

Deed of the Foundation of Annual Masses for Melcior de Wale
In Dutch, manuscript on parchment
Southern Netherlands, Ypres, 1471.

14 leaves, parchment, 19th-century pagination [i-ii], 1-21, [22-26] in brown ink in the upper outer corners; collation: i⁴ (pp. i-ii, 1-26), complete, written in a littera cursiva by one hand; ruling in brown ink for the boundary lines only, prickings for all lines still present, 1 column (justification 162-156 x 89-87 mm.); maximum of 31 lines on a page (p. 18); in good condition, some soiling along the edges. Stitched into a vellum bifolium; pp. i-ii and 25-26 serving as flyleaves, cropped at the outer edges, cover browned. Dimensions 234 x 163 mm.

Long lost document from 1471, settling the institution of annual masses in memory of Melcior de Wale, to be celebrated by the Brotherhood of Saint Nicholas in Ypres, Flanders. The deed specifies in detail the donations of the benefactor and the ceremonies which had to be performed after his death, in order to secure the salvation of his soul. The document survives as a striking testimony of religious practices in a late-medieval Flemish city.

PROVENANCE

1. The deed may well have been the copy once kept by the Brotherhood of Saint Nicholas itself, regarding the note at the top of the front cover concerning payments to be made by the custos of the brotherhood to church attendants performing services during the ceremonies.
2. The inner back cover bears the contemporary inscription “petrus de compriser [?] pertinet”, suggesting that someone with the name Petrus de Compriser (?) once owned the manuscript.

TEXT

Title on cover, in the hand of the scribe: “Dit es den bouc vanden jaerghetijde dat her Melchior de Wale gheoordeneert ende ghecocht heeft jeghen die van sinter Niclaunen ghilde tYpre zekere diensten ende provende te doene ende te deelne ten tween stonden in elc jaer naer den inhoudene van desen boucke.”

pp. 1-21, incipit, “Hier naer vollecht ten love vander glorieuse divine heleghe drievuldicheide ter heere ende werdicheide vander ghebenedider moeder der maghet Maria, ende van allen den hemelsche gheselsceipe tjaerghetijde van her Melcior de Wale her vanden Coorvere ende van Venissien gheordonneert ter lavenesse van zijner ziele van zijns liefs vaders ziele van mer vrouwe zijner moeder ziele van joncvrouwe Denijse Hallois zijne wettelijk gheselnde ziele vanden her Boudem Hallois hueren vader ziele ende joncvrouwe Clare Dreljncx huerer moeder ziele, ende voort van allen zalighen zielen verscheeden van deser brootscher ketivighe werelt. Ghecocht ende vercreghen bijden zelve Melcior de Wale int jaer XIIIIC een ende tseventich jeghen senter Niclaens ghildebroeders te doene alle jare ten tween stonden eeuwelic ende ervedic gheduerende inde kerke van sente Andries gheseit sinte Mertins inder voorme ende maniere hier naer van pointe te pointe gheschreven ende verclaert”, explicit, “Comt als dat ic de voreseide ghilde ghegheven hebbe also hier boven ghescreven staet over mijn jaerghetijde voorseid de somme

van vier ponden zeventien scellinghen vier penningen groten ende een half pond was alle jare eeuweleke ende erveleke gheduerende. Ende mijn jaerghetide draecht alle jare also hier vooren ghescreven staat de somme van drie ponden achte scellinghen neghen penningen groten eeuwelic ende ervelic gheduerende. Dus blijkt claerlijc dat de voreseide ghilde sjaers ewelic ende ervelic te boven gaet de somme van achte ende twintich scellinghen ende zeven penningen groten ende een half pond was" (pp. 22–26 blank);

A (partly illegible) contemporary addition at the top of the front cover, by another hand, states which payments should be made by the custos of the Brotherhood of Saint Nicholas to church attendants performing services during the ceremonies, such as ringing the bells: "Voor dit jaerghetijde moet de custode [...] ghilde van sinter niclaus LVII scellinghen groten telker reyse [...] wanof de clockluder heift XIX scellinghen [...] de kerke XXXIII scellinghen de custode."

A later, probably eighteenth-century hand added on the front cover a transcription of the title and a summary of the donation which Melcior de Wale made.

The document described here originates from Ypres (in Dutch: Ieper), an ancient town in West Flanders. During the later Middle Ages it was the third largest city in the County of Flanders, after Ghent and Bruges. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Ypres prospered, due to a large textile industry and the export of linen to England, which is mentioned in the *Canterbury Tales*. Economic and political difficulties brought decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Dominating the city view is Saint Martin's Church, built between 1230 and 1370, one of the tallest buildings in Belgium. It is the burial place of, among others, Count Robert III of Flanders (1249–1322), known as "The Lion of Flanders."

