

Oaths in 12th Century Flemish Society

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In *the Murder of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders*, Galbert of Bruges described the crisis that faced Flanders¹ in the early 12th century. Galbert began his record by stating that on March 2, 1127, Count Charles was murdered by members of the Erembald clan, a powerful and wealthy family. In addition to his own commentary, Galbert continued to record the unfolding events which followed Charles's murder—the siege of the Count's castle, disputes over succession, and civil war. Throughout Galbert's record of these events, the Flemish custom of swearing oaths is referenced often. Not only did oaths organize Flemish society, but their prevalence also demonstrates the emphasis placed on trust and morality in 12th century Flanders. I argue that, although oaths, homage, and fealty were used prior to the events of 1127, the citizens of Bruges extended the use of oaths and homage for political gain, to create unity, and to provide security within the chaotic period following the Count's murder. Coupled with its strong influence prior to the murder and its extended use, the oath emerged as a stronger bond than kinship or social rank within 12th century Flemish society.

Galbert, notary of Bruges, began his record with a description of the Count's murder on March 2, 1127.² Galbert stated that the Count was murdered by members of the Erembald clan because the Count discovered the clan's servile origin and threatened to submit them to servile status.³ As serfs⁴, the Erembalds would have lost their rights as freemen, their land, and high-ranking government positions⁵—Bertulf was provost of Bruges, and Didier Hacket was

¹ During the Middle Ages, Flanders was a region located in present-day Belgium. It was known for its trading towns—Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres. Bruges, the town in which Charles was murdered, was located in the north western region of Flanders and was located close to the coast (“Bruges” 80).

² Galbert, *The Murder of Charles the Good Count of Flanders*, trans. by James Bruce Ross, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 118.

³ Ibid, 101-102.

⁴ Serfs were laborers within the feudal system. A serf worked for his feudal lord and, in return, the feudal lord provided the serf with shelter, food, and protection (“Serfdom/Servitude/Slavery” 876).

⁵ William Chester Jordan, “Serfdom/Servitude/Slavery” in *Medieval France*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Kibler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 876.

Castellan.⁶ Regardless of their supposed status, the Erembalds were the vassals of the Count at the time of the murder and were consequently tied to the Count by the feudal bond of homage. By doing homage to their lord, a vassal became the lord's man and promised loyalty and fealty to him.⁷ The Erembald's conspiracy and murder of the Count was a clear betrayal and breakage of the bond made to their lord. In fact, much of Galbert's disgust towards the conspirators was based on their betrayal of the Count, rather than on the immorality of murder. For example, Galbert highlighted treachery rather than murder when he referred to the Erembalds as "those evil traitors."⁸ Galbert's dislike of the traitors reveals that the breaking of the feudal bond in such a traitorous manner was clearly looked down upon in 12th century Flanders society. The success of feudal relationships depended on the respect of the bond of homage by both vassals and lords; therefore, this betrayal shook the foundations of Flanders's feudal tradition.

In order to understand the role of homage in the society of Flanders, it is important to situate homage within the larger system of feudalism. Simply put, feudalism was a system of social organization composed of lords and vassals. The lords and vassals entered into a legal relationship wherein the lord granted his vassal a fief, or land, in return for loyalty and military service.⁹ In the feudal custom, homage was the formal, and often public, acknowledgment of a man becoming a lord's vassal.¹⁰ Galbert provided a detailed description of homage when he described the homages paid to the newly elected Count William of Clito in April 1127. These

⁶ Galbert, *The Murder*, 97.

⁷ Theodore Evergates, "Homage" in *Medieval France*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Kibler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 456.

⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

⁹ John Bell Henneman, Jr., "Feudalism" in *Medieval France*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Kibler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 343.

