

INTRODUCTION

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Do heads excite a desire to chop them off; a desire to decapitate and take a human life, as anthropologists have suggested? In other words, is there a head hunter hidden inside every human being?¹ Readers of this book might suspect its authors and editors of cruel inclinations and although we do not see ourselves as such it is true that the contributors are fascinated by what we have called 'disembodied heads'. We have pursued these heads with great enthusiasm in their medieval and early modern disguises and representations, including the metaphorical. This fatal attraction towards the head can be explained above all by the fact that in medieval and early modern cultures the head was usually considered the most important part of the body. The basis for this claim was that it accommodated the soul and directed bodily functions. This primacy was only contested to some extent by the heart, a position that mainly found religious backing.

Being puzzled and feeling challenged by the historical urge to privilege certain human body parts above others, we decided to take issue with the historical hierarchy of human organs. Our primordial aim was to throw light on as many aspects, functions and contexts of its leading member – the head – as possible, including the theological/religious, medical, scientific, political, historical and art historical. Sometimes heads are discussed within a specific domain, but more often the phenomenon of head reverence is studied in relation to other fields, collapsing the distinctions between these fields. Heads were always the centre of a configuration of meanings and we have tried to pay respect to their individual as well as collective voice. Since we also attempted to use beliefs, mythologies and traditions concerning the head, the result might be deemed an attempt to establish a 'cultural anatomy' of this body part, to borrow the central concept of Claudia Benthien's and Christoph Wulf's *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie* (2001). In this attempt we have confronted the connection between the organic and symbolic wholeness of the body and the

¹ Stahl P.-H., *Histoire de la décapitation* (Paris: 1986), and Le Goff J., "Head or Heart? The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages", in Feher M. (ed.) *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 3 vols. (New York: 1989) vol. III, 12–27, 13.

significance of its most precious part, the *pars pro toto* par excellence: the head.² In devising our topic we were much assisted by David Hillmann's and Carla Mazzio's *The Body in Parts* (1997) and by Caroline Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991).³ Both collections of essays were inspiring in their exploitation of historical ideas on fragmentation and the ways aspects of culture have been invested in human body parts.

Securing or severing the head usually implies wilfully putting a creature to death, denying them further existence. To emphasise the fact that there are many kinds of detached heads with cultic functions, which have not necessarily been cut off, we opted for the term 'disembodied heads'. By 'disembodied' we mean nothing more than having become detached from its original bodily context and having a new life in this distinct separated status, including the attainment of new functions and significance. In our view decapitation practices and other procedures of isolating and subsequently iconising the human head always carry beliefs or at least assumptions about supposed individual 'capital authority'. It is precisely these convictions, woven together with the various types of disembodied heads and their functions, as well as their material and symbolic qualities, that are mapped, explored and explained in this book.⁴

The rise of cultic body-part reliquaries in the Early Christian Church demonstrates a general awareness of fragmented human bodies, amongst which head relics held an eminent position.⁵ In the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, saintly heads appear mostly as skulls. This requires stripping down a fleshy body part and its sensory organs to uncover a bony structure. Even today, of all human remains, the skull is the most instantly recognisable of human body parts, and it tends to survive more often than other human body parts due to both its solid material quality and its symbolic richness, in combination with a strong power of expression. Some of the venerated crania were products of decapitation,

² Benthien C. – Wulf C. (eds.), *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie* (Reinbek b.H.: 2001).

³ Hillmann D.A. – Mazzio C., *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 1997) and Walker Bynum C., *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: 1991).

⁴ Very recently the theme of decapitation was explored in: Tracy L. – Massey J., *Heads Will Roll. Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (Leiden: 2012). This book concentrates on the representation of decapitation practices in literature. Unfortunately, it appeared after the deadline for this collection and thus could not be worked into our contributions.

