

Introduction: The Mystery of the Convent of Wesel

In the first days of November 1568, dozens of Calvinist leaders from the Habsburg Netherlands who had escaped fierce persecution in their homeland stealthily made their way from secret underground communities and foreign refuges to Wesel, a German city along the Rhine River. At the time, Wesel was the largest community in the duchy of Cleves, one of hundreds of principalities within the Holy Roman Empire, the loose confederation of states in Central Europe that owed allegiance to the emperor in Vienna. In the preceding years, these men had been some of the most aggressive activists for religious reform in the Netherlands; their preaching and organizing had inspired tens of thousands of men and women to leave the Roman Catholic Church and sometimes to attack its churches, monasteries, and imagery with physical violence. These men were thus critical figures in the struggles over religious truth that divided Europe during the Reformation and the century of religious wars that followed. They were at the forefront of a massive outbreak of widespread religious activism and violence lasting from spring 1566 to spring 1567. When the government cracked down on this dissent, tens of thousands of Calvinists escaped into the German lands of the empire or to Protestant England. The men descending on Wesel, thus, were enemies of the state, forced to live in secrecy and exile as they plotted ways that they might achieve victory for what they believed was the true church of God.

Though these beleaguered activists had lost their homes, they had not lost hope. By November 3, 1568, more than fifty devoted champions of religious reform had secretly arrived in Wesel. Where they met is unknown, though only a few buildings were large enough to host such an event – the largest meeting of Reformed leaders anywhere in sixteenth-century Europe. The city's two parish churches were certainly big enough, though it seems unlikely that delegates met there. After all, they didn't have permission to even be in the city, let alone use it as a staging ground. Delegates may have crammed into the smaller Chapel of the Holy Spirit, where French-speaking refugees had been permitted to attend sermons. Perhaps they even crowded into someone's private house

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or a barn outside the city gates. Wherever they met, the delegates proved extremely productive. They very quickly debated and drafted 122 articles that outlined a future church, including its structures, rituals, operational norms, and doctrinal standards, should they succeed in toppling the Catholic Church in the Netherlands.¹ The final version, penned in neat Latin text, ran to twenty-three pages. Once complete, each man signed his name to the document. Delegates also signed for twelve colleagues who had been unable to attend. Signers must surely have been conscious of the magnitude of their achievement: the document that they signed established the most comprehensive framework for a Reformed church yet produced in either the Netherlands or Germany.

The coordination and planning that this summit required was unbelievably impressive. Many risked persecution to attend. Somehow, delegates successfully kept their activities secret from authorities in Wesel, at the ducal court of Cleves, in the neighboring Netherlands, and back in England. The preparations for such a feat must have required the cooperation of hundreds of people. Fellow believers must have helped transport letters that no longer survive and find passage on ships that left no record. Friends and family members must have offered credible lies to authorities explaining the absence of these men from their homes. The whole effort required a tightly knit, well-disciplined, and international network of people willing to risk punishment to help orchestrate the assembly. Yet no records of their efforts exist. City officials made no note of the event. No surviving letters describe travel plans, coordination efforts, or the setting of an agenda. No records from delegates' home churches describe their important mission. These men orchestrated one of the most sizable church meetings of the Reformation era without leaving a trace.

The efforts of these brave men were not in vain. Three years later, in the German city of Emden, some of the same men used the framework drawn up in Wesel as the model for a second organizational meeting. The following year (1572), rebel armies carrying the flag of the most powerful nobleman of the Low Countries – William the Silent, prince of Orange (a fiefdom of the Holy Roman Empire in present-day France) and count of Nassau-Dillenburg (an imperial territory in northwestern Germany) – captured large swaths of the northern Low Countries. Immediately, Protestants who had been scheming in exile were able to implement their plans. Their Dutch Reformed Church, built during the trials of exile, became the new rebel state's only permitted church. By 1578 these triumphant leaders held their first countrywide church council, called a national synod, in the city of Dordrecht. There, they affirmed the basic principles crafted a decade before in Wesel. Leaders of

the Netherlandish Reformed churches had succeeded where no other Calvinist leaders thus far in the Reformation had been able: in Wesel, under the specter of persecution and exile, they had envisioned and outlined the shape for a new church, which became the model for the state-sponsored church in what would soon become one of Europe's most powerful states – the Dutch Republic.