¹⁰ Evergates, "Homage", 456.

homages were most likely done by members of the nobility, such as knights¹¹ and barons¹². This description of homage was customary, as it consummated the feudal relationship between nobles and their lord¹³. Galbert described that the act of homage included multiple ritualistic steps. First, the vassal placed his hands within his lord's hands to signify that the vassal was becoming "wholly his man", and the feudal relationship was then sealed by a kiss.¹⁴ Next, the vassal swore fealty over a Saint's relic to his lord. This concept of fealty included two aspects: the swearing of loyalty and of an oath. Loyalty signified the negative aspect of fealty, that the vassal would maintain his homage without guile. The oath represented the positive side of maintaining homage in good faith.¹⁵ Since fealty was sworn over relics, it conferred a religious guarantee to a secular contract.¹⁶ The addition of this component to a secular agreement was effective within the Christian society of Flanders. After fealty was sworn, the vassal was invested with a fief using a wand.¹⁷ The specific steps of homage demonstrate the long tradition and importance of homage in Flemish society. Each step can be interpreted as solving a problem which previously arose within the contract. For example, the double-sided oath of fealty indicates that vassals were traitorous to their lords before the addition of the oath of loyalty. In essence, each specific step attempted to close a possible loop-hole within the bond.

In contrast to the customary homage described above, many instances of homage in Galbert's account strayed from custom. One instance, in which homage strays from custom is

¹¹ Jonathan D. Boulton, "Knighthood" in *Medieval France*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Kibler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 509.

¹² Jonathan D. Boulton, "Baron/Barony" in *Medieval France*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Kibler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 97.

¹³ Galbert, *The Murder*, 204, n.11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 206.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 207, n.3.

¹⁶ Theodore Evergates, "Fealty" in *Medieval France*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Kibler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 340.

¹⁷ Galbert, *The Murder*, 207.

when the citizens did homage to Count William of Clito.¹⁸ This is an example of non-noble homage, wherein the citizens of Flanders who were not the Count's vassals did homage to him. Non-noble citizens did not hold direct fiefs of the Count; therefore, the custom of homage did not extend to the relationship between Count and citizens. Even though homage was reserved for direct feudal relationships, Galbert insisted that this act was customary and had been done formerly to William of Clito's predecessors.¹⁹ However, Galbert did not include any mention of homage paid to Count Charles by the citizens. He described that the barons agreed upon the Count's succession but there was no reference to the role of citizens in the succession²⁰. Galbert most likely insisted that this use of homage was customary because he wanted to support the election of William. Galbert continuously expressed disdain for the chaos caused by Count Charles's murder. He revealed his desire to return order to Bruges through his hasty acceptance of William of Clito by calling him "our count" only ten days after his promotion.²¹ Galbert revealed his desire for order but consequently misleads his readers in this instance by asserting that non-noble homage was customary. Regardless of custom, homage strengthened the legitimacy of the Count's succession since it created a strong bond between citizens and the Count. This sense of legitimacy was crucial considering the succession crisis, and the fact that William of Clito did not hold a hereditary right to the countship.²² The lack of a bloodline connection to the countship was an argument for illegitimacy; however, once all citizens swore homage to William, they could not betray him if another man tried to claim the countship because of hereditary right. This extension of homage provided a sense of security regarding the

¹⁸ Ibid, 204.

¹⁹ Ibid, 204.

²⁰ Ibid, 82.

²¹ Ibid, 208.

²² Ibid, 310.

succession and was also used as a political tool to combat opposition by other claimants to the countship and their supporters.

Another instance of untraditional homage is when William of Ypres forced the merchants whom he captured to swear their loyalty and do homage to him.²³ The feudal relationship that homage seals was usually voluntary; however, William of Ypres forced the merchants into it. Galbert implied that forced homage was not considered moral in Flanders when he stated that William was advised to do it by the “provost and his traitorous nephews”²⁴. By blaming the forceful homage on the traitors, Galbert aligns this act with treachery and deceit. This is another example of the non-noble homage which occurred following Count Charles’s murder. William of Ypres’s use of homage demonstrates the extended use of the bond during this time. William used forced homage as a political tool to gain support for the countship from the merchants²⁵, a social group whose support was necessary in the trading hub of Bruges.²⁶ However, William’s attempt to gain the countship “by force” was used against him in the decision that he was unfit and unworthy of the countship.²⁷ In summary, William’s political and forceful use of homage went against the customs and morals of the people of Flanders.

Homage was broken multiple times throughout Galbert’s record; however, two specific instances stand out. The first instance occurred between Walter the knight and Hacket, the Castellan of Bruges, who was a traitor against the Count. Walter declared to Hacket that “we

²³ Ibid, 133.

