



**Vlaams-Nederlandse Vereniging
voor *Nieuwe Geschiedenis***

Flemish-Dutch Society for Early Modern History

Conference Report

Festivities in the Early Modern Low Countries

Groningen, the Netherlands 26-27 October 2017

Festivities are a common phenomenon throughout history. Since the earliest moments in antiquity, societies have created and celebrated festivities that convey various social, cultural and political meanings. If one thinks about festivities during the early modern period (c.1500-1800), examples such as joyous entries, carnivals and other recurring celebratory events often come to mind. Historians have already studied the latter extensively for the last few decades. Yet the specific social, political and cultural meanings of various early modern festivities are still subject of numerous research programs.

On the 26th and 27th of October 2017, the Flemish-Dutch Society for Early Modern History (VNVNG) organized their annual conference dedicated to the topic of early modern festivities in the most northern part of the Low Countries, namely in the city of Groningen. Scholars from predominantly Flanders and the Netherlands gathered together to discuss new insights and research topics regarding early modern festivities.



Dr. Joop Koopmans (University of Groningen)

VNVNG-chairman Dr. Joop Koopmans opened the conference on Thursday, followed by a word of welcome from Professor Raingard Esser as the director of the ICOG (Groningen Institute for the Study of Culture) after which the first panel started with the topic “Tradition and Innovation in the Organization of Festivities.” This was followed by the keynote lecture of Professor

Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly (Oxford University), titled “The Impact of the Reformation on Court and Civic Festivals in Early

Modern Europe.” After the keynote lecture, the first conference day ended with a carillon and organ demonstration in the Martinikerk (Martin’s Church), followed by the festive conference diner. The second day of the conference started with a general members meeting of the VNVNG, in which Dr. Joop Koopmans, one of the main organizers of the conference, laid down his function as chairman of the society after having been a board member for ten years. This was followed by the other panels of the conference, which focused on topics regarding themes such as “The Representation of Festivities in Visual Media and the Arts,” “The Role of Material Culture in Festivities” and “Festivities in Different Social Milieus.” The wide range of approaches to the topic of early modern festivities presented during the panels, ranging from drinking culture, celebrations of peace in propagandistic writings, the use of table objects and the role of lotteries, gave a good impression of some of the interesting research programs currently conducted in Flanders and the Netherlands.

The conference was organized by the VNVNG with the help of funding provided by Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Groningen University Fund, Sustainable Society (part of the University of Groningen) and the Groningen Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG), which helped to organize the keynote lecture for the conference.

Day 1: Thursday

Panel 1: The Role of Tradition and Innovation in the Organization of Festivities



Dr. Annemieke Romein (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Dr. Annemieke Romein (Erasmus University Rotterdam) opened the first panel with her paper titled “Festivities in Legislative Provincial Publications: Ordinances in Gelderland c.1600-1700”. She started off with a description of the authorities general fear of festivities ending with brawls and people being harmed. Consequently festivals were banned on the basis of preserving the “common good”, stating that “government creates legislation in order to prevent a situation they do not want”. Banned were, for example, May-tree planting, geese- pulling and skeet shooting, as they posed a threat to public order. This was shown by analysing the *plakkaten* (placards) of 1598,1619,1622,1631 and 1632, which were issued by stadtholders, chancellors and courts. According

to Romein, this repetition was necessary for two reasons: illiteracy and hearsay. In her conclusion she came back to the question whether the authorities wanted to spoil the fun or wanted to keep the community safe. She confirmed that, in her opinion, the main reason for the banning these festivities was the wish to prevent anyone from taking damage. And the most logical and efficient way to do so was by banning the whole festivity all together.

