



HAL
open science

Gassendi and the Low Countries: Introduction

Delphine Bellis

► **To cite this version:**

Delphine Bellis. Gassendi and the Low Countries: Introduction. *Erudition and the Republic of Letters*, 2023, 8 (4), pp.319-325. 10.1163/24055069-08040001 . hal-04393361

HAL Id: hal-04393361

<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04393361>

Submitted on 14 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

1 **Gassendi and the Low Countries: Introduction**

2

3 *Delphine Bellis* | ORCID: 0000-0003-1076-6483

4 Assistant Professor in History and Philosophy of Science, Centre de Recherches en Sciences
5 Humaines et Sociales (CRISES), Paul Valéry University, Montpellier, France

6 *delphine.bellis@univ-montp3.fr*

7

8 **Abstract**

9 This introduction summarises the nature of the strong intellectual links existing between the
10 French philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) and the Low Countries. It retraces the main
11 steps of his trip to the Spanish Low Countries and the Dutch Republic in 1629, and the
12 importance of this trip for the development of his philosophy, as well as the epistolary
13 network with his correspondents from that area, especially in the field of astronomy. Scholars
14 in the Low Countries were receptive to atomistic theories, empiricism, and anti-dogmatism,
15 all of which are central to Gassendi's philosophy. Gassendi's philosophy also provided
16 arguments against Descartes's metaphysics, and helped disseminate Galileo's mechanics in
17 the Low Countries. Gassendi's influence in the Low Countries lasted beyond his death, as can
18 be seen in the philosophy of Spinoza and Bayle.

19

20 **Keywords**

21 Pierre Gassendi – Low Countries – *libertas philosophandi* – correspondence – astronomy –
22 Cartesianism – atomism – Galileo Galilei – Baruch Spinoza – Pierre Bayle

23

24 Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) was certainly one of the most important founding fathers of the
25 new science and philosophy of the 17th century. But unfortunately, in comparison to Descartes

26 or Newton, Gassendi is often viewed as a second-rate author, and a bit of an antiquarian,
27 because of his interest in reconstructing Epicurean philosophy. However, for his
28 contemporaries, Gassendi was a major figure and his thought has recently sparked renewed
29 interest among scholars.¹ The time is therefore ripe to reassess his role in the articulation of
30 early modern intellectual life. For that purpose, it is important to evaluate his impact on
31 European intellectual networks, and especially in those areas that were receptive to his atomism,
32 his empiricism, his anti-dogmatism and anti-Cartesianism, as well as his observational
33 activities. The Low Countries are one of those privileged areas.

34 It is well-known that throughout his life Gassendi had connections with many Dutch
35 scientists and philosophers. However, since the classic work by Ferdinand Sassen, the topic of
36 Gassendi's presence in the Low Countries has received scant attention by scholars, despite the
37 wide range of sources and the relevance of the topic for studies on seventeenth-century
38 philosophy and science.² While it is well-known that the *Disquisitio Metaphysica* was read and
39 referred to in Cartesian, as well as anti-Cartesian circles, the spread of Gassendi's philosophical
40 and scientific thought as a whole in the context of the Low Countries remains unclear.³ In order
41 to fill this gap in the literature, this special issue is devoted to the reception of Gassendi's
42 philosophy in the Low Countries. By 'Low Countries' we mean both the Catholic South Low
43 Countries (present-day Belgium) and the Protestant United Provinces (present-day
44 Netherlands).

¹ See e.g. Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700* (Cambridge, 2015), esp. ch. 5; Maria Seidl, *Pierre Gassendi und die Probleme des Empirismus* (Stuttgart, 2019); Enrico Piergiacomi, *Amicus Lucretius. Gassendi, il De rerum natura e l'edonismo cristiano* (Berlin, 2022); Delphine Bellis, Daniel Garber, and Carla Rita Palmerino, eds, *Pierre Gassendi. Humanism, Science, and the Birth of Modern Philosophy* (New York, 2023).