²⁴ Ibid, 134.

²⁵ Merchants were business people who traveled throughout and between regions, trading their goods. Merchants were crucial to the development of the medieval European economy, especially in trading hubs like Bruges (“Bruges” 80). Merchants relied on freedom of movement granted by the lord of their region (Galbert 275). Unlike serfs, they were not owned by a lord and tied to his land; therefore, they enjoyed economic mobility.

²⁶ Bryce Lyon, “Bruges” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 386.

²⁷ Galbert, *The Murder*, 187.

throw away, reject, and cast from us the faith and homage which we have heretofore observed towards you”²⁸. As castellan, Hacket was the lord to some of the nobility of Bruges; however, Walter argued that he and Hacket’s other vassals were no longer under the obligation of vassalage because of the castellan’s betrayal of the Count. Likewise, later in Galbert’s record, two barons, Ivan and Daniel, challenged the authority of William of Ypres because the Count broke his oath to maintain peace and to uphold the rights of the citizens.²⁹ In response to Ivan and Daniel, the lord declared his desire to reject the homage done to him by his vassals. Galbert described that “the count leapt forward and would have thrown back the Festucato Ivan, if he dared to do so in the midst of the tumultuous crowd of citizens”³⁰. Galbert’s description demonstrates that homage could be rejected both by vassal and by lord. This account also demonstrates the voluntary nature of breaking homage, since the Count respected Ivan’s refusal to break the bond.³¹ Just as it was custom for both parties to agree to homage, it might also have been custom for both lord and vassal to agree to break homage. Mutual agreement on both sides maintained the idea of order, even when homage was broken.

In both these cases, ritual was once again involved. The vassals or lord threw away the *Festuca*, the rod used for investiture, to signify the breaking of the feudal bond³². This was the act of *Exfestucatio*³³. The need for the vassal and lord to be present for this ritual assured that either party could not abandon their duties. This ritual was likely a response to the abandonment of feudal duties by both lords and vassals prior to the creation of the *Exfestucatio* ritual. Furthermore, this ritual exemplifies that the moral component of homage was not always

²⁸ Ibid, 171.

²⁹ Ibid, 268.

³⁰ Ibid, 269.

³¹ Ibid, 269.

³² Ibid, 171 n.7.

³³ Ibid, 269 n.8.

foolproof in securing the feudal bond, since vassals or lords would deceitfully escape homage. Yet, the ritual demonstrates the attempt to combat deceitfulness and to restore the trust and security provided by the homage.

In addition to homage, oaths that had no connection to feudal bonds were sworn often during the period of crisis in 12th century Flanders. For example, following the murder of Charles the Good, the knight Gervaise swore loyalty with the burghers, and they agreed to avenge their lord's death.³⁴ The oath not only added legitimacy to the agreement between Gervaise and the burghers but also unified members of varying social classes under a sworn compact. Oaths were a stronger unifier than similar social rank was. Social classes in Flanders were somewhat fluid and vague, as evidenced by the uncertainty surrounding the Erembald's status and lack of unity among the knight class during the siege of the castle³⁵. The oath created unity among varying groups during the crisis of 1127 within a society that did not rely on social distinctions to guide loyalties and opinions.

The dominance of oaths as a social bond could only persist if oaths were most often upheld. The extensive amount of oaths sworn throughout Galbert's record indicates that Flemish culture emphasized trust and morality. One source of this emphasis on morality was the influence of Christianity in 12th century Flanders. Christianity not only played a large role in Galbert's worldview but also in the worldview of other citizens of Flanders. For example, peace was observed on Sundays even though conflict and violence persisted on other days.³⁶ Likewise, the traitors were given the Eucharist on Easter, even though Galbert expressed his dislike for this act.³⁷ The observation of peace and giving of the Eucharist demonstrates that Christianity played

³⁴ Ibid, 150.

³⁵ Ibid, 152.

³⁶ Ibid, 160.

³⁷ Ibid, 200.

a large role in society and influenced the effectiveness of oaths. Another aspect of the oath which increased its effectiveness was the public's knowledge of the oath. Galbert's knowledge and record of these oaths reveal that they were sworn publicly, just as was homage. When the public was aware of an oath, the involved men were bound to keep the oath to preserve their reputation. The oath was an effective tool for multiple reasons and it was employed heavily by such an extensive number of citizens of Flanders, including burghers, knights, and barons³⁸.

