

Picking up the Pieces

Catholic Material Culture and Iconoclasm in the Low Countries¹

DAVID DE BOER

59

In 1566 the Catholic majority in the Low Countries witnessed the large-scale destruction of their religious habitat during the *Beeldenstorm*. Afterwards, Catholics treated the objects that had fallen to (or survived) iconoclasm in different ways. This article analyses how Netherlandish Catholics interacted with and renegotiated their material religious culture after its violent dislocation. I will argue that church objects had multiple layers of meaning and were tied to individuals, groups and local communities in various ways. Moreover, iconoclasm could fundamentally change the meaning that was ascribed to these objects. By evaluating the diverse qualities of the objects that had come under attack, Catholics simultaneously found strategies to condemn the *Beeldenstorm* in secular terms.

Tussen het puin. Katholieke materiële cultuur en iconoclasmie in de Lage Landen

In 1566 moest de katholieke meerderheid in de Nederlanden toezien hoe een groot deel van haar religieuze habitat werd vernietigd tijdens de *Beeldenstorm*. Katholieken behandelden de objecten die wel (of juist niet) aan iconoclasmie ten prooi waren gevallen op verschillende manieren. Dit artikel analyseert hoe Nederlandse katholieken opnieuw duiding gaven aan hun religieuze materiële cultuur na haar gewelddadige ontwrichting. De rol van kerkobjecten in de vroegmoderne samenleving was complex en ambigu, omdat ze op verschillende manieren verbonden waren met individuen, groepen en lokale gemeenschappen. Iconoclasmie kon er bovendien voor zorgen dat de betekenis van een kerkobject fundamenteel veranderde. Door de verschillende kwaliteiten van de aangevallen kerkobjecten nader te beschouwen vonden katholieken strategieën om de *Beeldenstorm* ook op seculiere gronden te veroordelen.

Image-breaking is a messy business. After the Iconoclastic Fury had hit Antwerp in 1566 the Catholic merchant Jan de Pottre laments in his diary that the image-breakers could at least have taken away what they had broken.² City chronicler Marcus Van Vaernewijck recounts how in Ghent, hardly anybody wished to enter the churches and cloisters, where one would see ‘nothing but a confusing heap of rage and crime’.³ The chaos was confusing to Catholics; much of what had been a fundamental part of their lived religion had turned into formless piles of rubble, which now seemed to desecrate rather than sanctify the churches. But what to do with the objects that had fallen to iconoclasm was a difficult question. To grasp the meaning of destruction one needs to understand the value of the thing destroyed. About two decades ago, Alastair Duke first drew attention to the material aspects of iconoclasm by approaching it as a ritualised and symbolic practice. He argued that the iconoclasts mocked and ritually mutilated the images to prove, not only to Catholics but also to themselves, that they were inanimate. Duke reminds us that the iconoclasts ‘were not sons of the Enlightenment; they believed as firmly as their opponents in the powers of darkness’.⁴ Cultural historians of the Reformation have similarly emphasised that the differences in the material religion of sixteenth-century Catholics and Protestants should not be overestimated.⁵

Yet we know strikingly little about the ways in which Catholics in the Low Countries valued and engaged with their material religion. Moreover, iconoclasm has been studied almost exclusively from the perspective of the iconoclast. To grasp its broader impact on society however, we need to understand how the Iconoclastic Fury was perceived by those against whom it was directed, the Catholic majority in the Low Countries. In her contribution to this issue, Judith Pollmann notes that initially, people were above all amazed at what had happened in the summer of 1566 and the complete social inversion that had characterised it. This article aims to uncover how people coped with this confusion. Drawing mainly on witness accounts, I will explore the different ways in which Catholics dealt with the large-scale destruction of their religious habitat between 1566 and 1580. In doing so, I want to shed light on the complexities and ambiguities of Catholic material religion

1 I want to thank Joke Spaans for our valuable discussions in the course of my research and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene for commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

2 J. de Pottre, *Dagboek 1549-1602*, B. de St. Genois (ed.) (Ghent 1861) 22.

3 M. Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566-1568*, I. F. Vander Haeghen (ed.) (1568; Ghent 1872) 111-112.

4 A.C. Duke, ‘Calvinists and “Papist Idolatry”’, in: J.S. Pollmann and A. Spicer (eds.), *Dissident Identities in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Farnham 2009) 190.

5 See for instance R.W. Scribner, ‘The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the “Disenchantment of the World”’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23:3 (1993) 483-484.

before, during, and after its dislocation through destruction. Predating well-developed cultural memories of iconoclasm, as they are described by Pollmann, witness accounts reflect the direct, often physical, responses of Catholics during and after events.

Given the subjective nature of the sources, some caution is necessary. Catholics, of course, were not a homogenous community. Moreover, in most cities the secular and religious authorities failed to offer a clear answer to iconoclasm under which Catholics could unite and act collectively.⁶ Therefore reactions varied greatly from person to person, often guided by other markers of identity, such as gender, citizenship, or (religious) occupation. We must keep in mind that most witnesses did not write down their experiences and only few of those who did – mostly privileged citizens and clergy – could be represented in this article. However, most accounts give very clear descriptions of what the author heard or saw citizens do during the Iconoclastic Furies. Moreover, I want to argue that the renegotiation of the Catholic religious habitat, in fact, was first and foremost a physical endeavour. This article therefore focuses primarily on practical responses to iconoclasm, thereby including the reactions of the men and women whose voices no longer echo on paper.

Church objects were things with multiple layers of meaning. Many objects were sacred, deriving value from their material connection to God, but they were also precious in different ways. They could be the identity marker of a guild, an individual's gift to the parish, a vessel of commemoration for a deceased person, inciting parishioners to pray for his or her soul, or they were simply worth a lot of money. These different relations between objects and the communities in which they had their place made iconoclasm more than just a religious assault, a continuation of religious polemic with chisels rather than words. They were also assaults on the dead, on memory and indeed on the social order itself. Therefore there was a lot to be gathered when Catholics started to dig in the rubble.

