

The Medieval Low Countries
I (2014)

The Medieval Low Countries

An Annual Review

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Editors

Manuscripts may be directed to:

Dr. Hildo van Engen
Streekarchief Langstraat Heusden
Altana Postbus 79
5256 ZH Heusden
The Netherlands
hvengen@salha.nl



Book reviews

Dr. Nico Lettinck
nlettinck@kpnmail.nl

Please send books for review to:
The Medieval Low Countries
Fryske Akademy /
Prof. dr. Johannes A. Mol
PO Box 54 8900 AB Leeuwarden
The Netherlands

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Volume 1 (2014)



BREPOLS

Cover illustration: *The Seven Works of Mercy (Feeding the Hungry)*,
Master of Alkmaar, 1504, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

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D/2015/0095/44

ISSN 2295-3493

ISBN 978-2-503-54940-8

Printed in the EU on acid-free paper

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CONTENTS

Jean-François NIEUS et Steven VANDERPUTTEN

- Diplôme princier, matrice de faux, acte modèle.
Le règlement d'avouerie du comte Baudouin V pour Saint-Bertin (1042)
et ses réappropriations sous l'abbatiate réformateur de Lambert (1095-1123) 1

Aart NOORDZIJ

- The Wars of the Lord of Bronkhorst. Territory, Lordship,
and the Proliferation of Violence in Fourteenth-Century Guelders 61

Rombert STAPEL and Jenine DE VRIES

- Leydis, Pauli, and Berchen Revisited. Collective History Writing
in the Low Countries in the Late Fifteenth Century 95

Tom GAENS

- Acquiring Religious Perfection Outside a Vow.
The Carthusian Institution of the *Donati* in Late Medieval Reformist
Communities and the Modern Devotion 139

Mario DAMEN

- Patricians, Knights, or Nobles?
Historiography and Social Status in Late Medieval Antwerp 173

Johannes A. MOL

- The Cistercian Model? The Application of the Grange System by the
Various Religious Orders in the Frisian Coastal Area, 1150-1400 205

Book reviews

233

- G. Krutzler, *Kult und Tabu. Wahrnehmungen der Germania bei Bonifatius* (Rob MEENS), 229 – Steven Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900-1100* (Guy GELTNER), 231 – E.H.P. Cordfunke, *Willem II, graaf van Holland en Roomsconing. Een zoektocht naar het koningsgraf in Middelburg* (Jan W.J. BURGERS), 234 – S.J. Molvarec and T. Gaens (eds), *A Fish out of Water? From Contemplative Solitude to Carthusian Involvement in Pastoral Care and Reform Activity* (José J. VAN AELST), 238 – Joost van Driel, *Meesters van het woord. Middelnederlandse schrijvers en hun kunst* (Dirk SCHOENAERS), 243 – Werner Paravicini (ed.), *La cour de Bourgogne et l'Europe. Le rayonnement et les limites d'un modèle culturel* (Robert STEIN), 246 – Frits van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1300-1400* (David F. JOHNSON), 251 – Huib J. Zuidervaart, *Ridders, priesters en predikanten in Schelluinen. De geschiedenis van een commanderie van de ridderlijke Duitse orde, Balije van Utrecht* (Xavier BAECKE), 257 – Robert Stein, *De hertog en zijn Staten. De eenwording van de Bourgondische Nederlanden, c. 1380-1480* (Jonas BRAEKEVELT), 261 – Rudolph Ladan,