The articles drawn up in Wesel provided a model for many Germans, too. While Calvinism was banned in the Holy Roman Empire, there remained pockets of dissenters. Some princes supported their cause, though there was no agreement about whether Calvinism was legal according to imperial law until thirty years of devastating warfare forced this concession in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. Still, in the Rhineland, where Calvinism established itself most strongly despite these bans, the articles drawn up in Wesel provided an inspiration. Within fifty years, churches there had been organized according to the model agreed upon at the secret council. The articles drawn up by these gallant men shaped Protestant churches elsewhere as well. They influenced churches in the New World, South Africa, and Australia, after Reformed Protestants began migrating around the world from the seventeenth century on.²

The preceding narrative briefly lays out the history of an event mostly known today as the “Convent of Wesel,” as historians have treated it over the past several centuries. The Convent of Wesel has become one example of several foundational moments that defined the creation of the new churches of the post-Reformation world in the mid- to late-sixteenth century. For nearly four hundred years, historians have described this event as a significant moment in the development of Reformed Protestantism – a more appropriate and inclusive alternative to Calvinism – as it developed in the Netherlands and northwest Germany. The Convent of Wesel, or some version of that term, has found its way into dozens of textbooks, scores of historical studies, hundreds of scholarly articles, countless web pages, and who knows how many church publications.³

The central argument of this book, however, is that the Convent of Wesel, as described in the preceding pages, never happened. Instead, it was an invention of later historians. This book takes on the daunting task of unraveling a mystery surrounding this supposed event that has stumped historians for centuries. At the heart of the problem is the remarkable gap between the significance usually attributed to the event and the almost total lack of evidence for the assembly's very existence. Much of what will come in the ensuing chapters is aimed at figuring out what actually happened on November 3, 1568, what *did not* happen on

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that day, and what circumstances led to the production of a single piece of evidence that has led so many historians to misconstrue the history.

I stumbled on this mystery quite by accident. I was first introduced to it in 1999 as I was beginning research for a detailed study on religious coexistence in sixteenth-century Wesel. As I worked, two things struck me as curious. The first was historians' frequent description of Wesel as officially Reformed. All I could find was evidence of a mixed religious community incapable of categorization into any of the major religious camps of the era. Catholic monks celebrated communion with Lutherans. Mennonites subjected themselves to the authority of Reformed elders. Pastors denied religious divisions altogether. My project, thus, focused on understanding patterns in this coexistence. But always gnawing at me was the problem of why so many historians repeated the claim that Wesel was a Reformed city. Not infrequently, authors cited the Convent of Wesel as the moment at which the Reformed gained the upper hand.⁴ That point raised a second curiosity: What was the Convent of Wesel anyway? There was no other sixteenth-century event with a similar title. I could find no trace of such a meeting in any of the thousands of pages of records I was reading. Where did this idea come from?

To get answers, I turned to specialized studies investigating what I learned was a historical mystery going back centuries. As I expanded my reading beyond Wesel, I found that the question was of particular interest in the Netherlands, where a rich tradition saw the Convent of Wesel as a foundational moment in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church. I also learned that most historians on both sides of the border had been aware of the lack of evidence for the meeting's very existence since at least the 1760s. Some even devoted entire books to understanding the mystery. Yet no one could adequately resolve the problem for me. Arguments were based on speculation and unwarranted assumptions that contradicted evidence. For years, I plugged away at my study of coexistence, all the while collecting material related to this curious mystery, resolving that one day I would tackle this problem. Finally, in 2010, I began turning my full attention to what turned out to be a fascinating, at times even gripping, project. The book you are reading is the result.

Revisiting this mystery turned out to be no trivial matter. First, its solution reveals much about the way that historians have been telling the history of the Reformation. In most treatments, the story goes like this: in the early sixteenth century, efforts at religious reform were inchoate and unsystematic. By the 1550s, new separate churches were crystallizing into four main branches of Latin Christianity: Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Tridentine Catholic. With the exception of Anabaptists, the consolidation of churches was often supported by governments.

