

Reflections on Medieval Art, Politics, and the Courtrai Chest

Just outside the Flemish town of Courtrai, on 11 July 1302, an army of French nobles clashed in battle with an army primarily consisting of Flemish guildsmen, artisans and peasants who had little military experience. The forces were large and the outcome surprising. The historian J. F. Verbruggen estimates that in the Flemish army there were between 8,500 and 11,000 armed foot soldiers from the towns and between 400 and 600 noblemen, very few of whom were mounted on horses; the French army was made up of around 3,000 knights and squires, most of whom were on horseback, and perhaps 5,000 or 6,000 foot soldiers.¹ The greater size of the French army's cavalry and the far greater number of trained fighters ought to have ensured the defeat of the Flemish. Instead, the Flemish secured an extraordinary victory, and retaliated against the French nobles mercilessly. The short and decisive confrontation became known as the Battle of the Golden Spurs, named for the hundreds of golden spurs removed from the bodies of French nobles by the Flemish.

The events leading up to the battle and the battle itself are depicted on the Courtrai Chest, a wooden chest whose oak front was carved shortly after the battle in Flanders.²



The Courtrai Chest, 14th-century Flemish school, New College, Oxford
All images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

¹ Jan Frans Verbruggen, *The Battle of the Golden Spurs (Courtrai, 11 July 1302): A Contribution to the History of Flanders' War of Liberation, 1297–1305*, trans. David Richard Ferguson, ed. Kelly DeVries (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), pp. 152–94. The number of Flemish nobles on horseback is a topic of debate: contemporary chronicles emphasise the courage of the burghers and mention only a few nobles, but Verbruggen (pp. 163–82) points to hotel and town accounts that suggest a much higher number of noblemen. It seems clear, however, that the Flemish nobles dismounted their horses and fought alongside the burgher infantry, unlike the French nobles.

² On scientific evidence for the dating of the chest, see E. T. Hall, 'The Courtrai Chest from New College, Oxford, Re-examined', *Antiquity* 61 (231) (1987), 104–7, at p. 106. Debates on the dating of the chest are summarised in Brian Gilmour and Ian Tyers, 'Courtrai Chest: Relic or Recent? Reassessment and Further Work: An Interim Report', in *Papers of the Medieval Europe Brugge Conference 1997: Vol. 5: Art and Symbolism in Medieval Europe*, ed. Guy de Boe and Frans Verhaeghe (Zellik: Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, 1997), pp. 17–26, at pp. 20–25.

In the early twentieth century, the chest was discovered at one of the New College holdings in Stanton St John and brought to the college. The chest is organised chronologically, presenting a series of tableaux.³ The narrative begins in the top-right panel, where the Bruges Matins, the bloody massacre of occupying French troops at the hands of the Bruges townspeople, is represented.



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

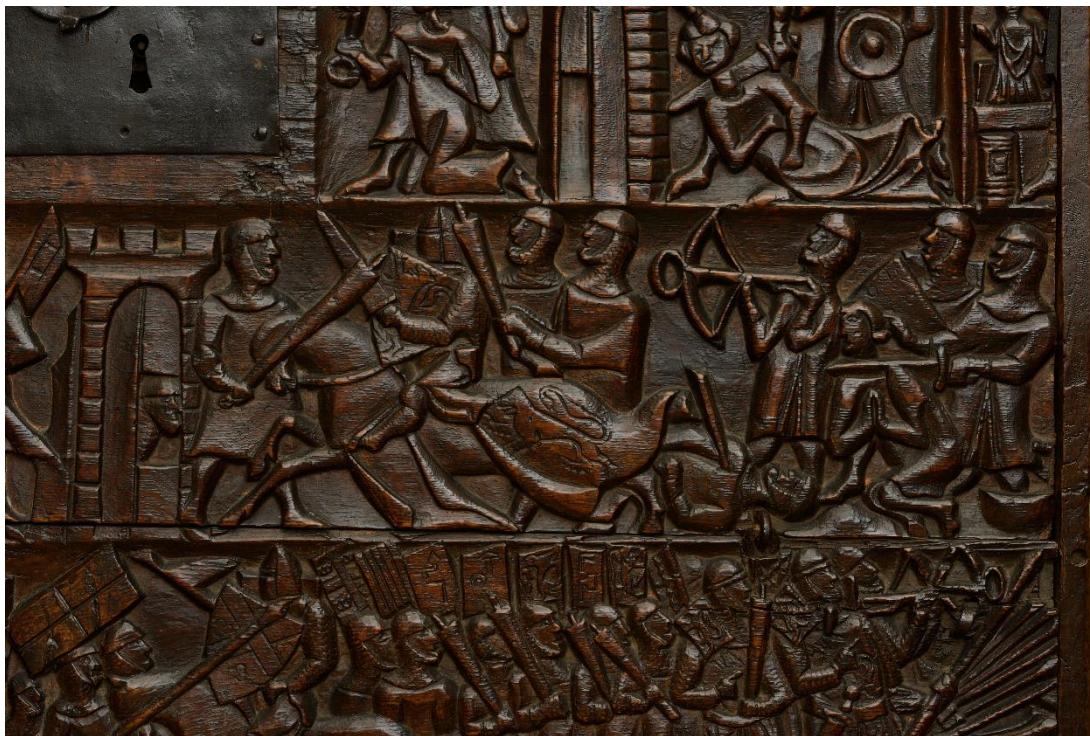
To the left of this, either side of the chest's lock, the people of Bruges present the keys of the city to Gui de Namur and Willem van Jülich, son and grandson respectively of the count of Flanders, Gui de Dampierre, and leaders of the Flemish contingent in the battle.



