

Medieval documents as artefacts

Schrift en Schriftdragers in de Nederlanden in de Middeleeuwen VI

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Paleografi Codicologie Diplomatiek

Writing and Writing Practices in the Medieval Low Countries
Palaeography Codicology Diplomatics

Belgisch-Nederlandse Werkgroep / Belgian-Dutch Working Group:

A. Berteloot, J.A.A.M. Biemans, J.W.J. Burgers, V. Van Camp, G. Croenen, G. Declercq,
E.C. Dijkhof, H. van Engen, T. Van Gassen, J.G.M. Kienhorst, J.-Fr. Nieuw, E. De Paermentier,
I. van Renswoude, T. Snijders, A. Stuckens, G. Van Synghel, E.T. van der Vlist, J.P. Westgeest

Medieval documents as artefacts
*Interdisciplinary perspectives on codicology,
palaeography and diplomatics*

edited by

E.C. DIJKHOF

in collaboration with

A. BERTELOOT, J.A.A.M. BIEMANS, J.W.J. BURGERS, V. VAN CAMP, H. VAN ENGEN,

J.S. LOVE, E. DE PAERMENTIER, A.T. SMITH, and M.K. WILLIAMS



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‘Writing and Writing Practices in the Medieval Low Countries’

Each message requires a carrier. Codicology and diplomatics; two worlds?

WALTER PREVENIER

In the early 1950's Prof. Edgard Blancquaert of the seminar for Dutch philology at the Rijksuniversiteit Gent started a project based on the famous German model of the *Corpus der altdutschen Originalurkunden* by Friedrich Wilhelm. His goal was to establish a systematic edition of all original charters written in Dutch before 1300. His assistant, Josef Van Cleemput, discovered several hundreds of originals in Belgian and Dutch archives. With the help of the seminar for Palaeography and Diplomats (led by Prof. Egied Strubbe), he made excellent photographs of all of them, which were safely kept and well analysed in this seminar. Van Cleemput died in 1958, at a very young age. Maurits Gysseling took over his work and enriched the collection with many more hundreds of charters. In 1977, he published, in seven volumes, the texts of no less than circa 2200 originals in Dutch.¹ That was made possible by the financial support and the scientific and technical collaboration of the Belgian-Dutch Foundation ‘Institute for Dutch Lexicology’ (‘Stichting Instituut voor Nederlandse Lexicologie’, INL), located in Leiden.² Before this, Drs. Willy J.J. Pijnenburg was appointed at the same Institute in 1972 in order to invent, before the digital revolution, a system of codes for punched cards for the production of word-indices for this *Corpus*, which also happened to be published in 1977.³ In the meantime, Gysseling decided to expand his project to include the literary manuscripts, which resulted in the publication of six volumes between 1980 and 1987.⁴

From 1976 onwards, a specific collaboration took off between the Institute for Dutch Lexicology in Leiden and the Seminar for Palaeography and Diplomats at Ghent University. This primarily resulted from the fact that the Institute became in-

1 Maurits Gysseling, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten tot en met het jaar 1300. Reeks I. Ambtelijke bescheiden*, 7 volumes (Leiden 1977).

2 This story is told in [anonymous], *15 jaren Belgisch-Nederlandse samenwerking 1972-1987. Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten tot en met het jaar 1300* (Leiden 1988) 4-8.

3 Maurits Gysseling, m.m.v. Willy Pijnenburg, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten tot en met het jaar 1300. Reeks I. Ambtelijke bescheiden. 1-8 & 1-9*, 2 volumes (Leiden 1977).

4 Maurits Gysseling, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten tot en met het jaar 1300. Reeks II. Literaire handschriften*, 6 volumes (Leiden 1980-1987).

terested in the use of the patrimony of the Van Cleemput photographic collection of original charters in the Dutch language. As a result, researchers from the Institute for Lexicology started the new Dictionary of the Middle-Dutch written language (*Vroegmiddelnederlands woordenboek*).⁵ With this goal in mind, and given the important geographical variations in vocabulary and spelling in the Middle Ages, identifying the geographical localization of the charters based on palaeographical and philological grounds was crucial if they were to be used for cataloguing the documents which were typical for Ghent, Bruges and other places. Additionally, the linguists absolutely needed the palaeographical analysis of the Ghent original collection for this enterprise. Eventually, it all came to a happy ending, and now the *Corpus Gysseling* and the new dictionaries are not only published, but also available on-line.⁶