Assaulting the body of Christ

Sixteenth-century churches housed all kinds of objects, and like the different parts of the building itself, they were inscribed with varying

6 Important exceptions of collective resistance against the iconoclasts were in Seclin, Veurne and Nijmegen, where Catholics were called to action by either magistrates or clerics; see J. Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm* (Bussum 1974) 35; M. Backhouse, 'Beeldenstorm en Bosgeuzen in het Westkwartier (1566-1568). Bijdrage tot de Geschiedenis van de

Godsdiensttroebelen der Zuidelijke Nederlanden in de xvie eeuw', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Kortrijk* 38 (1971) 53, 71-72; M. Hageman, *Het Kwade Exempel van Gelre. De Stad Nijmegen, de Beeldenstorm en de Raad van Beroerten, 1566-1568* (Nijmegen 2005) 168-169.

degrees of sacredness.⁷ This ‘cosmic order’, as Robert Scribner formulated it, was not unambiguous.⁸ We will come to see that it was continually contested by other forms of object valuation, but it was nonetheless a main pillar of Catholic religious practice. If we look at Thomas Aquinas’ influential hierarchy of sacredness, we find the Holy Sacrament – the physical incarnation of Christ – first in line.⁹ Since consecrated hosts were generally considered to be the holiest objects in churches, they also formed a prime target among the image-breakers.

Interestingly, the religious importance of the Holy Sacrament contrasts sharply with the limited attention Catholics paid to its desecration by iconoclasts. In most witness accounts, while enumerating in depth what had been destroyed, the loss of the Holy Sacrament takes a modest place and often remains completely unmentioned. Although it is always harder to explain an absence than an occurrence, I want to argue that there are two main reasons for this lack. First of all, the host was small. As irrelevant as size might have been for the sacredness of an object, it made a huge difference in its overall visibility. Gradations of awe were not necessarily dictated by the theological status of an object, but often simply by its visual prominence. Next to decapitated images and broken altars, desecrated hosts made but a small contribution to the visible devastation of iconoclasm and most Catholics were not directly confronted with its destruction. In her contribution to this issue, Anne-Laure Van Bruaene shows that the sacrament houses, which contained the Holy Sacrament, became important sites of physical contestation of the material devotion to the host. In a twist of fate, the ruins of the sacrament houses after iconoclasm must have often consumed the host, keeping it out of sight rather than elevating it.

Second, for all its sacredness, the Holy Sacrament was hardly unique and in fact, could easily be reproduced. The host was turned from a mundane piece of bread into the Body of Christ through an act of consecration. Although consecrating objects was restricted to an ordained group, the clergy, it was nevertheless an act of human agency. And even though God ultimately invested priests with the power of consecration, it remained a repeatable gesture. Many Catholics therefore, painful as it might have been, will not have had the feeling that something was irretrievably lost when the consecrated host was desecrated. Of course, there were exceptions and in some narratives of iconoclasm, the Holy Sacrament did play an important role. The Escorial in Madrid for instance, still

7 W. Coster and A. Spicer, ‘Introduction: The Dimensions of Sacred Space in Reformation Europe’, in: W. Coster and A. Spicer (eds.), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2005) 9-10.

8 R.W. Scribner, ‘Cosmic Order and Daily Life: Sacred and Secular in Pre-Industrial German

Society’, in: K. von Greyerz (ed.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800* (London 1984) 17.

9 M. Teter, *Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation* (Cambridge 2011) 40-41.

houses a host that had supposedly been smuggled out of the Low Countries. It was believed to have started bleeding when the iconoclasts had trampled on it, proving that it was indeed the Body of Christ. Through this miracle, that particular host became unique. It had a property that lay fully outside the realm of human agency and therefore became irreplaceable.¹⁰

Relics and the community

Moving down the hierarchy of sacred objects we find relics next in line. The remains of venerated saints too, were popular targets among iconoclasts, many of whom believed they were evil charms, used by the clergy to perform their magic.¹¹ Moreover, inherent to their destruction by burning was an argument against their power, as relics were believed to be invulnerable to fire. The theological status of relics had been reaffirmed by the Council of Trent in 1563; the decree *On the Invocation, Veneration and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images* stressed that the veneration of relics, like images, was no adoration of the material itself, but of its prototype, the actual saint in heaven. Unlike images however, relics belonged to the Resurrection and were therefore physically bound to heaven.¹² This came with its benefits for the venerating believer, as through the remains ‘many benefits (were, D.D.B.) bestowed by God on men’.¹³ Unlike the image, the relic was a medium between heaven and earth in both directions.

Yet iconoclasm hit relics in times that were already uncertain. In Antwerp for instance, the revenues of pilgrimages to the Cathedral of Our Lady had steadily been dropping before it reached zero in the summer of 1566.¹⁴ In Utrecht too, where Protestantism had hardly gained a foothold as yet, incomes from indulgences received from visiting relics had been decreasing since at least the first half of the sixteenth century.¹⁵ The decline in the veneration of relics was part of a larger pattern of a decrease in pilgrimages, church attendance and the number of people who took clerical vows, which probably set in under the influence of humanist ideas.¹⁶ Erasmus

10 For the host in the Escorial see W.H. Vroom, ‘In Tumulto Gosico: De Reliquias y Herejes en Tiempos Tumultuosos’, in: J.M. Millán (ed.), *Felipe II (1527-1598): Europa y la Monarquía Católica*, part 3 (Madrid 1998) 425-435.

11 Duke, ‘Calvinists and “Papist Idolatry”’, 190.

12 Anonymous, ‘Decree on the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and Sacred Images’, in: J. Waterworth (ed.), *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent* (1563; London 1848) 234.

13 *Ibid.*

14 W.H. Vroom, *De Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-Kerk te Antwerpen. De financiering van de bouw tot de Beeldenstorm* (Antwerp 1983) 50-52.