² Ferdinand Sassen, 'De reis van Pierre Gassendi in de Nederlanden (1628-1629)', *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, afd. Letterkunde* 23/10 (1960), 263-307.

³ Theo Verbeek insisted on the importance of anti-Aristotelianism, the influence of Francis Bacon's empiricism, and the spread of David Gorlaeus's atomism in the Low Countries, all elements which could partly account for a favourable reception of Gassendi's philosophy: see *Descartes and the Dutch. Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637-1650* (Carbondale, 1992), 9, 61, 63, 88. But Verbeek deemed this reception mainly restricted to Gassendi's *Disquisitio metaphysica*: see Theo Verbeek, 'Gassendi et les Pays-Bas', in *Gassendi et l'Europe*, ed. Sylvia Murr (Paris, 1997), 263-73.

45 Gassendi's close connection with the Low Countries dates back to his formative years.
46 Leaving Paris in December 1628 in the company of François Luillier, he made a long trip to
47 the Low Countries during which he met numerous scholars, philosophers and scientists. In
48 March 1629, he reached Aachen and, from there, Liège. In May 1629, he was in Leuven, where
49 he met, among others, Erycius Puteanus (or van de Putte), Libert Froidmont, Thomas Feyens,
50 and Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz, and later that month in Antwerp. Gassendi then spent two
51 weeks in Brussels (until 7 June 1629), where he met Jan Baptist Van Helmont. After some time
52 probably spent in Ghent, its surroundings and the seaside, on 14 June Gassendi was back in
53 Brussels.⁴ From there, he left for Mons, Valenciennes, Douai, Arras, Béthune, Aire-sur-la-Lys.⁵
54 On 2 July, Gassendi left Calais by boat, in order to reach the Northern Netherlands. He passed
55 through Middelburg and stayed in The Hague, and then Leiden where he met Daniel Heinsius,
56 Gerard Jan Vossius, André Rivet, Otto Heurnius, Adolph Vorstius, and Jacob Golius.⁶ In all
57 likelihood, Gassendi arrived one week later in Amsterdam, where he encountered Henricus
58 Reneri.⁷ On 10 July 1629, he left for Utrecht, and then went back to Leiden and The Hague.
59 From there, he probably made his way to Dordrecht, via Rotterdam. On 15-16 July, he stayed
60 in the military camp at the siege of 's-Hertogenbosch, where he had the opportunity to meet
61 Albert Girard, engineer and translator into French of Simon Stevin's works.⁸ On the next day
62 he was back to Dordrecht, where he met for the second time Isaac Beeckman, 'the best
63 philosopher [he] had ever met'.⁹ On his way to Dordrecht, he could have stopped in Gorkum

⁴ Sassen, 'De reis', 20-1.

⁵ On this trip, especially on the reasons why Gassendi might have spent much more time in the Southern Low Countries than in the Northern Low Countries, see Steven Vanden Broecke's article in this issue.

⁶ About each of the various scholars Gassendi met in the Dutch Republic, one can consult Wiep van Bunge, Henri Krop, Han van Ruler, and Paul Schuurman, eds, *Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers* (Bristol, 2003). On Gassendi and Golius, see Verbeek's article in this issue.

⁷ On Gassendi and Reneri, see Verbeek's article in this issue.

⁸ *Les Œuvres mathématiques de Simon Stevin, augmentées par Albert Girard* (Leiden, 1634).

⁹ See Gassendi to Peiresc, 21 July 1629, in *Lettres de Peiresc publiées par Philippe Tamizey de Larroque*, 7 vols (Paris, 1888-1898), 4: 201. The date of the first meeting remains unclear. According to Cornelis de Waard, the first time was probably on Gassendi's way to 's-Hertogenbosch, on 14 July: see *Correspondance du P. Marin Mersenne, religieux minime*, eds Cornelis de Waard, René Pintard, Bernard Rochot, and Armand Beaulieu, 17 vols (Paris, 1932-1986), 2: 245n9. Sassen considers it more likely that it took place either in the first few days of July on his arrival in the Northern Netherlands, or more likely on 17 July, and was followed by another visit on

