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Latijn en de volkstalen in de dertiende-eeuwse Brabantse oorkonden

Summary

The first use of the French and Dutch vernaculars instead of Latin as the language for charters in the duchy of Brabant dates back to the third decade of the 13th century. The earliest examples are charters written in French in monasteries situated in Walloon-Brabant, the small French-speaking part of the duchy. The earliest Dutch charters date back only to 1266/1267 and were issued by the rural aldermen of Lubbeek and Erps. From the middle of the 13th century the number of charters in French issued by Brabantine noblemen rose steadily. The first ducal charters in French date from 1254 and 1255. Under the dukes John I and John II the ducal chancery drafted a large number of charters in French. Taken together, those charters issued by the dukes and the nobility account for 75% of all surviving Brabantine charters in French dating from the 13th century. The relatively large number of charters in French (more than 500) compared to the smaller number of Dutch charters (325) is striking, as Brabant was largely Dutch-speaking territory. The high number of charters in French either issued by the dukes and nobility or received by them has to be explained by several factors. French was an international language, with a high cultural and political prestige, and also one which had a longer and better established tradition of writing. Furthermore, the dukes and a number of noble families had close personal links with French-speaking territories, and must have used French as a language for daily communication alongside the Dutch vernacular.

The dukes and, in particular, the nobility, also used Dutch as a language for charters (12% and 28% of all surviving Dutch charters were issued by the dukes and noblemen respectively). However, the largest proportion (53% of all surviving charters in Dutch from the 13th century) originated in local administrations, especially the benches of aldermen and other small courts of justice in rural communities where writing traditions were only established at the very moment when Dutch was introduced as a language for administration. By the second half of the 13th century, similar urban institutions already had fixed Latin traditions and, generally speaking, did not make the switch to the vernacular until the very end of the Middle Ages, at least not for the traditional formats of deeds or charters recording real estate transactions. Newer forms of writing, such as urban accounts or registers of annuities, were often in Dutch. The only notable exception was Antwerp, where the aldermen used Dutch for their charters from the last decade of the 13th century in ever-increasing numbers. In the urban administration of Antwerp, Latin had gone almost completely out of use by the middle of the 14th century.