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

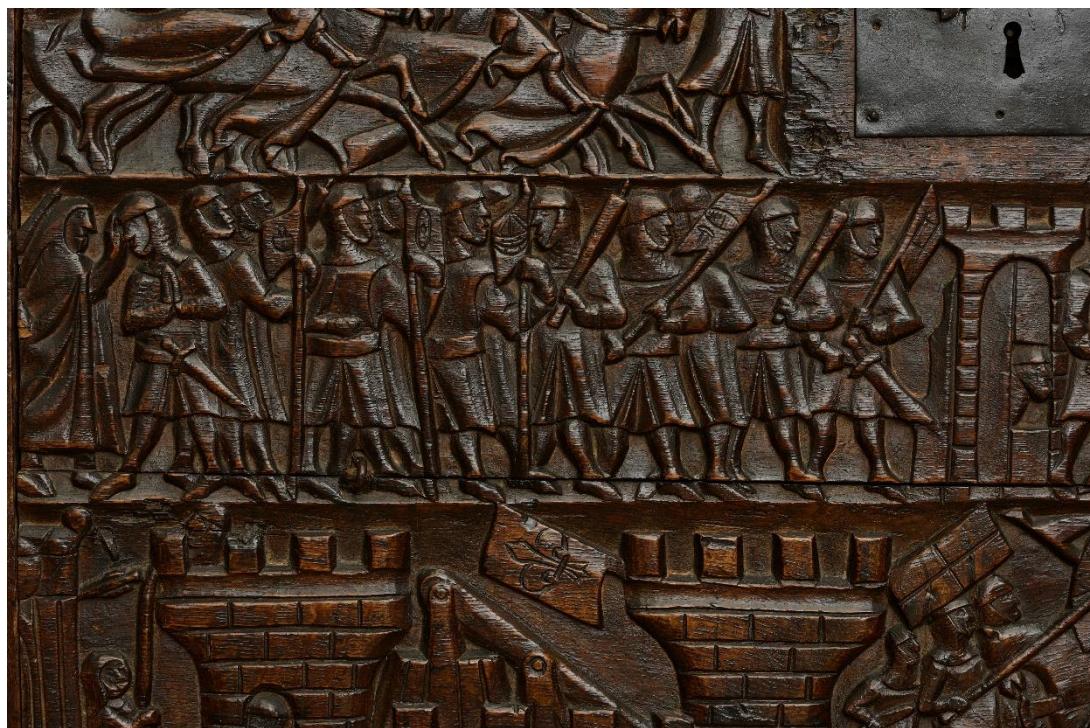
³ For a detailed description and interpretation of the carvings on the chest front, including identifications of chivalric insignia, see Charles ffoulkes, 'A Carved Flemish Chest at New College, Oxford', *Archaeologia* (second series) 15 (1914), 114–28; Verbruggen, *Battle of the Golden Spurs*, pp. 197–208.

In the second row, the right side probably depicts the Flemish capture of Wijnendale Castle,



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

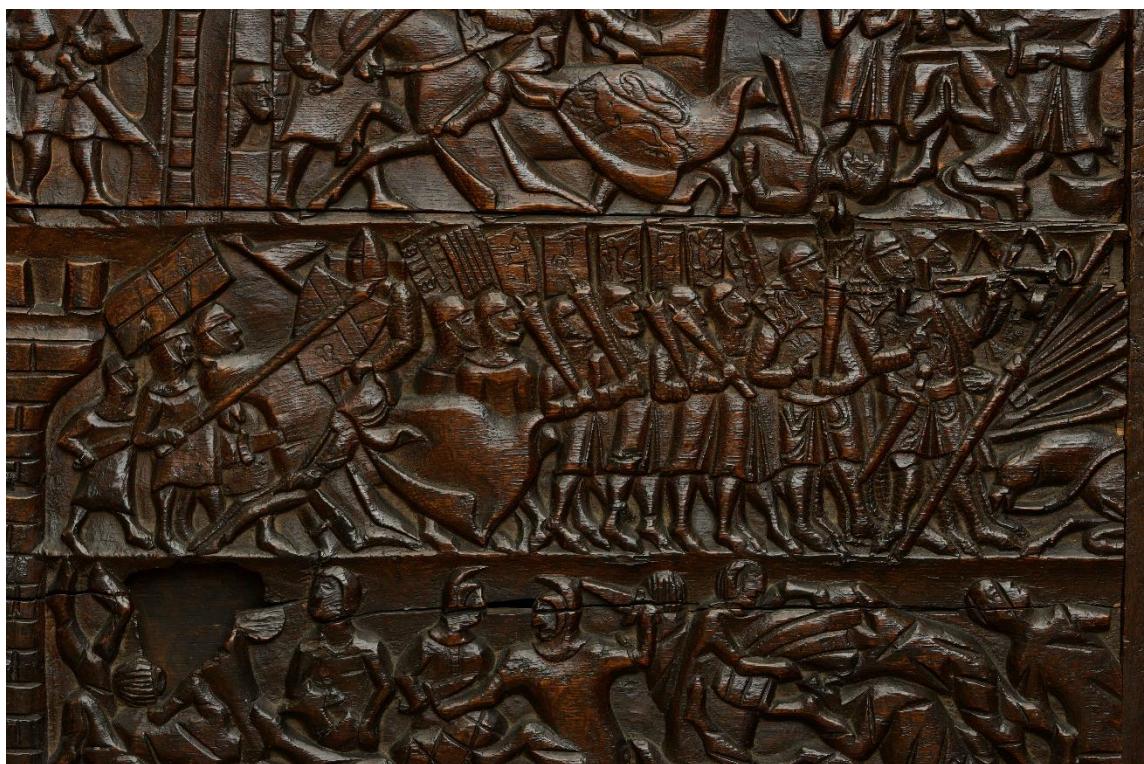
and the left side shows an array of Flemish footsoldiers, with a priest conferring a blessing in preparation for the battle;



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

the Flemish infantry carry their characteristic *goedendag* weapons (a wooden staff with a bulbous metal head that ended in a sharp point) and guild banners.

