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TEACHING THE MEDIEVAL BOOK IN HOLLAND

The teaching of (book) palaeography in the Netherlands started, I believe, in the nineteenth century with the great Leiden Hellenist C. G. Cobet [1813-1889; professor 1846-1884] for him it was merely an aid to change back (Greek) letters which had been changed by stupid scribes. He attracted enthusiastic students, and there was a certain amount of teaching, in his line I believe, and both in Latin and in Greek, in several universities. It is quite difficult, however, to find out who taught when, to whom, and especially what. From our present-day point of view most of it was probably irrelevant.

Scato G. de Vries [1861-1937], librarian of the Leiden library, started with exercitationes palaeographicae in 1888. As a pupil of Cobet, his teaching was in the service of textual criticism; he was quite up to date, counted Delisle and Traube among his friends, and was perfectly well aware of their work, on scriptoria for instance; he can be considered modern for his time. (He is the originator of the well-known series of facsimile editions of classical authors.) In 1909 he became an Extraordinary Professor of Middeleeuwse Handschriftenkunde, which he modestly declined to view as a new "science"; he remained so until 1931.

In 1918 Willem de Vreese [1869-1938] arrived in Holland. He was a Flemish scholar, who from an early age collected all he could about the older stages of the Flemish = Dutch language, and especially about the manuscripts which contained it; all the information about these manuscripts, which he gathered during years of travel all over Europe, he brought together in a huge file index, the Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta. As an ardent Flemish nationalist he kept, in the first World War, not enough distance from the German occupation; this political choice made it necessary for him to flee in 1918; he went (with his files) to neutral Holland, where he was accepted with no qualms and made a director of the Rotterdam Municipal Library. He continued to work on his files there, and to be the foremost authority on everything concerned with Dutch manuscripts, as he had been since the beginning of the century. Although he never did any formal teaching, many scholars learnt from him. Gerard Lief tinck [1902-1994] for instance, who wanted to write a thesis on Tauler in Dutch and found he could not do so without studying the manuscripts first, took an unsalaried post in Rotterdam in order to be close to him. De Vreese died in 1938; his files went to the Leiden library, and so did Gerard Lief tinck, to care for them.

De Vreese's ultimate goal was the glory of the Dutch language; but his voracious interest focused on many things much closer to the eye of the manuscript scholar: his files contain not only descriptions of manuscripts and indexes of texts, but also indexes of medieval libraries, scribes and owners, of dated manuscripts, drawings of watermarks, and rubbings of bindings, among other things. So when Lieftinck started his own teaching (he was made a Lector of Medieval Handschriftenkunde in 1948; in 1963 this post was elevated to a full professorship), he had the example of De Vreese and his own ten years experience as a Keeper of Manuscripts behind him. Quite soon he contacted the Belgian and French scholars (such as François Masai and Gilbert Ouy) who were in these years founding Scriptorium and creating the French school of what was going to be known as codicology; and he felt quite at home with them. His teaching, and his scholarly work, soon lost the philological bias of his early years (in fact he came to dislike De Vreese very much) and focused on the manuscript, not as the receptacle of a text, but as an artefact in its own right.

By its codicological scope, and by its scale, Lieftinck's teaching stood out in our country. Apart from it, there was as there had, probably, always been some teaching at an elementary level in various philologies, mainly the classics and Dutch, I suppose, in several universities. This teaching does not require further mention except for the work of W. Gs Hellinga (1908-1985) in Amsterdam. I am sorry to say that I do not know enough of this to give a sensible account of it. Hellinga's contributions to the history of the early printed book are monumental; for palaeography and codicology his work was, perhaps, more striking than lasting, but it certainly deeply influenced a substantial number of students, called "the school of Hellinga"; these include P. F. J. Obbema, the Keeper of Manuscripts in Leiden (until 1995). There was, for a time, a distinct rivalry between Lieftinck and Hellinga; in the end Lieftinck held the field, so to speak.

One should certainly mention also Bonaventura Kruitwagen [1874-1954], a most colourful and lovable Franciscan, another incunable scholar, but with valuable contributions in the field of manuscripts to his name as well; but he never did any official teaching. For Greek palaeography B. A. van Groningen [1894-1987] published a short but useful manual.