64 where he claimed to have met ‘a Maronite with admirable views on the disposition of the
65 world’.¹⁰ On 21 July, Gassendi arrived in Brussels (probably via Antwerp), and on 1 August in
66 Mons. On 8 August 1629, he was back in Paris. Over the five months of this trip to the Low
67 Countries, most of it was spent in the Spanish Netherlands, and only two weeks in the Northern
68 Netherlands. This trip’s importance for Gassendi’s scientific career can hardly be
69 underestimated: Gassendi established lasting contact with scientists and philosophers during
70 his stay there. And it is in fact the only trip outside France that he made in his lifetime.

71 The encounters he made on this occasion certainly played a fundamental role in the
72 development of Gassendi’s science and philosophy for at least two reasons. The first reason is
73 that he had the opportunity to have direct exchanges with authors such as Beeckman who
74 prompted him to deepen his knowledge of Epicureanism, that had so far been restricted to
75 ethical issues, to a broader project including natural philosophy and thus atomism.¹¹ The second
76 reason is that, after his return to France, Gassendi maintained a correspondence with many of
77 the scientists and philosophers he had met (Beeckman, Caramuel y Lobkowitz, Feyens, Golius,
78 Heinsius, Puteanus, Reneri, Snel, Van Helmont, Vossius, and Wendelin). But his
79 correspondence published in vol. VI of his *Opera omnia* also includes letters to and from other
80 correspondents from the Low Countries, like Willem Jansz Blaeu, Henricus Bornius, Jan
81 Caspar Gevaerts, Hugo Grotius, Adriaan Heereboord, Martinus Hortensius (or Martin van den

the same day or shortly afterwards: ‘De reis’, 39. On Beeckman, see Klaas van Berkel, *Isaac Beeckman on Matter and Motion. Mechanical Philosophy in the Making* (Baltimore, 2013).

¹⁰ *Lettres de Peiresc*, 4: 201. Klaas van Berkel suggests that ‘Maronite’ be corrected to ‘Mennonite’: *Isaac Beeckman*, 206n44. This Mennonite has been identified by De Waard as Balthasar van der Veen: see *Correspondance du P. Marin Mersenne*, 2: 246n2. It is most likely that Beeckman recommended that Gassendi meet him. In his letter to Beeckman, dated 14 September 1629, Gassendi evoked ‘our admirable Balthasar’ as if a common friend: *Opera omnia*, VI, 26. On the reasons why Gassendi and Beeckman could have found Van der Veen’s cosmological opinions noteworthy, see Édouard Mehl, ‘L’étrange rencontre: Gassendi et Balthasar van der Veene’ (text of his talk presented at the conference on ‘Gassendi and the Low Countries’ in Montpellier on 18 February 2022): https://www.academia.edu/104684728/L'étrange_rencontre_Gassendi_et_Balthasar_van_der_Veene, accessed 7 August 2023.

¹¹ Bernard Rochot, *Les Travaux de Gassendi sur Épicure et sur l’atomisme. 1619-1658* (Paris, 1944), vii, 34, 36-41.

82 Hove), and Anna Maria van Schurman.¹² The letters exchanged with correspondents based in
83 the Low Countries represent an important part of Gassendi's correspondence. Two
84 correspondents in particular stand out for the number of letters exchanged with Gassendi,
85 namely Hortensius (5 letters from and 7 letters to Gassendi) and Wendelin (18 letters from and
86 12 letters to Gassendi), these two sets of correspondence being mainly focused on
87 meteorological and astronomical observations.¹³ Through his epistolary network with his
88 correspondents based in the Low Countries, Gassendi cultivated fruitful exchanges that played
89 an important role in his intellectual evolution and in the gathering of observational data.