15 P.J. Margry, *Bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1997) 746.

16 W. Bergsma, ‘Church, State, and People’, in: K. Davids and J. Lucassen (eds.), *A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge 1995) 214.

for instance, had already reduced relics to nothing but an incentive to *memento mori*.¹⁷

This did not mean however, that relics were no longer treasured. On the contrary, some people were willing to risk their lives to save them. When the churches in Mechelen were stormed by Protestant soldiers in 1580, a Beguine named Anna van Roy rushed to St. Rumbold's Cathedral, hoping to save some of its treasures. With the help of an acquaintance, she got hold of St. Rumbold's skull, hid it under her skirt, and managed to smuggle it out of the church.¹⁸ Interestingly, the Beguine put herself in great jeopardy for a relic with a limited 'sacred value'. It did not have a history of performing miracles and consequently it was not an object of pilgrimage.¹⁹ Nevertheless, St. Rumbold's relics belonged to a limited repository of sacred objects, unlike fabricated reminders of saints. This led people like Sasbout Vosmeer, the first vicar general of the Missio Hollandica in the Protestant Netherlands, to devote a considerable part of his life to smuggling relics out of the country, regarding them as fundamentally 'irreplaceable'.²⁰ Therefore even damaged relics were carefully collected and taken to safety; the principal of the Jesuit College in Emmerich for instance, possessed the charred remains of the relics of St. Martin, St. Agnes and St. Pontian from the Dom Church in Utrecht, which had been saved from the iconoclasts in 1580.²¹

While no miracles were associated with St. Rumbold, he was nevertheless treasured as Mechelen's patron saint. Every year the citizens held several processions – as they do today – in which they carried around the saint's relics, often in remembrance of an event in the city's history. About Easter for instance, they gathered and held a procession around the city walls to remember a victory their forefathers had achieved over Brabant in the fourteenth century.²² The remains of St. Rumbold, the very founder of Mechelen, were an important symbol, representing the city's pride and unity. They provided a sense of continuity between the founding of the city, the dangers it had overcome in the past, up to the civic unity of the present.

17 A. Nagel, 'The Afterlife of the Reliquary', in: M. Bagnoli, H.A. Klein and C.G. Mann (eds.), *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (London 2010) 211.

18 J.J. de Munck, *Gedenck-Schriften dienende tot ophelderinge van het leven, lyden, wonderheden, ende duysent-iaerige eer-bewysinge van den heyligen bisschop ende martelaer Rumoldus, apostel ende patroon van Mechelen* (Mechelen 1777) 237-238.

19 For the history of St. Rumbold and his remains see Theodoricus, abbot of St. Truyden, Kort

begryp van 't leven, lyden en mirakelen van den H. Rumoldus bisschop ende martelaer (Brussels 1775).

20 A. de Kruiff, *Miraculeus bewaard. Middeleeuwse relieken op reis. De schat van de Oud-Katholieke Gertrudiskathedraal* (Zutphen 2011) 28.

21 A. van Lommel, 'Berigten aangaande reliquiën van heijligen of H. Zaken uit Noord-Nederland ontvoerd', *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht* 7 (1879) 106.

22 Theodoricus, *Kort Begryp*, 27-28.

Most man-made objects failed to represent such continuity; essentially they were manufactured as representations and thus less tangible remnants of the past. This of course, did not mean that each and every individual valued the relic only as a communal treasure. During the five years of Calvinist rule that followed the sack of 1580 practicing the Catholic religion was forbidden and Van Roy safely kept the skull at home. At first, she occasionally lent it to acquaintances who secretly wanted to conduct the Mass with it, but stopped doing so as soon as she found out that someone had chipped away a fragment of the skull.²³

In 1585, after Mechelen had been reconciled with the king and the Catholic faith, the Beguine returned the skull to the newly appointed bishop. Corresponding with the idea of the relic as a civic symbol, she was given a reward by the secular authorities, as were other citizens who had kept parts of the skeleton safe during the Calvinist regime.²⁴ After the saints' bones were reunited in 1586 and brought back to the cathedral's choir, the relic was invested with new meaning yet again. The day of the reunion, the city's final victory over heresy was commemorated annually.²⁵ On this day the relic was carried around in procession and presented to the people, who received forty days of indulgence for attending.²⁶

In the Northern Netherlands Catholics would never celebrate a final victory over iconoclastic heretics and completely lost their public stage after 1580. With Catholicism reduced to a clandestine practice, it is hard to find evidence of ritualised commemorations of the *Beeldenstorm*, though they are not entirely absent; in Utrecht the relics of St. Frederic were taken away to an anonymous 'genteel and pious citizen', as a matter of precaution against impending iconoclasm in 1580.²⁷ After the storm a protocol was drawn up that determined that the memory of the transfer of the relics would be solemnly celebrated each year. The protocol meticulously recounts the Iconoclastic Fury, from which the relics had so narrowly escaped, describing all that was destroyed or burned.²⁸ The relic of St. Frederic had become a relic of the *Beeldenstorm*, a token of the event that had nearly caused its destruction. The relics that were smuggled abroad ended up in cities such as Cologne, where many were eventually acquired to refurbish and resacralise the polluted churches in the Southern Netherlands.²⁹ Some however, had not been properly identified in the haste of their removal and remained there, stored

23 De Munck, *Gedenck-Schriften*, 238.

24 *Ibid.*, 238-243.

25 R. Valerius, *Chronyke van Mechelen* (Mechelen 1681) 37.

26 R. Gootens, *Chronyke van Mechelen* (undated manuscript, eighteenth century) 412, City Archive Mechelen.

27 G. Brom, 'De overbrenging der reliquieën van den H. Bisschop-Martelaar Frederik in 1580', *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht* 24 (1897) 138.

28 Brom, 'De overbrenging der reliquieën', 138.

29 G. Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt and Catholic Exile in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge 2014) 143.



The bones from the St. Rumoldus shrine on display for academic research in 2004 to verify the gender, age and height of the remains.

Gilde der dragers van het reliekschrijn van Sint-Rumoldus [Mechelen].

anonymously in depositories³⁰; they had survived the *Beeldenstorm*, but were nevertheless erased from Catholic memory.