Lief tinck's teaching was very varied, but not systematic or particularly clear — I remember my irritation when he would speak, virtually in the same sentence, of things as "very early" and "very late", leaving it to the student to deduce that the "very early" thing was mid fourteenth century, and the "very late" thing early tenth. But he provided a wonderful introduction to the whole field. And, being (or having been) a Keeper of Manuscripts, he used to show actual manuscripts, to a few advanced students, on a special hour after closing time of the library; I think that seeing his handling of manuscripts, and his very acute judgment, in action was the most valuable part of his teaching. I was privileged to spend a year as a pupil of Bischoff; there I certainly found system, and a much more solidly grounded knowledge of facts; but there I did not find this practical demonstration, which I have come to believe is absolutely essential for teaching the medieval book.

In the beginning Lieftinck combined his Keepership with his teaching; later his lectorship became a full-time post, and it was eventually elevated into a Professorship of Western Palaeography and Codicology; he got an assistant, and a working room of his own — those were the rich days. He also had the great...
advantage of not being affiliated with any of the departments of the Faculty ; his
teaching was never compulsory anywhere (such basic training as departments such
as History or Classics thought essential they preferred to give themselves). So he
always had small numbers of pupils — six or eight, typically ; but they all came of
their own free will, out of interest. Also they came from a great variety of
directions : from Dutch studies, many of them, but also from Classics, English,
Theology, Law, even Medicine ; and some came from other universities. For
during a long time he was the national palaeographer ; and if any teaching was
done elsewhere, it generally was done by people who had learnt from him.

An honourable mention in this respect is certainly due to Albert Grujits
[1920-1966], a self-taught theologian, who had learnt palaeography in Paris ; in
1961 he became Keeper of Manuscripts in Nijmegen, and from 1970 to 1985 he
was Lector in the Auxiliary Sciences of History, which were explicitly understood
to be mainly Palaeography and Codicology. He was a good organiser, and an
inspiring teacher, who had a host of enthusiastic pupils. He was succeeded by
Obbema but by that time the economic climate had changed, the post was reduced
to a fraction, and soon abolished.

In the meantime Lieftinck had retired, in 1972, and I succeeded him. I in-
herited his room, and his independent position ; but not his assistant, and not his
title — I was made a Lector merely, and became a Professor only when the rank of
Reader was renamed. On my teaching during these 25 years I shall say more
below.

There may be low-level teaching about medieval manuscripts elsewhere, for
all I know. But there are only two places outside Leiden which need to be
described here.

In Groningen there is Jos Hermans, who has just recently been given the title
of “Extra-ordinary Professor of Western Codicology and Medieval Bibliology” (a
fine title which otherwise entails no real change in his position). He started life as a
Byzantine scholar, and is a pupil of Grujits (and of the Vatican), rather than of me.
He teaches one three-hour course in each of the three 13-week terms they have in
Groningen (for a total of almost 120 hours) : in the first term, Book palaeo-
graphy ; in the second, Introduction to Codicology ; in the third, Analytical
bibliography. His students number between ten and twenty. A strong point in his
teaching (and his research) is that it includes the early printed book ; another is that
it concentrates on the Northern and Eastern regions of our country, which used to
be rather disregarded as merely periphery. A long time ago he and Gerda Huisman
(who is a pupil of me) produced a syllabus of codicology, De descriptione
codicium, which is a sort of conglomerate of Grujits teaching and an early phase of
mine ; it ought to have been superseded years ago, but we have not found time to
sit down and make a new version.

In Amsterdam there is Jos Biemans, a Dutch student from Utrecht, a pupil of
mine, for years charged with the BNM (De Vreese’s giant files), and now Keeper
of manuscripts in Amsterdam. For almost ten years he has been teaching
“Production and design of the hand-written book” in the department of “Book and
Information Sciences”. This is a three-hour course during one of three terms (13
weeks, 39 hours), for some twenty students. It is mainly introductory, and centers
on the making of a book in the fourteenth century ; there are no reading exercises.

