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Charters, Pitchforks, and Green Seals*

Written Documents between Text and Materiality in Late Medieval Revolts

During the great Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England, the insurgents assaulted and looted the house of Admiral Edmund de la Mare in Peldon, about 100 kilometres northeast of London. One of them, Ralph atte Wode, grabbed a file of official documents and impaled them on his pitchfork. Together with other insurgents, he carried them all the way to London in order to see the king and present his demands.[1]

When we think of objects that were usually impaled in medieval times, the heads of decapitated criminals or traitors spring to mind. Fixing an object on a lance or a stick primarily answered the purpose of making it widely seen and, in the case of a decapitated head, making the death of a person publicly known.[2] The display of body parts was likewise a symbol of the triumph of justice and at the same time a warning: city gates with decapitated heads on them were a common sight in the Middle Ages and served as a deterrent to every newcomer or visitor.[3] Impaled charters, however, do not seem to fit into this picture of triumphant or daunting acts.

This essay examines the function or significance that insurgents attributed to written documents during revolts in the late Middle Ages. In so doing, it approaches the topic of this volume through the back door. It is very difficult to estimate literacy rates for the late Middle Ages, but one can assume that large parts of society were not able to read and write fluently. The dichotomy between the specific content of a doc-

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1 *...et libri domini Regis a domo dicti Edmundi usque le Mile End super unum longum furcum felonice portandum coram domino Rege.* London, Public Record Office, KB 145/3/6/1, cited in Eiden 1995, 210; cf. also Prescott 1984, 100–101 and 136. Cf. Justice 1994, 40, 46, and 71.
2 For decapitation as punishment, cf. Gonthier 1998, 151–156.
3 The gates of *London Bridge*, until 1739 the only bridge over the river Thames, were regularly used to display the heads or extremities of executed men, Eaton 1996, 47. This act of punishment was deliberately imitated by the insurgents in 1381: The Westminster chronicle, 6; Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 450, 480, and 484; The Anonimalle Chronicle, 135, 145, and 151; Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II., 27; Froissart, Chroniques, vol. 10, 111. Cf. Mauntel 2012, 111–112; Eiden 1995, 299–301.

ument and its use as a symbolic object of literacy, or any legal order in general, therefore deserves special focus. Firstly, I will briefly outline the current state of research concerning literacy and medieval forms of protest (part 1). I will follow this with an analysis in three steps, considering how the insurgents demanded the surrender of certain documents, either to use or to destroy them (part 2), how they later asked for the written affirmation of their recently gained privileges (part 3), and how the authorities 'responded' to this threat with similar practices of symbolic acting (part 4).

1 Literacy—Visibility—Credibility

In the late Middle Ages, written documents were widely distributed and common even among merchants and craftsmen.[4] All over Europe, law and government increasingly depended on written records, as did trade and diplomacy.[5] How literate medieval and early-modern societies really were is, however, still a matter of scholarly debate.[6] Apart from methodological problems in estimating literacy rates, it remains questionable how to define 'literacy' in societies where texts were frequently presented and read aloud in public.[7] Against this background, Malcolm Richardson, for example, characterised medieval England as a society "highly involved in a culture of pervasive literate practices."[8] Thus, the ability to read (or even write) is not the only indicator for the degree to which a given society was accustomed to using and handling written documents—and, even more important, willing to rely on them. It was, first and foremost, trust in the efficiency and potency of written charters and agreements that was pervasive in late medieval Europe.[9]

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4 This was famously pointed out by Clanchy 1993, with regard to medieval England, and by Robins 2011, 11–13, with regard to Italy.
5 Cf. e.g. Arlinghaus 2000; Richardson 2011; Jucker 2008.
6 By counting how many people marked rather than signed legal records in England in the 1640s, Cressy 1980, concluded that about 70 percent of the population were illiterate (and up to 90 percent of the women). This, however, only hints at the ability to write, not at literacy as such, which was far more common, ibid., 132–136. Cf. Brayman Hackel 2004, 169–171. In contrast, Clanchy 1993, and Robins 2011 asserted that literacy grew in urban centres beginning in the 12th century, and was quite common by the 14th century. Cf. Richardson 2011, e.g. 17: "By 1350, writing had become an essential tool for urban tradesmen." Cf. also Justice 1994, 32–38.
7 Clanchy 1993, 2–11. Cf. Richardson 2011, 9; Justice 1994, 52.
8 Richardson 2011, 3–4.
9 The term 'trust' can be understood as "a specific combination of cultural practices, of emotional and rational phenomena, and of specific ideas and values connected with these practices and phenomena. Theories of trust might serve as a tool to become aware of the human ability to cooperate." Weltecke 2008, 391, with further references. For trust in writing, cf. Schulte 2008, 6–12, and Clanchy 1993, 294–327; for strategies of securing this trust, cf. Mostert 2008.