If we briefly evaluate the treatment of relics in times of trouble it becomes clear that we cannot make an easy distinction between their ‘theological’ and ‘popular’ signification. The stories of the objects first and foremost show that this dichotomy supposes too sharp a distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘deviant’ behaviour – the latter often explained as the remnants of paganism. Relics had value on different levels. They were religious items with a closer proximity to God than other, profane objects. But they were also things with a history, one often intertwined with a community’s identity. The celebration of this identity through relics did not work against the idea of the object as something sacred, otherwise the church would not have partaken so enthusiastically in such festivities, or even organise them themselves. After all, the Council of Trent did not forbid these different meanings; it just did not comment on them.

Despite all the spectacular survival stories like the saving of St. Rumbold’s relics, we should not forget that many, if not most relics met a less happy fate. Yet one hardly finds narratives of successfully destroyed relics in the witness accounts of contemporary Catholics. We must keep in mind that their annihilation was painful to remember as the perished relics had turned out to be corruptible after all. Moreover, because they were special parts of the Resurrection, standing in close proximity to God, their destruction meant the loss of something irreplaceable. As such, the loss of relics stands in contrast to what Willem Frijhoff calls ‘the autonegation of sacrilege’. Frijhoff argues that in the early modern period sacrilege was essentially a contradiction in terms, because it systematically turned itself against those who committed it.³¹ The tales of objects resisting destruction and miraculously dying iconoclasts are indeed abundant.³² The successful elimination of something so holy however, could not easily be moulded into a religiously meaningful narrative. It was therefore rather left unmentioned.

Broken images

Before the iconoclastic destructions of 1566, churches and their interiors had already been subject to change and damage. Particularly in wartime the

30 De Kruijff, *Miraculeus Bewaard*, 155.

31 W.T.M. Frijhoff, ‘The Function of the Miracle in a Catholic Minority’, in: W.T.M. Frijhoff (ed.), *Embodied Belief: Ten Essays on Religious Culture in Dutch History* (Hilversum 2002) 122.

32 D.R. de Boer, ‘Een Straf van God? Voorzienigheid en Daderschap in de Beeldenstorm’, *Transparant* 25:4 (2014) 22-23.

destruction could be just as dramatic.³³ Although Canon Law did not prescribe how to dispose of damaged consecrated objects, there was a widespread tradition of burying them, as one would do with deceased people.³⁴ After the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566 Margaret of Parma, Governor-General of the Low Countries, ordered all cities to get rid of everything broken and restore the church interiors to their former state.³⁵

Catholics thus could partly fall back on both tradition and duty in their responses to iconoclasm. However, differing from accidental damage, weathering and even destruction caused by war, iconoclasm was a directed attack against the Catholic religion and its material culture. The cause of destruction often influences the valuation of that which is destroyed. Some Catholics therefore held on to objects that they might have otherwise disposed of and chose to give them a second life instead. After Mechelen reconciled with the Catholic faith in 1585, the citizens got their first chance to properly deal with the remnants of the Iconoclastic Fury, which had heralded a five-year Calvinist regime. Before 1580 the city had had a pilgrim road that led to a Holy Cross in the hamlet of Battel. The path allegedly had the exact same length as Christ's path to Golgotha.³⁶ Along the road dozens of saints' sculptures had stood, but they had all been severely damaged by the image-breakers. In 1589 the parson of the Our Lady over the Dijle Church successfully petitioned the bishop to have the images collected and re-erected on the city walls, from where they would not look damaged.³⁷ They had lost their devotional value but proudly demonstrated the city's religious identity to everyone who passed the city, not the least Protestants. By so doing the images turned the defeat around.

Other objects could not simply be replaced. Some broken images were kept because they were considered to be miraculous. Such objects usually

33 A. Spicer, 'After Iconoclasm: Reconciliation and Resacralization in the Southern Netherlands, ca. 1566-85', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 44:2 (2013) 415-416; the reordering of graves is another source of continuous change within the church, see V. Bonenkampová, 'Waren "rijke stinkers" rijk? De social stratificatie van de Delftenaren en hun graven in de Oude Kerk', in: P. Bitter, V. Bonenkampová and K. Goudriaan (eds.), *Graven Spreken. Perspectieven op grafcultuur in de middeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Nederlanden* (Hilversum 2013) 193-204; for medieval church laws concerning the desecration of churches see J.T. Gulczynski, *The Desecration and Violation of Churches: An Historical Synopsis* (Washington DC 1942) 1-48.

34 For the late medieval approach to images as living things see C.W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York 2011) 105-112; iconoclasts often followed this tradition of burying images, thereby confirming that they were dead things, see A. Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York 2012) 104.

35 Spicer, 'After Iconoclasm', 418.

36 J. van Balberghe, *Aanteekeningen over de heiligenbeelden op de openbare wegen van Mechelen* (undated manuscript), City Archive Mechelen.

37 Gootens, *Chronijke van Mechelen*, 413.

had two features. First, they were believed to perform miracles for those who visited them. To speak in terms of the Council of Trent – which reserved this for relics – God worked His beneficiary powers through the object. Secondly, many of them had proven to be special because they had resisted alteration or destruction by human hands. The Sweet Mother of Den Bosch for instance, had miraculously escaped being chopped to kindling by people who considered the statuette to be ugly.³⁸ Similarly, the Brabant hamlet of Meeren had a miraculously coloured Holy Virgin. According to legend, a craftsman had attempted to paint the image, but had thrown it into a ditch after the paint failed to stick to the surface. When retrieved from the water a while later, it was suddenly adorned with the most beautiful colours.³⁹

The fact that an image had not been made entirely by human hands, or had miraculously resisted being destroyed, elevated the object's sacred status. Instead of being entirely a product of human agency, it belonged to the realm of God in its very materiality. Our Lady of Hanswijk, to take another example, was renowned for the fact that the handiwork of the craftsman was hardly discernible in the image.⁴⁰ Indeed, many miraculous images were claimed not to have been manufactured at all. Instead, they had suddenly appeared in wells, trees and fields. Presumably having God as their manufacturer, they were often invested with special powers. This meant that, just like relics, if they were lost, something irreplaceable was lost. This is what happened to Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel. In 1580, when the village fell to iconoclasm, the image-breakers were believed to have taken the miraculous image with them.⁴¹ Because the pilgrimages to the site did not cease, a dignitary from a nearby town had replaced the statuette with another one, which he had found in the wooden box of some old lady. Soon, the miracles reoccurred and it was believed that the sculpture was the same as the one that had been lost⁴²; iconoclasm had failed to deprive the Catholics of their material medium with God.