These informal contacts between Ghent and Leiden have been the trigger for a much broader scientific project called 'Writing and Writing Practices in the Medieval Low Countries' ('Schrift en schriftdragers in de Nederlanden in de Middeleeuwen'). This was started in 1985 by an even larger group of Dutch and Belgian scholars, composed of Prof. Dr. J. Peter Gumbert (Leiden), Prof. Dr. Jan Goossens (Leuven), Prof. Dr. Walter Prevenier (Gent), Dr. Maurits Gysseling (Gent), Drs. Jos A.A.M. Biemans (Amsterdam), Dr. Jaap G. Kruisheer, Dr. Jacques Mertens, Dr. Willy J.J. Pijnenburg and Drs. John J. Van der Voort van der Kleij. This spinoff had the goal of preparing the publication of a series of photographic reproductions of medieval charters and literary manuscripts from the Low Countries, which would include introductions on palaeography, codicology and diplomatics. Three sub-projects were at stake: Dutch-language charters of the thirteenth century in the Southern Low Countries, Dutch-language charters in the Northern Low Countries and Middle-Dutch literary manuscripts.

The efforts of the Dutch-Belgian project resulted in a series of publications, at first printed by Peeters Publishers in Leuven,⁷ currently by Verloren in Hilversum.⁸ Southern and Northern Low Countries were equally represented therein. Moreover, the first three publications also contained palaeographic, codicological and diplomatic studies: the three disciplines mentioned in the subtitle of the working group. Nevertheless, due to the personal circumstances of some of the researchers involved, all

5 W.J.J. Pijnenburg e.a., (eds), *Vroegmiddelnederlands Woordenboek* (Leiden 2001); te consulteren op de site van de geïntegreerde taalbank: <http://gtb.inl.nl/>.

6 Frits van Oostrom, Paul Wackers & Jo Reynaert (eds.), *Cd-rom Middelnederlands* (Den Haag-Antwerpen 1998).

7 J.W.J. Burgers, *De paleografie van de documentaire bronnen in Holland en Zeeland in de dertiende eeuw*, 3 delen (1. Onderzoek; 2. Bijlagen; 3. Afbeeldingen) (Leuven 1995); Jos A.A.M. Biemans, *Onsen Spieghel Ystoriale in Vlaemsche. Codicologisch onderzoek naar de overlevering van de Spiegel Historiaal van Jacob van Maerlant, Philip Utenbroeke en Lodewijk van Velthem, met een beschrijving van de handschriften en fragmenten*, 2 delen (1. Onderzoek, Appendices; 2. Catalogus, Registers, Bibliografie, Platen) (Leuven 1997); E.C. Dijkhof, *Het oorkondewezen van enige kloosters en steden in Holland en Zeeland 1200-1325*, 2 delen (1. Onderzoek; 2. Bijlagen, Afbeeldingen, Transcripties) (Leuven 2003).

8 Astrid Houthuys, *Middeleeuws kladwerk. De autograaf van de 'Brabantsche yeesten', boek VI (vijftiende eeuw)* (Hilversum 2009); Valeria Van Camp, *De oorkonden en de kanselarij van de graven van Henegouwen, Holland en Zeeland: schriftelijke communicatie tijdens een personele unie: Henegouwen, 1280-1345* (Hilversum 2011).

projects were not brought to a successful end. For example, a palaeographic album of Dutch literary manuscripts, based on the edition of Maurits Gysseling, was foreseen. This would include palaeographic and codicological comments. However, despite great efforts, this album was, unfortunately, never published. Furthermore, the study of the Dutch charters in the Southern Low Countries in the thirteenth century has also been placed in limbo,⁹ and some projects have yet to be completed or finalized for publication. Meanwhile, the group has been enlarged with new young members, including women. In fact, Dutch is no longer the only vernacular language which is the focus of interest. Palaeographical research in the Southern Low Countries would indeed be unthinkable if French and Picard writings were not included. French-speaking Belgian scholars are also now involved, and palaeographical, codicological and diplomatic studies seem to have reached a new élan. All in all, this new wave is a kind of miracle, considering the fact that these disciplines have largely disappeared from the curricula at our universities.

Within this encouraging shift in perspective, several people started to be convinced that it was time for a new start in the good old ‘Schrift en schriftdragers’ program. That is why they organised a two-day conference in the ‘Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg’ in Maastricht on February 5 and 6, 2014. An attractive and innovative title was chosen for the event: ‘Medieval Documents as Artefacts’. The goal of this conference was to share and evaluate the knowledge and expertise of the members of the working group by creating a dialogue with external experts from the European scholarly community. As a result, the conference would focus on all types of competences related to diplomatics, palaeography and codicology. Moreover, a sign of the connection with the past would be the fact that four of the ‘founding fathers’ would attend the conference, with two of them even delivering a lecture.

The outside response was no less impressive: from all over Europe the organizers received interesting proposals, in fact too many for a two-days conference. In fact, the ‘Call for Papers’ evoked enthusiasm, not only from scholars of the traditional, historical auxiliary sciences of codicology, palaeography and diplomatics, but also from art historians, librarians, archivists and curators. In order to avoid having to decline excellent talks from young, enthusiastic scholars, the committee decided to work with parallel sessions.