Although the use of oaths demonstrates Flemish society's emphasis on trust and loyalty, the traitors themselves swore an oath before the murder of the Count. Galbert described that the conspirators "gave their right hands to each other as a pledge that they would betray the count"³⁹. By giving their rights hands, the conspirators swore an oath using a ritual gesture. This example of an oath is similar to homage, in that ritual was involved. Ritual added another element of legitimacy to oaths, since the swearer not only had to give it using words but also with gesture. Aside from the ritual aspect, this oath strayed from the standards set by other oaths in Galbert's record. First, the conspirators forced Robert the Young, a member of the Erembald clan, to swear the oath. In other instances of oath swearing, all parties voluntarily gave the oath, such as when the barons formed a sworn league to avenge the count.⁴⁰ Likewise, the traitor's oath was most likely sworn in secret because acknowledging it before the murder would spoil the conspiracy. In this example, Galbert's knowledge of the traitors' oath does not reveal that it was public knowledge at the time; instead, the details of the conspiracy were revealed overtime through confessions of the traitors. Galbert described the traitors' sworn oath in his introductory portion of the record, which was written following the punishments and confessions of the murderers⁴¹.

³⁸ Ibid, 158.

³⁹ Ibid, 109.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 158.

⁴¹ Ibid, 109.

In summary, although the purpose of this oath was to provide unity and collective security, the forceful nature of this oath strayed from the customs of other oaths described by Galbert. Therefore, this oath cannot be used as an example of morality and trust; instead, it reveals the head conspirators' belief that the kinship bond would not assure Robert's support for his traitorous family. The traitors' lack of confidence in the strength of the kinship bond demonstrates that the oath emerged as the strongest social tie in Flemish society following the Count's murder.

One of the more radical extensions of the oath was its use by the barons when they reached an agreement with the new Count William of Clito and the King of France, who was the lord of the Count of Flanders⁴². In April 1127, the barons and King of France decided on the election of William of Clito and drew up a charter about the remission of the toll and the ground rent on their houses. The charter stated that the citizens of Bruges did not have to pay the tax or rent towards the Count.⁴³ The agreements of the charter held significant benefits for the citizens of Bruges, who relied heavily on trade and who were concerned with economic prosperity. The barons ordered the King and Count to swear an oath on the Saint's relics to bind them to the agreement. The barons used the oath as a political tool to assure the honesty and cooperation of two more powerful men. This oath demonstrates the barons lack of trust that the King and Count would respect the charter without the oath; therefore, it can be assumed that rulers often reversed the agreements of charters in 12th century Flanders. In fact, in September 1127, Galbert recorded that Count William demanded that the burghers pay the remised toll.⁴⁴ William's breaking of the oath was one of the main reasons for his deposition, demonstrating the severe consequences of

⁴² James Bruce Ross, "Introduction", in *The Murder of Charles the Good Count of Flanders*, trans. by James Bruce Ross, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 16.

⁴³ Galbert, *The Murder*, 204.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 260.

breaking an oath.⁴⁵ In Flanders, the oath bounded even the highest and most powerful men to their agreements; no official or ruler was above the oath. The oath equalized people of varying social ranks so that each party was subject to the scrutiny of the society which respected this bond.

Galbert's record of events from 1127 to 1128 provided numerous examples of homage and oaths. Some of these examples reflect the traditional nature of homage and oaths. These traditional examples demonstrate the emphasis placed on trust, morality, and ritual in 12th century Flanders. In addition to many accounts of traditional homage and oaths, Galbert's record includes many examples of uncustomary homage and oaths. For example, non-noble homage occurred throughout the crisis of 1127 to 1128 and was used as a political tool in the face of the power vacuum caused by the Count's murder. Likewise, both the customary and extended use of oaths and homage provided unity and security among groups of varying social classes and motives. Prior to the Count's murder, the oath had significant influence in society; however, Galbert's record illustrates the evolution of oaths into the strongest bond in Flemish society, compared to kinship and social class.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 268.

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