⁵ As well as heads, arms were also extremely important body-part relics and were likewise considered to be expressive and communicative, on this see Hahn C., "The Voices of Saints: Speaking Reliquaries", *Gesta* 36 (1997) 20–31.

but others were carefully severed post-mortem in order to create a relic. The corpses of holy men or women soon became precious material. After their demise, saints such as Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Siena were carved up, with their heads becoming extremely precious relics. The head of the former found its resting place, after being passed around quite a bit, in the French town of Toulouse, while that of the latter was taken back to her home town, Siena.⁶

Heads severed in the execution of a sentence of death constitute a special category. Execution by severing the head of the victim with a sword was the common beginning of martyrdom, with many saints from the Early Church dying in this way. This does not mean that decapitation was dishonourable *tout court*, a qualification, moreover, that not only applies to martyred saints. For the whole period under consideration here, aristocrats facing capital punishment were granted death by beheading rather than the usual hanging, cases of heresy excepted.⁷ In order to leave no human remnants at all, public and obstinate rejection of orthodox beliefs led to burning at the stake.

The bodies of martyrs from Late Antiquity tended to resist the separation consequent to their beheading in the most literal way, as, paradoxically, after having been put to death these saints managed briefly to stay alive. They picked up their detached head, took it in their arms, and walked to the place where they wished to rest forever with the remainder of their body. Hence they are known as *cephalophores*, 'head carriers'. This designation refers to martyrs who temporarily survived their decapitation and who continued to attest to their beliefs until they reached their final burial ground. Frequently such post-mortem physical activity involved verbally professing one's faith, demonstrating that it was impossible to silence God's voice in his advocates. As Jacobus de Voragine's compilation tells us, Saint Denis's mouth, to mention the best-known representative of all *cephalophores*, continued to preach while he walked ten kilometres with his head in his hands from Montmartre to his burial place, the present basilica of Saint Denis.⁸ Another subcategory is the severed head that has

⁶ Conway P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas of the Order of Preachers (1225–1274). A Biographical Study of the Angelic Doctor* (London: 1911) ch. X, <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/conway04> and Parson G., *The Cult of Saint Catherine of Siena. A Study in Civil Religion* (Aldershot: 2008) 20.

⁷ Carlino A., *Books of the Body. Anatomical Ritual and Renaissance Learning*, trans. J. Tedeschi – A. Tedeschi (Chicago-London: 1999). See also Esther Cohen in this volume.

⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Reading on the Saints*, ed. W.G. Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton N.J.: 1993) vol. II, 236–241.

become a relic and consequently functions as the centre of a cult, as in the case of the head of St John the Baptist. We find his decapitated head as a skull relic in several places, but often the *Johannes in disco* was also recreated in sculpture to invoke its former full fleshy status, as well as represented two-dimensionally on canvas.⁹

Speaking heads appealed to the medieval and early modern imagination, but it has to be admitted that apart from St John's head the denotations of the phenomenon were not altogether favourable. Their sight brought to mind the pernicious power of Medusa's head, killing the onlooker or carrying them along in its misfortune. A telling example is the beheaded troubadour Bertrand de Born, who greets Dante and Virgil in the eighth circle of Hell – the residence of those who sowed discord – his head saying: 'Because I cut the bonds of those so joined, I bear my head cut off from its life-source, which is back there, alas, within its trunk. In me you see the perfect contrapasso'.¹⁰ The theme of the evil talking head was taken further by the construction of mechanical heads that functioned as magical or theatrical devices. They spoke the truth or predicted the future. These devices were by no means neutral, since onlookers saw them as the results of necromancy, often causing the downfall of their inventors.

Art historians discern a type of body-part depiction that revolves around the head but shows slightly more of the body: the bust portrait. For the whole period under consideration it was well known as the profile depiction on coins and medals, being increasingly imitated in non-monetary contexts.¹¹ From the fifteenth century onwards the bust portrait rotated a quarter turn, showing the portrayed *en face* on canvas or in stone. In these representations, the theme of separation is further emphasised by the omission of the rest of the body. This is the case in particular for two types of early modern painting, the 'self-portrait *en décapité*' and the representation of seventeenth-century Dutch burghers with their millstone collars isolating their heads.

⁹ Survey: Arndt H. – Kroos R., "Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel", *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38 (1969) 243–328 and Baert B., *Caput Joannis in Disco. Essay on a Man's Head* (Leiden: 2012).

¹⁰ 'Perch'io parti' così giunte persone, partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!, dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone. Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso', Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. I. *Inferno*, trans. M. Musa (Harmondsworth: 1984) Canto XXVIII, 139–142, 329.

¹¹ On this: Kohl J. – Müller R. (eds.), *Kopf / Bild. Die Büste in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit (Head / Image. The Bust in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era)* (Munich-Berlin: 2007).

