

PHD RESEARCH

BRECHT DESEURE

A usable past. The politics of history in Belgium during the French Regime (1792-1814)

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Until very recently our knowledge of the political culture of the French regime in Belgium has remained hidden by the clichés of a body of antiquated patriotic historiography. This dissertation parts the clouds through a detailed study of the public discourse, verbal as well as visual, of representatives of the French regime in Antwerp and Brussels. By focusing on the politics of history it brings to light the remarkable versatility of that discourse. Contrary to the established idea of the French administration as a centralizing and homogenizing force, administrators showed a remarkable willingness to adapt their discourse to the local context. With a view to making official discourse recognisable to the inhabitants of the occupied and annexed territories, ideological orthodoxy was purposely sacrificed in order to accommodate local historical sensitivities. As a result the universal ideals of liberty and equality were used to connect such apparently incompatible themes as Brabantine constitutionalism and local old-regime history. Furthermore, such adaptation did not stem from local initiatives but was encouraged from above during the Directory, the Consulate, and the Empire. These findings not only readjust the image of French administration as alien to the local context, but also unveil a hitherto unacknowledged aspect of the politics of history of these successive regimes.