which appeared in 1900, the battle of Courtrai was still accorded great significance, since the victory of the Flemish militias had supposedly saved the county of Flanders from annexation by France and thereby left the way open for the later independent Belgium. In this perspective there was no contradiction between a Flemish and a Belgian interpretation of ‘1302’. Therefore in a public lecture held in 1902 in Ypres the Bruges priest and local historian Adolf Duclos invited all Belgians to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the battle and concluded his speech by shouting: ‘Heil aan onze Helden van 1302! Heil aan het onafhankelijk Belgenland! Leve de Koning!’ (Hail to our heroes of 1302! Hail to the independent land of the Belgians! Long live the king!)

The story of the Golden Spurs as a local myth

Besides its national significance, the myth of the battle of the Golden Spurs also had a decidedly local character. It was, after all, mainly because of the local historical research of Jacques Goethals-Vercruysse that the battle was discovered in the early 1830s. It was also certainly no accident that the idea of erecting a monument to the heroes of 1302 was conceived in the mid-nineteenth century in Bruges – the city in which the resistance to the French occupation had formed and which had enlisted the largest contingent of militiamen. The most elaborate festivities to commemorate the battle took place in 1902 on the occasion of the 600th anniversary, in Courtrai, on the historic battlefield, so to speak. Bruges
and Courtrai remained the only towns that raised monuments to the battle of 1302.

In Bruges the project of putting up a memorial to the Bruges heroes of 1302 – Jan Breidel and Pieter de Coninck – came into being in the late 1860s in connection with more extensive plans for the city’s economic and social development. The economy of Bruges was seriously depressed in the mid-nineteenth century; the economic heyday of the medieval Venice of the north was over and gone. More than a third of the inhabitants lived on charity. In this situation, among the Liberal-orientated wing of the petty bourgeoisie, initiatives were developed to counteract the image Bruges had of being a dead town by referring to its great past. This image-polishing was closely tied to attempts to revitalize the city’s economy.

The erection of the Bruges monument to Breidel and de Coninck was a long and complicated matter. In 1867, a politically Liberal commission was formed, with Hendrik Conscience as honorary chair, for the purpose of raising money to finance the monument. In 1874, all the commission’s efforts were rendered futile when the sole Bruges bank, where the monies had been deposited, went bankrupt. It was with great difficulty that the Breidel movement recovered from this blow. When in the early 1880s they finally had sufficient means to commission the monument with financial support from the city government, the province of West Flanders and the Belgian state, they found themselves in open conflict with the local administration, which meanwhile had fallen into the hands of the Conservative Party. The Conservative city government wanted to present the memorial as its own work and to gain control over the arrangements for the festive inauguration. It therefore took away from the Breidel-Commissie the privilege of organizing the dedication ceremony. In the end, the monument was dedicated twice, once in July 1887 by the Liberal Breidel-Commissie, and again a month later with great pomp under the direction of the city government and with the participation of the Belgian king. The municipal authorities took the affair very seriously. Altogether, including the subsides from the province and the Belgian government, more than 20 per cent of the annual budget of the city of Bruges was spent on the costs of the monument and its dedication. The essential part of the August celebrations was a historical parade, with 1302 participants dressed in accurate replicas of fourteenth-century costume and representing the events and the actors of 1302. In spite of the fact that the anniversary of the battle should have been celebrated in July, the urban administration chose the month...
of August for the ceremony because at that season the greatest number of tourists from the coastal resorts nearby could be attracted to Bruges.

The chief founder of the Breidelbeweging (Breidel Movement) was Julius Sabbe, a teacher at the Bruges grammar school, who tirelessly publicized the project in numerous lectures and newspaper articles. At the same time, Sabbe was one of the most important supporters of the building of a seaport for Bruges. It was hoped that renewed access to the sea would give the city’s economy a major boost.

The most important pressure group of the Brugge-Zeehaven project was De Reizigerskring (Travellers’ Circle), an association of business people that also was one of the primary sponsors of the Breidel monument. The Bruges division of the Willemsfonds, a Liberal Flemish cultural organization, likewise supported both projects, the monument and the seaport, with all available means.

Thus, there were many personal and organizational links between the two projects, so that those involved readily divided up the work of realizing the projects. This cooperation is seen most clearly in the close friendship between Julius Sabbe and Auguste de Maere d’Aertrijcke. In 1878 de Maere wrote to Sabbe that they should both work towards the building of the seaport and the revitalization of Bruges, each in his own sphere – Sabbe in publicity and culture, and de Maere in building up contacts with influential men.

At the same time, conservationists in Bruges were making intensive efforts to maintain the medieval character of the city. If at all possible, new buildings were to be constructed only in the neogothic style. Bruges was to become the Nuremberg of Belgium.