Leaders of confessional churches spent considerable time delineating the doctrines that defined their tradition. They put equal effort into debating what institutions and rituals would follow from those doctrines and best preserve the beliefs and values advocated by their branch of Christianity. Once articulated, doctrinal statements and church ordinances became centerpieces of clerical campaigns of religious reform. Historians usually describe this shift from broad reform movements to the creation of carefully defined competing doctrines and institutions as the building of “confessional churches,” also sometimes called “confessionalization.”⁵ Scholars who have described the emergence of the Reformed Church in the Low Countries and neighboring German lands often treat the Convent of Wesel as a critical step along the way. Revisiting this mystery, therefore, offers an opportunity to consider the ways that evidence has been deployed to tell the history of the Reformation. As we will see, it also reveals the need to recast elements of that story.

This book also addresses the amazing tenacity of this historical problem as a study of the nature of historical inquiry itself. What is most remarkable about the Convent of Wesel is the enduring nature of the idea. This book takes on the mystery with equal doggedness. It begins with a central question: what happened to produce the surviving articles? But it does not stop there. It goes on to ask: how did the idea of the Convent of Wesel ever come to exist? Why has the idea remained so persistent? The answers do not shatter the foundations of any religion or church tradition. But they do prove to be enormously instructive about how we go about studying the past.

To begin our journey into this mystery, let’s start with the lack of evidence. The Convent was not recorded in the surviving records of the synod held in Emden three years later. Nor was it mentioned in any of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century reports of the Dutch Reformed churches or in contemporary published accounts of the Dutch Reformation and Revolt. There is no mention of the event in the records of the Dutch refugee community in Wesel, though the consistory’s elders kept an impressive array of documents, including extensive correspondence, detailed notes of their meetings, lists of rules governing their community, and petitions to the city government. There is also no mention of the event in the records and correspondence of any of the other refugee churches in Germany and England, including in the correspondence among the meeting’s supposed attendees. The archives of Wesel’s city government, which include records of biweekly city council meetings and frequent letters, make no mention of any event that could have been the Convent of Wesel. Wesel’s church officials, who kept records of their correspondence, examinations, baptismal records, marriage lists,

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financial records, and death records, also left no record of this event. Local histories and chronicles written in the following years also omit any mention of it.⁶ In 1578, Jacques van der Haghen, the Flemish nobleman and Reformed elder who had been living in Wesel for decades, gave a formal speech before the city council recounting the exiles' travails and thanking magistrates for their hospitality. He, too, made no mention of the event.⁷

The only evidence that something happened in Wesel on November 3, 1568, comes from one surviving twenty-five page Latin manuscript, today resting within the Old Synod Archive (Oud Synodaal Archief), a collection of papers held at the Utrecht Archives (Het Utrechts Archief).⁸ The text of this manuscript outlines a list of articles that might serve as an outline for a new Reformed church, followed by a list of sixty-three signed names. At the end of the main text, and before the signatures, the document includes the location (Wesel) and the date (November 3, 1568), presumably suggesting when and where it was completed. The manuscript does not include the term "Convent of Wesel" anywhere in it, and there is no supporting documentation that explains the significance of this piece of evidence.

It was only in 1618, when the long-neglected document was rediscovered in a collection of papers in London, that we find the first reference to a meeting. From that time, the supposed event started to be called the National Synod of Wesel. This title assigned it binding authority for the Dutch Reformed Church. Later, the adjective "national" was dropped as the meeting was increasingly considered important for the Reformation in northwest Germany as well. In light of increasing recognition of the lack of evidence in the late nineteenth century, historians began dropping the authoritative noun "synod" altogether. In its place, they called it a "convent," though this word was not used for any other formal Protestant ecclesiastical meeting. No one has ever explained where this idiosyncratic title came from and why. Today most scholars are content to reproduce the term "Convent of Wesel" with little comment or discussion, often in inverted commas or scare quotes to indicate their awareness of the mystery surrounding the event.