When a miraculous image was successfully destroyed some Catholics took pains to retain at least part of the item. The Flemish town of Damme had a Holy Cross, which had been caught in the nets of some fishermen and performed miracles ever since. In 1578, when Damme was captured by the Gueux, the Cross was smashed to pieces, but that same night some nuns from

38 Margry, *Bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland*, 395.

39 Van Vaerenwijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, II, 287-288.

40 M. Delbeke, 'Miracle Books and Religious Architecture in the Southern Netherlands: The Case of Our Lady of Hanswijk in Mechelen', in: C. Brusati, K.A.E. Enenkel and W. Melion (eds.), *The Authority and the Word: Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe, 1400-1700* (Leiden 2012) 570-571.

41 J. Deckers, *Wonderdadig beeld van Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Scherpenheuvel, weldoenster van het menschdom* (Leuven 1859) 3.

42 Anonymous, *Kort begryp der mirakelen, gratien ende wonderheden geschied door de voorspraeke van de glorieuse H. Moeder Gods Maria* (1680; Turnhout 1784) 14; for a recent study on the pilgrimage site Scherpenheuvel see L. Duerloo and M. Wingens, *Scherpenheuvel. Het Jeruzalem van de Lage Landen* (Leuven 2002).

St. John's Hospital had supposedly gathered the fragments. When they returned the shattered cross to the church, the women kept one of Christ's knees, which they preserved with deep veneration⁴³; through its destruction by evil forces, the Holy Cross had become a relic, one that could be divided and the pieces venerated. After the reparation or replacement of the Cross – probably shortly after Damme returned to Catholic hands in 1584 – an annual procession was organised in July to do penance for what the image-breakers had done.⁴⁴ According to the church's parish book, the commemoration was accompanied by a remarkable ritual; in the procession, participants pretended that they were possessed by an evil spirit. While shouting and raving, they tried to touch the Holy Cross to be redeemed.⁴⁵ Since the procession was held in memory of iconoclasm, it is likely that the parishioners imitated the raging image-breakers, symbolising the heresy that was bound to succumb to the Holy Cross.

Secular losses

Early-modern Catholic churches and cloisters housed more than only sacred goods and many witnesses bemoaned the loss of profane objects just as much. Among the most treasured items destroyed were manuscripts. With a keen eye for the visual effect of iconoclasm Van Vaernewijck describes how the image-breakers had their way with the written word:

They tore and spoiled innumerable books, so that the whole street was covered with adorned paper. [...] So much paper had been thrown in the (river, D.D.B.) Leie, that it appeared as if enormous snowflakes fell into the water [...] It seemed as if the Leie was made out of paper and books, which had cost untold amounts of money.⁴⁶

The inversion that the Iconoclastic Fury brought about could hardly be more dramatic. The ever transient river, its polluted water flowing through the city, had swallowed priceless works that were meant to last for eternity. Some youths and servants tried to fish books out of the water, only to see them being thrown back in by the iconoclasts.⁴⁷ The damage was not only monetary. In fact, Van Vaernewijck mainly laments the loss of the books' content. Down to earth as most of his observations are, here he sees the Devil's work, who hoped 'to obscure the good doctrines of the old doctors, in order to better

43 St. John's Hospital in Damme still houses the knee, which remains an object of devotion till this day; J. Koldewey, *Geloof en geluk. Sieraad en devotie in Middeleeuws Vlaanderen* (Arnhem 2006) 204.

44 G.F. Tanghe, *Parochieboek van Damme* (Bruges 1862) 96.

45 Tanghe, *Parochieboek van Damme*, 97-98.

46 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 113-114.

47 *Ibid.*, 114.

sow his heresy'.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the Devil had done so rather successfully, as the books had 'many antiquities described in them, which would never be recovered'.⁴⁹ As a man of letters, the chronicler sees the loss as a loss of arguments in the theological fight against Protestantism. Many Catholics believed their religion's antiquity to be a trump against 'Protestant novelties'. The Catholic religion had proven itself to be the true religion in its endless history of miracles and its theological refinements as described in all the religious books.

It is therefore not surprising that especially learned clerics appeared to be distressed by the loss of written works. After the iconoclasm of 1580 in Mechelen, Cornelius Vranx, abbot of one of the city's cloisters, principally deplored the loss of books that described the many miracles of Our Lady of Hanswijk, even though the sculpture itself had survived the storm.⁵⁰ The abbot compared the loss of these works, 'in which the power of the saint becomes all the more cognisable', with the book burnings of Emperor Diocletian. He argues that 'also in those days the heretics focused on burning the books in which the lives of saints were described'.⁵¹ *Damnatio memoriae* could also take the form of attacks on manuscripts which individuals or groups were tied to in a more personal way. An anonymous nun, who wrote a chronicle about the image-breaking in Mechelen, was tormented above all by the loss of the letters and registers of her cloister. The nuns put so much value in these manuscripts that they had offered the iconoclasts all their money to save them.⁵² With the destruction of their documents, the nuns lost the written memory of their order and were thus deprived of an integral part of their identity. On a more mundane level, many manuscripts were legal documents, describing the cloister's titles and possessions and as such were important sources of revenue. In books and written documents we have found – next to relics and miraculous images – another form of irreplaceable material culture. Yet the manuscripts are different in that they were not sacred – except for the Holy Bible. Some of the works destroyed did not even deal mainly with religion, but they were invaluable as memories, both materially and in their content, which could make their destruction intimately painful. Moreover, because old manuscripts were man-made, their loss was in a way even more final than that of something sacred. After all, unlike saints' remains and miraculous sculptures, God was not making more of them.

