

**The Medieval Low Countries**  
4 (2017)

# The Medieval Low Countries

An Annual Review

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# CONTENTS

## G. J. de LANGEN and J. A. MOL

- Church Foundation and Parish Formation in Frisia  
in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries. A Planned Development? 1

## Justine SMITHUIS

- Urban Historiography and Politics in Fourteenth-Century Utrecht.  
New Findings on the Dutch Beke (c. 1393) 57

## Jan TRACHET, Ward LELOUP, Kristof DOMBRECHT, Samuël DELEFORTERIE, Jan DUMOLYN, Erik THOEN, Marc VAN MEIRVENNE, and Wim DE CLERQ

- Modelling Monnikerede. The Topographical Reconstruction  
of a Deserted Medieval Outport near Bruges 91

## Ulrike WUTTKE

- Vernacular Eschatology or Eschatology in the Vernacular? The Representation  
of Death in Fourteenth-Century Vernacular Brabantine Writings 131

## Jelle HAEMERS and Valerie VRANCKEN

- Libels in the City.  
Bill Casting in Fifteenth-Century Flanders and Brabant 165

## Mathilde VAN DIJK

- Baking the Bread and Roasting the Meat.  
Dorlandus's Saint Lawrence as a Model for Carthusians 189

## Wim BLOCKMANS

- The Medieval Roots of the Constitution of the United Provinces 215

## Book Reviews 249

A propos d'une édition critique récente: Arnoldus Leodiensis, *Alphabetum narrationum*, Elisa Brillì (ed.), 249 – Annemarieke Willemsen and Hanneke Kik (eds), *Golden Middle Ages in Europe. New research into early-medieval communities and identities. Proceedings of the Second 'Dorestad Congress' held at the National Museum of Antiquities Leiden, The Netherlands, 2–5 July 2014*, 265 – Steven Vanderputten, *Imaging Religious Leadership in the Middle Ages. Richard of Saint-Vanne and the Politics of Reform*, 270 – *Libri Feudorum*, J. E. Spruit and J. M. J. Chorus (transl.) with an introduction by C. H. Bezemer, 273 – *Sigebert de Gembloux*, éd. par Jean-Paul Straus, 276 – Taco Hermans, *Middeleeuwse woontorens in Nederland, de bouwhistorische benadering van een kasteelvorm*, 279 – Laura Crombie, *Archery and Crossbow Guilds in Medieval Flanders, 1300–1500*, 284 – André R. Köller, *Agonalität und Kooperation. Führungsgruppen im Nordwesten des Reiches 1250–1550*, 289 – Rolf de Weijert-Gutman, *Schenken, begraven, gedenken. Lekenmemoria in het*

*Utrechtse kartuizerklooster Nieuwlicht (1391–1580). Gifts, Burial Practices and Remembrance. Memoria in the Utrecht Charterhouse*, 294 – Frans Gooskens, *Idealen en macht. Het kerkelijk netwerk van Anselmus Fabri van Breda in de vijftiende eeuw en de stichting van apostelhuizen*, 298 – Jaap van Moolenbroek, *Nederlandse kruisvaarders naar Damiate aan de Nijl. Acht eeuwen geschiedenis en fantasie in woord en beeld*, 301 – Paul Bertrand, *Les écritures ordinaires. Sociologie d'un temps de révolution documentaire (entre Royaume de France et Empire, 1250–1350)*, 306 – Gerardi Magni *Scripta contra simoniam et proprietarios*, 311 – Ulrike Wuttke, *Im Diesseits das Jenseits bereiten. Eschatologie, Laienbildung und Zeitkritik bei den mittelniederländischen Autoren Jan van Boendale, Lodewijk van Velthem und Jan van Leeuwen*, 317 – Marieke Abram, Anna Dlabáčová, Ingrid Falque, Giacomo Signore (eds), *Mobility of Ideas and Transmission of Texts. Religion, Learning, and Literature in the Rhineland and the Low Countries (ca. 1300–1550)*, with a foreword by Geert Warnar and Loris Sturlese, 323 – Thomas Cohen and Lesley Twomey (ed.), *Spoken Word and Social Practice. Orality in Europe (1400–1700)*, 327 – Anne-Laure van Bruane, Bruno Blondé and Marc Boone (eds), *Gouden eeuwen. Stad en samenleving in de Lage Landen, 1100–1600*, 331 – Alain Marchandisse, Gilles Docquier (eds), *Pays bourguignons et Orient: diplomatie, conflits, pèlerinages, échanges (XIV<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles)* – *Rencontres de Mariemont-Bruxelles (24–27 septembre 2015)*, 336