Over the centuries, there has been a lot of discussion and debate about the Convent of Wesel (whatever it was called). Central disagreements have focused on nomenclature as well as on the extent to which this and other meetings reflected uniformity or disagreement within the Reformed tradition. More recently, debate about the Convent of Wesel has focused on the timing and location of the event. But what first sparked my attention years ago was that relatively little discussion had focused on explaining the lack of any evidence of the meeting's existence or

influence. Answering this question proved to be a daunting, often dizzying task. But the answers are also extremely instructive. Beyond helping us solve this centuries-old mystery, the answers also reveal lessons about the nature of the Reformation and help us better understand the challenges of historical inquiry itself.

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This book is at once a microhistory and a macrohistory of the production of and ideas about one sixteenth-century document. In the first sense, it draws on a tradition of microhistory inspired by a group of twentieth-century Italian historians, including most notably Carlo Ginzburg.⁹ The goal of microhistory is to reduce the scale of historical inquiry to such a circumscribed degree that it is possible to appreciate the deep complexities of human events. Microhistorians investigate the tensions and conflicts within cultures and subcultures, and try to capture the interaction between the social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and political forces shaping specific actions. The approach helps avoid treating any specific evidence simplistically within linear narratives, which can tend to erase the fascinating complexity of the world. Turning complex and messy realities into simpler and neater stories that have a known end point is a normal process – it helps humans find meaning in events. A central task of the microhistorian is to recover the forgotten complexity of the past. Most microhistories, however, are studies of one person or of a specific relationship, such as that between family members. This is, to my knowledge, the first microhistory of a document. It examines one piece of evidence in terms of the very complicated and specific constellation of events that led to its production. This research entailed a meticulous hunt through patchy records to determine the whereabouts and activities of dozens of Reformation-era figures. The microhistory presented here not only solves this enduring mystery but helps us understand the diverse, complex, pluralistic, and contingent world of the sixteenth century.

At the same time, this book is a macrohistory. Thus, while Part I focuses intensely on minutiae, Part II steps back to look at massive changes facing Europe and the world through time. It provides a survey of major shifts in historical thinking about this document over a four-hundred-year period. This approach has the advantage of being able to explain changes in Western historical thinking without resorting to narratives of progress and modernization that seem to take as inevitable the outcomes that we know today. While there are surveys that provide a similar scope, because this book treats interpretations of only one

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document across this large time frame, comparisons and causality from one interpretation to the next become easier to trace.¹⁰ This approach also allows us to see, through this one example, how historians and archivists from the sixteenth century until today have been complicit in forgetting the complexity of the sixteenth century and replacing it with linear narratives. This macrohistorical approach helps us understand the extent to which knowledge of any specific moment in the past is necessarily mediated by experiences and knowledge from the intervening years.

The macrohistorical and microhistorical characteristics of this book offer interpretations that, respectively, run, as historians sometimes say, “along the grain” and “against the grain.” The grain, in this case, is a metaphor. It refers to the grain of wood, the ordering of the fibers within a tree along the logic of its growth pattern. The metaphor refers to the ordering of evidence along coherent narratives, usually either the way that the producer of that evidence intended readers to understand it, or following the implicit logic and narrative inherent in archivists’ and historians’ later organization of that evidence. That is, the logical organization of knowledge carries with it an implicit story about past events that reflects not just actual events or the content of evidence but also the logic through which the documents recording those events were conceived, produced, collected, preserved, organized, and interpreted after the fact. To read evidence along the grain is to consider the *intended* meanings that the author and organizers of evidence hoped to convey. To read evidence against the grain, in contrast, involves looking for what the producers or organizers of evidence *did not intend* to convey or sometimes suppressed, whether consciously or unconsciously. This entails exploring assumptions or logics within a text, including any unresolved contradictions, and asking questions about what the evidence can tell us that its producers and organizers did not intend, did not want us to ask, or could never have even imagined. It is the contention of this book that a richer understanding of the past can be achieved by reading both along *and* against the grain, and that each approach strengthens the other.