Another highly treasured category of church objects were paintings. Besides the building itself, the altarpieces and paintings it housed were often

48 *Ibid.*, 116-117.

49 *Ibid.*, 75.

50 P. Siré, *Hanswyck ende het wonderdadich beeldt van de alder-heylichste maget ende moeder godts Maria* (Dendermonde 1738) 233.

51 *Ibid.*, 234.

52 Anonymous, 'Chronicon prioratus de Musenis, olim in agro Mechliniensi in pago Muijsen, a turbatoribus calvinianis pulsi num in civitate Mechliniensi degentibus', in: *Analecta Mechliniensia* (undated manuscript) 140, City Archive Mechelen.

the things for which churches were most famous. Paintings, despite the fact that they often depicted biblical scenes or saints, were secular objects; they were not consecrated and usually not (supposed to be) a medium of veneration. Yet in practice the line between secular and sacred could be blurred, as believers sometimes imbued paintings with sacral agency. In the Holland town of Abbenbroek, for instance, a miraculous late medieval painting of the Virgin Mary had been an object of veneration and pilgrimage since the fifteenth century – approved of by both the bishop of Utrecht and the pope.⁵³ This however, was an exceptional case; especially compared to sculptures, only a handful of paintings were considered to be miraculous objects.⁵⁴ Nevertheless many paintings were valued as priceless and exquisite pieces of art. Some witnesses of iconoclasm voiced a strong appreciation for religious paintings simply for their beauty, fully differentiated from any religious worth or worthlessness. One anonymous eyewitness who recounted the *Beeldenstorm* in the abbey of Middelburg – perhaps one of the monks – in fact was most devastated by the destruction of a painted work:

One principally lamented a very beautiful and precious painting from the High Altar, painted in former times by Jasmijn Mabuyze [Jan Gossaert], on which he worked for fifteen years; it was reputed to be the most beautiful painting in all Europe.⁵⁵

It is important to note that the author does not dwell on its religious quality by mentioning what the painting depicted, but instead appreciates the artistry of the work by focusing on its maker. This Renaissance focus on craftsmanship went against the idea of the materially sacred object, which, as we have seen, was usually some sort of *acheiropoieton*, an object not made by human hands.⁵⁶ Pasquier de le Barre, a magistrate from Tournai, who describes the Iconoclastic Fury with little religious reflection, similarly complains in his diary that the iconoclasts ‘utterly (disregarded, D.D.B.) the excellence of the paintings’.⁵⁷ Having no interest in dwelling on whether iconoclasm was theologically right or wrong, the magistrate repudiates the deed as the vandalism of art. Paintings were so highly treasured that they often received priority in the hurried attempts to save church objects from impending iconoclasm. Some

53 Margry, *Bedeveartaatsen in Nederland*, 89-93.

54 This observation is based on Margry’s comprehensive overview of pilgrimage sites in the Netherlands.

55 Anonymous, ‘Register Perpetueel der Stad Rumerwaal’ (extract), *Messenger des Sciences Historiques* 29 (1855) 416; Karel Van Mander claims that the triptych was lost when the church burned down after being struck by lightning. See

K. Van Mander, *Het schilder-boeck* (Haarlem 1604) f. 225v.

56 J.L. Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (London 2004) 13-14.

57 P. de le Barre, *The Time of Troubles in the Low Countries: The Chronicles and Memoirs of Pasquier de la Barre of Tournai, 1559-1567* (1567; New York 1989) 131; cited from translation.

days before the Iconoclastic Fury hit Ghent, wary citizens had hidden the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers in the tower of St. Bavo's Cathedral. In one of the first written celebrations of the work, Marcus Van Vaernewijck judged it a wise decision, calling it the most 'artistic (altarpiece, D.D.B.) in all of Christendom'.⁵⁸ A few days later Ghent's iconoclasts would throw relics that had not been hidden out of broken church windows.⁵⁹ In Leiden the mayor managed to save Lucas van Leyden's famous Last Judgment triptych by buying it from the iconoclasts who had just stormed the Pieterskerk, and moved it to the city hall.⁶⁰ Now hanging in a secular building, the triptych also survived subsequent waves of iconoclasm.

Paintings thus constituted, besides the sacred and the personal, a third form of irretrievable loss – the loss of manmade, yet unique, beauty. Because they were not sacred objects however, their loss was not so painful to recall. On the contrary, because paintings could be held dear for their artistry in secular terms, recalling their destruction was an effective way of bringing supraconfessional shame upon the iconoclasts. *Lutherana tragoedia artis*, the widespread idea in contemporary Catholic polemic of the Reformer as an enemy of culture, was all the more true for image-breakers.⁶¹

Assessing the damage

Not all that was hidden seems to have been particularly precious. In Roeselare, the bailiff and some priests commanded citizens to hide valuable church jewels in their homes. What kind of jewels they were is unspecified; they might have referred to liturgical objects. However, it is striking that the authorities stressed that the objects should be saved simply because the church was rather poor. Their possible sacred or artistic value was not mentioned.⁶² However, the worth of miraculous objects was sometimes also expressed in monetary value; the sacred had a price. We should keep in mind that the Iconoclastic Furies struck busy centres of commerce. Valuing goods and making them fungible by putting a price on them – even if they were one of a kind – was an all too common practice in cities like Ghent and Amsterdam.⁶³

58 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, 1, 88; H. van der Velden, 'The Quatrain of "The Ghent Altarpiece"', *Simiolus* 35;1-2 (2011) 5.

59 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, 1, 132.

60 W. Moll and N.C. Kist, 'De Beeldenstorm in Leiden', *Kerkhistorisch Archief* 3 (1862) 441.

61 Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 28.

62 Anonymous, 'Omstandig verhael der religieberoerten en kerkschendingen binnen en omtrent de stad Rousselare (1566)', *Oud en nieuw. Historische, letterkundige en wetenschappelijke uitgaaf* 3 (1867) 28-29.