Marieke Abram, Anna Dlabáčová, Ingrid Falque, Giacomo Signore (eds), *Mobility of Ideas and Transmission of Texts. Religion, Learning, and Literature in the Rhineland and the Low Countries (ca. 1300–1550)*, with a foreword by Geert Warnar and Loris Sturlese. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2015. XII + 292 pp. ISBN 978-88-6372-897-2 (Manuscripts Ideas Cultures – Temi e Testi 148). € 45.00.

The authors and editors of this volume were all doctoral students in the international research project ‘Mobility of Ideas and Transmission of Texts’ in the years 2010–13. Their erudite contributions collected here consider, in large part, what we might broadly term the social context of religious literature in the German- and Dutch-speaking lands in the later Middle Ages. It is good to see such interest from early career scholars in late medieval religious literature, given the shift in German literary studies over the last decade back towards the old canon of courtly literature, and especially the Arthurian romance of the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

It is good to see as well how, as a general principle, the authors work outwards from close reading of their chosen texts and manuscripts to consider questions of audience and reception, rather than imposing existing assumptions *a priori* onto those texts. Claudia Lingscheid tackles the short version of the *Neunfelsenbuch*, the longer version of which is associated with the authorship of the mystical writer Rulman Merswin (d. 1382), and focuses attention on those sections of the work that are actually expanded in the short version. Central to her inquiry is the expanded critique of beguines in the first part of the *Neunfelsenbuch*, in which the short version charges them with the predilection for wearing fashionable secular dress. In Strasbourg, meanwhile, where an episcopal ordinance of 1374 listed the *Neunfelsenbuch* amongst problematic works that were circulating amongst the beguines, the ecclesiastical hierarchy sought in the 1370s to compel beguines to wear secular dress, and set aside their temerity in putting on religious habits or distinctively mean and humble clothing. Lingscheid speculates as to whether the criticism of beguines in the short version of the *Neunfelsenbuch* might, in consequence, reflect an implicit partisan stance alongside them in their struggle to secure their form of life. Careful comparison of the short and long versions of the work, and of the Latin translation of the long version by the Augustinian friar Johannes von Schaftholzheim (d. 1381), establishes that the audience for the short version may well have been ‘semireligious’, to be sought amongst communities of Franciscan tertiaries and beguines, whereas the long version is oriented for an enclosed audience with the space and time to engage in contemplative and ruminative reading.

Yves van Damme offers a new interpretation of the difficult fourteenth-century dialogue known as *Meister Eckhart und der Laie*. He argues that it is not straightforwardly 'antihierarchical', but a text in which a discourse is opened in a more complex way on the appropriate topics on which a spiritually-gifted layperson might speak; a text in which lay spirituality is channeled into mystical fulfilment, yet whilst a guard is maintained against unwanted censure from the 'proud clergy'. The issues raised in the text stand in tension between questions of the legitimacy of lay religious teaching, the ineffability of the divine, and the communicability of mystical experience. It is beneficial to have the range of perspectives and contexts brought to bear on this text that Van Damme marshals, but the ultimate interpretation depends very much on the way in which key terms and phrases are to be understood. If one were to translate the injunction *en niet en spreekt van godlijke saken noch van godlijken weesen* as referring to 'divine causes and divine essences' – in other words, using the terminology of philosophical theology – and not as a general prohibition about discussion of divine things, then one would be dealing here with a much more limited warning against particular kinds of speculation for which even schoolmen were berated.

A different kind of social context is considered in what is arguably the most learned essay, Giacomo Signore's examination of a single manuscript (Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. F VIII 16) from a larger collection that once belonged to the Dominican friar Albertus Löffler (d. 1462). In detailed codicological scrutiny the manuscript is revealed to consist of fascicules from Löffler's study at the Latin school in Ulm in early 1436 and at the University of Heidelberg in 1436–39, and from a slightly later period of his life in 1442, by which time he had been ordained priest and was probably living in or around Basel, but had not yet joined the Dominican Order. Signore demonstrates expertly the interrelationship between the arithmetical-computistical, astronomical-medical, and musical texts assembled in the manuscript within the context of academic programmes of study, and explains the different ways in which commentaries to those texts function within those curricula. Codicological observations, presented with exacting precision, are made to work productively here in the service of wider argument. A series of fascicules initially collected as personal tools for study are transformed ultimately into a kind of textbook for use in a mendicant convent, a codicological transformation that provides material evidence of the transmission of academic learning acquired at a university out into the world beyond (or at least such as it was constituted by the Dominicans in Basel).