The lower section of the chest is split into two rows on the right: the upper of these (the third row down) depicts the moment when the French cavalry charge was stymied by the Flemish row of pikes, lodged in the ground and pointing diagonally upwards.



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

Once the French nobles had lost the advantage of speed and momentum, the Flemish hacked them and their horses down with their rudimentary *goedendags*. Below is the aftermath of the battle, in which the Flemish can be seen collecting booty from the mutilated French corpses.



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

To the left of these two scenes is a representation of the castle of Courtrai, from which, during the battle, the Viscount of Lens unsuccessfully attempted a sortie against footsoldiers from Ypres.



The Courtrai Chest [detail]

As the only surviving pictorial source for the battle, the Courtrai Chest has provided important evidence about the battle that is not found in contemporary written sources.⁴ In fact, outside of manuscript illuminations, surviving visual depictions of medieval warfare before 1300 are uncommon, making the Courtrai Chest all the more remarkable. Yet in the centuries leading up to Courtrai, Western Europe witnessed a continuing interest in the representation of military victories in artistic forms, pointing to an artistic construction of history as a kind of propaganda—history told by the winners. Of the three ‘matters’ of medieval literature (Rome, Britain, and France), stories about the history of France, especially the exploits of Charlemagne, were told and retold in rhymed poetry set to music, such as the *Song of Roland*. The Christian conquest of the Holy Land in the late eleventh century generated similar aestheticised tellings of history in sung epics such as the *Chanson d’Antioche* and *Chanson de Jérusalem*. Prose accounts of the crusades were accompanied by gorgeous illuminations. Rhymed chronicles such as Mellis Stoke’s *Rijmkroniek* or the *Battle of Annesin* provide accounts of battles such as the Battle of Bouvines or the Battle of Westkapelle appear from the thirteenth century.⁵ And throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, poet-singers composed strophic songs that called listeners to fight in the crusades and reported the outcomes of battles. The Battle of the Golden Spurs was commemorated in at least one such song during the period, transmitted in the Harley Lyrics (London, British Library, Harley MS 2253, ff. 59v–61v).

Artistic works like the Courtrai Chest provoke questions about the nature of artistic expression in the Middle Ages and its relation to contemporary politics. Songs, poems and visual depictions of important political events convey historical detail and espouse, explicitly, an ideological position: that of the victor’s superiority over the vanquished. Yet these artistic works

⁴ For example, the only evidence of the sortie from the castle is the Courtrai Chest. The depiction of *goedendags* on the chest has also been important in verifying the kinds of weapons that the Flemish used at Courtrai: ffoulkes, ‘Carved Flemish Chest’, pp. 120–2, 127.

⁵ On the likelihood that *Battle of Annesin* is a parody for Bouvines, see John Haines, “‘The Battle of Anesin’: A Parody of Songs in Praise of War”, *Speculum* 82 (2) (2007), 348–79.

also have aesthetic dimensions to them which may or may not be easily reconciled to their politics. As the music historian Carl Dahlhaus once put it, ‘the distinction between works of music and political events . . . must on no account be obscured or minimised: the possibility of an aesthetic presence which can be recaptured in later performances distinguishes a work of music fundamentally and profoundly from a political event, which belongs once and for all to the past and only extends into the present by virtue of reports or remnants of it’.⁶ Aesthetic aspects of artworks, according to Dahlhaus, are not reducible to their historical circumstances. This claim, which has its roots in nineteenth-century theories of aesthetic autonomy, has been challenged by critics of art, music and literature in recent decades.⁷ Under the umbrella of New Historicism, scholars have demonstrated that works of art that are not ostensibly political can be shown, via close reading and deconstruction, to stem from and promulgate tacit ideologies. The intersection of politics and aesthetics has thus focused on works of art whose politics is implicit, while works of art with an explicit political message tend to be discussed as propaganda rather than art. What I hope to do in this essay is to argue that creations with clear ideological, propagandistic purpose like the Courtrai Chest *are* works of art, not to claim, as Dahlhaus would have it, that they have a kind of aesthetic autonomy, but rather that the ideologies implicit in works of art like the Courtrai Chest may align neatly with or work against their explicit ideological function.

The thirteenth century is a particularly interesting period in which to study the intersection of artistic endeavour and politics because around 1200, writers began to acknowledge that the medium through which a story is transmitted inflects the veracity of that story. Before 1200, poetry and song were the default media for constructing texts in the various vernacular languages of Western Europe. Gabrielle M. Spiegel has argued that prose history, as a distinct genre of vernacular writing, emerged in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries because poetic and musical accounts of history were deemed untrustworthy.⁸ Despite this, songs, poems and visual depictions of battles continued to be created: for consumers and patrons of medieval culture, these artistic works could clearly accomplish and were valued for things that prose lacks.

In thinking through ways in which arts, politics and the construction of history related to one another in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries, this essay puts the Courtrai Chest into dialogue with a mid thirteenth-century song about a battle that similarly took place on the borders of France. In this case, the battle took place on the western fringes of the territories of the king of France and was won by the French crown. *Mult lieement dirai mon serventes* relates the events of the Battle of Taillebourg from the perspective of the French. Taken together, this song and the Courtrai Chest demonstrate that aspects of artworks such as their form, level of craft, and affective presence could serve ideological functions in promoting the values of the victorious party in a conflict. But read against *Mult lieement*, the Courtrai Chest emerges as an artwork that was radical in its time, embodying a challenge to traditional models of medieval social structure that explains the chest’s enduring appeal to historians and the people of Flanders today.

