Book Review - Border lines: two recent publications on tomb monuments in Belgium


For obvious logistical reasons the MeMO project confined itself to the pre-Reformation memoria culture within the modern-day Dutch borders, although in reality the Netherlands in its current form was once part of the Low Countries, a region with ever-changing borders that also included modern-day Belgium, Luxembourg, and areas in what is now northern France (département du Nord). As a former member of the MeMO research team with a particular focus on tomb monuments, I have always been aware of the need to look across the borders for artistic and cultural comparisons. This is especially true for gravestones, which were generally imported from abroad, either as freshly quarried blank slabs or as (semi-)finished products with decorative borders and often also a custom-made central design, whether an effigy or heraldry or even an image of a patron saint.

In late-medieval Flanders the production of memorial slabs in blue hardstone developed into a veritable industry, thanks to the availability of high-quality stone in local quarries and of waterways for transport. Methods of production became ever more efficient with workshops preparing stocks of slabs with standard border designs, such as quatrefoil or round medallions in the corners and blank text bands all around the slab that could then be customized on demand with inscriptions, heraldry, etc. The virtually identical evangelist symbols that are found in the corners of many early-sixteenth-century grave slabs indicate the use of templates that, along with other criteria (e.g. lettering styles), might be used to identify particular workshops. Trained draughtsmen (and probably also artists) were responsible for the more complex designs, which were then copied and engraved into both stone slabs and brass plates by workshops specializing in such monuments, the craftsmen being known by such names as tombiers or graveurs de lames. Flemish brasses can be found across Europe, with relatively many examples surviving in England, but many have been lost. However, a few impressive examples survive in the Netherlands (e.g. MeMO Object ID 361 and 2849).

Ronald Van Belle’s weighty new monograph *Corpus Laminae* on Belgian memorial brasses from the period 1143–1925 is thus of great interest to researchers of Dutch grave slabs. Just as MeMO confined itself to the modern Dutch borders, Van Belle has chosen to limit himself to modern-day Belgium, but whereas his specific subject is brasses his time span is evidently much longer. Nor does Van Belle limit himself strictly to Belgium in his discussions in volume I, entitled ‘Synthese: productie en uitstraling’ (Synthesis: production and appearance), for he is an acknowledged expert on European brasses and his scope is thus much wider. This richly

1 For example, see MeMO object ID 2528 and 3698 and [https://churchmonumentssociety.org/monument-of-the-month/an-unusual-saint](https://churchmonumentssociety.org/monument-of-the-month/an-unusual-saint).
4 Founded in England in 1887 but with a strong international outlook, the Monumental Brass Society still actively promotes the preservation, recording and study of monumental brasses, e.g. through its annual *Transactions*. See [www.mbs-brasses.co.uk](http://www.mbs-brasses.co.uk).
Volume I of *Corpus Laminae* is divided into two parts. The first serves as an introduction to the subject and comprises seven chapters in which Van Belle covers a huge range of subjects. After a brief introduction the author discusses the historiography; the origins of brass plates and their occurrence across Europe; technical aspects such as casting, alloys, assembly, design, tools and finish; commissions, prices and transport; clients and distribution from the 12th to the 20th centuries; and the disappearance of brasses, including losses through iconoclasm and war, and also palimpsests, i.e. re-used brasses with (part of) the original engraving on the reverse. The second part discusses stylistic evolution and production centres. It is divided into eight chapters each focusing on one century (though chapter 1 deals with early examples in the 12th and 13th centuries while the 19th and early 20th centuries are combined in chapter 8), followed by a conclusion and appendices. The volume is lavishly illustrated and each chapter features endnotes.

The catalogue of Belgian brasses in volume II of *Corpus Laminae* comprises some 260 objects in over 100 locations, with full descriptions and a bibliography per entry, which makes this a standard reference work, especially as there are also addenda on palimpsest brasses and fragments. Van Belle’s impressive monograph thus complements the MeMO database, at least for medieval brasses, and a comparison between the Flemish brasses described in his catalogue and contemporary brasses and incised slabs in the MeMO database will undoubtedly yield interesting comparisons that may tell us yet more about production methods and about distribution both within Flanders and across the borders.

The second work on Belgian monuments is Hadrien Kockerols’s two-volume *Le monument funéraire médiéval dans l’ancien diocèse de Liège*, which is based on the doctoral thesis that he defended at the University of Namur on 1 July 2014. Kockerols has also produced many books and articles on the subject of tomb monuments in the Walloon part of Belgium, such as his 2010 monograph *Les gisants du Brabant Wallon*. The focus of this new study is the funerary monument in the medieval diocese of Liège between 800 and 1515.

---

Until 1559 when several new bishoprics were created across the Low Countries, mainly at the expense of Liège, this diocese covered a vast area that also included large parts of the modern Dutch provinces of North Brabant and Limburg. Kockerols’s cut-off date of 1515 may thus seem somewhat odd, even if it coincides with the end of the regency of Margaret of Austria on behalf of her nephew Charles V, who was formally declared of age on 5 January 1515. The argument that this date marks a clear break in style is also not wholly convincing, but one can understand the need to limit the scope of an already ambitious survey that might have been so much more extensive with the explosive increase in the production of tomb monuments in the course of the sixteenth century. Furthermore, Kockerols does not focus on just one particular type of monument, but actually covers a wide variety over almost as long a period as Van Belle, albeit that there are fewer examples left or known from the earlier period. Having said that, his detailed discussion of the lost tomb of Charlemagne in Aachen (cat. 5) is fascinating.