Contents

Gezondheidszorg in Leiden in de late middeleeuwen (Bram VAN DEN HOVEN VAN GENDEREN), 264 – Patricia Stoop, *Schrijven in commissie. De zusters uit het Brusselse klooster Jericho en de preken van hun biechtvaders (c. 1456-1510)* (Krijn PANSTERS), 268 – *Church History and Religious Culture* 93:2 (special issue *Challenging the Paradigms: Holy Writ and Lay Readers in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Sabrina Corbellini) (Tjamke SNIJDERS), 271 – Judith Keßler, *Princesse der rederijkers. Het oeuvre van Anna Bijns: argumentatieanalyse – structuuranalyse – beeldvorming* (Arjan VAN DIXHOORN), 275 – Erik Thoen, Guus J. Borger, Adriaan M. J. de Kraker, Tim Soens, Dries Tys, Lies Vervaeet and Henk J. T. Weerts, (eds), *Landscapes or Seascapes? The History of the Coastal Environment in the North Sea Area Reconsidered* (Daniel CURTIS), 280 – Peter Bitter, Viera Bonenkampová, Koen Goudriaan, (eds), *Graven spreken. Perspectieven op grafcultuur in de middeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Nederlanden* (Harry TUMMERS), 284.



Patricia Stoop, *Schrijven in commissie. De zusters uit het Brusselse klooster Jericho en de preken van hun biechtvaders (c. 1456–1510)*. Hilversum: Verloren, 2013 (Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen, 127). 495 pp, ill. ISBN 978-90-8704-195-3. € 39.00.

In 1459, Maria van Pee (d. 1511), a canoness and later prioress of the Jericho Monastery in Brussels (1456), decided to publish from memory the sermons of her rector and confessor Jan Storm (d. 1488). This was the start of a long tradition resulting in the most extensive collection of conventual sermons (*conventspreken*) ever produced in the Low Countries. The collection is unique because of its long prologues and the fact that it mentions the names of most priests and sisters involved. The latter, intending to honor God and the name of their confessors, recorded the work of their spiritual fathers ‘for their own salvation and that of their sisters’. In *Writing in commission. The Sisters of the Jericho Monastery in Brussels and the Sermons of their Confessors (c. 1456–1510)*, Patricia Stoop analyzes these sermons and the methods used to record them. She shows that the collections are the result of a collective authorship and the nucleus of a much broader monastic writing culture.

In the first chapter, Stoop deals with the manuscript tradition and textual transmission. The eight collections consist of approximately 350 (unique) sermons in total. Most of them were recorded for internal use, although these sisters also wrote dozens of books for others (*pro pretio*). Their authorship was complex: a preacher/confessor delivered the sermons, a sister recorded them afterwards from memory, and another sister collected and edited these recorded sermons. In the words of Stoop’s promotor, Thom Mertens: ‘the “skeleton” of the sermon was the work of the preacher; the sisters who did the writing were to a large extent responsible for the “flesh” that brought these bones to life’ (35).

In the second chapter, Stoop describes the historical context. A short history of the monastery ‘Onze Lieve Vrouw ter Rosen gheplant in Jericho’ is followed by a list of monastic offices, ranks, and duties, and a presentation of the main characters: preacher/confessors such as the regular canons Jan Storm, Paul van Someren, and Willem Storm; and the sermon writers and collectors (Maria van Pee, Janne Colijns, Elisabeth van Poyle, Barbara Cuyermans, Mergriete van Steenberg, and Anne Jordaens). Obviously, these six sisters belonged to the more intellectual among the fifty or so living in Jericho during the second half of the fifteenth century.

In the third chapter, Stoop describes the main aspects of the monastic writing culture at Jericho: the scriptorium (*scrijfcamere*), and who made use of it; intellectual and spiritual formation, the monastic school, and

training; writing and copying manuscripts; the style of writing (mostly 'a neat and uniform *littera hybrida*', 119); illumination; payments and sales; buyers (mostly priests and male (!) monasteries); and the collection of 29 manuscripts in Middle Dutch that is, in fact, the third largest of all collections stemming from female monasteries. The library of Jericho furthermore contained liturgical books such as books of hours and missals, most of them now lost, as well as spiritual treatises (e.g., Ruusbroec, Hendrik Herp), bible commentaries, *vitae*, devotional texts (*exempla*, miracles, meditations), and some incunabula (e.g., Ludolph of Saxony, Otto of Passau). This chapter includes sixteen beautiful full-page color plates, mainly showing a colophon, initials, and images of the Jericho manuscripts that are now in Brussels and Ghent.