SINGING ABOUT WAR

Mult lieement dirai mon serventois is an anonymous song copied in a songbook of French and Occitan music in Northern Italy and gives an account of the French victory over the English and their allies at Taillebourg (county of Saintonge, just south of Poitou) in July, 1242.⁹ The Angevin kings of England had held the continental territories of Normandy, Anjou and Maine since the Norman

⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 35.

⁷ See, for example, the explication of the political entanglement of Western art music’s aesthetic features in Philip V. Bohlman, ‘Musicology as a Political Act’, *The Journal of Musicology* 11 (4) (1993), 411–36. For a summary of political musicology and a challenge to its efficacy, see James Currie, ‘Music After All’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62 (1) (2009), 145–203.

⁸ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 55–69.

⁹ Modena, Biblioteca Estense, R 4,4, f. 220v.

conquest of England in the eleventh century. Since these fiefs were granted by the French king, the English kings had to do homage for them to the French king. Stubborn ambition on both sides led to rising hostilities in the late twelfth century, resulting in significant gains for the French and major losses for the English: after the Battle of Bouvines in 1214, the continental holdings of the English king were reduced to a handful of small counties, with the major holdings of Normandy, Maine, northern Anjou and Touraine now under the control of the French crown.¹⁰ Poitou in the west of France was subsequently conquered (through diplomacy and force) by king Louis VIII of France and in 1241 was passed as inheritance to the third of his sons to reach adulthood, Alphonse. This seizure of Poitou violated the truce between king John of England and king Philip Augustus of France, agreed at Chinon in 1214, that acknowledged the English king's right to rule Poitou.¹¹ The granting of Poitou to Alphonse in 1241 also involved seizing lands from the powerful count of La Marche, Hugh X de Lusignan, who subsequently refused to pay homage to Alphonse in 1241 and gathered a coalition of disgruntled barons, eventually including king Henry III of England.¹² The French forces, led by king Louis IX, faced the English and rebel forces at Taillebourg on 21 July 1242, the French achieving a decisive victory and forcing Henry III to flee and Hugh de Lusignan to humble himself before Louis.¹³ The kings of England and France subsequently signed a truce, and in 1258 agreed to a treaty in which Henry III surrendered any claim to most of his continental lands (including Poitou), though still retaining Agenais and Quercy, and the Duchy of Gascony.¹⁴

The events of the battle at Taillebourg and Saintes are narrated in some detail in *Mult lieement* (see text and translation below),¹⁵ which gives the names of some of the key figures in the French army and describes how the battle unfolded. The coalition of English and rebel French barons attempted to prevent the French crossing the river Charente via the strategic bridge at Taillebourg, but were unsuccessful. The coalition forces were then pursued south to Saintes where a battle was fought and the French were victorious. These details are corroborated by contemporary prose accounts such as Jean de Joinville's *Vie de Saint Louis*, Guillaume de Nangis's *Gesta sanctae memoriae Ludovici*, and the *Grandes Chroniques*.¹⁶

Mult lieement is highly partisan, naming and praising many of the French combatants (most of whose identities can be verified) while denigrating the coalition forces, especially the Count of La Marche, Raymond of Toulouse, and Henry III of England.¹⁷ The four royal brothers of France are singled out for estimation, as the two-line refrain at the end of each stanza of the song calls on God to 'protect our Lord of the French [Louis IX], Charles [later of Anjou], Aufor [Alphonse of Toulouse] and the count of Artois [Robert I]'. It is clearly a piece of propaganda, and displays itself as such. In the final stanza of the song, known as the *envoi*, the poet-composer declares that he sends his song to a number of prominent nobles in France in order to bolster the reputation of

¹⁰ For a summary of this protracted episode of conflict, see John Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 87–100, 91–6, 207–19.

¹¹ On the truce at Chinon, see *ibid.*, p. 219.

¹² Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, trans. Gareth Evan Gollrad (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 103–4; Elizabeth M. Hallam, *Capetian France 987–1328*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 263.

¹³ Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, pp. 105–6.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 194–5. Henry's power over these lands was, nevertheless, diminished, as the treaty stipulated that Gascony was a fief granted to Henry by the French crown, and that Henry was therefore vassal to Louis with respect to Gascony.

¹⁵ Text adapted from Holger Petersen Dyggve, *Moniot d'Arras et Moniot de Paris, trouvères du XIII^e siècle; édition des chansons et étude historique* (Helsinki: Société néo-philologique de Helsinki, 1938), pp. 142–4. Translation my own, with the generous assistance of Helen Swift.

¹⁶ For the Taillebourg/Saintes episode, see Pierre-Claude-François Daunou and Joseph Naudet (eds.), *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1840), t. 20, pp. 206–7 (Joinville), pp. 334–51 (de Nangis and *Grandes Chroniques*). The battle at Saintes is depicted in a miniature in one source for the *Grandes Chroniques*, London, British Library, Royal MS 16 G VI, f. 399r.

¹⁷ For identifications of the various figures in the song, see the various entries in Holger Petersen Dyggve, *Onomastique des trouvères* (Helsinki: Société de littérature finnois, 1934); *Moniot d'Arras et Moniot de Paris*, 13, pp. 141–2.

the king of France and to remind them that it is their chivalric duty to remain loyal to him. The fact that the song calls itself a *serventois* is also an indication of its overt political intent: the *serventois* was a genre of song cultivated by both the troubadours and the trouvères (poet-composers in Occitania and Northern France respectively) whose purpose was to comment on political and moral matters. *Molt lieement* is therefore an artwork that, like the Courtrai Chest, was created to serve a political and ideological function. In the remainder of this essay, I consider how the features specific to these works of art might have served such a function.