Volume 1 of Kockerols’s study serves as an overall introduction to the phenomenon of tomb monuments, their uses, their various forms (from reliquaries to endotaphs) with references to examples discussed in vol. 2 but also outside the diocese. The approach is methodological and clearly aims to be comprehensive. The sixteen chapters are divided into sub-sections with endnotes for each chapter, while there are also three appendices, a lengthy bibliography and a lexicon of technical terms. Of course, such a wide scope allows only brief discussion, but the cited examples are interesting and there are numerous illustrations, albeit of varying quality and not always referred to in the text.

The most useful part of Kockerols’s study is undoubtedly the extensive illustrated catalogue in volume 2. The introduction outlines the 650 objects included, viz. 643 funerary and six commemorative monuments plus one votive monument, the latter a rather surprising inclusion, but more about that later. Each entry is listed alphabetically per locality according to French usage, so Bois-le-Duc for ’s-Hertogenbosch, Ruremonde for Roermond, etc. Full details are provided where possible, including location, type, date, material, dimensions, state of conservation, provenance, and biographical data of the person(s) commemorated, description of the object including heraldry and inscription, historiography, sources and notes.

There is much to be discovered and learnt here about the abundance of funerary art in this large diocese, including indications of what has failed to survive intact or at all, as fragments and
many lost objects are also listed – a valuable addition as the MeMO project was constrained to exclude lost objects. Yet unlike Van Belle, who cites many original archival documents, Kockerols has relied much more on the secondary literature and here we find some omissions, such as the 2005 volume *Care for the Here and the Hereafter* and the work of Douglas Brine. Yet more important is the use made of the available resources as this sometimes raises questions. Kockerols does cite the major inventory of tomb slabs in the church of St John in ’s-Hertogenbosch, which was published in Dutch in 2010 and which is also available online, but this church contains more pre-1515 monuments than the seven discussed by Kockerols (cat. 38–44) – a curious discrepancy, and perhaps a telling one.

![Figure 1. Foundation tablet of Cornelis Jacobsz. Peck and his wife Cornely, in the Grote Kerk in Bergen op Zoom (1450-1500). See MeMO Object ID 3412.](image)

Unfortunately Kockerols appears to have been unaware of the MeMO project and its database, which is a serious omission and also puzzling as the MeMO database was launched in January 2013; perhaps too late for Kockerols to have included it in his original thesis, but surely not in this revised edition published in 2016. The drawback of ignoring MeMO is evident when one looks closely at areas within the Liège diocese also covered by MeMO, notably North Brabant and Limburg. A quick initial comparison reveals hiatuses for Chaam (ID 1821) and Roermond (ID 2427), but more surprising and unfortunate is the fact that Kockerols has completely ignored the town of Tholen. Situated to the north-west of Bergen op Zoom but

---

6 Truus van Bueren and Andrea van Leerdam (eds), *Care for the here and the hereafter: Memoria, art and ritual in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2005)


nowadays part of the province of Zeeland, this historic town once belonged to the duchy of Brabant and fell within the diocese of Liège. As such it should have been included in Kockerols’s inventory, especially as its parish church is still unusually rich in medieval memorials, e.g. the large chamfered slab of Guy the Bastard of Blois (d. 1421) and his wife Clara van Botland (d. 1435) (ID 2348) and the incised effigial slab of Dean Cornelis Yonis (d. 1469) (ID 2352), to name but a few. With the MeMO database available and so easy to use, this is truly a missed opportunity in an inventory that purports to be comprehensive.

For Bergen op Zoom in North Brabant Kockerols lists six monuments (cat. 23–28), all included in the MeMO database, but the latter also includes at least four additional slabs within the same period up to 1515 (MeMO Object ID 3275, 3276, 3280, 3330 and potentially 3279). Kockerols’s inclusion of the foundation tablet of Cornelis Jacobsz. Peck and his wife Cornely in this church (ID 3412) is somewhat odd and it is indeed the only votive object in the catalogue. The inscription commemorates the foundation of Masses and the donation of alms (or ‘provenen’), consisting of bread and money that were to be distributed in perpetuity among the poor by the masters of the town’s Heilige-Geesthuis (Holy Ghost’s House) at set feast days. Kockerols clearly struggled with the transcription and translation of this long and complex text as both are inaccurate and incomplete in his entry. However, the flawed entry in this catalogue offered an opportunity for the MeMO team to study this object more closely, resulting in an amended transcription and a new and integral translation of this fascinating memorial text in the MeMO database. The work never ends!

The Belgian publishers have taken a brave risk in publishing two such hefty monographs for what must be a limited market, quite apart from the linguistic constraints. Both studies are a welcome addition to the literature and we must hope that they will inspire further research and comparisons across the borders, which is exactly what the MeMO project always aspired to enable future scholars to do.

SOPHIE OOSTERWIJK

Note: this review is part of the newsletter Medieval Memoria Research. For the full issue, see: https://mmr.sites.uu.nl/archives/full-pdf/