Besides the consideration of the social context of religious literature, a further interest documented in the volume is in the interface between

Latin and the vernaculars. Daniëlle Prochowski offers a comprehensive survey of the known influence of Jean Gerson on Dutch-language texts. Whereas the Dutch Gerson-reception in the early fifteenth century proceeds from his French treatises of the *Opus tripartitum*, and has been studied in depth by Kees Schepers, Prochowski identifies a real zenith of interest in Gerson in the Low Countries in the years around 1500, with the Latin works (or Latin translations of the French works) as the point of departure for Dutch interest. Although Prochowski only hints gently towards it, this is surely a development related to the renewed interest in Gerson at the same time in the upper Rhineland, associated above all with the figure of Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg. Myrtha de Meo-Ehlert investigates the reception of a quite different figure. She explores the longest text associated with the authorship of Dionysius – the *Epistola ad Timotheum de morte Pauli* – to become available in the German vernacular, initially by way of its inclusion in the (Latin) *Legenda aurea*, which was translated into German for the first time in Strasbourg in the mid-fourteenth century. This article, perhaps primarily of interest as a study of the *Elsässische Legenda aurea*, required more intrusive editorial intervention. Monika Studer offers editions of four German prose versions, previously unknown to scholarship, of the ‘knight in the chapel’ exemplum (Frederic Tubach’s *Index exemplorum* nos 3477 and 3694). They prove not to be interrelated, but all to be independent translations of different Latin versions of the exemplum, each of which is carefully identified. The plurality of translations of the same narrative, in verse and in prose, in the same region – the German south-west – in the later Middle Ages demonstrates just how vital the culture of literary translation was. Though offered as a concluding remark, there is much to commend Studer’s suggestion that the aesthetic of these exempla means that they should be considered in terms of literary interest in the collection of shorter narrative works, not just – as so often – in a purely functional, didactic context.

Joni De Mol’s study of Alijt Bake stands out amongst the other essays in this volume. It is first established that Bake never uses terms of ‘vision’ to describe her revelations: they were, instead, auditory experiences, presented to her audience as instruction received from God. Where ‘to see’ is used, it is used metaphorically, to mean ‘to understand’ (as in the English ‘insight’). In an explicitly-acknowledged adaptation of a sermon by Jordan von Quedlinburg, Bake wrote that the donkey which Christ rode on Palm Sunday, which Jordan had compared to the *incipiens* in the religious life who was unable to see Christ, was in fact able to hear every word that Christ spoke to his disciples, even if she had to concentrate on the path ahead with her eyes. De Mol then shows how this stance

in favour of audition over vision might have been influenced by a passage from a sermon by Eckhart copied in a manuscript by Bake herself, in which hearing is prioritized over vision as hearing allows God to be passively experienced or suffered (Eckhart's distinctive *gotliden*). Indeed, as a general principle audition allows for a more passive, and less active experience of the divine than vision: one directs one's own gaze, whereas one cannot choose what one's ears hear. Beyond this, De Mol argues that Bake's preference for audition might also be seen as a deliberate strategy of legitimation, to avoid criticism directed at those who claimed visions.

Marieke Abram and Anna Dlabáčová offer a preliminary study of a text that they plan to edit, hitherto known to scholarship as the treatise *Von den Kräften der Seele und den geistlichen Lebensformen*, but actually an epitome of the German translation of Hendrik Herp's *Spieghel der volcomenheit*. It is likely a product of Augsburg in the 1470s, and is transmitted in eight manuscripts, always as a prefatory summary to Herp's *Spieghel*. In the only French article in the volume, Luciano Micali offers some observations on the various tensions surrounding the proper approach to theology and understandings of its purpose in the later Middle Ages. Gerson, as one might expect, had much to say, and has much to contribute to our comprehension of these debates. All in all, this is a worthwhile and interesting collection, and much is to be expected of the scholars responsible for it in years to come.

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