

Medieval Libraries in the Low Countries

*Thoughts for an Integrated Approach**

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There exist many studies, old and new ones, on medieval libraries in the Low Countries and elsewhere. Some of these are excellent, but many leave the reader with a feeling of dissatisfaction. The praise of the clerics of olden time, who in a barbarous age preserved the treasures of ancient wisdom, the quoting of the saying *claustrum sine armario quasi castrum sine armamentario*, these clichés have no doubt more recently given way to more scientific approaches. Many studies of a statistical or descriptive nature are monuments of erudition, discussing e.g. the identity of all authors and texts and giving for each of them full bibliography; but in the end they answer only a limited number of questions, such as:

- which texts were available in a given library?
- in which libraries was a given text available?

Some recent research has built on the answers to these important but too obvious questions by posing more refined and fruitful ones. This kind of research has been called ‘material philology’; whether it must be seen as a novelty or as an application of the codicological approach is of minor importance here.¹ It is simply useful to remind the reader that for more than half a century codicology has been studying manuscripts as material objects and bearers of texts, so that the ‘materiality’ of texts is a normal concept for the codicologist. Among the questions that have been raised in this newer research is the question of the place and the function of a text in a given collection or library, analogous with the important studies that have been undertaken about miscellaneous manuscripts. In the following pages it is our intention to discuss in a similar way the following questions, specifically related to the situation in the Low Countries:

- how could texts be retrieved in medieval libraries?
- how can we know whether texts were actually used?

Access to the Texts

The sources for this kind of research are abundant and now generally quite accessible. All booklists and mentions of books in wills and inventories regarding institutions and persons in the Southern Low Countries have in principle been edited in the *Corpus*

* I thank Benjamin Victor for correcting this article from a linguistic viewpoint. I also thank the editors of *Queste* for their editorial work.

1 Gabriël 2009.

Catalogorum Belgii (with the exception of the inventories of the library of the Dukes of Burgundy, which are in press).² Volume VII of the *Corpus* offers a list of all surviving manuscripts and incunables that during the Middle Ages belonged to ecclesiastical institutions in the territory of present-day Belgium and their members. Of course neither of these publications can pretend to be exhaustive or entirely reliable; nevertheless, the more than 500 documents edited and the more than 4700 books (manuscript and print alike) recorded there should be a good base for new research. For the whole of the Low Countries the invaluable repertory of Stooker and Verbeij lists all Dutch-language manuscripts that belonged to religious and semi-religious houses.³ A similar list of the Latin and French manuscripts from medieval libraries in the present Netherlands is still a desideratum, as well as a general edition of the medieval booklists.⁴ Fortunately one of the major results of the Nijmegen Symposium seems to have been that we now can look forward with confidence to such a *Corpus Catalogorum Neerlandicorum*, which will happily complete our information in the field of medieval libraries and book collections in the Low Countries.

It is common knowledge that the sources for the study of medieval libraries are twofold: the medieval booklists and the surviving manuscripts and incunables. The problems regarding the study of medieval booklists have been discussed in two small publications. My own typology of medieval library catalogues is at the basis of the following considerations.⁵ The general opinion about medieval library catalogues is that these documents are no catalogues in the modern sense of the word, but inventories, the purpose of which was the preservation of the collection of books they describe. They were generally made by librarians or custodians for their own use or for the use of their successors. Hence the attention they give to the description of the volumes belonging to the library, whilst the exact recording of the texts present in the volumes is often considered of minor importance, if not entirely neglected. The description of the book materials, the bindings, the illumination of the codices, the recording of the opening or ending words of given pages (the so-called *dictiones probatoriae: secundo folio, penultimo folio*, etc.) all point in the same direction: what is important is the identification of all volumes present in the collection and the distinction of volumes bearing the same text. The titles of many booklists: *summa librorum, numerus librorum, hi libri inventi sunt*, et cetera suggest that the ‘catalogue’ is no more than a list of material volumes, which must be preserved, indicating the number of copies available where necessary. A famous example is the catalogue of Dutch books of the convent of Rooklooster (Regular Canons of Saint Augustine) of circa 1390, containing 25 items: *Dit sijn die dietsche boeke die ons toebehoeren. [1] Item in den eersten een ewangeliboec. [2] § Item een epistelboec. [3] § Item II brulochten.*⁶

There is no doubt that the countless inventories of church holdings, often under

² Referred to as CCB.