To secure this trust, distinguishing signs of authenticity (like signatures, monographs, and seals) developed from the early Middle Ages onwards, as did symbolic practices of confirmation.[10] Back then, in a mostly illiterate society, the presentation and public display of documents was of primary importance. Especially for the Early and High Middle Ages, many studies have pointed out that the confirmation and handing over of charters was often carried out in public. The document itself thus gained significance as a material object far beyond its actual legal content, and played a crucial role in public ceremonies:[11] Charters were confirmed by signature or seal, presented to the public, read aloud, handed over, touched, sworn on, and kissed.[12] At the same time, this performative use had an effect on the charters' design, as Peter Rück stated: Although parchment was expensive, it was used for charters in almost lavishly generous dimensions and was in addition inscribed only on one side. Rück interpreted the charters' increase in size, ornateness, and affirmation of authenticity from the 10th century as linked to their function in public ceremonies and thus as a hint at the visual culture of the Middle Ages.[13]

Thus, even if 'literacy' by modern standards was quite limited, written documents enjoyed an aura of credibility and reliability. People were indeed well aware of their importance as well as their material characteristics, as this essay will demonstrate. To do so, it focuses on late medieval revolts. As a counterpart to public ceremonies arranged by the authorities, revolts offer a unique insight into the way the people acted and which objects or actions they attributed significance to. The idea that insurgents relied heavily on symbolic actions is, however, far from new. František Graus, in 1987, referred to "stereotypical sequences of events"[14] in uprisings. In his monograph on medieval revolts, Samuel Cohn took these ideas up and underlined the importance of symbolic acts and objects (particularly flags), both in Italy and north of the Alps.[15] In the context of the uprising of the French rural population in 1358, known as the *Jacquerie* and commonly seen as the example par excellence of a brutal and arbitrary eruption of violence,[16] Bettina Bommersbach noted that the revolt was marked by

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10 Keller 2004, esp. 309–311; Rauschert 2003, 169–173.

11 Arlinghaus 2004, 393, called this "Statuszuweisung in der Kommunikation". Cf. also Keller 2011, esp. 76–77; Schulte 2006, 200–204; Mente 2004, 431, and Declercq 2011.

12 Keller 2011, 86; Mente 2004, 431. Declercq 2011 argued that touching a charter was of outstanding importance as a sign of affirmation and acceptance until the High Middle Ages.

13 Rück 1991, 333, famously stated that "aus den langen Präsentiertischen urkundlicher Schriftlichkeit [of the Carolingians, cm] werden hochragende romanische Textfassaden." Cf. Keller 2004, 309–310; Keller 2011, 105.

14 Graus 1987, 499.

15 Cohn 2006, 177–204.

16 Cf. e.g. Dommanget 1971, 80: "C'est folie de rechercher dans cette tornade qui, en balayant une partie de la France, renverse tout sur son passage, à la fois une cause extérieure et un sens politique."

concerted and symbolic acts of destruction rather than by random violence.[17] Striving for legitimacy and approval, the rebels often imitated the authorities' actions to prove the righteousness of their cause.[18]

The importance of literacy and the symbolic uses of written documents in medieval diplomacy have already been studied intensely, e.g. within the German Collaborative Research Centre 231 "Pragmatic Literacy", in Münster (1986–1999).[19] Whereas in most cases the specific content of a document was of primary importance (e.g. in Neuenburg in 1406, where a falsified version of the municipal law was publicly destroyed[20]), my interest is in the dichotomy between the content and materiality of written documents: It is unlikely that Ralph atte Wode read the documents he seized in Edmund de la Mare's manor before he took them. Only their character as 'official records' (*libri domini regi*) was of significance to him.[21] However, the question of the extent to which literacy was important for the insurgents is to be kept in mind.

As a detailed description of the insurgents' actions is an indispensable precondition of any in-depth analyses of their practices, my focus is limited to urban revolts in late medieval Europe.[22] In this epoch, uprisings are very well documented, both by historiographical accounts and legal records. These sources on uprisings clearly convey how important symbolic acts were during revolts. Although historiographical sources generally present insurgents as wild, brutal, and barbaric, their actions themselves reveal how purposefully and predictably they acted.[23]

2 Seizing, Defiling and Destroying Documents

Referring to uprisings, the sources frequently report that the insurgents intentionally set fire to manorial or monastic archives and thus destroyed all sorts of documents and records.[24] Through a close examination of the sources, it becomes clear that the

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17 Cf. Bommersbach 2008.

18 Cf. Mauntel 2012.

19 For an introductory overview see Keller/Worstbrock 1988 and Keller 2011, as well as the essays in Keller/Grubmüller/Staubach 1992 and Meier/Honemann/Keller 2002.

20 *Also wart der brief zerschnitten und dem herren in sin hant geben.* Justinger, Berner-Chronik, 200, cf. Mente 2004, 437.

21 Cf. Justice 1994, 46–47.

22 Most examples I use for this essay refer to the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, but I will also rely on French and Italian examples. The examples are not based on a systematic study, but are thought to show the similarity of forms of protest in different regions throughout Europe, cf. Adamska/Mostert 2006, 709.

23 Cf. e.g. Mauntel 2012, 95–102; Baraz 2003, 124–136. Justice 1994, 207, interprets this as a strategy of the chroniclers to cover up the people's comprehension of administrative practices.