Part I offers a microhistory that reads evidence against the grain. It seeks to understand the meaning of the production of the surviving manuscript not as its author, later archivists, and historians intended for it to be understood. Instead, the goal is to look for clues in the wider context – social dynamics, political pressures, and cultural fissures – that can help us better differentiate between the messy and complicated forces that inherently shape all human actions and the clear goal of the producer of this document to present a picture of a unified, stable, and harmonious intellectual movement. The author’s goal in drafting these articles was quite clearly prescriptive: he wanted to promote a future that

fit his worldview. But, even in the most successful cases, aspirations never quite match outcomes (as most of us know only too well). We simply cannot assume that the articles describe anything other than the ideas that one person put forward at a specific moment. As we will see, we can't even assume that its signers agreed with all the proposals in the articles. The goal of Part I is to describe, in as much detail as extant evidence allows, what we can reasonably conclude about these articles by interpreting them within appropriate contexts. This approach includes following individual biographies, looking at networks of relationships, tracing intellectual movements regionally and internationally, and following day-by-day developments in political and military contests.

Part I includes four chapters, which together offer a solution to the curious mystery surrounding the Convent of Wesel. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on understanding who had the motive, means, and opportunity to create such a document and what that person hoped to achieve. Chapter 1 looks at the international, national, and local political and military contexts of the Reformation at the time that the document was produced. It argues against theories put forward by recent historians that the solution to the problem of evidence is reimagining when and where the Convent of Wesel took place. A microhistorical examination at various scales of analysis suggests that the articles constituted a proposal that could only have been produced precisely when and where the document purports to have been written. Chapter 2 centers on the content of the manuscript's articles within their intellectual context. It places them alongside other contemporary efforts at religious reform and church building in order to discover who was behind their production – and who was not. Chapter 3 shifts attention to the sixty-three individuals who agreed to put their names to this document. It is interested in understanding who had the motive, means, and opportunity to sign it. A chief focus of earlier historians has been to identify evidence that would put the fifty-one men who signed the articles themselves (twelve had a colleague sign on their behalf) in the same room at the same time. As we will see, historians' assumption that these men must have signed at a planned event has been a central hurdle to solving this mystery. Chapter 4 follows key developments for the two generations after the production of these articles. It shows that the articles had no significant impact on the emergence of Reformed churches in the Dutch Republic and northwest Germany.

Part II offers a macrohistory that explores how the mystery about the nature of these articles was created and perpetuated. To do so, it examines the Convent of Wesel *along the grain* over four centuries. That is, it seeks to reveal the way that organizers and interpreters of this document

operated not as uninterested transmitters of knowledge but as subjective shapers of that knowledge. In this case, the various meanings ascribed to the 1568 articles were shaped far more by the contexts of their later interpreters than by the nature of their content. In every case, a critical component of that context was the inheritance that each interpreter received from earlier generations. That is, Part II offers a four-hundred-year genealogy of knowledge about these articles: it takes one minute piece of knowledge about the past and seeks to show just how complex and layered it became over centuries. In the process, it belies the claim that anyone can understand evidence from the past without accounting for the extent to which events in the intervening years have necessarily molded his or her interpretation of that evidence. Logically speaking, then, Part II argues that every present-day historian of the sixteenth century inherently also needs to be a historian of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, as well as a conscious analyst of his or her own time. If historians avoid this responsibility, this book suggests, they risk inadvertently aligning themselves with actors in the past, who usually had quite different motivations and goals than we do today.

The Convent of Wesel offers a particularly illuminating example of this problem because it was historians and archivists, precisely those people whose central goal has been to understand the past, who created the mystery in the first place. Chapter 5 explores the role of historians and archivists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in inventing a specific interpretation of this document. It begins in 1618, when an explanation of these articles was presented that was so un-credible that even the most sympathetic contemporaries did not accept it. It then follows knowledge about the articles through the religious controversies of the seventeenth century and into the intellectual revolutions of the Enlightenment. As I will argue, efforts to rationalize and systematize knowledge and to provide intellectually responsible and accurate representations of the past, ironically, did not erase errors but played a critical role in ensuring their survival into the modern era. Chapter 6 examines how cultural transformations of the nineteenth century – particularly expanding liberalism, secularism, and nationalism – imbued these articles with much wider significance than they had ever had before, in popular culture, national politics, and scholarly writing. Chapter 7 follows essentially the same methodology into the twentieth century. It begins by assessing how the emergence of history as an academic discipline forced a reassessment of knowledge about the articles by about 1900. It then shows how post-World War II transformations – particularly the legacy of the Third Reich, leftist radicalism,