The heads described above were usually portrayed 'cut off' at their throat, or half way down the breast in the case of bust portraits, sometimes shown with a bloody section to emphasise their gruesome origin and make them appear as realistic as possible. These representations are in sharp contrast with the floating neckless heads of Christ, the last category under examination in this book. These are the appearances of Christ on earth known as the *vera icon*. This type always features frontal and symmetrical images of Christ's countenance of the *Acheiropoieton* typus, thus not produced by human beings. Usually they are represented on cloth, showing Christ with parted, sleek hair, a forked beard, and a shining Nimbus or Mandorla.

This book is the result of a two-day conference at the Academia Belgica and the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome on the 'cultural anatomy of disembodied heads' in art, law and penal practices, theology, philosophy, and theoretical as well as practical medicine. We believe this implies that the historical agents in these fields proceeded in mutual interaction, although it is difficult to unravel the exact nature and outcome of their reciprocal impregnation. It is therefore necessary to say something here about the sociocultural background of the entire range of disembodied heads, a phenomenon which gained strength through the Middle Ages. The only exception to this appears to be the cephalophores, because they flourished somewhat earlier, although they enjoyed an enduring popularity. We decided to concentrate on the later Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period because the emphasis on the bodily aspects of culture and religion as well as the fascination with its fragmentation were strongest in these centuries, with a cultural trend towards more intense and vehement emotive expressions becoming apparent.¹² This development is, of course, connected to the desire for human salvation in the most real sense, that is, bodily survival as a complete being, meaning non-partibility and non-passibility. The heads treated in this collection of papers are all connected to the concept of wholeness and thus might be deemed *partes pro toto*.¹³

The works of Samuel Edgerton, Jonathan Sawday, Mitchell Merback and Nicholas Terpstra led us to wonder about a correlation between our topic

¹² See also the support for the chronological demarcation in Cohen E., *The Modulated Scream. Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: 2010) 3–4.

¹³ Caroline Walker Bynum has written on this extensively, see for instance Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, esp. the "Introduction. History in the Comic Mode" 11–26.

and changing social norms concerning the fragmentation of bodies from the later Middle Ages onwards.¹⁴ In his *Pictures and Punishment*, Edgerton begins with the claim that there was a link between artistic achievement and the Florentine system of criminal justice. Some painters depicted severed heads with such anatomical correctness that they must have been frequent visitors, as well as keen observers of, public executions. In the sixteenth century, they might even have participated in dissections. It is assumed that Michelangelo was a member of the Roman Brotherhood of San Giovanni, which handed over the bodies of executed criminals to doctors for the purpose of autopsy.¹⁵ Particularly interesting is Edgerton's claim that the revolutionary realism of Renaissance art helped raise people's sensitivity to the brutality of torture and public execution. At the same time, he remarks that while from the middle of the fifteenth century the number of executions rose, artistic representations were softened. This discussion of Italian practices chimes with an observation made by Mitchell Merback, who asserts that Northern European pictures of the time representing fragmentation tended to create more emotion than those from the south, and were therefore often much more gruesome.¹⁶ On the basis of our collection, this conclusion cannot be drawn unequivocally, as the isolated heads portrayed in Dutch portraiture are as elegant and highly stylised as the *en décapité* portraits of the Italian Renaissance. On the whole, however, one can assert that the proliferation of severed heads with a tendency to greater expressiveness increased, which possibly relates to Counter-Reformation Catholicism and developing Protestantism.

Edgerton's declaration that to 'know the subliminal mind of society one must study the sources of its liturgies for inflicting death upon its members' is telling for the research presented in this volume.¹⁷ The procedures for trials were devised by communal authorities aiming to make

¹⁴ To mention the most important: Edgerton S.Y., *Pictures and Punishment. Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca: 1985); Sawday J., *The Body Emblazoned. Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: 1995); Merback M., *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel. Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (New York: 1999); Eckstein N.A. – Terpstra N., *Sociability and its Discontents. Civil Society, Social Capital, and their Alternatives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: 2009), and Terpstra N. (ed.), *The Art of Executing Well. Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Missouri: 2008).