24 For the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 see Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 414 and 420; The Anonimalle Chronicle, 140–141; Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II, 26 and 30–31; The Brut, 337. These burnings

burning of archives should not be understood as an act of random vandalism, but as a systematic and tactical move. For example, in 1381, the rebellious English population primarily demanded an improvement in their legal position (e.g. the abolition of bondage).[25] They were well aware that the detested duties and services they owed their lords were fixed in written documents. Thomas Walsingham, a Benedictine living in St. Albans Abbey (35 km northwest of London), wrote one of the most detailed accounts of the Peasants' Revolt. He reported that the rebels decided

> to set to fire all court rolls and muniments, so that after they had got rid of these records of their ancient service their lords would not be able to claim any right at all against them at some future time; so that is what they did.[26]

This example shows that the English society of the late 14th century already broadly relied on written documents: obligations and privileges were written down and were legally binding. Furthermore, the people knew that they were stored in manorial archives. The burning of those records did not nullify the service obligations, but made it impossible for the nobles to prove any claims against the local population. Thus, the destruction of a document rendered the claim therein virtually invalid.[27] For the same reason, tax records became another main target of the insurgents. Facing a similar situation during a revolt in Paris in 1382, Michel Pintoin, a monk and chronicler of the famous abbey of St. Denis, described the "irreparable harm" that could have resulted from the loss of those charters, if they had not been restored by the king after the revolt.[28] The people as well as the clergy and the nobility relied on the

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are also mentioned in legal records: Calendar of the Close Rolls, vol. 2, 27, 75, 83, and 89; Réville 1898, 188–189, 218, 220, and 284; Rotuli parliamentorum, vol. 3, 106 (no. 45). Archives were burned as well during the Jacquerie in France in 1358, but presumably less often: Bommersbach 2008, 55; Luce 1894, 83–84; Dommanget 1971, 81–82. Cf. also Cohn 2004, 273, 277, 290, 292, and 295; Justice 1994, 40–45 (for England); Mente 2004, 431 (for Switzerland) and van Leeuwen 2008, 312–316 (for Flanders). For the notion of 'destruction' or 'damaging', see Mauntel et al. 2015.

25 For the demands of the insurgent cf. Eiden 1995, 415–425.

26 S*tatuerunt omnes curiarum rotulos et munimenta uetera dare flammis, ut, obsoleta antiquarum rerum memoria, nullum ius omnino ipsorum domini in eos in posterum uendicare ualerent; factumque est ita*. Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 414, translation 415.

27 Insurgents in Bruges in 1477 similarly took possession of the original charter of the Peace of Arras (1438), which they wanted abolished: "By taking the original document to Bruges, trust was established that the detested regulation was really abolished, as all official evidence of the privilege was to be destroyed." Van Leeuwen 2008, 310.

28 *Ad sanctum Audoenum accedentes, quoniam religiosi privilegia contra cives observantes judicialem obtinuerant sentenciam, nephandissimi viri et divina animadversione digni, turrim Cartarum violenter ingressi, privilegia distrahunt et disrumpunt, dampnum utique irreparabile perpetrando, nisi majestas regia illa postmodum confirmasset*. Chronique du Religieux, vol. 1, 132.

preserving power of written records. This made them of prime interest to insurgents striving to improve their lot.[29]

It is therefore not surprising that the rebels (rather than destroying entire archives) sometimes demanded specific records be handed over to them. Thomas Walsingham was an eyewitness in 1381, when local peasants and townspeople turned against the abbey of St. Albans to which they owed services. The insurgents discussed their demands and presented them to the abbot.[30] Frightened by their anger, he agreed to meet these demands, but "these acts were insufficient to satisfy this disorderly mob", as Walsingham recounts. Furthermore, they demanded to be given "an ancient charter about the liberties of the villeins, whose capital letters [they said] were alternately gold and azure."[31]

With this demand, the people referred to a local belief that King Offa of Mercia (d. ca. 799), who was said to have founded the abbey, had issued a charter granting the local population extensive liberties, of which they now felt they had been deprived.[32] The myth of such 'ancient liberties' was quite common throughout medieval Europe, and arose from the idea of a former 'golden age', in comparison to which the dull present was in many ways imagined as a change for the worse.[33] The abbot of St. Albans, however, replied that he knew nothing of such a charter, although he agreed to search for it. The conflict around the alleged ancient charter continued for several days: the monks said they could not find the charter, the insurgents in turn did not believe them.[34] In the end, the abbey issued a new charter wherein the monks confirmed that they could not find any charter of King Offa, but that if they found it subsequently, they would hand it over to the townsmen.[35] Of special interest here is

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29 For Flemish examples see van Leeuwen 2008, 312–316.

30 The demands primarily related to the common use of land around the town and to the construction of hand-mills, Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 442.

31 S*et ista sufficere non ualebant indisciplinato populo quin quamdam cartam antiquam reposcerent de libertatibus uillanorum cuius littere capitales fuerunt, de auro una, altera de azorio, sine qua non posse satisfieri uotis populi asserebant.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 456, translation 457. Cf. Justice 1994, 47–48 and 171–172.

32 Walsingham, Gesta, vol. 3, 365.

33 Graus 1988; for a critical perspective see Cohn 2006, 135–141.

34 Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 456–472. For the topic of missing charters in monastic archives see Sennis 2013, 151–155 and 160–164.

