

PARDONS

Topographies of Pardon Tales: Contextual Mapping of Pardon Letters in the Southern Low Countries, 15th-17th centuries

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SUMMARY

Context

Although by now, several generations of European and North American historians have based much of their work on the late medieval and early modern criminal, social and political history of pardon letters, they have rarely made use of the large and rich series of pardon letters that are preserved in the various collections of the Belgian State Archives (henceforth ARAB). In fact, as these documents are scattered and poorly catalogued, they were hardly accessible both to scholars and to the larger communities of genealogists and local researchers. The PARDONS-project has uncovered these hidden gems and has stimulated new avenues of historical research based on their analysis.

Objectives

The main objective of the PARDONS-project has been to render publicly accessible various large collections of late medieval and early modern pardon letters once granted by the Burgundian and Habsburg rulers of the Low Countries, and which are now preserved in ARAB.

Moreover, the project has aimed to stimulate new strands of research on the criminal, social and political history of the Burgundian and Habsburg Low Countries, based on the scrutiny of these pardon letters.

Conclusions

The research team has certainly succeeded to draw the attention of scholars, local historians, and genealogists alike to the important series of pardon letters kept in the ARAB. However, it turned out that the number of letters preserved in the archives significantly surpassed the team's original estimates. In particular, despite substantial progress in the intensive training of automatic text recognition software (Transkribus) with early modern Dutch records, this tool still struggles to accurately decipher French texts produced by late-medieval and early modern secretaires belonging to the relevant institutions. The vast majority of the corpus consists of French-language documents.

Therefore, some form of follow-up project would be most welcome to capitalize on the groundbreaking work achieved thus far.

Keywords

Pardon Letters - Legal History – Burgundian/Habsburg Low Countries – Citizen Science - Handwritten text recognition