¹⁵ Wisch B., "Incorporating Images: Some Themes and Tasks for Confraternity Studies and Early Modern Visual Culture", in Black C.F. – Gravestock P. (eds.), *Early Modern Confraternities in Europe and the Americas. International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot: 2006) 246.

¹⁶ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*.

¹⁷ Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment* 15.

capital punishment understandable and acceptable. It is therefore regrettable that in this volume we lack an in-depth article on decapitation practices in relation to changes in the judicial system and societal criteria for punishment in the Early Modern Period, although Esther Cohen fortunately touches upon these questions in relation to earlier times. Nonetheless, we dare to suggest that there is a connection between the growing fascination with bodily fragments and an increasingly strict judicial system, as well as rising concerns about strife, insurrection and vendettas, as suggested by Guido Ruggiero and Lauro Martines.¹⁸

Following Edgerton, Mitchell Merback speculates that artists were influenced by a guilt culture forged in the Middle Ages and might have been steered in this by contemporary executions. They are understood to have developed the reaction of audiences that witnessed these horrible scenes when later being confronted with pictures of the Crucifixion. In his chapter, 'Pain and Spectacle', Merback refers to Jean Delumeau, who in his *La peur en Occident* (1978) pointed to the persistent connection between death and crime, sin and punishment. This observation concurs with the findings of Esther Cohen, who in her recent book *The Modulated Scream* (2010) decoded the multifarious expressions of passion and pain in the later Middle Ages, reducing them to what scholastics, physicians and preachers thought and did about pain in the period between 1200 and 1500. During these centuries there was a 'culture of pain', with evidence of heightened feelings of compassion and curiosity as well as cruelty pervading all levels of society. The government ordered its judges to become more strict and to apply harsher methods of torture during their inquests, while at the same time the devout inflicted pain upon themselves, drawing their inspiration not only from Christ and the early martyrs but also from the execution spectacles in their towns. It seems inevitable that the witnesses to the disembodied heads we have investigated in this book contemplated their own death as well as their own fate following the Last Judgment. They therefore pertain to the many-voiced culture of suffering that affected all realms of emotional, cultural and scientific production far into the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Lisa Silverman follows a line of reasoning

¹⁸ Ruggiero G., *Violence in Early Renaissance Venice* (New Brunswick N.J.: 1980) and Muir E. – Ruggiero G., *History from Crime* (Baltimore M.D.: 1993) and Martines L. (ed.), *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian cities, 1200–1500* (Berkeley: 1972) and also a later work, Martines L., *Fire in the City. Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (New York: 2006).

¹⁹ Cohen, *The Modulated Scream*. This topic is taken further in time in: Dijkhuizen J.F. van – Enenkel K.A.E. (eds.), *The Sense of Suffering. Constructions of Physical Pain in Early*

similar to Cohen in her book *Tortured Subjects. Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France* (2001), concluding that the point of pain was that it forged a path to redemption. She showed how the idea that truth was ensconced in the human body became part of the French legal system.²⁰ All of this concurs with the views of Valentin Groebner, who connects the body with violence and honour, and thus explores what he calls 'Angst-kultur'. Our bodiless heads also seem to be pivotal figures in this culture of fear.²¹

It is striking that the many recent authors on the history of anatomy have not paid any special attention to the topic of disembodied heads. Their interest seems to have been directed towards the human interior, as they assume the anatomists were driven by the urge to lay bare human-kind's hidden secrets. This neglect is strange, as Vesalius' *Fabrica* also contains some fine passages and pictures of severed heads, while one of his fellow students in Paris, the German Johann Dryander, provides even more. The Marburg professor wrote a lavishly illustrated *Anatomia capitis humana* (1536/37), the first significant book on the anatomy of the head based on the author's own dissections. Later he elaborated his views on the human head in more extensive anatomical handbooks. The illustrations in his books show many skulls and skeletons, sometimes even accompanied by the statement 'inevitabile fatum'. Whether as a complete head, a half-dissected specimen, or after a complete dissection had reduced it to a bare and empty skull, all the heads exposed and scrutinised address human mortality. They are poignant symbols of death exploited by early modern anatomists to relate their knowledge to both the historicity of death and the eternal (physical as well as spiritual) life of man.²² The dissected heads and skulls that are depicted and discussed are props, making onlookers evaluate their deeds and if necessary repent their sins in order to safeguard perpetual life. In this respect there is a clear parallel with the above-mentioned use that Renaissance artists made of execution and torture in their pictures, aiming to evoke feelings of penitence.