35 Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 460–462. The collective memory of specific rights also played a role in an uprising in Bern in 1364: the community demanded the removal of the acting sheriff and in so doing referred to a specific charter (the *Berner Handfeste*); assuming the content of the charter would prove their lawful claim, they demanded that the charter be read publicly. In the account of the chronicler Conrad Justinger, the town clerk at first pretended that he could not find the relevant paragraph. The town clerk only 'found' the passage after a man threw rotten cherries at the charter. Justinger, Berner-Chronik, 123, cited in Rauschert 2003, 174–177. It is noteworthy that the pollution of the document did not have any impact on its validity (cf. note 50). For further examples of deliberate hiding of documents cf. Mente 2004 and Weber 2011.

less the question of ancient liberties, than the pretended collective memory, referring quite precisely to a specific charter with gold and azure letters. Instead of enumerating specific liberties to which they claimed to be entitled, the insurgents described the outer appearance of the ancient charter. Its elaborate design (gold and azure were expensive colours) indicated the importance and authenticity of the charter.[36] We do not know whether the insurgents referred to a 'real' charter that might have been publicly shown in the past, or if they just described an imagined charter (on another occasion, Walsingham grumbled about some "worthless old leaders"[37] who incited the younger villagers with stories of old privileges). In any case, if we trust Walsingham's account, by describing a parchment with coloured display script, the insurgents chose to refer to the outer appearance of a charter rather than to its specific content. Thus, they revealed their understanding of what an 'authentic' charter should look like and signalled that its materiality was more significant than its actual content.[38]

Farther east, in Bury St. Edmunds, the insurgents also demanded the surrender of all documents that might prove their bondage to the local monastery or the king. More specifically, they referred to an ancient charter, in which Cnut the Great (d. 1035), the founder of the local Benedictine abbey, had granted the town certain liberties.[39] In fear, the monks delivered "all the things which were demanded, things which could be both advantageous to the villeins or harmful to them"[40] and swore that these were all the charters they were able to find. The insurgents then consulted literates to check whether any of the charters included those liberties for which they longed.

Whilst the townspeople of St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds demanded specific charters from which they hoped to benefit, the insurgents in other places deliberately removed charters and records from archives. They mainly targeted documents concerning the local jurisdiction, tax lists, monastic privileges or juristic records.[41] As an inversion of the public presentation and display of the records at the time they were

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36 Cf. van Leeuwen 2008, 308 (with Flemish examples).

37 *Nequam senum primicerius*. Walsingham, Gesta, vol. 3, 365. For the relationship between memory and written records see Sennis 2013, esp. 152.

38 Cf. Justice 1994, 36: "[Charters] came from the royal chancery and were held independent of the lord and his authority. This sort of practice, and its acceptance by landlords, brought to villeins an increasing familiarity with the apparatus of documentary culture—a knowledge of how it worked and of what documents looked like."

39 Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 484.

40 *Monachi uero, sibi et sue domui metuentes, so non parerent uolontati comunium, omnia que petebanturm que scilicet uel uillanorum firmamento uel illorum detrimento esse poterant, in forum coram omnibus protulerunt, iurantes inueniri non posse plures cartas, que uillanorum comodo cedere possint, apud eos*. Ibid., 484.

41 See e.g. ibid., 456; Réville 1898, 188–189, 218, and 220; The Anonimalle chronicle, 140–141 (England, 1381). Chronique du Religieux, vol. 1, 54; Cohn 2004, 273 (Paris, 1380). Chronique des quatre premiers Valois, 299 and Chronographia regum francorum, vol. 3, 25–26; Cohn 2004, 290 (Paris, 1382). Chronique normande de Pierre Cochon, 163; Cohn 2004, 292 (Rouen, 1382).

issued, the insurgents carried them together to the local market, where they were first publicly shown and then solemnly destroyed.[42] The choice of location (the market was traditionally the geographical and social centre of urban life) shows how important the public nature of the act was to the insurgents. Beyond the mere physical destruction of documents, the visibility of the act had a symbolic value in itself: the insurgents wanted everyone to know that their former obligations and duties were null and void. Therefore, the documents' destruction became a collectively and solemnly celebrated ceremony of liberation.

From this perspective, the destruction of a document was only the final act. If we remember the example of the impaled records cited at the beginning of this article, the symbolic meaning of this action becomes clear. By impaling the documents, Ralph atte Wode took possession of these administrative objects and carried them with him to the king in London. As the insurgents protested against taxes and obligations, written records were considered material representations of the burdensome manorial system. By appropriating these documents, the insurgents demonstrated their control over them. Comparable to a flag or a banner, the impaled charter thus became a tangible symbol of the insurgents' demand to reduce taxes and to abolish bondage.[43] On his way to London, Ralph may have passed through Chelmsford, halfway between Peldon and the capital. Here, approximately 50 km northeast of London, the insurgents collected and burnt the juristic records of the surrounding villages.[44] Forty documents, however, were spared, impaled on long skewers and lined up at the roadside on the way to London—once more a rejection of any obligation fixed in written form and at the same time a kind of signpost to the king and the capital.[45] The single document used for this 'avenue of records' was irrelevant in itself—it was merely a material *pars pro toto* hinting at any duty or obligation fixed in written form. Thus, this symbolic use of ordinary documents is not to be underestimated.

A similar act occurred in Siena in the 14th century, although the document used was anything but arbitrary. The history of Siena—like other towns in Tuscany and Lombardy—is marked by repeated uprisings and changes in government.[46] When the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV visited Siena in 1355, the townspeople once more revolted against the city council, known as the *Nove* (council of the Nine). Charles had to take refuge in the Palazzo Pubblico, where he took over government from the

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42 *Igitur mox obligaciones, cum quibusdam domus munimentes et rotulis quas extorserant ab archidiacono (…) in foro villae, juxta crucem, flammis consumpserunt.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 456. Cf. Justice 1994, 69–70.

43 Justice 1994, 71, in contrast, connects the act of Ralph atte Wode to the traditional punishment for forgery, i.e. the public presentation of a forged document.