9 This was the case for the unpublished thesis at the University of Ghent of Mieke Leroy (*Een paleografische en diplomatische studie van de dertiende eeuwse Middelnederlandse oorkonden uit Vlaanderen*, Gent, 1989). She published some of her results in four articles: H. Rombaut, M. Leroy & G. Declercq, ‘Acht nieuwe teksten in het Middelnederlands uit de 13de eeuw’, *Taal en tongval* 40 (1988) 1-13; Mieke Leroy, ‘Een nieuwe onbekende Middelnederlandse oorkonde uit 1271’, *Taal en tongval* 45 (1993) 203-210; Mieke Leroy, ‘The thirteenth-century Middle Dutch Charters (1272-1300) of Saint John’s Hospital in Bruges: a diplomatic and paleographic approach’, in: Wim Blockmans, Marc Boone & Thérèse de Hemptinne (eds), *Secretum scriptorum. Liber Alumnorum Walter Prevenier* (Leuven-Apeldoorn 1999) 93-128; Mieke Leroy, ‘Les débuts de la production d’actes urbains en Flandre au XIIIe siècle’, in: Walter Prevenier & Thérèse de Hemptinne (eds), *La diplomatie urbaine en Europe au Moyen Âge* (Leuven-Apeldoorn 2000) 267-279. The raw materials on the already processed sources by Mieke Leroy are now kept in the ‘Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde’ in Gent.

The reason for this considerable and general interest must have been tied to the fact that the 'Call' contained an innovating and challenging message: 'medieval charters and manuscripts are not only texts'. They came to us by a large variety of carriers: parchment and paper, codices and rolls. The differences between artefacts and materials are not incidental: there was always a specific background and a motivation for their use. The conference attracted experts from a diverse geographical region: they came not only from the Low Countries, but also from France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Denmark, Switzerland and Germany. Many of them were young scholars, at the start of their career, sometimes without much experience. Nevertheless, this was always compensated for by great enthusiasm and innovativeness. I consider their participation to be a guarantee for the future, which is particularly pleasing in these days of budget cuts at so many universities, endangering the continuity of a solid education in the so-called historical auxiliary sciences, such as palaeography, codicology and diplomatics. In fact, I learned from their papers that they are well aware of the fact that specialists in these sophisticated fields must never forget, nor neglect, the more general context and the historical background of their sources, and that they should be willing to integrate their topics into courses with a wider perspective and more general interest.

The Maastricht conference strongly focused on the widest possible range of material carriers in all types of written texts. The organizers used an innovative strategy: they assumed that medieval scribes were capable of using the same materials and writing techniques in both manuscripts *and* in charters. As a result, the 'Call' went down well, with literary historians and codicologists on the one side, and historians and diplomatists on the other side (both of whom traditionally belong to two different worlds), with palaeographers standing in between. Nonetheless, during the conference all contributors were prepared to emphasize the sophisticated terminology and methods found in their sister disciplines. Additionally, new ideas were also brought in by art historians, librarians, archivists and conservators. Diplomatist Benoit Tock recalled, in his keynote speech, that although the charters of medieval princes possessed, at the first glance, a juridical and political function, they also had the objective of charming and impressing their audiences through their festive design. The second keynote speaker, codicologist Peter Gumbert, made a fervent appeal to demolish in our erudite research the gap between administrative documents and books. There must have been a lot of interaction, he thinks. For instance, rolls of books can be traced back to the tradition of the bureaucratic rolls. Moreover, he also argued that historians should be aware that the technique of bookbinding in cartularies was related to that of the literary manuscripts, for which significantly more knowledge is available. This expertise may help us to determine, on the basis of the techniques and materials used, how to date both undated documents and those not localized dossiers.

There is a long way to go in this new focus on materials, and much more fundamental research remains to be done. Some articles in the present volume may give the impression that they are too focused on description, and therefore have a flavour of 'art pour art' of erudition for erudition's sake. However, we should not forget that this

focus on description applies to every discipline – answering the question of ‘what’ – and precedes further research into ‘how’ and ‘why’. Many articles bring to the table the connection between the choice of materials and art history, or even political, social and economic history. For example, some focus on the illumination of manuscripts and its relationship to diplomacy, reading culture, education, and identity. Hence, as demonstrated in this volume, charters can be beautiful for diplomatists in the same way that artistically painted bibles can be beautiful for codicologists and art historians. Materiality might be even important for archivists and librarians who keep and describe these documents and manuscripts, and for the curators, who restore them and prevent them from further decay. Furthermore, this volume would also be of interest to any scholar interested in e-humanities.

