

28. GALBERT OF BRUGES

THE MURDER OF CHARLES THE GOOD

Galbert, a notary of Bruges, recorded as an eye-witness the events prior and subsequent to the murder of Count Charles the Good of Flanders in 1127. This account shows the judicial measures by which the count had attempted to consolidate his county at the expense of the lesser nobility and chatelains who had gained power following the dissolution of the Carolingian state. Although the account is extremely favorable to Charles to the point of being hagiographic, the description of his murder by the Erembald family and the subsequent disintegration of his centralizing efforts indicates the strength of centrifugal forces in twelfth-century society.

Source: James Bruce Ross, *The Murder of Charles the Good Count of Flanders* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

Further Reading: Jeff Rider, *God's Scribe: The Historiographical Art of Galbert of Bruges* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

[1] Charles becomes count of Flanders in 1119; his concern for peace and justice, 1119–1124

Charles, son of Canute, king of Denmark, and born of a mother who was descended from the blood of the counts of the land of Flanders,² because of this relationship grew up from boyhood to manly strength of body and mind in our fatherland. After he was armed with the honors of knighthood³ he fought with distinction against his enemies and gained a fine reputation and glory for his name among the rulers of the earth. Our barons had for many years shown a preference for him as prince if by chance such a possibility should occur.⁴ Therefore when Count Baldwin, that extraordinary brave youth, was dying, he, together with the barons,⁵ handed the realm over to his cousin Charles and commended it to him under oath. The pious count, acting with the prudence of his predecessor, now took such measures to strengthen the peace, to reaffirm the laws and rights of the realm, that little by little public order was restored in all parts, and by the fourth year of his reign, thanks to his efforts, everything was flourishing, everything was happy, and joyful in the security of peace

²The marriage of Adele by her father, Robert the Frisian, count of Flanders (1071–1093), to Canute IV of Denmark was intended to strengthen a Flemish–Danish alliance against William the Conqueror that crumbled in 1086 on Canute’s assassination; following this event Adele fled to Flanders with her young son, Charles. Neither the exact date of the marriage nor that of Charles’s birth has been established, but Charles must have been born between ca. 1080 and 1086. He was still a “very small boy” (*parvulus*) on his arrival in Flanders, according to Walter of Therouanne’s *Vita Karoli*, c. 2, MGH, SS XII, 540 (hereafter cited as Walter, giving only the chapter number).

³That is, after he had undergone the ceremony of induction into the knightly order, when the candidate was girded with the sword and “dubbed” by his knightly sponsor.

⁴If, that is, his cousin Count Baldwin VII (1111–1119) should die without heirs, as it so happened. Baldwin, born in 1093, was injured on the Norman border while serving in the host of his feudal lord, Louis VI of France, in September 1118, and died on June 19, 1119.

⁵This was the normal procedure of succession in Flanders at the time, designation by the reigning count and confirmation by the barons.

and justice. When he saw that such a great boon of peace made everyone happy, he gave orders that throughout the limits of the realm all who frequented markets or dwelt in towns should live together in quiet and security without resort to arms; otherwise they would be punished by the very arms they bore. To enforce this, bows and arrows and subsequently all arms were laid aside not only in those places already protected by the count’s peace but in other places as well.

Thanks to this boon of peace, men governed themselves in accordance with laws and justice, devising by skill and study every kind of argument for use in the courts, so that when anyone was attacked he could defend himself by the strength and eloquence of rhetoric, or when he was attacking, he might ensnare his enemy, who would be deceived by the wealth of his oratory. Rhetoric was now used both by the educated and by those who were naturally talented, for there were many illiterate people, endowed by nature herself with the gift of eloquence and rational methods of inference and argument, whom those who were trained and skilled in the rhetorical art were not able to resist or refute. But, on the other hand, because these by their deceits brought action in the courts against the faithful and the lambs of God, who were less wary, God, who sees all from on high, did not fail to chastise the deceivers so that He might reach by scourges those whom He had endowed with the gift of eloquence for their salvation because they had used this gift for their own perdition.