Modern Culture (Leiden: 2008); on the response of spectators to physical suffering see Carlson M., *Performing Bodies in Pain. Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (New York: 2010).

²⁰ Silverman L., *Tortured Subjects. Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France* (Chicago: 2001).

²¹ For instance: Groebner V., *Defaced. The Visual Culture of Violence in the late Middle Ages*, trans. P. Selwyn (New York: 2004).

²² Crowther K.M., *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (London: 2010) 89–95 and 151–155.

This means that the heads we have studied become symbols of human survival and thus humaneness. Hans Baldung Grien's macabre portraits showing beautiful women looking into a mirror that reflects an image of their uncovered skull prove this, as do the Adams and Eves who, in the anatomical handbooks of Vesalius or Dryander, elegantly hold a skull in their hands.²³ Salvation and eternal life are inconceivable, even impossible without heads and skulls. Adam's skull is characteristic for this alpha and omega of humankind. On many paintings we find the typical material remnant of God's first creature at the foot of the Cross on which Jesus hangs. The skull refers to the death of Christ as a prerequisite for safeguarding the eternity of God's other human creatures.

This book does not aim to provide a universal explanation of the medieval and early modern phenomenon of the disembodied head. The editors merely hope to present a new step in the cultural anatomy of the head, addressing the questions of how it was represented, how it was seen and how it was codified/encrypted. Did it function as a *pars pro toto* for a person, or as a separate body part with its own meaning? This entails addressing oppositions such as partitioning versus totality, disintegration versus integration, particularity/individuality versus universality and their respective purports, which touch upon the question of the core of humanity.

Our anthology opens with an important prototype, an isolated head par excellence: Adam's skull. The iconographic motif of the skull at the foot of the Cross is an early medieval symbol of the accomplishment of the Redemption of the human race which set the agenda for the rest of the pre-modern period. However, the literary and semantic background of the theme is obscure. Nonetheless, Marina Montesano provides some clarification with respect to our theme of disembodied heads with her survey of the various textual sources and legends concerning Adam's skull, allowing us to understand and ascertain the reasons for its immense success. Among other issues, she explains the linguistic affinity between skull and cup – the basis for the Eucharistic interpretations of Christ's blood dripping onto Adam's skull found in the later Middle Ages.

Robert Mills' contribution focuses on the High Middle Ages, examining the peculiar phenomenon of talking heads. Disembodied heads literally spoke, but not, it seems, profusely. They did disclose certain prophecies

²³ Koerner J.A., *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Art* (Chicago: 1993) and Crowther, *Adam and Eve* 95–97.

and pieces of wisdom. The story of the talking head has an ancient pedigree; it is by no means simply a manifestation of 'medieval' superstition. Tales of heads that continue to speak following their severing can be found in the myths of almost every ancient culture, with references to prophetic heads being particularly common in Jewish and Arabic traditions. Mills discusses two case studies of skulls that communicate – the legends of Gerbert of Aurillac and Abbo of Fleury (both ca.1000).

Esther Cohen is concerned with the realm of medieval legends and martyrologies, and focuses on the history of pain, penalty and jurisdiction. Obviously, the head (and decapitation) plays a major role in these contexts. While the ancient world was rife with various forms of execution, very few were capital in the sense that they killed people by separating the head from the body. The ancient Germans either hanged their criminals publicly, or dumped them in swamps. In the Greco-Roman tradition, we hear very little about hanging or beheading, which were the most common forms of execution throughout the high medieval and post-medieval periods. At the same time, the term *capitalis sententia*, as a synonym for execution, was common. 'Capital penalty' meant a death sentence. Whether this was due to its primacy among punishments in terms of its severity or to any connection with the head is unclear. Esther Cohen entwines the history of capital punishment within a broader context and concludes that the practice stemmed from twelfth-century ideas in natural philosophy.

In addition to the phenomenon of severed heads that are apparently eloquent, the Middle Ages cherished another related tradition: cephalophory, or saints who carried their own heads. In his article, Scott Montgomery argues that the narrative possibilities of cephalophory are most frequently exploited in the interest of asserting the locus of relic claims. Moreover, individual images of cephalophoric saints may portray the saint with head in hand as an iconographic signifier that references the saint's identity. In these cases, the head portage localises the saint's post-mortem power in his/her bodily relics, but only insofar as it denotes the saint's *passio*.