90 One can also wonder to what extent this trip to the Low Countries may have not only
91 made him familiar with some Dutch works, like David Gorlaeus's atomist natural philosophy,
92 but also drawn his later attention, when he was working together with Nicolas-Claude Fabri de
93 Peiresc on ocular anatomy and vision, to specific optical works written by his Dutch
94 correspondents.¹⁴ Indeed, in the 1630s, he studied the works of Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius,
95 and Hortensius in depth. Peiresc and Gassendi read Hortensius's *Oratio de oculo* soon after its
96 publication in 1635.¹⁵ Even if Gassendi acknowledged their disagreement with the Dutchman,
97 who remained too much an Aristotelian despite his knowledge of Kepler's optics, one can
98 surmise that their interest in optics was, for both of them, stimulated by their empiricism.¹⁶
99 Plempius's *Ophtalmographia*, published in 1632, proved more satisfying and Peiresc enjoyed
100 reading it.¹⁷

¹² The correspondence published in his *Opera omnia* represents only a part of his whole correspondence. I focus on it as a sample, for there is no edition or inventory of Gassendi's complete correspondence.

¹³ On the importance of his network of correspondents in the Low Countries for astronomy, see Isabelle Pantin's article in this issue. On Wendelin, see Steven Vanden Broecke's article in this issue.

¹⁴ On Gorlaeus as a possible source for Gassendi's natural philosophy and matter theory, see Erik-Jan Bos's article in this issue.

¹⁵ Peiresc to Gassendi, 25 October 1635, *Lettres de Peiresc*, 4: 557.

¹⁶ Gassendi to Peiresc, 16 November 1635, *Lettres de Peiresc*, 4: 569: 'en toutes choses cest honneste homme n'[est] point d'accord avec nous'.

¹⁷ Peiresc to Gassendi, 18 January 1634, *Lettres de Peiresc*, 4: 425: 'J'ay depuis avoir escript passé une couple d'heures sur l'oeuil de ce Plempius avec un grand plaisir [...]. Car encores qu'il soyt long, et qu'il n'ayt pas de si belles figures que le P. Scheiner, il n'est pas si ennuyant et tranche bien plus net à mon gré ses observations et conceptions.' On Plempius's *Ophtalmographia*, see Katrien Vanagt, 'De emancipatie van het oog: V.F. Plempius'

101 The contacts established during the trip to the Low Countries or through his
102 correspondence were also a means by which the philosophers and scientists from the Low
103 Countries became acquainted with the Frenchman's philosophy. The dialogue with the savants
104 and philosophers from the Low Countries focused mainly on five themes reflecting the parts of
105 Gassendi's philosophy which received most attention in that part of Europe in the 17th century:
106 (1) The anti-Aristotelian arguments of Gassendi's sceptical *Exercitationes paradoxicae*—of
107 which the first book was published in 1624—could be echoed by some academic figures.
108 Indeed, it is evident that Gassendi's work and the critique of authority carried out in the same
109 years by figures such as Adriaan Heereboord and Jan Fokkes Holwarda, shared similar aims,
110 namely the defence of the freedom of philosophizing.¹⁸ (2) Gassendi's *Disquisitio*
111 *Metaphysica*—a scathing attack on Descartes's *Metaphysical Meditations* initiated with the 5th
112 *Objections* and then developed in order to reply to Descartes's 5th *Replies*—soon became a
113 reference repertoire of arguments for European anti-Cartesians or, at least, as a way to counter
114 Descartes's dogmatism, as was the case with Gerard de Vries.¹⁹ Descartes's main opponents
115 could draw inspiration from this work to oppose the introduction of Cartesian philosophy into
116 Dutch universities. (3) Gassendi's atomism, which was a consequence of his research on
117 Epicurus, could also find attentive ears in the Low Countries (Gorlaeus and Beckmann had
118 already revived this ancient matter theory).²⁰ (4) Numerous observational astronomical reports
119 were exchanged between Gassendi and his correspondents in the Low Countries, which played

ophthalmographia en de vroegmoderne medische denkbeelden over het zien' (Ph.D. Diss., University of Twente, 2010).

