

# PARDONS

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

**DURATION**  
15/12/2020 – 15/03/2025

**BUDGET**  
860 445 €

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

#### Context

In early modern Europe, pardoning crime was a multi-level and complex process of reconstructing social peace in territories subject to various level of sovereignty. The Belgian State Archives contain exceptional series of pardon letters granted by Burgundian and Habsburg rulers in the Low Countries. These letters not only reveal the expanding bureaucracies of the rulers who issued the pardon as well as the hierarchy of intermediate powers involved in the process, they also reflect the demands and experiences of individuals and local communities facing social and political conflicts. These fascinating collections of stories of violence, conflict, and disruption of daily lives are therefore an invaluable part of the early modern archival heritage in Belgium, and they should be easily accessible to everyone.

#### Objectives

The purpose of the PARDONS project is to digitize, study, and make publicly accessible the vast collections of pardon letters granted by Burgundian and Habsburg rulers and preserved at the Belgian State Archives. By studying the content of these letters, our research team aims to reconstruct the discourses, strategies, and concerns of offenders who requested a pardon and who sought to address the claims of the victim party. It will map the power structures behind the use of pardons, develop a complex archival topography of the pardoning procedure, and show how pardons were used as instruments of peace in the management of social and political conflicts. The project will thus provide an innovative history of power and social relations in the early modern Low Countries. Finally, by developing an open access digital resource, and by involving a citizen science network in the research, the project will valorize these collections of pardon letters.

#### Methodology

The series of pardon letters preserved in Belgian State Archives are exceptional in terms of quantity, density of information and chronological continuity (approx. 10000 letters, 15th-18th c.). They are divided into three main collections from the archives of the Audience, the Privy Council, and the Chamber of accounts. Our research team will systematically digitize, index, and transcribe a coherent set of pardons from these three collections. Through a partnership with VZW Histories and various historical associations, we will also develop a citizen science network of volunteer collaborators (amateurs, retired people, local historians, master students) who will help to accelerate the process of transcription. Building on the thick description of the pardon letters, the project will investigate the practice of granting pardon in the Burgundian and Habsburg Low Countries. Then, pardon letters will be analyzed as archival genres, as narrative manifestos, and as instruments for peace and conflict management. Adopting this triple perspective will provide a comprehensive study of the pardoning procedure, the strategies developed by subjects when petitioning for a pardon, as well as the political interests of the monarchs, intermediate powers, and local communities regarding the granting of pardons. The emphasis on the valorization component of the PARDONS project lies on the creation of a freely accessible website on which the digitized letters, the metadata, and the transcriptions will be displayed, with references from other sources or publications relating to the letters in question.

#### Expected impact and results

The pardon letters in the Belgian State Archives are among the most remarkable archival heritage collections of the early modern Low Countries, but also one of the least known. Therefore, the PARDONS project aims to offer a robust digital resource to provide unlimited access to these primary sources to a large audience of both local historians and genealogists, as well as professional researchers in medieval and early modern history and in various social sciences.

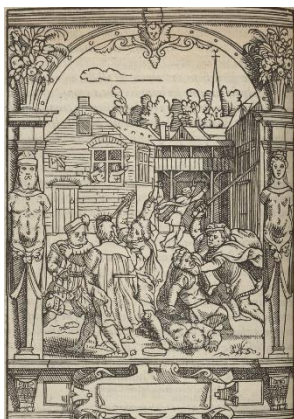


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This resource will also include a dedicated space to disseminate the results of our research, as a complement to the communication and publication of the research results via traditional channels such as international journals and conferences. Moreover, this website will offer an excellent hub for broad valorization. The metadata of all the pardon letters studied and digitized, as well as their transcriptions, will be integrated in the digital search environment of the Belgian State Archives. The involvement of volunteers in identifying, transcribing, and studying pardon letters is also an important form of valorization in terms of citizen science, as well as a major asset for the continuation of the project after its completion. It is a fascinating perspective to not only examine these pardon stories about thousands of disturbed lives in a scientific light, but also to bring them to the broad public they deserve. By retelling and valorizing these hidden stories, this project could even enable contemporary people to connect more than they usually do with a forgotten past.



"Des seditions ou commotions"  
Joos de Damhouder, La Practique et  
enchiridion des causes criminelles,  
Louvain, Wauters et Bathen,  
1555, p. 108.



"D'homicide"  
Joos de Damhouder, La Practique et  
enchiridion des causes criminelles,  
Louvain, Wauters et Bathen,  
1555, p. 116.



"De ravissement"  
Joos de Damhouder, La Practique et  
enchiridion des causes criminelles,  
Louvain, Wauters et Bathen,  
1555, p. 203.

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## LINKS

Project website: [www.pardons.eu](http://www.pardons.eu)

Page on the UCLouvain website:  
<https://uclouvain.be/fr/instituts-recherche/incal/chd/pardons.html>