1. Molt lieement dirai mon serventois,
Cai j'en truis bien en mun cuer l'achoisun:
Li Poitevin, li Gascun, li Anglois,
Li cuens Raimunz et li rois d'Aragun
Unt mal joï de leur enprisiun;
Par devers aus est tornez li sordois.
Diux, gardez nos le seignor des François,
Charle et Aufor et le conte d'Artois!
2. Molt fist li cuens de la Marche que fos
Qui mit sun cors et sa terre a bandon
Contre le roi: ce fist il por le los
De sa femme, qui ne quiert se mal non;
Mes l'on li a si pelé le grenun
K'a toz jorz mes en iert pis a ses oirs.
Diux, gardez nos...
3. Li Poitevin, li Gascon, li Anglois
Garderent mal le pont de Tailleborc,
Que malgré aus i passerent François
Et chacentent et mistrent en retor:
Dusq'en Seintes n'i firent unc estor.
Et sachoirz bien, la fu pris li baroiz.
Diux, gardez nos...
4. La bataigle le conte Boloignois
Vint premerains a cel assemblement.
Molt i fu prués Raos de Clarmontois;
Cil de Pontis i conquist los molt grant.
Dusqu'as portes les menerent batant.
A mie nuit s'en foï li lor rois.
Diux, gardez nos...
5. Aprés çaus vint Ansiau de Triaigniel
Et ses compainz Herarz de Valeri,—
Bien fu armez chascun sur un morel—
Cil de Beaujeu et Uges d'Antegni.
Lors furent bien li Anglois envaï:
En la vile les mistrent sor lor poïs.
Diux, gardez nos...
6. Molt fist li rois que pruez et que vaigllanz,
Li cuens d'Artois et li cuens de Poitiers,
Qui monterent por seurre lor genz
Armé de fer sur les corranz detriars.
Li messagier avrunt mauvés loiers
Qi le dirunt le conte d'Aubigois.
Diux, gardez nos...

- With happiness I will sing my *serventois*, for well do I find the occasion for it in my heart: the Poitevins, those from Gascony, the English, the count Raymond and the king of Aragon have acted badly in what they have undertaken; for they have been dealt a terrible blow.
God, protect our Lord of the French, Charles and Aufor and the count of Artois!
- The Count of la Marche did much that was foolish, he who set himself [lit. his body] and those lands in his power against the king: he did this for the honour of his lady, who did not want a bad reputation for herself. But he has plucked his moustache so much [i.e. humiliated himself] that his house will forever be worse for his descendants.
God, protect our Lord...
- The Poitevins, those from Gascony, [and] the English guarded the bridge of Taillebourg badly, for despite [their efforts] the French passed through there and chased them and made them turn tail: there was no battle until Saintes. And you know well that the barons were taken there.
God, protect our Lord...
- 25 The battle came first within this gathering [of barons] to the count of Boulogne. Raoul de Clermont was really full of prowess. The one from Pontis defeated the most. Unto the gate they led them beating them. At night their king fled from them.
God, protect our Lord...
- 30 After them came Ansiau de Triaigniel and his friend Heraz de Valeri—each was well armed on a black horse—the one from Beaujeu and Uges d'Antegni. Then the English were well and truly attacked. They beset them in the town against their will.
God, protect our Lord...
- 35 The king did much prowess and much that was valiant, [and] the count of Artois and the count of Poitiers, who mounted (their horses) to follow their brother, armed with swords on the running warhorses. The messengers were badly rewarded who told this to the Count of Aubigois.
God, protect our Lord...

7. Mun serventois envoi au Champenois
 Et Archambaut, au seignor de Borbun,
 Et au Flament et au conte de Blois
 Et a celi qui tient Biaune et Dijun,
 Q'envers le roi ne pensent se bien non;
 Loial soient, si ferunt que cortois.
Diux, gardez nos...

50 I send my serventois to the people of Champagne and
 to Archambaut, Lord of Bourbon, and to the Flemish
 and to the count of Blois and to the one who rules
 Biaune and Dijon, so that of the king they only think
 good things; they should be loyal, if they are to behave
 with courtesy.
 55 *God, protect our Lord...*

FORM AND MEANING

One key difference between prose accounts of history and artistic representations is the strict use of form in art. This is not to say that prose is formless; on the contrary, an analysis of a piece of prose might start by determining the structure beneath the surface of the text. But artistic works such as the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement* wear their formal structure proudly, such that form is demonstrably eloquent and persuasive. For the Courtrai Chest, the form is partly determined by the purpose of the chest, whose front panel consists of two planks that can be folded down to give access to the chest's interior; the division of the chest's front in half clearly shaped the maker's decision to carve scenes in four horizontal strips.¹⁸ The form of *Mult lieement* is similarly explicit, with seven stanzas of text that would have been set to the same eight-line melody, which, sadly, is not preserved in the single manuscript source for the song. Form is crucial in shaping the meaning that viewers or listeners perceive in an artwork: Eric Clarke, advocating an ecological analysis of the perception of artworks, places emphasis on 'the structure of the environment itself', in relation to which perception is 'the pick-up of that already structured perceptual information'.¹⁹ Form affects meaning, especially when the form is easily perceived.

A key aspect of the forms of the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement* is their linear unfolding in time. This is obvious for the song, since music is a temporal medium, but is also implicit in the way that scenes are ordered on the Courtrai Chest. The idea of a linear path through a work of art, or its *ductus*, was 'essential to medieval arts' and is mentioned in widely-read works on artistic creation by authors such as Cicero, Quintillian and Geoffrey of Vinsauf.²⁰ The Courtrai Chest encourages the viewer to find *ductus* starting with scenes in the top row, and working down the chest until reaching the aftermath of the Battle of Courtrai in the bottom row. This 'horizontal "strip-cartoon" fashion' makes the Courtrai Chest much like *Mult lieement*, with its narrative broken down into episodes, each of which is framed in a similar way (either by horizontal dividing lines on the chest, or by the repeating melody in *Mult lieement*).²¹ The *ductus* fixes the order of the events that are presented, but further, it confers a teleology on the artworks. The Battle of Courtrai *must* end with the defeat of the French and the looting of their corpses; the Battle of Taillebourg *must* end with the humiliation of the Count of la Marche and the flight of Henry III of England. The sense of inevitability resulting from the artworks' *ductus* implies that the course of history could only run in the victors' favour.