The main goal of this movement was to make Bruges into a tourist attraction and, by virtue of the increased tourism, to stimulate the urban economy. Sabbe described the plan as follows: ‘Qu’on fasse pour Bruges, ce qu’on fait pour les villes de plaisirs et de bains: une propagande incessante et sous toutes les formes: à l’intérieur et à l’étranger… et Bruges deviendra un séjour plus recherché, plus agréable que bien d’autres, une “great attraction” si l’on veut.’ (If we do for Bruges what is done for pleasure resorts and spas, that is, create constant publicity of all types both at home and abroad… then Bruges will become a more sought-after and agreeable resort than many others, a ‘great attraction’, if you like.) And it was for just this reason that the monument to Breidel and de Coninck was erected and the ostentatious dedication ceremony was held, which was supposed to spread the fame of Bruges as a city of art even beyond the Belgian borders and attract countless tourists to the city.

In this way, the historical and cultural inheritance of Bruges, among which the battle of the Golden Spurs and the two local heroes Breidel and...
The story of the Golden Spurs as a Flemish myth

From 1877, the battle of the Golden Spurs was commemorated annually in Bruges, and from there the custom of holding guldensporenherdenkingen (commemorations of the Golden Spurs) spread to nearly all Flemish parishes. The myth of 1302 thereby took on a whole new dimension. The continuation of Conscience’s glorification of medieval Flanders in times of increasingly political and militant ‘flamingantism’ stylized 1302 into a symbol of the purported centuries-long resistance by Flanders to French influence. For instance, in a public lecture in Antwerp in 1874 Julius Sabbe called upon the audience to remember what the Flemings had once been and thereby to learn what the Flemings could be in future. He alluded to the Brugse Metten (Bruges Matins) of 18 May 1302, when the French occupying forces were killed or repulsed from Bruges by the call, ‘Wat walsch is valsch is! Slaat al dood!’ (All that is Walloon is treacherous! Kill them all!) In Sabbe’s view, this call was still valid in his own time. For him it was an invitation to fight against the ‘Gallicization’ of Flanders and to rediscover the Flemish identity: ‘Ken u zelven, wees u zelven, reinig u van de vreemde roest, die op u kleeft, wees Vlaming in de taal en Vlaming in de ziel!’ (Know yourselves, be yourselves, cleanse yourself of the foreign rust which clings to you, be Flemish in your language and Flemish in your soul!) At the inauguration of the Breidel and de Coninck memorial he wished to see the whole of Flanders shouting in unison, ‘Vlaanderen den Leeuw! Ons Vaderland is herboren!’ (Flanders the Lion! Our Fatherland is reborn!)

In 1892 the governor of the province of West Flanders gave orders to close the provincial offices on 11 July, the anniversary of the battle, and to raise the Flemish flag. One year later, 11 July was declared a Flemish national holiday by the National Vlaams Verbond (National Flemish League). The myth of 1302 represented the starting point for the crystallization of a pan-Flemish identity applying to the entire Flemish-speaking population of Belgium. Paul Fredericq compared the impact of the Bruges celebrations of 1887 with an ‘elektrischen schok … die door de ziel van het Vlaamsche volk [had] doen lopen’ (an electric shock which had gone through the soul of the Flemish people). Especially in the former Brabant region of Antwerp, which, historically speaking, had absolutely no link with the events of 1302, a second centre...
of an intense cult surrounding the battle of Courtrai came into being in addition to that in West Flanders.⁴⁰

Still this symbolic glorification of Flanders’s past did not conflict with the Belgian national consciousness. In fact, the initiators of the 1302 commemorations themselves always stressed the importance of the battle of the Golden Spurs for Belgium as a whole; after all, it was the battle which, according to them, had made the independent country of Belgium possible in the first place. Consequently, 11 July was in their view not only a Flemish affair but should be seen as a Belgian national holiday as well.⁴¹

The Walloons, however, could not accept the Flemish demand that 1302 had to be treated as an event of Belgian national dimension; in the Walloon regions there had never been *guldensporenherdenkingen*.⁴² On the contrary, the Golden Spurs celebrations in Flanders were partly ridiculed by the Walloons, partly viewed with mistrust because of their anti-French attitude and therefore considered dangerous for the unity of Belgium.⁴³ That the Walloons viewed the *guldensporenherdenkingen* as a Flemish matter and took them very seriously as Flemish national celebrations can be seen from the fact that the Walloon movement, in reaction to the symbolic practices of the Flemings, considered it necessary in 1912 to introduce its own national symbols and a Walloon national holiday – 27 September, in commemoration of the Belgian Revolution of 1830.⁴⁴

Thus there was even before World War I a symbolic splitting-up of Belgium into two regions with their own regional holidays and a corresponding difference in conceptualizing Belgian history. Consequently, when King Albert I in 1914 appealed to the Belgians to resist the German invasion, he was forced to address Flemings and Walloons separately by referring to different historical examples: ‘Gedenkt, Vlamingen, den slag der Gulden sporen, en gij, Luikerwalen, die op dit oogenblik onze eer ophoudt, de zeshonderd Franchimonteezen’ (Remember, Flemings, the battle of the Golden Spurs, and you, Liegois, who at this moment are upholding our honour, the 600 Franchimontris).⁴⁵ A common historical memory which could bridge the growing gap between Flemings and Walloons no longer existed on the eve of World War I.