63 M.C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge 2010) 16.



The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb altarpiece (open) by the Van Eyck brothers. Fifteenth century, St. Bavo's cathedral, Ghent. Lukas – Art in Flanders vzw (www.lukasweb.be). Photo by Hugo Maertens.

Almost all witnesses of the *Beeldenstorm* recount that immediately after the event attempts were made to evaluate what was lost in monetary terms. Van Vaernewijck notes that the monks of St. Peter in Ghent had estimated the damage done to their abbey at about 11,000 Flemish pounds.⁶⁴ Interestingly, they had come to this amount mostly by looking at the value of the marble works that had been destroyed and the price of the wine that the iconoclasts had drunk.⁶⁵ Also during the image-breaking itself victims put a price on the objects under attack. In a lively account of the Iconoclastic Fury in the Den Bosch cloister of Mariënborg an anonymous nun writes that bystanders desperately tried to offer up to a hundred guilders for the preservation of objects, 'because some said they were easily worth eight hundred'.⁶⁶ Many were surprised to find these 'rogues who barely had shoes on their feet' unwilling to take the money.⁶⁷ Even the eyewitness in Middelburg reminded the reader that Gossaert's celebrated work had cost 80,000 ducats.⁶⁸

It appears that evaluating the destruction in terms of money served as a coping mechanism. By quantifying what the image-breaking had cost, it became something manageable. Like other financial setbacks, it was something that could be calculated and overcome. Emphasis was shifted from the loss of precious altars, exquisite paintings and devotional relics to the loss of capital. It was a way of conflating the loss of a barrel of wine with the destruction of a sacred image. People secularised the losses and made the irreplaceable appear replaceable. Moreover, it criminalised the iconoclasts as vandals. They had not purified the churches, but had destroyed, plundered and consumed everything in their paths.

But whose property had they actually violated? The simple answer would be, of course, the church's property, but the matter was more complex. Much of the church interior had either been financed from the parish's collective contributions, or had been given to the church as gifts by private donors. In the sixteenth-century Low Countries there was a widely held idea that goods that had been provided with a pious destination nevertheless remained the property of the person that had donated it to the church in the first place. The donor had lost free disposal over the object, as it had to meet its intended destination, but it was still considered to be his or hers.⁶⁹ This enduring association between

64 The Flemish pound was a currency in Flanders; see P. Vandewalle, *Oude maten, gewichten en muntstelsels in Vlaanderen, Brabant en Limburg* (Ghent 1984) 66.

65 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 130-132.

66 Anonymous, *Kroniek eener kloosterzuster van het voormalig Bossche klooster 'Mariënborg' over de troebelen te 's-Hertogenbosch e.e. in de jaren 1566-1575* (1575; 's-Hertogenbosch 1931) 5.

67 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 132.

68 Anonymous, 'Beschrijving van de beeldenstorm', 416.

69 J.F. van Beeck Calkoen, *Onderzoek naar den rechtsteestand der geestelijke en kerkelijke goederen in Holland na de Reformatie* (Amsterdam 1910) 35.



Lucas van Leyden (ca. 1526-1527), Triptych of the Last Judgment.

Collection Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden.

gift and donor became salient in the ways in which such objects were put to use. Chalice for instance, were often inscribed with the donor's name. When that person had died the thing would serve – in addition to its liturgical function – as a means to commemorate the deceased and reduce his or her time in purgatory.⁷⁰ In her work on late medieval church donations in Nuremberg, Corine Schleif has argued that, because of their liturgical function, many of these donations were also perceived to fulfil a common good. As such, they formed a strong material axis between donor, congregation and God.⁷¹

To ensure the devotional or spatial position of their gifts within the church over generations – and thereby protect their road to salvation – donors drew up contracts and appointed progeny or institutions as caretakers.⁷² In the Low Countries they often requested the bishop to take the object under ecclesiastical jurisdiction to ensure that it would keep its pious destination and could not be claimed by the worldly authorities. As such, the goods became possession of the Catholic Church, not the specific parish church in which it was located. Still, the objects remained under a form of familial inheritance. If a patron's family fell into poverty they could often reclaim the goods on request.⁷³ Some advocates of iconoclasm, such as Filips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde, confidant of William of Orange, invoked the idea of the church interiors as largely consisting of private property, to counter the claim that the *Beeldenstorm* had been a subversive act against the secular authorities.⁷⁴ Parishioners – having largely financed the church interior both as individual patrons and through collective contributions – indeed often regarded the church as shared property. This of course, was enhanced by the semi-hereditary status of much of the church interior. Taking this into account, Van Vaernewijck wonders if the iconoclasts would not regret their deeds:

(I do not, D.D.B.) suggest that the clergy deserved it, but (the iconoclasts, D.D.B.) mostly ruined and broke things that had belonged to laypeople, or which they, or their parents and ancestors, had given (to the church, D.D.B.) out of devotion.⁷⁵

Many iconoclasts played with the argument that the lush interiors of the churches should rather be spent on feeding the poor, but the very fact that this richness eventually came from the people could also lead to the interpretation that the iconoclasts attacked the community's property. Van Vaernewijck

70 E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven 1992) 330.

71 C. Schleif, *Donatio et Memoria. Stifter, Stiftungen und Motivationen an Beispielen aus der Lorenzkirche in Nürnberg* (Munich 1990) 232-234.

72 Schleif, *Donatio et Memoria*, 233.

73 Van Beeck Calkoen, *Onderzoek naar den rechtstoestand*, 37.

74 Anonymous, *Kroniek eener kloosterzuster van het voormalig Bossche klooster 'Mariënborg' over de troebelen te 's-Hertogenbosch e.e. in (S.l. 1567)*.