As well as leading the perceiver along their narrative paths, the two works act as a focal point, a centre for the community that they represent. In *Mult lieement*, it is the alternation of stanzas and refrains that enact community. Each stanza would have been sung to the same portion of music but with different words, while the refrain after each stanza repeats the same words and would have been sung to the same melody each time. The rhyme scheme of the stanzas (see Table

¹⁸ The folding front of the chest is described in Gilmour and Tyers, 'Courtrai Chest', p. 18.

¹⁹ Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 17.

²⁰ Mary Carruthers, 'The Concept of *ductus*, or Journeying through a Work of Art', in *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Carruthers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 190–215, at p. 204.

²¹ Hall, 'The Courtrai Chest from New College, Oxford, Re-examined', 105.

1 below) is consistent but lacks the sophistication found in most Old French song.²² Care has clearly been taken, however, to end the sixth line of each stanza with the **a**-rhyme ('-ois'): in some stanzas this is the only place that the **a**-rhyme is stated, so it must be answered by the two **a**-rhymes of the refrain. The return to the same words at the refrain and the **a**-rhyme that requires an answering rhyme in the refrain together draw listeners' ears to the refrain, the focal point of French identity in the song. The performance conventions of the song may have heightened this centripetal effect. Although there is little surviving evidence for medieval performance practices, the stanzas were probably sung by a solo singer, and the audience may have joined in with the solo singer to sing the refrain. The refrain's text perhaps hints at this with the use of first-person plural ('God, protect *our lord*') in contrast to the first stanza's first-person singular ('With happiness I will sing *my serventois*'). There is thus the sense that the audience joins together, centres itself, around the refrain that most explicitly states the song's ideological bent: loyalty to the crown.

Rhyme scheme of *Mult lieement*

Stanza	Stanza rhymes	Refrain	
1	a b a b b a	A A	a - ois b - un
2	c b c b b a	A A	c - os
3	a d a d d a	A A	d - or
4	a e a e e a	A A	e - ant/ent
5	f g f g g a	A A	f - el g - i
6	h j h j j a	A A	h - anz j - iers
7	a b a b b a	A A	

The centralising of Flemish identity is evident in the form of the Courtrai Chest, not only in its material properties but also in the way that users of the chest would interact with it. The carver made concerted attempts to centre Flemish identity and exclude the French, as is evident from the direction that Flemish and French figures face. Verbruggen notes that, based on how they hold their weapons, various figures on the chest are left-handed; this, he argues, was probably 'for reasons of symmetry'.²³ In the right side of the second row, for example, a left-handed Flemish man decapitates the sheriff of Torhout and the Flemish men move towards the centre; facing this on the left, the array of armed burghers all face towards the middle of the chest except two, one of whom has turned around to be blessed by the priest.²⁴ Similarly, in the bottom row, the burghers of Ypres move towards the centre as the French sortie out of the castle and towards the chest's edge. On the right, the French are pushed not to the right-hand edge, but to the bottom of the chest, as the Flemish pick through their mutilated corpses. These panels thus perform an exclusion of the French, placing Flemish identity at the chest's centre.²⁵ This performative identity formation is perhaps most clearly accomplished in the chest's top row, where Flemish nobles ride from the far left and burghers move from the far right, coming to face each other at the centre around the chest's lock.

²² Normally, the poet will adhere to a fixed versification scheme such as the same rhyme sounds in all stanzas (*coblas unisonanas*), different rhyme sounds in each stanza (*coblas singulares*), pairs of stanzas with the same rhyme sounds (*coblas doblas*), or a more complex pattern of shifting rhymes (*coblas retrogradas*, *coblas capcadaudas*, etc.). There is no single rationale to the change of rhyme sounds in *Mult lieement* which suggests it is less sophisticated than most Old French songs.

²³ Verbruggen, *Battle of the Golden Spurs*, p. 199. See also p. 201.

²⁴ The identification of the sheriff of Torhout is given in *ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁵ The right-hand panel of the third row, depicting the Flemish defence against the French cavalry charge, does this slightly differently: the Flemish burghers face towards the right-hand side of the chest to defend their territory from the French invasion from the right.



'The Courtrai Chest [detail]

Here the carver creates an interplay between the chest's form and its function, depicting the moment when the burghers hand the keys of the city of Bruges over to the nobles, Willem van Jülich and Gui de Namur. The depiction of a large key—surely disproportionately large within the composition of the scene, but perhaps almost the same size as the real-life key to the chest would be—in the hand of one of the burghers plays with the viewer's levels of perception: unlocking the chest, one would be reminded of the historic moment when nobles and burghers came together with greater equality than strict feudalism allows.²⁶ The act of unlocking the chest becomes a performative recognition of a centralised Flemish identity.

These two elements of form—*ductus* and centralisation—come together to enable audiences for the Courtrai Chest and *Mult liement* to construct ideologically sanctioned historical narratives in their memories. Mnemonic technique was central to medieval education, both in teaching medieval readers how to read and memorise texts, but also in teaching craftsmen how to construct works of art and scribes how to arrange and copy manuscripts.²⁷ Key works on memory such as Cicero's *De inventione* and *Rhetorica ad Herrennum* (misattributed in the Middle Ages to Cicero) were widely copied, taught and used in monastery and cathedral schools and universities. The art of memory that these works prescribed encouraged readers to divide texts or images into parts and to arrange these parts in rooms (or other kinds of structured spaces) in their memories: reading and memorising thus entailed the assignment of location and order to pieces of information, which would enable the efficient and easy reconstruction of the whole text or picture. Works like the Courtrai Chest and *Mult liement*, which display their formal structure so proudly, encourage their audiences to use the formal structure for their own comprehension, memorisation,

²⁶ The greater equality between different classes is evident in the actions of the nobles, who dismounted their horses at the battle, putting them on a par with the burghers. Some thirty prominent burghers were knighted by Gui de Namur shortly before the battle, likewise blurring class distinctions: Verbruggen, *Battle of the Golden Spurs*, p. 228.