¹⁸ On the topic of the freedom of philosophizing, see Antonella del Prete, 'Filosofare liberamente a Leida. Adriaan Heereboord, Johannes de Raey, Henricus Bornius', *Dianoia* 31 (2020), 123-36; Sylvia Murr, 'Foi religieuse et *libertas philosophandi* chez Gassendi', *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 76 (1992), 85-99; Delphine Bellis, 'La *Libertas philosophandi* contre le dogmatisme selon Pierre Gassendi', *Dianoia* 31 (2020), 113-22. On the importance of this approach for Holwarda, see Carla Rita Palmerino's article in this issue.

¹⁹ Theo Verbeek drew attention to Gerard de Vries's *De Renati Cartesii Meditationibus a P. Gassendi impugnatis Dissertatiuncula historico-philosophica* (Utrecht, 1691) which relied on Gassendi's objections to rebuke Descartes's *Meditations*: see 'Gassendi et les Pays-Bas', 263. On De Vries, see Daniel Garber, '*Cartesius Triumphatus*: Gerard de Vries and Opposing Descartes at the University of Utrecht', in *Descartes in the Classroom. Teaching Cartesian Philosophy in the Early Modern Age*, eds Davide Cellamare and Mattia Mantovani (Leyden, 2023), 231-52, and Verbeek's article in this issue.

²⁰ On the adoption of atomist theories in Dutch universities, see Erik-Jan Bos's article in this issue.

120 a crucial role in the establishment of the new science, and especially in the defence of
121 Copernicanism.²¹ (5) As the case of the Franeker Professor Holwarda shows, Gassendi's works
122 also served as a means of diffusion of Galilean mechanics in the Low Countries.²²

123 Even if many European scholars—Descartes included—chose renowned Dutch
124 publishers to have their works printed, it is noteworthy that many of Gassendi's works were
125 printed in the Netherlands—while he was alive or after his death.²³ This testifies to his
126 intellectual status, but certainly also contributed to the diffusion of his thought in the Low
127 Countries.²⁴ This diffusion lasted well beyond his death. In addition to investigating the
128 philosopher's relations with his contemporaries, this issue explores the posterity of Gassendi's
129 philosophy in the second half of the century, with the examples of Spinoza and Bayle.²⁵

130

131 **Acknowledgments**

132 Research for this paper was made possible by the GASSENDI project (ANR-19-CE27-0004)
133 funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche. The papers of this special issue were first
134 presented at the international conference devoted to 'Gassendi and the Low Countries',
135 organized by Delphine Bellis and Domenico Collacciani at Paul Valéry University, in
136 Montpellier, on 18-19 February 2022. We would like to thank all the authors for having

²¹ See Isabelle Pantin's article in this issue.

²² See Carla Rita Palmerino's article in this issue.

²³ The *Disquisitio metaphysica* was published by Blaeu in 1644 and by Willem van de Water in 1691, *De vita et moribus Epicuri* by Vlacq in 1647; the *Discours sceptique sur le passage du chyle* appeared anonymously in Leiden, printed by Jean Maire in 1648; Elsevier published the second edition of the first book of the *Exercitationes* in 1649, and Vlacq the second book of this work in 1659. *De septo cordis* underwent several editions in Leiden (1639, 1640, 1641, 1650) and Amsterdam (1663). The *Institutio astronomica* was reissued in The Hague (1656) and Amsterdam (1680, 1682); the *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* was published in The Hague (1659) and Amsterdam (1684), etc. For a complete list of Gassendi's printed works until 1727, see Bellis, Garber, Palmerino, eds, *Pierre Gassendi*, 378-82.

²⁴ A manuscript document of the year 1654, in which Gassendi gave instructions to Sorbière for the publication of his *Opera omnia*, testifies to the numerous offers he had received from Dutch publishers: see Delphine Bellis, 'Un document inédit sur le projet de publication des *Opera omnia* de Pierre Gassendi', *XVII^e siècle* 282 (2019), 149-62 (esp. 159). This publication would eventually be entrusted to Anisson and Devenet in Lyon.

²⁵ See Samuel Legendre's and Domenico Collacciani's articles in this issue.

137 reworked thoroughly their paper for this publication, as well as Édouard Mehl who participated
138 in the conference.

139