³ Stooker & Verbeij 1997.

⁴ In his still important book of 1903, Meisma edited a series of medieval booklists regarding the Northern Low Countries.

⁵ Derolez 1979a; Nebbiai dalla Guarda 1992.

⁶ CCB IV, nr 84.

the title *inventarium thesaurarie* or *inventarium ornamentorum et iocalium* fall into that category, even if they record large collections of books. The numerous inventories of estates of ecclesiastics, especially canons, found at the end of the Middle Ages, of course generally have only a practical purpose, namely as a basis for the execution of the will of the deceased.

Nevertheless, a close look at the documents may show that quite a number of makers of catalogues not only intended to record all the volumes in the collection, but also all the *texts* present in the codices; they even quite often appear to have consciously offered help to the user of the catalogue to retrieve the text he was interested in.⁷ When we study examples it is necessary to be aware of some of the basic problems the maker of a medieval booklist faced. We may suppose that the order of the items in such a list generally reflected the order of the books in the library room or library chest: the general classification scheme: Bible – Church Fathers – Medieval Theologians – Other Subjects is found in most lists, the number and order of the final sections varying more or less. The problem of how to enter in the booklist new acquisitions and changes was more complicated, especially at a time when the catalogues were copied in a codex that was part of the library. Writing the catalogue in an often large and precious manuscript was of course an excellent guarantee for its preservation, but the monuments of calligraphy represented by some of these catalogues severely risked being deteriorated by the addition of new entries recording the accessions to the library or by the cancelling of entries for books no longer available. That may have been one of the reasons why most booklists from the Low Countries, especially of the eleventh, twelfth, and early thirteenth centuries, do not appear to cover the new accessions at all. In the less formal catalogues written on single sheets of paper or in paper registers, as encountered in the later Middle Ages, accessions and changes could be entered without too much inconvenience, but it is probable that at that time, when a list was no longer up-to-date, it often was thrown away and replaced with a new one – with the result that the chance for late-medieval library catalogues to survive was slight as compared with other archival documents pertaining to a given institution.

The other problem for the maker of a medieval booklist was the description of miscellaneous manuscripts, volumes containing more than one text. The distinctions between all the various types of ‘composite’ manuscripts which modern scholarship has made are of no importance here: whether a manuscript was planned to contain several texts from the beginning, or whether several booklets had been bound together in order to obtain volumes of a certain bulk (the preservation of which was less hazardous), made no difference for the cataloguer faced with the problem of giving an adequate access to authors and texts present in the collection.

Various solutions to this double problem were attempted. Our first examples are from the early period (i.e. the eleventh, twelfth and early thirteenth centuries), during which the great traditions created in the Carolingian libraries were still in vigour. The catalogue of the Benedictine abbey of Saint Martin at Tournai of around 1160–

7 Derolez 1979b; Derolez 1989.

1180, containing 169 items, is titled *Brevis annotatio librorum huius ecclesie*.⁸ It is written in three columns on two pages of a large manuscript. Its subdivisions have headings announcing the author or subject recorded in them, and after each section space has been reserved for entering new accessions. The headings are a significant help to the reader; so is the indication *in uno volumine* or *in duobus voluminibus*, especially because this made clear which texts were to be found together in one volume. Quite often, unfortunately, the accessions in this catalogue have been entered in inappropriate places (e.g. items 65: a work by Hugh of Saint-Victor in the section devoted to the works of Saint Jerome, and 169: saints' lives in the section devoted to grammar and poetry):

Opuscula Augustini Yponensis episcopi [16–42, thereafter 8 lines blank]:

[16] *Augustinus super "Beatus vir" in I volumine.*

Opuscula Iheronimi presbiteri [43–61, thereafter 10 lines blank]:

[43] *Iheronimus super Ysaïam in duobus voluminibus.* [65] *Hugo de claustro anime in I volumine.*

Libri gentilium poetarum [162–168, thereafter 1 line blank]:

[162] *Presianus maior et Priscianus de constructionibus in duobus voluminibus.* [169] *Assumptio sancte Marie, passiones et vite plurimorum sanctorum in uno volumine.*

The catalogue of the Benedictine abbey of Saint Remaclus at Stavelot, dated 1105, 152 items, is copied in the famous giant Stavelot Bible under the title: *Anno incarnationis Domini millesimo CV scrutato armario sancti Remacli hi libri inventi et hic annotati sunt*.⁹ It basically lists all works contained in the single volumes, using the expressions *in quo* or *in eodem*, as e.g. is visible in the section devoted to Saint Augustine: [23] *Augustinus de omeliis Pasche, in quo Pascasius de fide catholica.* [24] *Augustinus de doctrina Christiana. Eiusdem liber soliloquiorum in eodem. Augustinus super "Quid gloriaris".* The case of entry 24 poses no difficulties, as this volume contains three works by the author treated in that section of the catalogue. Someone searching the work of Paschasius Radbertus, on the contrary, has to browse through the entire catalogue in order to find the text he wants to read, unless he knows it occurs in a miscellaneous volume classified under *Augustinus* (entry 23).