**The battle of 1302 between the ideological camps**

Parallel to this debate over the national significance of 1302 for Belgians, Flemings and Walloons there was a bitter dispute over whether 1302 had been a conflict between two nations, the Flemings and the French,
or two classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Catholic-conservative leaders continually emphasized that in 1302 all of Flanders had stood up to the French occupation. Liberal and socialist spokesmen, on the other hand, represented 1302 as the resistance of the artisans, who were interpreted as the proletariat in the modern sense, against the Gallicized bourgeoisie. Thus the question was – expressed in the terminology of the times – whether 1302 was a class struggle or a racial struggle.

The liberal point of view was clearly expressed by the writer, journalist and publisher Lodewijk Opdebeek. For him the battle of the Golden Spurs had been an episode in the long struggle between the proletariat and capital. ‘Op den Groeningher kouter [i.e. the battlefield of 1302] stonden niet twee elkander hatende rassen, maar twee elkander hatende klassen overeen. De strijd was het van de demokratie tegen de autokratie.’ (On the Groeningher kouter [i.e. the battlefield of 1302] it was not two hostile races, but two hostile classes, which confronted one another.) In Opdebeek’s opinion this was proved by the composition of the two armies confronting each other. According to Opdebeek the French army consisted exclusively of nobles from France, Brabant, Hainault and Germany, in addition to the Flemish Leliaerts, members of the Flemish nobility and the patriciate. Opposing them were the Flemish artisans and peasants led by only a few nobles. Their motivation was not to defend a ‘fatherland’, but for them it was evident that the result of the battle would decide who would rule the country, the patriciate or the common people. ‘In hun oogen, beduidde het te leveren gevecht niets anders dan de voortzetting van dien langen twist tusschen rijken en armen.’ (In their eyes, the battle to be fought represented nothing other than the continuation of that long strife between rich and poor.) On no account had the battle of the Golden Spurs been the outcome of a Flemish national consciousness, which did not exist and which could not exist at that time.

The Catholic-conservative interpretation is given by Adolf Duclos, among others, whom I have already quoted above. He outlined an idyllic image of the medieval society of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in which no social conflicts existed. According to Duclos, urban society in late medieval Flanders consisted mainly of artisans who were owners of their means of production and of their dwelling. The conditions of production and exchange were regulated by the guilds, which prevented a class of rich ‘capitalists’ emerging. ‘Te lande was de staat van zaken nog voordeeliger.’ (In the countryside the situation was even more favourable.) So it is misleading to search for the struggle of ‘capital’ against ‘labour’ in medieval society. According to Duclos, the Flemish artisans...
had two aims: first, to replace the patricians who had monopolized communal power (but this was a political and not a social struggle); second, to defend their fatherland, the county of Flanders, and their legal prince against the French attack. Their inspiration was a patriotic one, based on a Flemish national consciousness which had existed since the eleventh century.

Because of the sharp ideological contrasts that reigned on the Belgian political scene and the explosiveness of this issue, no agreement could be reached on this topic. So it is not surprising that not only was the Bruges monument dedicated twice, but also, in 1902 the 600th anniversary of the battle was celebrated in Courtrai separately by Liberals, Catholics and Socialists. Only in Antwerp, where there already was a tradition of non-partisan cooperation among Flamingants dating back to 1862 in the form of the Meetingpartij, was it possible to bridge the ideological gap for the sake of commemorating 1302. Thus, between 1890 and 1914 the Golden Spurs celebrations in Antwerp were powerful major demonstrations of the Flemish Movement, in which the representation of Flemish culture and history were invariably associated with concrete political demands.

**Conclusion**

It has been my intention to show the range of variation in the meanings assigned to the myth of the Golden Spurs and the diversity of contexts in which it was put to use in Belgium before World War I. One should beware of viewing the myth of the Golden Spurs simply as the myth of the Flemish movement. Deconstruction of the myth, i.e. the exact analysis of its genesis and history, shows instead that it was used by very different political and social groups, in a variety of different contexts, and even for opposing purposes. There was not one meaning of the myth; it was not even a single myth, but rather a plurality of interpretations and allusions. It was a cipher that could be applied almost at will.