44 Cf. Justice 1994, 150–151.

45 *...xl brefs quels il prespont et mistroit sur haut poles en la commune chemyn.* London, Public Record Office, KB 145/3/5/1, cited in Eiden 1995, 209.

46 Cf. Bowsky 1972.

Nine and nullified all privileges which he had just granted the city—by burning the relevant charters.[47] Meanwhile, the rebels stormed the palace and a church, where the lots traditionally used for allotting membership in the Council of the Nine were stored.[48] They took the box of lots and carried it into the Palazzo and, having done this, they threw them out of the window onto the square in front of the Palace. There, they tied the little cards to the tail of a donkey, shouted "death to the Nine" and chased the donkey through the city.[49] It is remarkable how purposefully the townspeople proceeded: they knew where the box was stored and seized it without hesitation. Instead of just being destroyed, the lots were elaborately desecrated as symbols of the detested Council.[50] The authority of the *Nove* was thereby visibly rejected and negated.[51] The desecration of the lots thus showed that the change of regime was intended to be definite (after the revolt, the newly founded Council of the Twelve (*Dodici*) was dominated by the lower ranks of society). The revolt was not only a reckoning with the current members of the *Nove*, but with the institution itself, for which the lots served as material representations.[52]

In summary, we can roughly differentiate three ways in which existing documents became relevant in late medieval revolts: (1) Documents and records of any sort were considered targets; whole archives were burned down with the intention of destroying any written record of the people's duties towards their lords. (2) The insurgents demanded the surrender of particular documents, either (a) because they hoped to benefit from the privileges they contained, or (b) because they wanted to destroy specific documents they deemed disadvantageous for them. In both cases the (real or imagined) content of the document was the primary concern, although the memory of specific charters was sometimes shaped by their outer appearance. (3) Documents or records were publicly used as symbols of abstract duties or institutions. As material representations, the documents were displayed, defiled, desecrated and destroyed.

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47 *E così stando lo 'nperadore in palazzo ebe la bachetta de' signori Nove e fe' rifiutare a' signori Nove e annulaare ogni saramento per lui a loro fatto, e ogni cara e brivilegio lo' tolse di fatte e arse.* Cronaca senese di Donato, 577. Cf. Dartmann 2004, 144–145. For the tradition of the destruction of documents by the authorities, see Sennis, 2013, 156–159.

48 Likewise, they stormed the exchequer, where they burnt the registers listing the culprits of former uprisings. Cronaca senese di Donato, 577–578. Cf. Dartmann 2004, 144–145. For a case study of the election process and use of written documents in 13th-century Bergamo, cf. Blattmann 1995.

49 Cronaca senese di Donato, 578. Cf. Dartmann 2004, 144–145.

50 We may assume that the lots were destroyed during this procedure. However, simply damaging a document could affect its validity, as a Swiss example shows. In a dispute with the city of Lucerne, the inhabitants of the village of Weggis rejected any claim by Lucerne to power over their village by indicating that the municipal law of the city had holes in it and was thus invalid. Hence, the intactness of a document could indeed be of paramount importance; cf. Rauschert 2003, 163–164. Concerning the cancellation of documents, cf. Schulte 2006, 211; Adamska/Mostert 2006, 702.

51 Cf. Weber 2003, 355–356.

52 Cf. Dartmann 2004, 145–146.

The respective objects could be either (a) any sort of official record, or (b) a specific document with historic, legal, administrative or symbolic value. The prominent role documents played thus varied between being a unique object with eminent value, and being a random document used as a *pars pro toto*.

3 Demanding New Charters—and Losing them again

The credibility and reliability attributed to written documents not only becomes apparent in their deliberate destruction, but also in the insurgents' demand that their newly acquired rights and privileges be confirmed in charters.[53] During the Peasants' Revolt in England, the rebels did not content themselves with oral assurances from either local barons or the king concerning their newly gained material and legal privileges. Instead, they demanded that new charters be issued.[54] Menaced by the angry crowd, both the king and local landlords met these demands and ordered their clerks to deliver charters according to the insurgents' wishes.[55] Once obtained, they were again publicly shown and read by the rebels.[56]

In France, the rebels even seem to have had a keen sense and knowledge of diplomatics. After the Parisian uprising of 1382, King Charles VI promised to grant the city all of their ancient rights and liberties and assured them that he would never raise taxes again. In his account of the uprising, the anonymous chronicler of the *Chronographia regum francorum* reported in detail that the king sealed the charter with yellow wax instead of the usual green. When the Parisians saw this they immediately took up arms again and angrily declared themselves prepared to fight for their rights.[57] The chronicler himself provided an explanation: green wax with waxed strings signalised a perpetual legal act, whereas yellow wax with a tail hanging down

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53 Cf. Blattmann 1994, esp. 335–338.

54 *...petierunt unanimiter, cum ingenti instantia, per regis patentes literas confirmari, asserentes ipsum ab eis non recussu[ru]m, antequam ea, que peterent, confirmassent.* Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II, 151. *...luy fesoient feare as eaux tiellez Chartes com ils vodroient mesmes deviser des plus[ieur]s Franchises & Libertez en temps a venir, p[ar] quels le dit Abbe & ses successors purront estre deseases & cinpeachez en temps a venir.* Rotuli parliamentorum, vol. 3, 129 (no. 10). Froissart, Chroniques, vol. 10, 112–113; Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 432, 456, and 460. Cf. Eiden 1995, 243–244.