The access to the texts provided by the famous catalogue of the conventual library of the Benedictine abbey of Lobbes, 1049, with 165 items, is on a more advanced level. Its title strongly reminds us of the title of the Stavelot catalogue quoted above: *Anno Dominice incarnationis M XLVIII fratres Lobienses suum recensentes armarium hanc sibi repererunt haberi summam librorum*, but in contrast with the latter this is strictly an author catalogue, as is obvious from the following extracts: [98*] *Eiusdem [Fulgentii episcopi] de remissione peccatorum. Eiusdem de V questionibus Ferrandi diaconi. Require in libro Tichonii de VII regulis.* [103] *Tichonii de septem regulis lib. I. Fulgentii episcopi de remissione peccatorum lib. II. Eiusdem responsio de V questionibus Ferrandi diaconi. Vol. I.*¹⁰ Two works of Fulgentius of Ruspe are thus not described in the section devoted to that author, because they occur in a volume together with a work of Tichonius. So they are recorded in the Tichonius section and a renvoi is made from Fulgentius to Tichonius (*require*).

⁸ CCB IV, nr 135.

⁹ CCB II, nr 68.

¹⁰ CCB IV, nr 101.

The distinction between *liber* as a bibliographical unit and *volumen* as a library unit was typical of the great catalogues of the Carolingian age. In any case the Lobbes booklist is clearly a catalogue of authors and texts.

Even more sophisticated is the exceptionally important catalogue of a school library that has been attributed to the Benedictine abbey of Anchin in Northern France, eleventh century: [56] *Aratores III*. [47] *Cato cum Avieno I. Cum Aratore I. Item cum Remigio in se et glosario. Unus cum fabulis. Unus per se*. [51] *Prosper I cum Sedulio. Unus cum Aratore. Unus item in alio Aratore*.¹¹ The expression *per se* signifies here that the work is not part of a miscellaneous manuscript but occupies an entire volume. The above extracts are to be understood as follows (this escaped the editor): three copies of Arator are available in the school library. One of them occurs in a miscellany together with Cato, the two others are part of miscellanies comprising also the work of Prosper of Aquitaine.

To summarize: the best Benedictine catalogues of the eleventh and twelfth centuries are very thoughtful indeed, though they dealt more successfully with the problem of the composite manuscript than with that of the new accession. It is noticeable that their refinements regarding composites are not found in the catalogues of the subsequent centuries. This may be due to a gap in our information, but one nevertheless has the impression that cataloguers of the later thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries in our regions were not very much concerned with informing their readers about the contents of libraries.

A good example is the extensive catalogue dated 1309 of the Cistercian abbey of Villers in Brabant.¹² It is part of a composite manuscript, partly a chronicle of the abbey, partly an archival document, and the titles of its two sections are *Numerus librorum qui sunt in magno armario* (items 1–346); *Numerus librorum qui sunt in parvo armario* (items 347–455). At the end is written *Anno Domini M CCC IX^o tot erant libri in armario parvo*. There is scarcely a logical classification of the items, perhaps because the list was made at a time when the original order had been lost, possibly due to the transfer to a different location. The title as well as the final sentence suggests that the aim of the maker was in the first place to ascertain how many volumes the library contained. The exact difference between the *magnum armarium* and the *parvum armarium* is not clear.¹³ The later thirteenth-century catalogue of the collegiate church of Saint Donatian in Bruges, in spite of its smaller size and its subdivisions partially provided with headings, is on the same relatively low level as the Villers catalogue.¹⁴ It occurs in a cartulary of the church. A possibility always to be considered when studying these documents is that they are copied from earlier originals, in which the structure of the catalogue was more apparent or as yet undisturbed.

