

Assembly of Relics by the Count of Flanders in the 11th Century: The Case of Hasnon Monastery in 1070

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In French history, the 11th and 12th centuries are often portrayed as an “age of princes”. Many princes, namely dukes and counts, inheriting vast territories, were essentially independent from the control of king, while the Capetian kings controlled only a very narrow territory surrounding Paris. However, historians have yet to provide a persuasive explanation concerning the resource of princes’ power and authority, because the economic and juridical sources have shown scant traces of administrative organizations in their territories. I will examine the princely power through the concept which anthropologists created to analyze the power in traditional societies, namely “ritual”. Since the 1980s, when many anthropologic methods were introduced into historical research, many historians have analyzed the kingship of the Middle Ages and l’Ancient Régime through the lens of the ritual. Nevertheless, the same historians have not analyzed princely powers using this anthropologic term. Hence, my research will examine the rituals which princes organized in the 11th and 12th centuries and will show their authoritative power and political strategies.

There are some sources that state that in the 11th century the counts of Flanders assembled relics from their territories on the occasion of councils of peace or dedication ceremonies of churches. Especially, an analysis of the dedication of Hasnon Monastery in the second half of the century, ordered by the count Baldwin VI “de Mons”, in comparison with the cases of Audenarde and Lille sheds light on ritual as a source of princely authority.

In 1070, when Baldwin VI finished the restoration of Hasnon Monastery, not only did he order three bishops to dedicate the restored monastery, and ordered his vassals to attend this ceremony, but also he organized a great pomp, assembling many relics of saints from all of his territories. Twenty-six relics were present at this pomp, transported by legates of monks from large monasteries, among which were those of St-Bertin, St-Bavo, St-Peter of Ghent and so on. This pomp attracted a number of people, who approached the saints’ relics striving to be the first in line, and fervently prayed before them. In comparison with other cases, Hasnon displayed the most relics around twice as much as at Audenarde in 1030 and Lille in 1065. The great number was the result of the fact that the count gathered the relics not only from the county of Flanders, his patrimony, but also from the county of Hainault, which he had newly obtained through his wife. Hasnon is located in the boundary between these two counties he ruled. The count of Flanders made an impression of unity of the counties, and showed his own power visibly in the ceremony through the relics assembled from all of his territories, to the participants, namely the prelates, vassals and warriors, and people who came to view this pomp.