75 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerliche tijden*, I, 163-164.

criticises the image-breakers for having ‘caused that laymen were again subjected to great costs to repair what had been broken’.⁷⁶ Tactically, he shifts the emphasis from the clergy to the community by arguing that most damage was done to ‘parochial churches, chapels, and such, to which the priests will return as soon as they are repaired, but as long as they are broken and spoiled, it is on the shoulders of the common people, since (the objects, D.D.B.) belong to the congregation’.⁷⁷ The church was the community’s property, not the clergy’s. As such, iconoclasm had brought parishioners into financial trouble. Therefore the image-breaking could never be religiously righteous. Van Vaernewijck argues that even if the criticism of the paintings in the churches had been justified ‘those very paintings had been donated by people, who had been minded to let them be painted as such; one does not look a gift horse in the mouth’.⁷⁸

Of course, the repairs made after iconoclasm did indeed largely come from the pockets of the church’s parishioners. About a year after the *Beeldenstorm* the aldermen of Ghent gathered the heads of the city guilds and, in the name of Margaret of Parma, ordered them to repair their altars or have new ones manufactured. The Ghent guild masters responded furiously to the demand and argued that those who had broken the altars in the first place should also be the ones paying for them.⁷⁹ This was conforming to Joos de Damhouder’s widely used 1555 *Handbook in Criminal Cases*, which states that all possessions of a church violator were to be used for repairing what he had damaged.⁸⁰

Suffered iconoclasm could also be invoked as an argument for not having to pay for other community expenses. Shortly after the *Beeldenstorm* in Tournai, the city’s Protestants started to build their own churches. The merchants responsible for the construction pleaded with the magistrates that all citizens should contribute; because there were officially two tolerated religions in the city a collective investment was considered only fair.⁸¹ The magistrates did not agree. They argued that it would be hard for Catholics to contribute,⁸²

[...] given the great disruption and disorder those of the new religion had brought to the Catholic temples and churches when they pulled down and smashed the images and wrecked the ornaments used in services.

After the destruction that Protestantism had brought, Tournai’s Catholics had more than paid their taxes.

76 *Ibid.*, 164.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Ibid.*, 168.

79 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, II, 258-259.

80 J. de Damhouder, *Practycke ende handbouck in criminele zaeken* (Leuven 1555) 191.

81 De le Barre, *The Time of Troubles*, 154.

82 *Ibid.*; cited from translation.

Other Catholics did not feel the need to have the damages repaired in the first place. Godefriedus van Thienwinckel, the parish priest of Zichem, bemoans in his diary that after the Iconoclastic Fury in 1580, parishioners had gathered everything that the image-breakers had left and started selling it.⁸³ The clergyman was sensitive to the dire straits in which his congregation found themselves, but he nevertheless deemed the selling of church objects to be plain thievery and argued that it would surely bring God's wrath over the villagers.⁸⁴ The objects in a way might have been theirs, but they had not been theirs to sell.

Between the ruins

Catholics gathered a lot from the piles of debris left in the churches after the Iconoclastic Fury. They found worthless rubble, broken belongings, signs of God's enduring support, ruined beauty and things sacralised in the course of the storm. To understand why the value ascribed to those objects was often so ambiguous, it is important to remember that sixteenth-century Catholics had not themselves created most of the material religion that surrounded them and ordered their religious lives. On the contrary, it was part of their habitat and therefore largely a given. The Low Countries' religious landscape had developed over generations and taken form through daily interactions with all sorts of different believers. Catholic material culture was a patchwork, inextricably intertwined with the practices and values of local communities. The signification of religious objects was therefore always more layered and complex than the Council of Trent, for instance, could ever capture in dogma.

The violent disruption of this material culture through iconoclasm however, forced Catholics to engage with their religious surroundings in an unprecedentedly conscious way. They had to reframe, redefine and reorder their religious landscape while at the same time coming to terms with the attack itself. In this renegotiation Catholics largely improvised on familiar practices and traditions, ranging from adorning city walls with damaged images to putting a price on goods. The fact that church objects were often not primarily defined in religious terms but, for instance, in terms of secular property, shows that iconoclasm was considered much more than just the physical escalation of a theological dispute; it was perceived as a violent disruption of the very structure and harmony of society. Contemporary Catholics emphasised that the image-breakers had not engaged in surgical operations to remove those parts of the religious infrastructure they believed to be blasphemous, but had attacked all social space.

83 G. van Thienwinckel, 'Eenige aantekeningen over onze zeer ongelukkige tijden, van voorvallen vol bitterheid en smert in de stad Sichem

(1576-1616)', in: H. van Leemputte (ed.), *Hagelandse Gedenkschriften* 5 (1911) 21-22.

84 Van Thienwinckel, *Eenige aantekeningen*, 21.

By downplaying the religious aspects of iconoclasm, they averted the sometimes difficult confrontations with their own material religion, while at the same time condemning the iconoclasts on a level that transcended confessions. Indeed, the question was often shifted from *what* had been destroyed, to *whom* what had been destroyed belonged. After the storm, Catholics were painfully confronted with what was lost and much of their inherited landscape could no longer be glued together. But that did not keep them from picking up the pieces, and like ashes, the debris proved to be fertile soil.

David de Boer (1990) is a doctoral student at the University of Konstanz and Leiden University (cotutelle doctoral programme). In his PhD research he examines the public communication of European religious persecutions and expressions of transnational solidarity in the Dutch Republic between 1650 and 1750. A forthcoming article explores visual representations of the violence committed against the Waldensians in Dutch newspapers: 'For Pity and Piety: Images of Religious Persecution in the Dutch Republic', in: David de Boer, Monika Barget and Malte Griesse (eds.), *Iconic Revolts: Political Violence in Early Modern Imagery* (Leiden, Boston, forthcoming 2016). De Boer has also written a chapter on the cultural memory of furies during the Dutch Revolt for a forthcoming book on civic identity in Mechelen: 'In Memoriam vs. Damnatio Memoriae: The Cultural Memory of a Sacked City', in: Peter Stabel et al. (eds.), *Urban Identities in the Late-Medieval and Early Modern City: Mechelen in the 15th and 16th Centuries* (Turnhout, forthcoming 2016). Email: david.de-boer@uni-konstanz.de.