Barbara Baert starts from a specific image type that occupies a complex position in the iconology of the decapitated head: the *caput Iohannis in disco*, more commonly known as the *Johannesschüssel* (the head of John the Baptist on a plate). The *Johannesschüssel* has a very particular relationship with the material culture of the isolated head in Western Europe. On the one hand, the artefact remained connected to its prototype, the skull relic; on the other, it grew into one of the most important devotional

images of the Middle Ages in both sculpture and painting. In this way, the *Johannesschüssel* channelled the cult of the severed male head into important Christian ideas such as the role of the gaze and empathy in the process of looking, the performative activities of processional images and relics, the archetype of the evil-averting visage, the involvement of the entire *sensorium* in spiritual experience and, finally, the role of the medium in the transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity.

Mateusz Kapustka inquires further into the history of the *Johannesschüssel* with an important case study: the public display of images of St John's head by the municipal authorities of Wrocław (Breslau), a city that at the same time functioned as an episcopal see. In the Wrocław cathedral of St Johannis, relics of John the Baptist had been preserved 'in disco', that is, in a reliquary in the common shape of the so-called *Johannesschüssel*, since at least 1428. The possession of these relics was understood to support the official authority of the Church. However, the same relics were also, to a certain degree, decontextualised in the public space of the city, with the aim of legitimising secular political power. This very special political case involved a metamorphosis of the saint's body into an image, which in turn became a corporeal point of contention in the struggle between two corporate bodies: secular and ecclesiastical.

Arjan De Koomen's contribution leads the transition between the Middle Ages and Early Modernity with a suggestive essay on decapitated heads and self-portraiture. The author discusses images of severed heads in Renaissance and Baroque works of art that, since Erwin Panofsky, have been accepted as depictions of the artist himself. In all cases these self-portraits appear in a story of decapitation, in the guise of a victim of the sword. De Koomen presents arguments that revise the phenomenon of the 'self-portrait *en décapité*' by elaborating on the modern paradigm of artistic self-insertion. He concludes that the phenomenon can better be described as the artist's token of professional pride, since it implicitly or explicitly functions as an artistic signature.

Jetze Touber undertakes a study of head relics in Counter-Reformation Rome (1570 to 1630). In these decades the predecessors of the Bollandists took stock of which relics were venerated under whose name. The inventory of relics in this period became more complete and articulated. As heads of martyrs and confessors were observed, details were noted that either supported or problematised the historical claims for which the Counter-Reformation Church required satisfactory proof. In particular, claims on the part of different ecclesiastical institutions to possess the head of one and the same martyr invited close scrutiny – perhaps more

so than in the case of other body parts. The head possessed distinctive features that were crucial for verifying its authenticity. Certain characteristics could, for example, serve as indications of age, which could be compared with the hagiographical documentation.

Bert Watteeuw's contribution provides an original interpretation of the concept of disembodied heads, focusing on the remarkable Dutch neckwear worn by early-modern sitters for portraits. He argues that the ruff not only visualises the archetype of the severed head, but truly and paradoxically embodies it by dividing and ruling the living, breathing bodies. Ruffs were not merely passive tokens of status but active informers of standing that were closely interwoven with ideas about purity, danger and gender. They marked borders between social classes and literal borders on the body in a porous and highly ambiguous way, with the complex relationship between the presentation and representation of the body highlighted by them. The ruff exemplified the strangling hold of the idea of the severed head, not just on human imagery but on human bodies themselves.

Catrien Santing closes the discussion of disembodied heads by opening and confronting it with a theme that rivals the head: the human heart. The so-called battle of the head and the heart is analysed against the backdrop of transitions occurring between the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The author explains in more detail why, for religious and philosophical reasons, the heart became more popular during a time in which its medical secrets were slowly but surely being revealed. Apart from other factors, such as the so-called 'renaissance of Aristotelianism' in the sixteenth century, the heart's quasi-equation with the soul was what made it so resistant to downgrading. Cardiac saints obstructed the cultic triumph of the head far into the eighteenth century, and even then successfully managed to pass on their task to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in which all other heart devotions merged.

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