55 Cf. e.g. Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 452–454, 466–468, 476–778; Knighton's Chronicle, 212; The Anonimalle chronicle, 143.

56 *Adepti cartam libertatum uille, et obligacionem praefactum, oppidani ibant gaudentes, tunc demum diuulgaturi ae crucem publice cartam quam obtinuerant de monasterio, una cum carta regia.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 472. *Et puis envoia la dicte bille od deux de ses chivalers a eux envers seint Kateryns et le fist leir a eux ; et cestuy qe list la bille estea en une auncien chare amont les autres, issint qe toutz purroient oier.* The Anonimalle chronicle, 143.

57 Chronographia regum francorum, vol. 3, 28.

the parchment was only used for acts with temporary and limited validity.[58] What at first sight seems to be expert knowledge of royal clerks was instead a widely-known language of materiality, depending on a fine distinction of the seal's colour and the way it was fixed to the document.

We find the same sense of materiality in southern France and in England. In the Languedoc in 1381, insurgents refused to accept a letter from the royal negotiator, because the red seal on it made them sceptical of its validity. With the help of jurists they examined the letter and indeed, instead of the expected pardon for their rebellion, the letter was only a temporary truce! As in Paris, the population of the Languedoc knew that only charters with green seals ensured indefinite validity and thus rejected the letter presented to them.[59] In the context of the English Peasants' Revolt, it has already been stated that the insurgents systematically targeted fiscal documents. The visible indicator to distinguish these from other documents was (once again) a seal of green wax.[60]

These accounts suggest that the people were well acquainted with the intricacies and subtleties of diplomatics. They knew the specific colour-based coding of the chancellery and thus were able to 'read' the outer appearance of charters and documents without knowing the actual content.

4 Excursus: A Revolt against all Literates?

An anonymous chronicler reported that the English rebels were not satisfied with the first draft of a charter that the king had issued to meet their demands. As in Paris in 1382, they angrily rose up once more and called on their fellow men to kill all lawyers, clerks, and generally everyone who knew how to write.[61] Similar statements are noted in other chronicles. Walsingham wrote that the insurgents forced Latin teachers to swear that they would never teach grammar again so that no one would be able to renew the records destroyed during the rebellion. Therefore, "it was dangerous to be recognized as a clerk, but much more dangerous if an inkpot were found by anyone's

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58 *Tradite sunt littere, non per modum carte perpetue, cujus sigillum de cera viridi et filis cericis apendi solet, ymo erant sigillate sigillo cere crocee in cauda pergameni pendenti; in quibus continebatur quod rex cum ejus consilio et quibusdam de parentela sua, protunc remittebat impositiones fieri solitas.* (Ibid.). Cf. Pastoureau 1996, 288–289; Challet 2008, 223, note 41.

59 Cf. Challet 2008, 223.

60 *Brevia de viridi cera*. London, Public Record Office, KB 145/3/6/1, cited in Eiden 1995, 208.

61 *Et quaunt les comunes avoient oie la bille, ils dissoient qil ne fuist forsqe troefles et mokerie; et purceo retourneround a Loundres et fesoient crier parmy la citee qe toutz les gentz de la ley et toutz ceuz de la chauncellerie et del eschequer et toutz qe savoient brief ou lettre escriver, deveroient estre decolles ou ils purroient estre trovez.* The Anonimalle chronicle, 143–144. Cf. Justice 1994, 49–50. See also Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 498; Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II, 30–31.

side, for such men never, or scarcely ever, escaped from their hands."[62] Was the revolt marked by anti-intellectualism and hostility to literacy?[63] Did the insurgents consider writing in itself an "instrument of oppression"?[64]

With this episode, the chronicler first and foremost created a nightmare scenario that surely shocked every reader.[65] It can be seen as a variation of the often-alleged aim of the insurgents of killing all nobles.[66] It is of course possible that clerks were targeted and killed on purpose. A closer look at the sources, however, reveals that the main targets were not people who were merely literate, but lawyers and judges.[67] On the one hand, this can be interpreted as an expression of the growing despair of the people, who felt systematically discriminated against by local and royal courts and who now punished those responsible.[68] On the other hand, this detail might well be part of the chroniclers' deliberate strategy to vilify the insurgents. According to Walsingham, they planned to kill all learned men in order to establish new laws.[69] This, however, is in sharp contrast to the insurgents' appeals that traditional laws be upheld. Thus, Walsingham's statement can be understood as a reference to the famous Sallustian phrase about rebels having a "desire for the new" (*cupiditas rerum*