For the moment, then, the situation of the teaching of the Medieval book in the
Netherlands appears to be quite a good one. Although the political and economic
climate is not very favourable to universities in general, and to such subjects as
Codicology in particular, and although the University of Amsterdam has a history
of severe economies, neither Hermans nor Biemans appear to be threatened at the
moment. The Leiden chair, however, is scheduled to be abolished early in 1998 ;
and I see no signs of this plan being stopped. The reason is simply that the Faculty
has to economise some 4 million guilders, equivalent to 40 posts. It should be
stressed that the abolition of the chair was planned with the firm intention of
proposing it, immediately and firmly, for a scheme which was then believed to be
imminent for saving a number of small departments by funding them directly on a
national level, or something on these lines. However, at the moment this scheme is
still very nebulous, and whether it materialises at all, and in which shape, and
when, cannot now be conjectured ; and meanwhile the Faculty plan goes on (in
fact I will go into partial early retirement early in 1997 ; the Faculty will keep me,
for teaching, for one day a week until my retirement in 2001). So I see a distinct
possibility that any saving measures will be too late and that after fifty years of
fruitful existence the Leiden chair, the only substantial one in our country, will
quite soon be extinct.

A personal teaching experience.

Inevitably there is a certain sadness in thus looking back on my twenty-five
years. But on the whole I have above all good memories (and some years to go
still).

As during Lieftinck’s time, I have always had only students out of interest
(except for a course for students of Latin — but this was gradually abolished : in a
University which used to be famous for its classical manuscripts, classical students
are now not told about them at all). What I offer is an “Optional Subject”, a thing
for which all major subjects must leave some space. My students still come from
various departments : the various philologies (Dutch, French, Italian mainly),
history, history of art ; most years there are also students from other universities.
There are also postgraduate students, mainly those which have a four-year post for
the writing of their thesis (which they seldom manage to do in those four years),
which entails the obligation to follow some courses, and they use this opportunity
to fill a lacuna. Also there are more and more elderly people, either late students or
just auditors ; some are among my best pupils.

In the beginning I used to have eight or ten students ; this number soon grew
to about twenty, and for some years there were over thirty ; we are back to about
ten now. In the early years students had time : they could spend years at the
university, and follow my courses during more than one year. This is becoming
increasingly difficult; the (financial) pressure to get the degree in four or five years is growing; so I have almost only beginning students now. This has contributed to the fact that my teaching has settled down to a fairly constant routine. Most of it is a one-year introduction, taking four hours on one day (Tuesday) in two terms, of about 13 weeks each; so the total is about 100 hours. Originally it was a single year-round cycle, but about ten years ago the faculty introduced a two-term system, and so I had to provide an exit for students wishing only to follow one term (for a lesser number of credit points, evidently). So I divided the course into a first round, once through everything briefly, and a second round to go more deeply into some matters; I am not a fan of credit point accounting systems and similar things, but I am very glad this system forced me to make this change.

Of my four weekly hours, one is for “codicology” (in the narrow sense, mainly): the usual matter, from parchment through quires and ruling to binding, use and destruction. The second hour is palaeography, mainly book scripts focused on the late Middle Ages and the Netherlands, since that is the principal area of interest to most students, but it can be adapted to the needs of the year’s crop. Most precarolingian scripts get rather brief mentions. The third hour is for reading and transcription — the students get a photograph, which they transcribe and hand in next week, and the week after that we discuss the corrected work, especially the more interesting errors. This takes a great amount of time, both of the students and of me, but I think it is much better than class-room reading. (I want them to draw the penwork initials as well.) The fourth hour, finally, is for looking at manuscripts — for that we move to the library. Of course it is a problem to have fifteen or twenty people look at one manuscript. I must also stress that the frequency of these meetings is lower: I never find the time). Although inevitably people drop out of this list, it still numbers well over a hundred names, and thirty or so may turn up at any meeting, which I consider mostly need correction very much, being the first specimens of that work the students have ever done; but I believe the experience of actually working with a live manuscript cannot be replaced by anything else. — For advanced students I used to offer other activities; but that is now coming to an end.

Of the effect of all this teaching I am none too certain. But I clearly manage to make my pupils like the subject. I have a list of addresses of all who stayed with me for at least a year, the Codicologisch Kringetje, with the idea of inviting them twice a year for an excursion and a few hours talk about what’s new in the field (in actual fact the frequency of these meetings is lower: I never find the time). Although inevitably people drop out of this list, it still numbers well over a hundred names, and thirty or so may turn up at any meeting, which I consider remarkably faithful. I also have a smaller circle, called het Draakje after a motif of Utrecht penwork, comprising essentially those of my pupils who do codicology in a professional way, or who are doing or have done theses in the field. These number about forty, and are quite a close club. These are fine rewards, quite apart from the pleasure teaching has always given me.

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