

Gruuthuse Manuscript Back in Bruges

In February 2007, Flanders was startled by the news that the Gruuthuse Manuscript, which was compiled in Bruges around 1400 and contains, among other things, the oldest collection of Dutch songs with musical notation, had been sold to the National Library of the Netherlands in The Hague. The sale exposed a painful void in the policy on Flemish literary heritage, but it did mean that the manuscript, which had been in private hands, was now more accessible to researchers and the general public than it had ever been before. In collaboration with the Huygens Institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the National Library of the Netherlands created an excellent website that enables the reader to browse the manuscript in any direction, with a transcription of the texts and extensive expert commentary (see the information at the end of the article). Soon after, it was agreed with the city of Bruges that the National Library would collaborate in putting on a prestigious exhibition featuring this literary monument.

The exhibition has now been organised. It is called *Love and Devotion. The Gruuthuse Manuscript* and will be held till 23 June in the Gruuthuse Museum in Bruges. After a long absence, the manuscript will return to the palace of the wealthy nobleman, courtier, soldier and diplomat after whom it is named, Louis de Gruuthuse (c. 1427-1492). It must have been part of De Gruuthuse's valuable collection of books, the second largest in the Low Countries after that of the Dukes of Burgundy.

The Gruuthuse Manuscript is less ornate than the dozens of manuscripts owned by Louis de Gruuthuse, most of which are beautifully illuminated and date from several decades later. It is not known how the manuscript came to be part of Louis' collection. According to certain respected Bruges historians, it was never actually owned by him. They claim that the ownership mark on the

recto side of the second folio - the Gruuthuse coat of arms surrounded by the chain of the prestigious Order of the Golden Fleece, to which Louis was admitted on 2 May 1461 - was forged in the eighteenth century in an attempt by the previous owners to give their family a noble lineage dating back to the Middle Ages. Researchers are currently using advanced techniques to analyse the ink in order to clarify the matter.

The manuscript owes its fame to the fact that it has given us several of the most beautiful Middle Dutch songs: the obscene *Het soude een scamel mersenier* (He was just a poor soldier of fortune), the moving elegy *Egidius, waer bestu bleven* (Egidius, where are you), the aggressive *Kerelslied* (Song of the churls), the airy *Aloette voghel clein* (Aloette, my thrush, my sweet), the sombre and almost despairing *Vaer wech, Ghepeins* (Go away, thoughts). These songs are some of those most frequently included in anthologies of Dutch literature. The Gruuthuse Manuscript also contains the oldest - and largest - collection of profane lyric in Dutch with music notation from the Middle Ages: more than 150 songs in total.

Much less well known are the seven prayers that precede the collection of songs. Several of the prayers are very skilfully adorned with acrostics en virtuoso rhyme schemes. One of the prayers, a paraphrase of the *Salve Regina*, was composed with an acrostic by Jan van Hulst, who also immortalised his name in one of the sixteen poems that follow the songs and form the third part of the manuscript. This poet must have been a veritable jack-of-all-trades: he was not only a civic official but also a formidable cultural entrepreneur, attending royal visits, the Procession of the Holy Blood in Bruges, and performances of polyphonic song. He was also an acclaimed illustrator of manuscripts. Late in life he founded the Holy Spirit brotherhood, which later became the Chamber of Rhetoric of the same name in Bruges.

Although the sixteen poems make up by far the largest part of the manuscript, they are the least well known. They include love allegories in



The Gruuthuse Museum
in Bruges

the tradition of the French *Roman de la Rose* and the great allegories by French poets such as Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart, as well as poems that are largely moralising or devotional in character. They are about suffering, the joys of Easter, and the vanities of this world. Notably, in one of the poems, spiritual love and profane love are weighed against each other.

One of the love allegories contains the acrostic Jan Moritoen. Klaas Heeroma, who published the songs in 1966, attributes all the amorous songs and poems to Moritoen and interprets them as an autobiographical account of a tumultuous and ultimately unsuccessful love life. We now know that Moritoen was a well-to-do furrier who even became alderman of Bruges. Heeroma's hypothesis therefore seems unlikely, and one can even wonder whether Jan Moritoen is mentioned not as the author of the poem but as the person who commissioned it. One poem certainly featured prominently in the highest circles of Bruges society: it was read aloud when the Feast of the Epiphany was celebrated by the *Witte Beer*, an elite jousting company whose members were predominantly burgomasters, aldermen, councillors, nobles and

members of the urban patriciate. With its emphasis on fostering brotherly love in the city, the poem gives the impression that it was intended to calm the serious political strife that divided the elites of Bruges at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

Today, six centuries later, the Gruuthuse Manuscript provides fascinating insights into cultural, religious and political life in late-mediaeval Bruges. That is also the purpose of the exhibition: using the themes of love, devotion, *const* (skill, craft), music and kinship, it sets out to give visitors an impression of the lives of the urban elite at the beginning of the golden age of Bruges.

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www.kb.nl/bladerboeken/het-gruuthuse-hand-schrift

Love and Devotion. The Gruuthuse Manuscript,
till 23 June 2013 at the Gruuthuse Museum in Bruges
(www.museabrugge.be - www.liefdeendevoetie.be).