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62 *Magistros scolarum grammaticalum iurare compulerunt se nunquam paruulos instructuros in arte prefecta. Amplius quid fecerunt? Munimenta uetera studuerunt dare flammis; et ne de nouo quis reperiri ualerent qui uetera siue noua de cetero posset, uel nosset, commendare memorie, huiusmodi trucidabant. Periculosum erat agnosci pro clerico, set multo periculosius si ad latus alicuius atramentarium inuentum fuisset; nam tales uix aut nunquam ab eorum minibus euaserunt.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 496, translation 497. Cf. Justice 1994, 18 and 72. See also the so-called 'confession' of John Straw, one of the leaders of the revolt: Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 498.
63 The chronicler Michel Pintoin noted that insurgents in southern France acted against all those whose hands were not calloused and who acted somehow sophisticated, and thus implied that the people deliberately turned against the elite, Chronique du Religieux, vol. 1, 308.
64 This is the conclusion of Declercq 2013, 155–156.
65 Cf. Justice 1994, 18.
66 Cf. Mauntel 2012, 99.
67 *...et omnes et singulis iuris terre peritos, tam apprenticios quam sense iustiiciarios, et cunctos iuratores patrie quos apprehendere poterant, sine ullo respect pietatis, capitis truncacione mulctare; asserentes non priusquam illis occisis, terram ingenua libertate posse gaudere.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 414; see also Knighton's Chronicle, 216, who furthermore pointed out that personal scores were settled then as well. Cf. Harding 1984; Prescott 1984, 115.
68 The background of this development is complex: owing to diminishing agricultural incomes, many landlords tried to tighten their grasp on their seigniorial privileges. People increasingly felt deprived of their traditional local self-government and directed their anger against lawyers and judges. Cf. Eiden 1995, 93–94, 421–422. See also the case of John of Cavendish, chief justice, who was murdered by the insurgents, ibid., 299–304.
69 E.g. the 'confession' of John Straw: *Cum uero nullus maior, nullus fortiori, nullus sciencior, nobis superfuisset, leges condidissemus ad placitum, quibus subiecti regulate fuissent.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 498. *...nec leges terre de cetero ualituras, eo quod iam maximima pars iuridicorum perempta fuerat, et reliqua iuxta estimacionem ipsorum fuerat perimenda, domum redirent, et strictis condicionibus experterent que uolebant.* Ibid., 444.

novendarum), frequently used by medieval authors to denounce rebels and terrify readers.[70] It is unlikely that the revolt itself was directed against intellectuals or literates. On the contrary, literates were quite useful for the insurgents. As we saw in Bury St. Edmunds, the townspeople consulted educated men to check and verify the newly issued charters.[71] Furthermore, only archives were deliberately destroyed, whereas libraries and church registers were spared.[72]

5 Repression: Issuing New Charters, Destroying Former Ones

Even though the insurgents frequently succeeded in ensuring that new charters were issued according to their demands, the quarrel over the documents did not end. Once Richard II, King of England, regained control of London in July 1381, he issued a new charter, revoking all of the liberties the rebels had forced him to grant, and stating (according to Walsingham) that all privileges awarded during the rebellion were to be returned.[73] In some places people refused to be the first to return any charter as a "dangerous precedent" and a "dishonourable act"[74]. Faced with the royal army, however, this resistance soon collapsed. The chronicler Jean Froissart vividly depicted how the 'natural order' was symbolically restored. After the rebellion, the king travelled through his land. In a village in Kent, he and his officials executed the alleged instigators of the local revolt and then demanded the handover of the rebels' charters: "In the presence of the people, the king's men ripped them up and threw them in a ditch."[75] The recently issued charter was thus publicly destroyed, as a symbol that the

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70 Sallustius, *De coniuratione*, §28, 37, and 48. The phrase was literally used by Michel Pintoin to describe the intentions of the Parisian rebels of 1380, Chronique du Religieux, vol. 1, p. 22; cf. Ribémont 2010.

71 See above and van Leeuwen 2008, 307 (concerning Bruges in 1477).

72 Justice 1994, 45–46.

73 Rotuli parliamentorum, vol. 3, 100; Calendar of the Patent Rolls, vol. 2, 27; Statutes of the realm, vol. 2, 20; Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 520–522. Cf. Eiden 1995, 388–395; Hinck 2008. In 1383, after a series of uprisings in Flanders, count Philip the Bold also forced the Flemish towns to send all their charters and privileges to Lille, where they were thoroughly revised, cf. van Leeuwen 2008, 311.

74 *Nunquam de cetero est offerenda pecunia, nunquam carte reddende. Et si reddende carte forent, quare nos primi meticulose in perniciosum exemplum inciperemus? Non contingat hoc dedecus in persona nostra* (...) Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 536.

75 *Et furent les lettres demandées que on leur avoit données et acordées; elles furent là aportées et rendues as gens dou roi, liquel, en la presence de tout le peuple, les deschirèrent et jettèrent en val.* Froissart, Chroniques, vol. 10, 131. Froissart reported the same procedure for London: *Encore leur fu commandé de par le roi et sus le teste que, qui avoit lettre dou roi empetrée, il le remesist avant. Li aucun, et ne mies tout, les aportèrent. Li rois les faissoit prendre e deschirer en leur presence*. Ibid., 123.

king had cancelled all concessions and privileges. The charter served as the visible and tangible representation of everything the revolt was about, and its destruction thus marked the end of the rebellion—and its failure. This public performance of the king's triumph must undoubtedly have been a humiliation for the people. In another scene, Walsingham reports the king's pithy words to the insurgents' petitioners: "You have been peasants and peasants you will continue to be; you will remain in bondage, not as before, but in incomparably worse conditions."[76]

The same public and symbolic (and non-violent) form of repression was used in Flanders. In 1469, as punishment for the fact that his 'joyous entry' into Ghent two years earlier had been disturbed, Charles the Bold, count of Burgundy and Flanders, forced the townspeople to hand over an ancient charter issued by King Philip IV in 1301, confirming the privilege of urban self-government. After a symbolic submission of the magistrates, the charter was read aloud and then cut with a knife, as reported in several sources.[77] The charter, however, was not entirely destroyed, but survived in Flemish and French archives until the present day.[78] The parchment has three angled cuts in the centre, so the charter was probably folded before cutting.[79] Another copy of the cancelled charter survived in Ghent, cut diagonally.[80] Marc Boone suggested that the count gave this copy to Ghent as an object of commemoration (*lieu de mémoire*), whereas Georges Declercq argued (by comparing the methods of cutting) that the charter from Ghent was nullified no earlier than the 16th century.[81] Either way, it is remarkable that the cancelled and damaged charter was not destroyed, but preserved in an archive. It was included and precisely described in an archive inventory from Lille in 1471.[82] The damaged charter now served as a constant reminder and as a legal proof for the cancellation of the privilege and thereby of the count's triumph over the city.