One of the leading citizens in fifteenth-century Ypres was Melcior de Wale (or Waele), lord of Corvere and Venissien. Between 1456 and 1476 he is mentioned repeatedly as alderman and once as governor of Ypres (Bossuyt 2000, part I, chapter 4). According to Joigny de Pamele 1935, p. 109, Melcior de Wale bought the seigniorship of Venissien near Courtrai in 1475, but apparently the seigniorship was already in his possession in 1471, given the fact that he is called "her vanden Coorvere ende van Venissien" in the document described here. In any case, Melcior de Wale was a man of power and wealth.

A clear indication of his prosperity is the "jaerghetijde," the annual mass, which he institutes in this document. In fact he ordered two "zynghende messe" a year (p. 4), solemn masses which were sung, on the occasion of which bread and alms should be distributed. The masses had to be celebrated in Saint Martin's Church in Ypres by the Brotherhood of Saint Nicholas. In return the brotherhood received from Melcior a piece of land in the parish of Saint John of "zeventien ghemeten eene lijne ende zestiene roeden" (p. 19), plus an annual amount of money of "vier ponden zeventien scellinghen vier penningen groten" (p. 21), and half a pound of wax for candles (p. 21).

Melcior's "jaerghetijde" was also in memory of his second wife Denyse Hallois, his father Christiaen de Wale, his mother Catharina Belle, his father-in-law Baudouin Hallois and his mother-in-law Clare Drelyncx. Denyse Hallois is known to have been dead already when the annual mass was instituted. The same may be true for Melcior's parents and parents-in-law. The name of Melcior's father and mother are not mentioned in the document, but are known from other sources (Merghelync 1877, pp. 121, 200).

The Guild or Brotherhood of Saint Nicholas, formed by secular priests, was originally established for the care of ill people and the reception of pilgrims. The priests also celebrated mass, including annual masses for deceased benefactors. In the fifteenth century the celebration of annual masses had become the sole *raison d'être* of the brotherhood, and its only source of income. Around 1564 the brotherhood moved from their chapel in Saint Martin's Church to Saint Peter's Church, where the priests continued their services up to the suppression of their brotherhood by the French in 1794.

In 1727 a large number of the old foundations had been "verduysterd" (embezzled), and the income from more recent ones did not suffice for celebrating all annual masses. Therefore the brotherhood obtained permission to end the special services, on the condition that each year 64 masses would be held for the salvation of the souls of all old benefactors. Besides, the brotherhood continued to celebrate the annual masses of which the foundations had not been embezzled.

Among the latter were the annual masses for Melcior de Wale. Still in the eighteenth century his annual masses were celebrated twice a year, one on the first Friday of March and the other on the first Friday of September. It was on the occasion of the annual masses for Melcior that small tokens with death's-heads were distributed (Vanden Peereboom 1876; Vanden Peereboom 1877, pp. 222–227). This could be inferred from the archive of the brotherhood, which was kept in the Stadsarchief (Municipal Archive) of Ypres, until it was destroyed by the Germans in 1914, during World War I.

Up to now the conditions for the foundation of annual masses for Melcior de Wale were only known from a much later source. "L'acte même de la fondation Melchior de Waele n'a pu être retrouvé jusqu' ici," Vanden Peereboom regretfully remarked in 1877. For its content he had to rely on a document as late as 1787 in the National Archives in Brussels. Now with the document described here we have a contemporary copy of the original deed. It may well have been the copy once kept by the Brotherhood of Saint Nicholas itself.

Melcior de Wale died on 6 August 1478. He was buried in Saint Martin's Church in Ypres, in the north chapel near the altar of St. Catherine, in the same grave as his first wife Anna van den Brande and his second wife Denyse Hallois, who had died on 26 October 1467. Their gravestone, still present, is adorned with a copper plate and shows the three deceased, the coat of arms of the De Wale family and the symbols of the four Evangelists (Gailliard 1859, pp. 110–111; Bossuyt 2000, part II).

Melcior had at least one son, Andries. He was senior bailiff and, like his father, alderman of Ypres. Andries died on 29 January 1521 N.S. and was buried in the church of St. Martin, in the same grave as his wife Isabelle Corteville, who had died on 4 March 1499 N.S. (Bossuyt 2000, part I, chapter 4).

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