

Graven spreken, Perspectieven op grafcultuur in de middeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Nederlanden, eds Peter Bitter, Viera Bonenkampová and Koen Goudriaan. Hilversum (Uitgeverij Verloren) 2013. For the table of contents, see http://mmr.let.uu.nl/pdf/MMR_012.pdf

In January 2011, an important and inspiring symposium on death, burial, and burial culture in the late medieval and early modern Netherlands took place at VU University in Amsterdam. Symposia on burial culture and related subjects, such as the commemoration of the dead and remembrance practices, usually attract an interdisciplinary group of historians, art historians, literary historians and theologians. However, in this case archeologists and anthropologists were also invited to contribute. The importance of their participation is stressed in the introduction of this volume, in which a number of the symposium papers have been published: ‘Het archeologisch onderzoek [...] blijkt unieke informatie op te leveren die deels niet gekend is uit schriftelijke of beeldende bronnen of die kan helpen om deze bronnen beter te begrijpen’ (p. 10). (It is evident that archeological research [...] offers unique information which is in part not known from written or visual sources or which can help us understand these sources better.) The often misused word *unique* is justified here, as becomes clear from the article by anthropologist George Maat on the interment and embalming of members of the noble Van Nassau family in the Church of Our Lady of Breda. Modern techniques now enable us to compare the practice of embalming with old descriptions of the process, such as in the *Opera Omnia* by Pieter van Foreest (1521 - 1597), the personal physician of William of Orange. Another example: when researching burial practices one is inevitably confronted with questions about the truthfulness of what is shown in illuminated manuscripts and on tomb monuments. Comparing the visual sources and texts with the proper procedures and literary texts may be helpful, but in these cases the question remains to which extent the texts represent reality, and to which period and which geographical areas they apply? It is very interesting, therefore, to read that archeologists excavating sites from the period 1200 – 1350 found heather and also impressions of straw in the plaster inside sarcophagi from 1500 – 1650 (article by Nico Arts, p. 31). Especially the latter discovery confirms that representations of the dead lying on straw beds were based on real life.



Tomb monument of Engelbrecht II of Nassau and Cimburga of Baden with the recumbent figures on a straw mat, Church of Our Lady, Breda, 1525-50.

What also makes the symposium and the book important is that the organizers and editors chose a specific theme which has nevertheless been placed in a broad framework. As the three editors explain in the introduction, their chosen theme was the moment of burial itself and the grave as a tangible and visual memorial to the dead (p. 7). Fortunately this has not prevented both the organizers and speakers from taking a broader look and addressing the importance of research into burial sites overall (Bonenkampová, De Geest and Goudriaan) and even the town itself as a site of remembrance (Marini). As for the time frame, some speakers looked beyond the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, as a result of which the volume includes papers on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Arts and Bitter). Of course, there is also the large variety of source types that were used, from grave goods to entire burial sites, tomb monuments (Brink, Frequin), last wills and other archival sources, and ephemeral monuments such as the *castrum doloris* that we only know from drawings and descriptions. The article on the latter subject by Van Dael fits in beautifully with Van der Meulen's article on a literary text which can be considered in form and content as a *castrum doloris* in verse. Geographically the volume mainly covers the present-day Netherlands, meaning all of the country and not just Holland and Utrecht, as illustrated by the article on immigrants originating from Holland who found their last resting place in Het Bildt in Friesland (Kuiken).

This is a scholarly publication, and although it is well and clearly written it does not appear to be intended for the wider public. It is a pity, therefore, that the volume is in Dutch as it contains articles that really ought to be accessible to scholars who cannot read Dutch. There are thirteen papers in all, of which I would also like to mention the essay by Van den Hoven van Genderen. This author shows convincingly that by comparing different types of sources a researcher can gain important insights into the connections that may exist between changes, in this case the changes in the administration of memoria and the advent of tomb slabs and tomb monuments in the Utrecht chapter churches.

In their introduction the three editors have succeeded in placing the different topics along with the overall insights they provide within a larger framework. By citing the historical findings of Sam Cohn, for example, they question the generally accepted thesis (first proposed by Ariès and then adopted by others) that as early as the thirteenth century people increasingly put themselves first as individuals and that this is shown by the care for 'one's own death' and by distancing oneself from society and family. This is one of the subthemes raised by the editors that demand further discussion, not only at (international) symposia about burial, commemoration and remembrance, but also at symposia on the Renaissance and the emergence of the individual. When that happens, I hope that, just as at the symposium in Amsterdam, they will attract an inspiring and challenging group of scholars from various disciplines, including archeologists, anthropologists and perhaps even researchers from the social sciences.

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