²⁷ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), *passim*.

and subsequent reconstruction of historical narratives. Both the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement* are divided, giving locations to scenes in the narrative (rows on the chest, stanzas in the song), and an order to the information through the works' *ductus*. These artworks thus condition their consumers to commit the events they portray to their memories—a form of history-making—but following the ideological views that the artworks, through their form, carefully shape.

AURA, CRAFT, AND AFFECTIVE POWER

In his early twentieth-century discussion of the nature of art, the Frankfurt school critic Walter Benjamin identified an 'element' common to all artworks that he designates 'aura'.²⁸ For Benjamin, an artwork emanates aura because it is unique, irreproducible, and tied to a specific time and place. To this he adds that artworks have a 'cult value', a ritual significance tied to a work's aura because it situates the work within the ideological framework of a particular social group. Benjamin's concept of aura is thus useful for analysing the political significance of works of art because it shows how aura-producing elements—what makes a work of art art—are connected to the dominant ideologies of the work's makers, patrons and consumers. The Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement* are not merely narrative accounts of battles: their aesthetic aura singles them out as important testaments of sanctioned beliefs within their communities of reception. Aura can be produced in many ways; for the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement*, the most important are their level of craft and affective power.

The concept of craft is perhaps a closer translation of the term *ars* in medieval Latin than 'art': artistic endeavour in the Middle Ages involved the skilled labour of an expert artisan. This way of defining art may at first seem far removed from Benjamin's notion of 'cult value' in describing pre-capitalist artworks. But in using the term 'cult value', Benjamin is clearly evoking Marx's ideas of 'labour value' and 'use value'. While not directly equivalent, the 'cult value' of a work like the Courtrai Chest stems in part from its 'labour value', that is, the level of craft demonstrated. To put it another way, the cultural capital enshrined in the chest is related to the economic capital spent to produce it. The Courtrai Chest must have been produced by a skilled craftsman, probably a cabinet maker in the city of Bruges, and would have been expensive, if not exhibiting the highest quality of craftsmanship.²⁹ (Some critics describe the chest's carvings as crude and rudimentary, perhaps suggesting that the patron of the chest paid a substantial but not very high price.)³⁰ Like the deluxe manuscripts copied and decorated in the period, the craft exhibited by the chest demonstrates the wealth and status of its patrons. Wealth and status were intimately connected, not because having money automatically gave a person status, but because wealth enabled a person to demonstrate the chivalric attribute of *largesse*. Throughout the thirteenth century, aristocrats complained about the merchant class who were wealthy (and on whom many aristocrats relied for loans) but were, in their eyes, of lower status. Aristocrats demonstrated their high status by giving generously of their wealth, and compared their exemplary behaviour to the mean-fisted behaviour of merchants. The Courtrai Chest's performance of wealth via its high level of craft, leading to its aura, is thus a bourgeois appropriation of an aristocratic system of generosity that extended to the production of lavish artworks.

The aura of the Courtrai Chest and *Mult lieement* must also have been felt through their affective power. This is most obvious in *Mult lieement*, whose oral performances are likely to have stirred listeners' emotions. As Spiegel argues,

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211–44, at p. 221.

²⁹ ffoulkes had suggested the chest was produced by an artisan in Ypres, but Verbruggen believes a Bruges craftsman is more likely: Verbruggen, *Battle of the Golden Spurs*, pp. 196–7.

³⁰ Gilmour and Tyers, 'Courtrai Chest,' p. 20.

The power of oral vocality lies in its expressive, emotive qualities—those we still call ‘evocative’; it encourages empathetic identification with the subject matter being sung about or recited, not analytic distance. The fundamental goal of oral recitation is, precisely, to revivify the past and make it live in the present, to fuse past and present, singer and hearer, author and public, into a single collective identity.³¹

Medieval writers testify to the immediate emotional reactions that performances of oral, sung epics could generate in listeners. Medieval preachers would, for example, include excerpts of epics in their sermons to move their listeners to tears.³² Johannes de Grocheio, a music-theorist writing in Paris around 1300, states that the *cantus coronatus* (high-style love song) should be ‘sung before kings and princes of the earth, so that it may move their spirits to boldness and bravery’.³³ Scholastic theologians such as Robert Grosseteste theorised that perception of a text (and, by extension, a work of art) involved two parts of the soul: the rational soul or *aspectus*, which judged the truthfulness of what was perceived, and the appetitive soul or *affectus*, which judged whether what was perceived was good.³⁴ Medieval writers thus recognised the affective power that works of literature and art could have over the perceiver, an auratic force that exceeds the rational.

We can only guess at the emotions that might have been stirred in medieval audiences for the Courtrai Chest, and how it might have provoked them to respond. The chest was clearly designed to appeal to the senses, especially through its texture and lustre. Scientific analysis in the 1970s discovered residues of red pigment in the carving of the lowest panel, which might indicate that the chest was originally fully painted.³⁵ The intricate carving has produced an array of textures—smooth human skin, embroidered banners, castle brickwork, a man’s intestines erupting from his torso—that invite the viewer to reach out and touch the chest’s surface. There is plentiful evidence that medieval audiences not only looked at artistic depictions but also felt moved to touch them, as if wanting closer, haptic contact with what is depicted.³⁶ This appeal to viewers also served an ideological function. Like the form of the chest, elements such as texture and colour may have been intended to encourage viewers to memorise the chest’s version of events. Mary Carruthers has argued that the surface ornamentation of texts through rhetorical devices, or of manuscripts through artistic decoration, was intended to stimulate the mind to make more powerful mnemotechnical associations.³⁷ The affective elements of the chest would have enabled audiences to memorise the narrative presented by the chest and to reconstruct it vividly when recalling it. The work of the craftsman to make the chest emotionally affective was also a way of controlling the reception of the chest and ensuring that its ideological message shaped audiences’ constructions of historical narratives.

