

POLEMIC ABOUT THE CITY OF THE *NERVII*: ANTIQUARIANISM AND LOCAL TRADITIONS IN THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS

Olivier Latteur – RSA Dublin 2022



INTRODUCTION

- The antiquity of a city and the construction of the collective identity of its inhabitants
- The quest for Roman origins: traditions and the development of antiquarianism
- The polemic relating to the location of the ancient city of the Nervians: an interesting case study
 - Tournai vs Bavay
 - The Nervians: a Gallic people praised by Julius Caesar (battle of the Sabis)
 - Prestigious and valiant “ancestors”

THE TOURNAISIAN TRADITION

- The development of a more marked interest in Roman antiquities located outside the Italian peninsula (16th c.)
 - Ex.: Abraham Ortelius, William Camden...
- The rediscovery of Ancient sources: Peutinger Table, the Geography of Ptolemy, the Antonine Itinerary...
- Bavay rather than Tournai (Joseph Justus Scaliger)

THE SYSTEMATIC CRITICISM OF THE TRADITION



- Four authors:
 - Aubert Le Mire - Miraeus (1573-1640)
 - Gilles Bouchier - Bucherius (1576-1665)
 - Henri d'Outreman (1546-1605)
 - François Vinchant (1582-1635)
- The written sources: *Bagacum Nerviorum* (Bavay) and *Turnacum* (Tournai)

Portrait of Miraeus (between 1616 and 1657)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portret_van_Aubertus_Miraeus,_RP-P-OB-16.466.jpg

THE SYSTEMATIC CRITICISM OF THE TRADITION

- The material remains (Bavay):
 - Architectural vestiges: *thermae*, aqueduct, “*circus*”, *Campus Martius*, sewer system, milestone, Roman roads...
 - Smaller objects: "coins, clay objects and other antiquities" ...



The “Circus” (Roman walls) of Bavay
[author, 2019]

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE TRADITION

- The reaction of the inhabitants of Tournai
- Three Tournaisian authors:
 - Jean Cousin († 1636) - Canon
 - André Catulle – Catullus (1586-1667) - Canon
 - François Gautran (1591-1669)

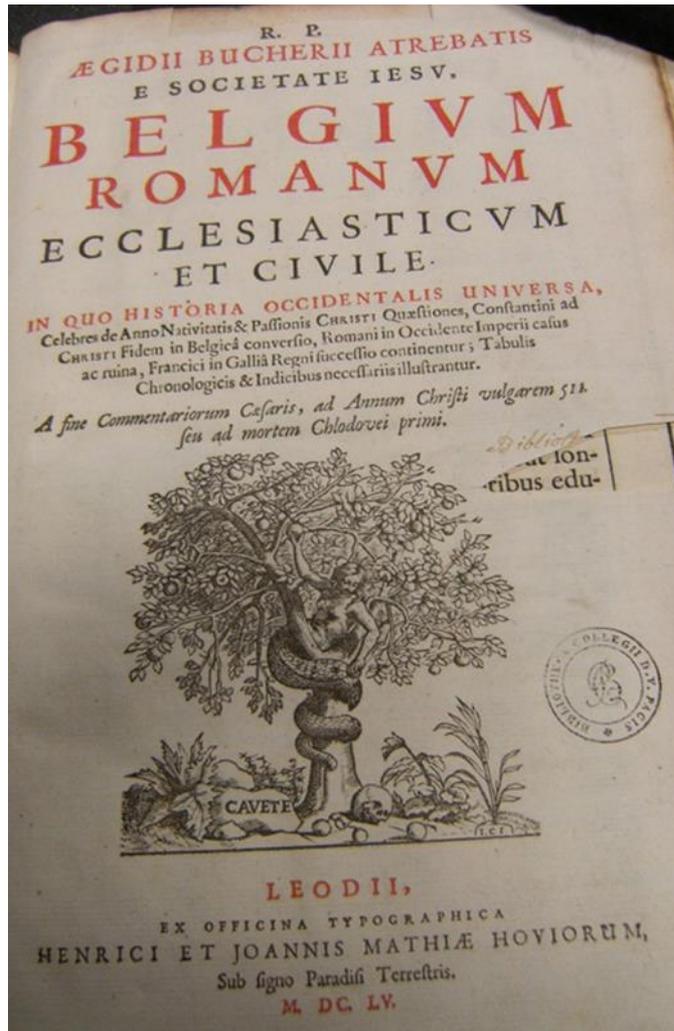
THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE TRADITION

- Jean Cousin (1619):
 - Tournai: the capital of the Nervians and, consequently, the seat of a diocese founded during the first centuries of Christianity
 - Sources:
 - Mainly medieval sources favorable to the local tradition
 - A Roman trophy? The hypothesis about the “pierre Brunehaut” (Hollain)



The “pierre Brunehaut” (Brunhilda’s stone) in Hollain, near Tournai [author, 2019]

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE TRADITION



- Catullus and Gautran:
 - Particularly hostile towards Bucherius (*Belgium Romanum*)
 - Bucherius as an expert
 - The bishop “Superior” and the origins of the diocese of Tournai
 - The close emotional relationship with the *patria* in early modern Europe

THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE TRADITION

- Catullus and Gautran:
 - The reliability of the Ancient sources in question
 - The local tradition and the authoritative testimonies
 - The problem of the material remains :
 - Bavay: a Roman city without political function ?
 - Tournai:
 - Massive destructions in the Late Antiquity ?
 - The “Roman trophy” (pierre Brunehaut)
- The controversy seemed to die out in the last third of the 17th century due to the political and economical context

CONCLUSION

- Ancient origins were prestigious and constitutive of regional identity
- Tournai and the *Nervii*: valiant Gauls and ancient bishops (precedence over neighboring bishoprics and principalities)
- Scholars from Tournai fought hard to maintain medieval traditions in the face of new discoveries due to the antiquarian method

CONCLUSION

- The development of antiquarianism contributed to question the validity of local traditions
- The material remains were gradually set up with the rank of proof coming to compete, then to supplant, the local tradition
- An upheaval in the relationship of the populations with their past

Thank you for your attention!