In the fourth chapter, Stoop describes the structure, contents, style, and metaphorical language of these sermons against the background of the use of the liturgical calendar, annual cycles of seasons and feast-days, and the sisters' *lectio-meditatio-oratio* reading practice. Many of the normal characteristics of Middle Dutch sermons can be found in them: *divisiones* (subdivisions); *dilatationes* (explanations), *rationes* (argumentations), *auctoritates* (authorities), and so on. Of particular importance are the prologues, in which the sisters (despite all conventionalism, literary topos, and *Bescheidenheidsformeln*) not only claim their share of authorship, but also explain their own methods and motives. It appears that they themselves instigated these recordings with the memory of their dear fathers, their own salvation, and the spiritual welfare of their sisters in mind. Their goal is thus the honor of their memorable preachers (*totten love ende weerdicheit des ghedincelijken predicaers*, 182), their own spiritual profit (*selfs orbore ende salicheit*, 184), and the spiritual nourishment of their sisters (*te treckenne ten smake der sueticheit*, 185).

A large portion of the book (190-311) is dedicated to the characteristics of individual sermons and the female authors' individual styles, including their allegorical explanations of key religious themes and their specific, mostly female, spiritual foci. Among the many themes we encounter in the works of Maria van Pee, for example, are the merits of Mary, the beauty of virtues, the jewels in the crown of John the Baptist, the sun-like appearance of St. Catharine, the grace in Mary Magdalene, and the seven works of mercy. Most illustrative is Maria's explanation of the conversion of Paul in connection to Psalm 76,11 and in terms of the four changes brought forth by God: substantial, natural, miraculous, and spiritual (199). Most sermons seem to be reproduced from memory: a number of them are incomplete or contain illogical repetitions; *rationes* and *auctoritates* are missing from the general structure (*divisio*); the images are lively; and numbers and lists abound. These things should not surprise us, as Maria

had already stated in her prologue that she intended to reproduce the 'drift' (*den bloeten sin*) of the words of her confessor only. The other five women writers equally reproduce more the internal senses than the intact sermons, constructing new texts rather than reconstructing existing ones (210).

Even more important than individual accents in the selection and elaboration of devotional themes is the genesis and structure of each collection as a whole. This is the subject of the fifth and final chapter. The collections are the result of a complex editing process, involving several (anonymous) people and consisting of five (overlapping) phases (p. 358): (1) the delivery of the actual sermons (predication); (2) the recording of a selection of them on separate sheets (redaction); (3) the gathering and organizing of the material according to the liturgical calendar (collection); (4) the editing of the collection (edition); and (5) the copying of the collection and the addition of a prologue and an index (codification). The sisters thus 'wrote together' (*Schrijven in commissie*), neither being 'in commission' nor working 'on commission' as the misleading title may suggest.

It is this systematization and division of labor that is most striking even beyond the level of religious fervor that these writers displayed or the measure of authority that they enjoyed among their sisters (359). The *auctores intellectuales* of the sermons did not disappear behind the texts, but in each collection and in every production phase different contributors found ways to give expression to their own spirituality and creativity (360). At the same time, the general purpose shared by all was the deepening of devotion and the promotion of spiritual virtue. Thus, both a strong collaboration and shared contemplation (in which 'physical activity and spiritual edification' were combined (146), constituted the community's identity – a collective identity that was maintained by the preaching of faith, the production of books, and the practice of virtue.

In its creative solutions in rendering an existing discourse in an exciting new way, its broad attention to devotional forms of living spirituality, its intelligent use of the intellectual work of others, its sensitivity to the connection between individual authority and collective identity, its strong codicological as well as internal focus, and its incidental repetitiveness and lengthiness, *Schrijven in commissie* very much resembles the fifteenth-century collections that it presents so carefully here.

Krijn PANSTERS
Tilburg University, Utrecht