ART AND BOURGEOIS STATUS

In summary, numerous aspects of the Courtrai Chest tacitly project an ideological position that supports its explicit political purpose of claiming authority for Flanders and for the bourgeois classes. Its form centres Flemish identity and presents the outcome of the Battle of the Golden

³¹ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 65.

³² Paula Leverage, *Reception and Memory: A Cognitive Approach to the Chansons de Geste* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 38.

³³ Johannes de Grocheio, *Ars musicæ*, ed. and trans. Constant J. Mews et al. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), p. 69.

³⁴ Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd edn. (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), pp. 120–1.

³⁵ Gilmour and Tyers, ‘Courtrai Chest,’ p. 20.

³⁶ David Ganz, ‘Touching Books, Touching Art: Tactile Dimensions of Sacred Books in the Medieval West,’ *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* 8 (1–2) (2017), 81–113.

³⁷ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 117.

Spurs as inevitable. Its aura as an artwork is felt in its level of craft, which confers high status on the object itself and the narrative that it relates, while its affective power surely stirred deep emotions in anyone who looked at the carving. Both form and aura would have made it easy for audiences to memorise the narrative as it is presented on the chest in accordance with contemporary mnemotechnical theories: having memorised the events depicted, they would then reconstruct the narrative as the chest presents it, thus constructing a historical narrative for themselves that reflects the dominant ideological views of the chest's patrons and makers.

In this way, a close reading of the chest's construction shows how explicit and implicit ideology can be aligned in objects that function both as propaganda *and* as art. Such alignment is not automatic: it could be argued that *Mult lieement* fails as a song because of a misalignment between its explicit politics and the messages implicit in its construction. Outwardly, the song is a declaration of the military might and God-given power of the French monarchy in a period when the French crown was solidifying the boundaries of its territories and centralising its forms of government. As I have shown, specifically poetic and musical aspects of the song, which would not be found in a prose text, reinforce the message of the song. Yet by choosing a medium which, as Spiegel has argued, was considered untrustworthy, the poet-singer of *Mult lieement* simultaneously weakens the efficacy of his message as he tries to amplify it. The aesthetic elements of *Mult lieement* arguably work counter to its intended purpose of convincing listeners and claiming historical truth.

The Courtrai Chest is more successful, and radical, in its political claims. While the same concerns of historical inaccuracy and unreliability could be levelled at the chest, what I think is more salient is the unusual status of the chest as a bourgeois object that conveys bourgeois experience. Sung epics, historical chronicles and accompanying manuscript illuminations before 1300 overwhelmingly depict aristocrats and their activities, principally because aristocrats had the wealth and means to commission manuscripts and patronise music, literature and the visual arts, but also because aristocrats considered themselves the proper subject of artistic depictions of history. In the latter half of the thirteenth century, as urban centres such as Arras, Paris or Bruges grew in prosperity, the wealthy urban bourgeois emulated the aristocracy by engaging in literary and artistic creation, in order to claim a higher status for themselves.³⁸ The Courtrai Chest is a production of such an environment. The non-noble people in Bruges aspired to the status that is normally accorded to those depicted in artworks. But in commissioning the chest, they also wrote themselves into the narrative of history, a story that in the thirteenth century had only concerned the deeds of princes and aristocrats, but that in the fourteenth century needed to account for the wealth and power of the bourgeois classes too. The Courtrai Chest shows that in the early fourteenth century, making art was itself a political act because through the creation and consumption of art, bourgeois men and women could make claims about their power and status in relation to other sectors of medieval society.

It may be its nature as both political and artistic that has ensured the survival of the Courtrai Chest. Quite how the chest is still (almost) intact when so little carved wooden furniture of the period has been lost or destroyed is not known. Some have suggested that the chest's position as a status symbol for the Flemish bourgeoisie meant that it was carefully preserved in the fourteenth century, and hidden with equal care from the French when they retook Courtrai in 1382.³⁹ When the chest reached England (probably before the seventeenth century), it may have been its artistic elements—its aura—that inclined its English owners to keep it and treasure it.

³⁸ See, for example, the claims made about bourgeois identity as expressed in vernacular poetry and song in Arras by Marie Ungureanu, *La bourgeoisie naissante: Société et littérature bourgeoises d'Arras aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles* (Arras: Imprimerie Centrale de l'Artois, 1955). Many of Ungureanu's claims about class are rebutted in Joseph A. Dane, 'Parody and Satire in the Literature of Thirteenth-Century Arras, Part I', *Studies in Philology* 81 (1) (1984), 1–27 and *idem*, 'Parody and Satire in the Literature of Thirteenth-Century Arras, Part II', *Studies in Philology* 81 (2) (1984), 119–44, but Dane (Part II, p. 126) supports Ungureanu's wider claim that literature was a vehicle used by bourgeois poets in Arras to appropriate the status usually associated with aristocratic patronage of literature.

³⁹ Gilmour and Tyers, 'Courtrai Chest', p. 22.

Even today, the chest retains its significance in both political and artistic arenas: for New College, the chest is a treasured item in its collection, and for the people of Flanders, the chest is a symbol of Flemish proto-nationalism. The combination of politics and art is what makes the Courtrai Chest such a fascinating object—one that will surely continue to provoke debate, inspire with its beauty, and illuminate the history of medieval Europe for future generations.

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