The second paper “How to refuse the goblet: Ritualistic Drinking and its ‘Flow’ in *Nederlands displesingheden, 1732-1735*” was presented by Adriaan Duiveman MA (University of Groningen/ICOG). Duiveman showed that the elites established “ritual behaviour regarding the drinking of alcohol,” which, over time, was adapted by the rest of society. He explained a theory suggesting that if rules and shame are established, moderation is the result. After discussing several table rituals, he established his own view on the theory. He thinks that by establishing rules and shame, the outcomes can be either the already mentioned moderation, but also the other extreme, excess, is possible. Duiveman says that drinking rituals were structured by hierarchy and situation (friends,



Adriaan Duiveman MA (University of Groningen/ICOG)

business, etc) and that “community and hierarchy is important for social harmony.” Unfortunately, this bears dangers. Excess and drunkenness can result out of the factor when a person drinks, competition, compliance and drink coercion. This danger led to the conclusion that sociability can be very dangerous. Up to this point, it seemed that it was impossible to break the expectation of society to drink, but there has been the possibility to deny a drink. Duiveman presented quips which were used to get out of drinking. As the refusal could destroy relations and connections one had to be careful when refusing a drink. Mentioned was the usage of humour. Phrases like “I am a smaller man than you, I should drink from smaller cups than you” were given as example for those situations. In conclusion, a new conceptualisation of the drinking table was proposed.

The third speaker, Dr. Brecht Deseure (Free University of Brussel), presented his paper titled “Republican and Napoleonic ceremonial in Brabant: back to the future?”. Here, Deseure analysed two images, which both emerged around the time after the French annexation of the

Southern Netherlands. Both images, a pencil drawing of the “Triumph of Liberty” and a painting by John de Larr, were described in detail. This has shown that, against any expectations, not only French symbols (like Liberty) were displayed, but that they also contained local elements (like the Belgium lion). This was said to be very unusual as the French government had clear regulations on what was allowed in art, and Symbols of the old regimes were removed and burned, which makes it even more interesting why these images were kept alive. Deseure said that pageant floats often did not even refer to France, but were



Dr. Brecht Deseure (Free University of Brussel)

slightly edited to match (change of colours to blue, white and red). This was a more effective tool of propaganda, as the recycling of the old regimes’ symbols as tool for popularising the revolutionary thought Napoleons. In conclusion Deseure remarked that continuity was used to establish a legitimacy for Napoleons regime. This way the local identity merged with the new ideology.

Keynote Lecture: Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly (University of Oxford)

After a short break, everyone returned for the final lecture of the first day. This keynote lecture, titled “Catholic Ruler, Protestant People: The impact of the Reformation on Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe,” discussing the changing characteristics of certain festivities in response to a changing religious landscape, was presented by Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly,



Professor Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly (University of Oxford)

Professor of German Literature in the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages at Oxford University. Her primary focus for research is late fifteenth to early eighteenth century German literature and culture. However, Watanabe-O’Kelly has also studied early modern European court festivals and court culture, writing several publications on the subject.

When a ruler and his subjects no longer shared the same beliefs, this created some problematic situations. Specifically, Watanabe-O’Kelly spoke about ceremonies organized by the social and political elite, the problems they faced during the Reformation, and the solutions they came up with. This highlighted the religious aspects and rituals of ceremonies and celebrations, while contrasting this with the social and political purposes of festivities. To showcase the changing festivities in response to a changing religious landscape, Watanabe-O’Kelly started off with the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II in 1562. The office of Holy Roman Emperor, and the rituals surrounding the coronation ceremony and festivities, were very Catholic in nature. The coronation also required the participation of the



Electors to be legitimate. However, by this time, three of the eight electors had converted to forms of Protestantism. In the end Maximilian II opted to retain political unity instead of taking a strict confessional stance on the issue. This resulted in the habit that certain Protestant electors and their following left the room during certain Catholic rituals inherent to the coronation ceremony, such as communion.

