

GALBERT OF BRUGES

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Upon the arrest of the townsman who had broken the law of the siege, the townspeople's reaction was immediate and surprisingly violent. However, this response fitted in well with the interests of the community and with their growing sense of communality and political independence. The response of Gervaise spoke to an understanding of the feelings of the community and effectively forestalled further violence.

Although, throughout Galbert's chronicle, it often appeared as though greed alone motivated the townspeople, this passage makes it clear that the motivations were not so simple. In the wake of the death of Count Charles, the uncertainty of political life in Flanders must have been apparent to all the inhabitants of Bruges. This insecurity would not only have an impact upon their day-to-day lives but also upon the wealth of the community. However, it must also have been evident that, should they act together, they could be a political force within the county. William Clito had come to them, had courted them and granted them rights as a town in exchange for their loyalty (p. 203). However, now, less than a week later, the feudal hierarchy challenged these concessions.

Partial legal autonomy from the count and his servants must have seemed a very urgent priority for the townspeople. Autonomy could insulate them against the whims of the counts, making them less subject to tyranny and in less danger from political chaos in the county. Autonomy would also allow them to formulate and enforce laws that would not simply maximize their own wealth but could also reflect the desires and aspirations of the community. Autonomy could lead to greater stability and with greater stability could come increased prosperity. In the wake of Charles' death and the turmoil that followed, taking control of their own destiny must have seemed very attractive, even vital. They could not afford to ignore the

opportunity that the turmoil afforded them.

When Gervaise appeared to challenge their newly received rights, it was understandable that the townspeople reacted strongly to assert themselves. Had they not responded thus, Gervaise, the count and the barons might have taken it as a sign of weakness, of a lack of will to defend their new charter. Townspeople who lacked confidence in the move of the burghers to claim freedom from the tolls and laws of the count might also falter should the burghers show weakness. Thus, a strong response was imperative. That the townspeople responded with violence might be the result of their continued existence within a society in which knighthood, war and aggression were every present. According to Galbert, some of the burghers came from the knightly class and might naturally resort to violence. In addition, would the barons respect mere talk or would they only respond to the threat of bloodshed?

Gervaise's response was that of a man who understood the people of Bruges and their ambitions. He realized that, in the confusion of 1127, the deep desires of the people of Bruges for stability and prosperity were powerful driving forces. He also seemed to appreciate not only their burgeoning influence but also the sense of empowerment of the burghers. Had he denied that, had he re-asserted the absolute rights of the count, he would have only inflamed the people even more. Instead, he acknowledged the words of the townspeople, showing empathy towards them while asserting that it was the will of the king and of the count that the man be arrested. He excused them by reason of expediency during the siege without denying the wishes of the people.

In doing so, he probably realized that the people would not want to blame him if given some other focus. He was playing upon the affection that the townspeople had towards him and ensuring his own safety in the

ensuing dispute. By offering to resign his viscounty, he was able to assuage the anger of the townspeople towards him without outwardly defying his lord. He ventured that the townspeople would rather have a castellan who understood them and showed some sympathy towards them than a stranger imposed upon them by the count. If, as Galbert asserted, Gervaise had been one of the first and most important avengers of Count Charles, then he might

have hoped this would serve him well with the burghers.

His intelligent ploy was certainly effective for Gervaise, if less so for the count, the king and barons. Galbert subsequently clearly placed the blame on the latter. From his reaction and his account of the actions of the townspeople, it seems that the townspeople agreed. Gervaise was able to calm the situation enough that negotiations could take place.