[2] God desolates Flanders by famine, 1124–1125

Therefore God inflicted the scourge of famine and afterward of death on all who lived in our realm, but first He deigned by the terror of omens to recall to penitence those whom He had foreseen as prone to evil. In the year 1124 from the Incarnation of our Lord, in the month of August, there was visible to all the inhabitants of the lands an eclipse⁶ on the body of the sun at about the ninth hour of the day,⁷ and an unnatural failure of

⁶Scientists have demonstrated that this solar eclipse was visible in Europe, at noon on the meridian of Paris on August 11, 1124. It is puzzling that Galbert describes the obscuration as moving from east to west; actually in a solar eclipse the moon travels across the sun from west to east.

⁷Since the day was divided into two periods, each of twelve hours, beginning respectively at sunset and sunrise, the hours were variable.

light so that the eastern part of the sun, darkened little by little, poured forth strange clouds on the other parts, not darkening the whole sun at the same time, however, but only partially. Nevertheless, the same cloud wandered over the whole circle of the sun, moving across from east to west, but only within the circle of the solar essence. Consequently, those who observed the condition of the peace and the wrongs in the courts, threatened everyone with the peril of famine and death. But when men were not corrected in this way, neither lords nor serfs, there came the hunger of sudden famine,⁸ and subsequently the scourges of death attacked them. As it is said in the Psalms: "He called for a famine upon the land, and broke the whole staff of bread."⁹

During this time no one was able to sustain himself by eating and drinking in his usual way, but, contrary to habit, a person ate as much bread in one meal as he had been accustomed to consume in several days before this time of famine. So he was glutted by this unusual quantity, and since all the natural passages of the organs were distended by the excess of food and drink, he fell ill. Men were wasting away from repletion and indigestion and yet they suffered from hunger until they drew the last breath. Many swelled up, and food and drink were loathsome to them although they had plenty of both. In this time of famine, in the middle of Lent,¹⁰ the men of our land living near Ghent and the Leie and Scheldt rivers ate meat because bread was completely lacking. Some who tried to make their way to the cities and towns where they could buy bread¹¹ perished of hunger along the road, choking to death before they were halfway. Near the manors and

farms¹² of the rich and the strongholds and castles, the poor, bent low in their misery as they came for alms, fell dead in the act of begging. Strange to say, no one in our land retained his natural color but all bore a pallor like that of death. Both the well and the ill languished because those who were sound in body became ill on seeing the misery of the dying.

[3] Count Charles takes steps to relieve the poor

But the impious were not corrected in this way, for it is said that at this very time they had plotted the death of the most pious count Charles.¹³ The count tried in every way possible to take care of the poor, distributing alms in the towns and throughout his domain, both in person and by his officials. At the same time he was feeding one hundred paupers in Bruges every day; and he gave a sizable loaf of bread to each one of them from before Lent until the harvests of the same year.¹⁴ And likewise in his other towns he had made the same provision.¹⁵ In the same year the lord count had decreed that whoever sowed two measures of land in the sowing

⁸ This great famine is mentioned in many contemporary records. It is best explained in terms of a long, extremely cold and snowy winter in 1123–1124, a late, cold, and rainy summer, followed by another bitter winter in 1124–1125 and again in 1125–1126.

⁹ Psalm 105:16.

¹⁰ That is, about March 4, 1125.

¹¹ It is clear that grain was stored and could therefore be purchased not in the country but in the towns. The granaries of the counts, where the produce of the domain and payments in kind were assembled, were generally located in the "castles" (*castra*) of the counts, close to which mercantile settlements such as Bruges and Ghent had sprung up. A charter of Charles in 1123 refers to "my granary" at Veurne.

¹² By *villas et curtes* Galbert probably refers to larger and smaller units of agrarian exploitation. The older great domain or villa was now breaking up into smaller units, manors or farms of various sizes and kinds. In the area around Bruges and Ghent the domanial disintegration began early, probably in the tenth century.

¹³ Evidence that this chapter was written after the murder of Charles, March 2, 1127. It also reveals the current belief that a plot against the count had sprung up earlier than his legal action (in 1126) against the Erembald clan, the villains of Galbert's story. The complex motivation of the crime is discussed more fully below.

¹⁴ Galbert's calculation of the yearly calendar from Christmas rather than from Easter is in accord with the general practice of the time in Flanders, where the "Paschal style" did not appear until late in the twelfth century and then only concurrently with the still predominant "Christmas style."