There are also plenty of examples in which confessional purity was chosen over political harmony, like the Dutch Revolt, when the Spanish Catholic rulers vehemently and forcefully tried to suppress Protestantism in the Netherlands. Watanabe-O’Kelly discussed the Siege of La Rochelle (1572-73), during which protestant Huguenots were starved and persecuted. These atrocities were also reflected in certain parts of the celebration, which definitely added to the tension between the Protestants and Catholics. The Catholic victory in La Rochelle was celebrated as a victory over Protestantism, and this victory was also referenced in other festivities. However, many of the festivities organized by the social and political elite still retained elements of both Protestantism and Catholicism, showing a more pragmatic approach. For example, the case of the 1679 funeral of Johann Friedrich, the Catholic duke of Protestant Brunswick-Lüneburg. The funeral was organised by his politically ambitious brother, who was himself a Protestant, and who mainly used the opportunity to enrich his own prestige by turning his brother’s funeral into a huge spectacle. The expensive funeral included a Lutheran procession and a Catholic Church service, but these were only considered a small part of the funeral festivities. The festivities discussed during this lecture were meticulously organized high class events; they were considered an opportunity to show

power, to gain legitimacy, or to show allegiance. Though the religious historical precedents added weight to the ceremony, these characteristics were not always seen as absolutely morally necessary. Watanabe O’Kelly thereby demonstrated that during the Reformation, these high class festivities sometimes needed to respond to changes and challenges in the new religious landscape of Europe, but were able to do this in often very pragmatic ways.

Organ and Carillon Demonstration in the Martin’s Church and the Conference Dinner



Drs. Heleen van der Weel playing on the Martin’s church Carrilon

After the keynote lecture, the conference participants enjoyed a brief moment to have a drink and to exchange thoughts. But at a quarter to six, everyone was expected to gather outside the Van Swinderenhuis for the walk to the Martini Church where the organ demonstration was to be held. During the walk to the Martin’s Church (Martinikerk), VNVNG member and professional carillonist Drs. Heleen van der Weel

played a few festive pieces on the church carillon. After the arrival in the church, organist Stef Tuinstra gave a brief introduction on the famous organ of the Martini Church. Dating back to 1480, the organ underwent many extensions and renovations during the ages, the last one during the 1980s when the organ was carefully restored to the same size and quality as in 1740. The sheer power of the organ was demonstrated by Tuinstra during a number a improvisations of various styles, which ended with Johann Sebastian Bach’s famous Toccata and Fugue in D minor.

The first day of the conference ended with a festive conference dinner in *Land van Kokanje*. During the dinner, honorary VNVNG chairman Simon Groenveld delivered his festive speech.



Church organist Stef Tuinstra explaining the history of the organ

Day 2: Friday

Panel 2: The Representation of Festivities in Visual Media and the Arts

Mario Damen's opening lecture on Friday explained the relation between chivalric encounters and social integration among the nobles in the Habsburg composite state. When Prince Philip II of Spain was inaugurated, fourteen tournaments were organized in the Habsburg Netherlands around 1549. The Habsburg composite state was expanding and its



Dr. Mario Damen (University of Amsterdam)

monarch had to find a way to relate to the regional nobility, using chivalric tournaments for social integration. Most of the tournaments were organized in Brussels, the residence of the Habsburg monarchs, near the Palace of Coudenberg, where tournament fields had been planted. The crowds watched mostly from stands and buildings around market squares. Prince Philip II himself participated in eight of the fourteen tournaments. In this way he could profile himself towards the people. Mario Damen stated the tournaments were an early form of integration in the Habsburg composite state. Tournaments were exchanged between cities and competitions were used by the nobility to get to know each other better. For instance, there were many foreign noblemen from the Iberian Peninsula attending. Tournaments could also



Rozanne Versendaal MA (University of Utrecht)

serve as a wedding market. Another sign of integration was the incorporation of noblemen in the new Burgundian court. About sixty percent of the participants was (or had been) a member of the court. It seems that the tournaments became more and more festive court events in urban settings. They (and also the “afterparties”) served as an important meeting place for nobility.