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76 *Rustici quidem fuistis et estis; in bondagio permanebitis, non ut hactenus, set incomparabiliter uiliori.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 514, translation 515.

77 *...fit convenir Gantois à compte et à genoux devant lui, atout leurs privilèges; et en présence d'eux les coupa et déchira à son plaisir ; ce qui est de perpétuel record, et non onque veue la pareille.* Chastellain, Oeuvres, vol. 5, 505. Cf. Paravicini 2001, 323. See also an official report: *Dont mondit seigneur respondi incontinent que on adnulleroit du tout ledit privilege. Et ce oyant, mons[eigneu]r Jehan Le Groz, premier secretaire et audiencier, prinst ung canyvet ou tailgeplume, et cassa ledit previlege, present tous assistens.* Collection de documents inédits concernant l'histoire de la Belgique, vol. 1, 208 (No. 32, 15.01.1469), cited in Declercq 2013, 157–158. See also Philippe de Commynes, Mémoires, vol. 1, 113 (II, 4). For the charter cf. Boone 2003, esp. 24. For the uprising, cf. Arnade 1991.

78 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Coll. mélanges Colbert 347, no. 59. Cf. Boone 2003, 26–28, 41–43, reproduction: 40 and Mauntel et al., 2015, 743.

79 This was the usual method of cancellation in the Burgundian chancery, cf. Nelis 1927, 771–772.

80 Ghent, State Archives in Belgium, Series 94, no. 233. Cf. Boone 2003, 33 and 43–45.

81 Boone 2003, 33; Declercq 2013, 158, note 135. Cf. Nelis 1927, 768–775.

82 Lille, Archives départementales du Nord, B 114, fol. 273ʳ, cited in Boone 2003, 27, note 82.

6 Conclusion

Finally, we have come full circle. Both the insurgents and the government mirrored each other by publicly destroying unpopular documents. One might assume that the rebels deliberately imitated those practices of public display and destruction they knew from witnessing official ceremonies. The public destruction of documents was widely used both as a symbolic rejection of legal claims and as a legal annulation of privileges.[83]

It is striking to note how similarly different social groups in medieval society used symbolic acts involving written documents to communicate demands, claims and triumphs. Documents were not considered to be merely functional objects. Both insurgents and the nobility considered them to be symbolically charged and thus integrated them into eye-catching forms of political action. These actions repeatedly involved the (violent) seizure and public display of documents, as well as their demonstrative defilement and destruction.

To conclude, I would like to bring my results together in three steps.

1. On literacy: With regard to the sources, the question of whether the insurgents were literate or not seems to miss the point. In fact, the majority of the population may not have been literate in a modern sense. Still they were, on the one hand, surely able to recognize key words or to interpret the outer appearance of a document (display type, colour of seal, etc.) and thus fit into what Steven Justice called 'insurgent literacy'.[84] On the other hand, the sources describe how the people had specific charters checked and interpreted with the aid of specialists, such as clerks and lawyers. Thus, in the late Middle Ages, a lack of literacy might indeed appear as a shortcoming, but could easily be compensated for. Hence, literacy in this sense does not only mean the ability to read and write, but also to interpret the materiality of an object.

2. On materiality: During revolts, written documents were broadly considered to be material manifestations of the existing legal order or of law itself.[85] According to this function, insurgents took possession of documents and records, showed them publicly, defiled them symbolically and ultimately destroyed them. The actual legal content was transcended and the document became a representation of what the protest was directed against. On a more practical level, the outer appearance of a document was understood as a link to its content and value: the display script or the seal's colour were indeed legally relevant characteristics of a charter and thus affected its meaning. People were well acquainted with some

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83 For a brief overview cf. Declercq 2013, 152–161. More examples can be found in Weber 2003.
84 Justice 1994, 13–66. Clanchy 1993, 328–334, called this "practical literacy". Cf. Challet 2008, 223.
85 Cf. Mente 2004, 430–431.

aspects of alleged experts' knowledge on charters and diplomatics, and chose their targets accordingly, or likewise rejected inadequately issued charters. Apart from that, however, the primary aim and effect of the destruction of documents was to nullify their (legal) content.

3. On communication: The lack of widespread literacy was compensated for by public performances, where documents were shown, defiled or issued. When issued, the validity of a charter depended on such forms of confirmation. When defiled, the public desecration made the denial of its legal content and symbolic value widely known. It is remarkable that the authorities, as well as the insurgents used the same mechanism of communication for these purposes. Thus, large parts of society spoke and understood the same 'language of action', strongly relying on visibility, symbolism, and materiality. Documents could easily be symbolically charged and desecrated again by the same mechanisms, based on the widespread trust in the efficiency and reliability of written documents.

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