¹⁵ Walter, c. 11, also speaks of Charles's order that a daily stipend be given to the needy on every one of his many farms, and of his personal distribution of food, money, and clothing wherever he was, in town, stronghold, or manor (*urbe, oppido, vel villa*). One day at Ypres he gave out 7,800 loaves of bread.

time should sow another measure in peas and beans,¹⁶ because these legumes yield more quickly and seasonably and therefore could nourish the poor more quickly if the misery of famine and want should not end in that year. He had also ordered this to be done throughout the whole county, in this way making provision for the poor in the future as well as he could.¹⁷ He reprimanded those men of Ghent who had allowed poor people whom they could have fed to die of hunger on their doorsteps.

He also prohibited the brewing of beer because the poor could be fed more easily and better if the townspeople and country-people refrained from making beer in this time of famine. For he ordered bread to be made out of oats so that the poor could at least maintain life on bread and water. He ordered a fourth of a measure of wine to be sold for six pennies and not more dearly so that the merchants would stop hoarding and buying up wine and would exchange their wares, in view of the urgency of the famine, for other foodstuffs which they could acquire more quickly and which could be used more easily to nourish the poor. From his own table he took daily enough food to sustain one hundred and thirteen paupers. In addition he provided daily for one of the poor a set of new garments, including a shirt, tunic, cloak, breeches, hose, and shoes, from the beginning of that Lent and of his devout fasting (during which, betrayed, he fell asleep in the Lord) until the day when he died in Christ. And after he had seen to these arrangements and completed such a merciful distribution to the poor, he was in the habit of going to church where, kneeling in prayer, he would sing psalms to the Lord, and according to his custom would distribute pennies to the poor while prostrate before God.¹⁸

¹⁶ Galbert obviously means measures of land sown with bread grains, probably wheat. A "measure" probably refers to the Flemish *ghemet*; the *ghemet* of Bruges contained 4,426.38 square meters, a little more than the English statute acre (4,047 square meters). Peas and beans were essential foods, used in a variety of ways. In hard times flour ground from them was mixed with the usual bread cereals.

¹⁷ This seems to imply that the original order affected only those parts of the count's domain that he exploited directly as a landlord.

¹⁸ The evidence of the use of money supports the theory that coins, especially in the form of silver pennies, were an indispensable instrument of daily life, even among the poor, at this time.

[6] In praise of Count Charles

Strength of mind and memory and even reason, the greater virtue of the mind, fail me in praising the good Count Charles; in comparison with him all you earthly princes are less worthy and less powerful, lacking experience and judgment, and disorderly in habits. For Count Charles held such a place among the devout sons of the Church that in his merits he excelled the leaders and many philosophers of the Christian faith; and although he had once been a sinner and guilty, at the end of his good life, from the fruit of penance, all things worked together for his good and for the eternal salvation of his soul. As it is said,