Next, Rozanne Versendaal (University of Utrecht) spoke about a specific sixteenth-century manuscript from the Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum in The Hague

regarding “vastenavondgeschrift” (Shrove Tuesday-writing). This manuscript, which contains several writings and images which refer to early modern carnival festivities of cheerful societies in Jutphaas, a village near Utrecht. It also includes prank regulations, parodies of official ecclesiastical and worldly ordinances and regulations. These were important for those cheerful societies which organized festivities. Especially the mock regulations known as the *Placcaet van Marcolpus* offer an interesting perspective on the practical elements of the festivities. Until now, historians have not really focused on this element in the ‘vastenavondgeschriften.’ The foolish *Placcaet van Marcolphus* contains a lot of obversion, which contributed to the parody. The fool and the jester played leading roles, especially in the harlequinade societies in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Members of cheerful societies were dressed in colorful costumes: they wore mostly red, yellow and green: colors which symbolized disorder. They read writings like the “vastenavondgeschriften” and even wrote plays around it. It was part of their festive culture. The actors in the prank regulations had names such as “van Narooien” or “Gekshoven,” which were of course parodies on Dutch names referring to folly. Mockery also manifested in coats of arms, depicting shields with for instance jester hats. Such hats were given to new members of cheerful societies. However, although the writings contain a lot of mocking elements, the purpose of the regulations was serious for the members. At the same time, they also show a mixture of elements from the liturgical calendar and the regional festive calendar.

As the final speaker of this panel, Lotte Jensen (Radboud University Nijmegen) discussed publications that were published on the occasion of peace treaties, which present an image of blessing regarding the signing of peace treaties and of the performances of the Dutch Republic. With regard to these publications, Jensen made three important assumptions. First, peace writings can be used to investigate Dutch nation building (the development of a



Professor Lotte Jensen (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Dutch “imagined community” in terms of Benedict Anderson’s theory). Second, peace was a continuation of war by other means. And third, every peace treaty shows a following conflict. To explain these assumptions, Jensen focused on the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. She

mentioned four points of interest. First was the propagandistic Orangist view in praise of Stadtholder William IV. Secondly, the comparison between the Dutch people and the chosen people of Israel. In the text it almost seems like there was an alliance between God and the Dutch Republic. And third, the many references to the history of the Dutch and the Dutch Republic. In 1748, the centennial of the Peace of Münster was celebrated at the same time when William V, a new Prince of Orange, was born. Such things could not be a coincidence. The presentation of a return to a Golden Age under the stadholderate, when society would blossom again, was thereby a reoccurring theme. But at the same time, there were cracks in the “imagined community” of the Orangists, like the Dutch *pachtersoproer*, a series of taxation riots in 1748. The character of the peace publications is therefore somewhat ambivalent. Jensen argues that the propagandistic language in publications regarding peace treaties even resemble a character of war. Peace treaties therefore had a large predictive potency for new conflicts.

Panel 3: The Role of Material Culture in Festivities

Opening the panel with her presentation “The art of the feast: conversation pieces and table plays during diner in the early modern Netherlands”, Lucinda Timmermans (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) demonstrated how table objects such as jugs, pitchers and so-called *teljoren*, were not only meant to feed the body, but also to feed the minds. Objects like these could be richly decorated with scenes that could start conversation and discussion during a feast. Whilst showing many examples of these table objects, Timmermans explained that these scenes could be of a serious nature, showing off the knowledge of the host by referring to the

classical and biblical, but could also be intentionally ludicrous. Among this last category we can find many depictions of sayings, insinuating or uncivilized scenes, animals behaving like humans, and, in many cases, comical farmers, all of which meant to produce a laugh within the higher classes that used these decorated objects. This was also true for the table plays, performed during or after dinner, which often featured objects played by humans.



Lucinda Timmermans MA (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)

Objects could also be given as presents, as a riddle or as exclusive wedding gifts. Seemingly every-day table objects thus played a major role in the dynamics of table festivities in early modern times. In response to questions concerning continuity, Timmermans added that these conversation pieces also existed in the Middle Ages, albeit often with heraldic signs. More research on materiality during feasts and dinners is still imperative.