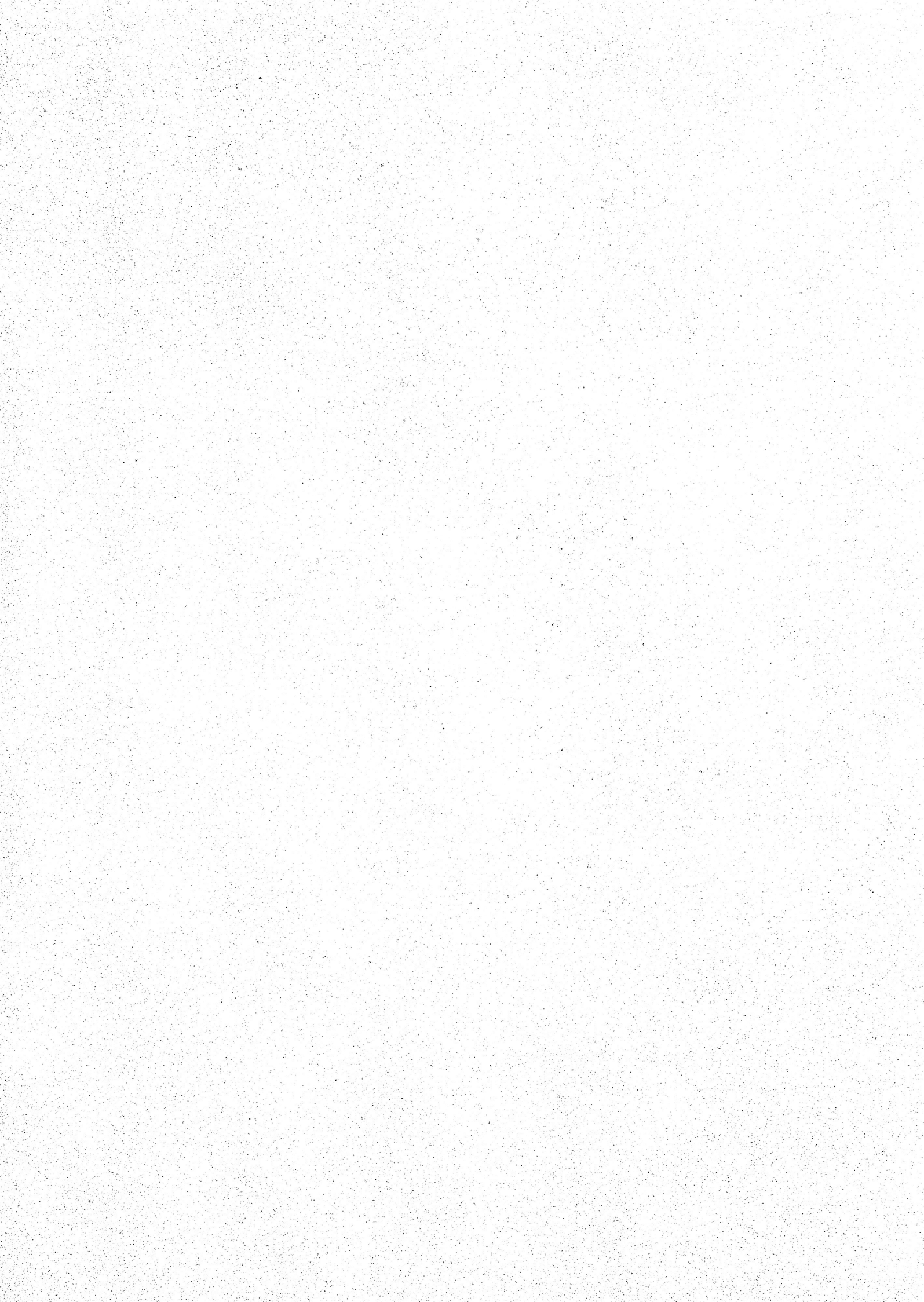
And none be counted happy till his death,
Till his last funeral rites are paid.

And, according to the apostle, "We know that to them who love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose."²⁰ For in a holy place and in holy prayer, and in holy devoutness of heart, and in the holy time of Lent, and in the holy act of almsgiving, and before the sacred altar and the sacred relics of Saint Donatian, archbishop of Rheims, and Saint Basil the Great, and Saint Maximus, the one who raised three dead, those foul dogs, full of the demon, those serfs, murdered their lord! Certainly there is no one so senseless, so stupid and obtuse, as not to sentence those traitors to the vilest and most unheard-of punishments, those serfs who by unheard-of treachery did away with their lord, the very one whom they should most have protected.

It is certainly a marvelous and memorable fact that among the many emperors, kings, dukes, and counts whom we have seen, we have never yet seen or heard of any one whom it so well became to be lord and father, and advocate²¹ of the churches of God. That he knew

²⁰ Romans 6:28.

²¹ "Advocate" may be used here in the general sense of "protector" (as it seems to be in Galbert's Introduction and in c. 6) but it also possesses a specific meaning since the counts of Flanders were the "superior-advocates" of almost all the abbeys in their realm. This function of military protection and limited judicial authority, which they exercised at the expense of the abbots and their officials, as well as of the lesser lay advocates, gave them a substantial control over these great and rich religious establishments.



how to be lord, father, advocate, to be pious, gentle, compassionate, an honor to God and an ornament to the Church, cannot be doubted, for after the death of such a great man, everyone bore witness to his merits. Friends and enemies, foreigners and neighbors, nobles and common people, and the inhabitants of every land whatsoever, were convinced that he would be held worthy of great merit by God and men, because he died like a Christian ruler, seeking the justice of God and the welfare of those over whom he ruled. But the men whom he trusted tripped him up and betrayed him, as it is said in the Psalm: "Why, my own intimate friend, who shared my bread, has lifted his heel to trip me up."²²