Laurien Hansma (University of Groningen) took a different approach on materiality in her presentation “Orangist festivities during the counterrevolution (1787-1794),” focusing mainly on a lack of material manifestations and the political background of festivities. Whilst in other regions in the Netherlands the return of stadtholderly power after the Patriot Period (1780-7) was celebrated with flags, tokens, illuminations and a broad iconological program, there was a remarkable lack of such material manifestations in the province of Groningen during the counterrevolution. Although in this province people were also compelled to wear Orangist symbols, celebrations in honour of the house of Orange are rarely mentioned in the newspapers of this region. There were only references to a parade and a temple of honour. Hansma argued that this was the result of the specific developments preceding the counterrevolution in Groningen. Stadtholder Willem V had already limited the power of regents in the government of Groningen with distinct regulations. Because of this, the Patriots, demanding more democracy and overthrowing city boards all over the Dutch Republic, were less radically disposed in Groningen. This in turn resulted in a more moderate counterrevolution. Very mild penalties were imposed upon former Patriots once the stadtholderly power had been re-established. Some former patriots received no penalties at all. The moderate character of the counterrevolution, as Hansma stated, might explain the lack of exuberant celebrations in honour of the Orange family. In this case materiality of festivities was closely related to earlier developments around what had been celebrated.



Laurien Hansma MA (University of Groningen)

Panel 4: Festivities in Different Social Milieus

Dr. Jeroen Puttevils (University of Antwerp) started the fourth and final panel with his research regarding lotteries in the Southern Netherlands during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. He stated that lotteries gained their festive character because of the increase in the scale of the event following the first public lottery in Bruges in 1441. This lottery 1441 was held in a period when lotteries were still in an early stage throughout Europe. There have been two peaks in the number of lotteries in the Netherlands: around 1525 and between 1545 and 1569. The intermediate drop was a result of the interdiction by the central authority, because the government wanted to set up a lottery themselves. It took until the second half of the sixteenth century before the lotteries became popular in the Northern Netherlands. In the beginning stage, governments were the organizers of lotteries, using them to solve the problem of increasing town debts. Later on, church institutions and private entrepreneurs also became important as organizers. The lotteries contained different phases, like advertisement, registration and draw. The lottery tickets were sold using visual (like banners) and auditory (like trumpet playing) communication. The draw itself was a dramatized event. every single



ticket had to be read individually, so the lottery could last for weeks. The peculiar thing is, as Puttevils remarked, that almost anyone could participate (elite, but also regular folk). Regarding the performance and festive character of the draw that developed in the early modern period, there were a lot of different actors on the stage, like noblemen, sergeants and torch-bearers. The location of the draw was also very important. The public character of lotteries was enhanced by performing the draw in large public spaces like marketplaces. In many

Dr. Jeroen Puttevils (University of Antwerp) cases the tickets also contained prose as a way to make the lotteries less boring for the spectators. As the lotteries grew in number, these theatrical elements became more important than ever.

Professor Dick de Boer (University of Groningen) discussed in his paper how several festive manifestations at the end of the sixteenth century gave the meaning of citizenship in the



Professor Dick de Boer (University of Groningen)

Dutch Republic a new stimulus; for instance lotteries, commemorations and ‘Landjuwelen.’ The main point of De Boer’s lecture had to do with the transmission of bourgeois morality, for which he used sixteenth century Leiden as an example. Proses on lottery tickets, an aspect which was already introduced in the previous lecture, were read out loud supported by trumpet players, which contributed to the theatrical and festive nature of the event. Because there were only a few prizes for the huge number of participants in sixteenth-century lotteries, it sometimes occurred that participants only had a chance of one in four hundred to actually win a prize. Hence, the festivities around the lottery and the charity character had to compensate this. De Boer named the example of Lieutenant Admiral Johan van Duyvenvoorde, who bought 4.000 tickets in 1596, so his prose that was written on his tickets was often read out loud. People rendered a certain message from those proses. Van Duyvenvoorde’s recent success as lieutenant admiral in sea battles meant, for example, that he was a famous war hero within Leiden. The reading out of his prose during the lottery thereby confirmed his status as a war hero and taught the people a lesson in bourgeois morality. The real ‘main prize’ of the lottery for Van Duyvenvoorde was therefore his confirmation as war hero. The role of prose also meant that chambers of rhetoric (‘rederijkerskamers’) came to play a huge and permanent role in the festivities surrounding lotteries. In 1596, the “rederijkers” of Leiden, for example, organized a huge five-day festival in which actors were dressed and performed plays with a moralistic-didactic aim.



Professor Hans Cools (Fryske Akademy Ljouwert/KU Leuven)

Professor Hans Cools’ (Fryske Akademy Ljouwert/KU Leuven) lecture discussed the joyous entry of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in Rome in March 1536. This entry was the highlight of the triumphal tour after his successful siege of the North-African port city of Tunis. However, Charles’ visit of Rome was not undisputed. The Romans had not forgotten how Habsburg troops had plundered Rome a few years before in 1527. As a result of this, the great triumphal arches, like those used in Charles’ entry in Naples, were missing in Rome. Nevertheless, Charles arrived in the city as a triumphant emperor, which can be pointed out through a lot of things. For instance, the route through the city along famous monuments from antiquity, such as the Arch of Constantine, the Arch of Titus, the Forum Romanum, Palatine Hill and the Capitoline Hill. Hereby, Charles V followed exactly

the route of the triumphal entries of his classic predecessors. These wonders of antiquity were shown to the emperor as a means to overwhelm him. Charles was also dressed as a Roman emperor in the fashion of a famous Equestrian Statue of emperor Marcus Aurelius on horseback in the Capitoline Hill. He also grew a beard around 1530 to look like the old emperors. Charles V drew parallels between the classical antiquity and his own time, and numerous letters and pamphlets make those parallels very clear. Cools therefore states that the Burgundian visual language of the Habsburg court was replaced by an imperial iconography, based on the classical antiquity.

The Concluding Discussion and the Closing of the Conference

During the concluding discussion, the speakers of the final panel and the rest of the participants attempted to synthesize all the interesting insights that were discussed throughout the conference. The discussion was guided by one of the questions that arose during the conference, namely, what exactly are “early modern festivities?” The final panel showed that lotteries were a medieval concept that evolved from a small-scale activity into major festive manifestations during the early modern period. Yet both speakers who discussed lotteries in their lecture seemed to disagree whether this actually made lotteries more early modern than medieval. Due to the shortage of time, since many of the conference participants – especially those from Flanders – still had a long journey home ahead of them, no conclusive answer was given to this burning question. Nevertheless,

the many panels which discussed various aspects of festivities ranging from the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, certainly showed that early modern festivities definitely had certain characteristics which distinguished them from their medieval predecessors, and eventually from their modern successors. The extensive use of symbolism and allegory in festive elements, for example, was something that returned in almost all of the specific panels. Some of these symbolisms and allegorical elements had their origins in the middle ages and were adapted in the early modern times, but much of the symbolism and allegory present in early modern festivities were part of the Renaissance



The panel for the concluding discussion

tradition in which they developed. Neither did such elements perish completely at the advent of the modern era. Because when Napoleon entered Antwerp in 1803, he was welcomed with the same kind of joyous entry as Holy Roman Emperor Charles V received three centuries before. However, as noted earlier, the differences between medieval, early modern and modern festivities are often vague, and hence highly debatable. This means that there is still plenty of work to do in this specific field of early modern history.



Dr. Joop Koopmans (L) and Professor Guido Marnef (R)

After the concluding discussion, the conference was closed by the newly appointed VNVNG chair, Professor Guido Marnef (University of Antwerp), who gracefully thanked the resigned chair Dr. Joop Koopmans with a special gift. With this the VNVNG-anniversary two-day conference in Groningen came to an end.

Report by: Daniël Bokma, Frido Dijkstra, Dániel Moerman (main editor), Rozemarijn Moes, Lisa Wallesch and Sian Wierda (University of Groningen, MA Students of History)