The universal renewal we observe in church and monastic libraries around the year 1400 is of major importance for the scholar studying the function of texts in medieval collections. In the course of the fifteenth century, in innumerable institutions in the

¹¹ Gessler 1935.

¹² CCB IV, nr 88.

¹³ For the problems of the Villers catalogue, see Falmagne 2001, 73–116.

¹⁴ CCB I, nr 95.

Southern and in the Northern Low Countries, by decision of the chapters or through wills of private persons, especially canons, a *libraria* was installed (this is the name for the new library room, which everywhere now replaced *armarium*, with the latter's connotation of cupboard or chest). In churches and chapels these libraries were often located in the choir, the books being placed on pulpits and chained, for chaining of the books was a necessity for a library to which not only the clergy, but often also lay people had access. *Libri in sanctuario* and *Libri in choro* are common denominations for the two sections of late medieval church libraries, comprising the liturgical books on the one hand, the library proper on the other. The will of Pieter Adorne creating a library in the Jerusalem chapel in Bruges and the decision of the translator of Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* to place the first copy of his work in the choir of the church of Saint Pharaïldis (Sint-Veerle) in Ghent are only a few of the better known examples. The former document, dated 1452, stipulated that the testator's books were to be placed in the chapel *up pulten, de latinsche an de rechter side, de vlaemsche an de lucher, om elken meinssche sijn profijt daerin te mueghen doene* ('on desks, the Latin books at the right side, the Flemish ones at the left, that all people may profit by them').¹⁵ In the prologue of the 1485 Ghent edition of Boethius, the translator and commentator says *so heb ic tot elcx nutscap ende profite den allereersten bouc van deser translacie, met mijnder hand ghecorrigeert, te Sente Verelde te Ghend in de librerie doen legghen* ('to the use and profit of everybody I have had the first copy of this translation, corrected by my own hand, placed in the library of Saint Pharaïldis' church in Ghent').¹⁶ This is, by the way, all we know about this library.

Two other testimonies may suffice to show the eagerness of rich ecclesiastics to found or to contribute to the founding of a church library at that time. In 1424 Giles of Vinalmont, canon in Tongeren, Huy and Liège stipulates in his will:

Item omnes alios libros meos lego capitulo ipsius ecclesie sancti Dionysii Leodiensis ad opus unius perpetue librerie eiusdem ecclesie, ut in ipsa libraria ponantur, recondantur, ligentur, conserventur, cooperiantur et aptentur ordinate, ita quod nullatenus extra ipsam librariam transportentur nec commodentur nec aliquo modo alienentur; sed canonici et persone dicte ecclesie et alie ydonee et ad hoc apte possint in ipsa liberaria de die et non de nocte studere et aliqua per seipsas extrahere et transscribere sine lesione, maculatione et dampno librorum eorundem.¹⁷

[Translation: I leave all my other books to the chapter of the same church of Saint Dionysius in Liège in order to found a perpetual library in the same church; they will be placed, stored, chained, preserved, bound and adapted in good order, and they will never be taken out of the library nor lent nor removed; but the canons and other members of that church and other suitable and capable persons will be allowed to study in that library during the daytime, and not by night, and to excerpt and transcribe personally passages without causing detriment, stains or damage to the books.]

It would be difficult to find more details about the founding, arrangement, public and conditions for the use of a medieval library. In the same way master Engelbert Ysbrandi, priest of the diocese of Utrecht, in 1500 bequeathed a book to the church of

¹⁵ CCB I, nr 6.

¹⁶ CCB VII, 130.

¹⁷ CCB III, nr 113.3.

Saint Peter in Leiden *ad usum capellanorum ecclesie sancti Petri et aliorum sacerdotum, dummodo libraria ordinetur honeste, publice et libere visitabilis*. By the same will he donated his glossed Bible *ad usum pastoris et capellani et aliorum sacerdotum pro inchoatione librarie* to the church of Our Lady in the same city.¹⁸

The catalogue of the collegiate church of Saint Donatian in Bruges, dated 1417, containing 100 items, is copied in a paper register under the title *Secuntur libri incatenati in scampnis secundum facultates liberarie ecclesie sancti Donacioni Brugensis*. It says:

[95–97] In prima parte septimi scampni. § Primo, liber de spera qui incipit secundo folio “nam et eadem eclipsis” et penultimo folio “gracia ad quam”. § Sirurgia magistri Lanfranci Mediolanensis que incipit secundo folio “os stomachi et nutriciam” et penultimo folio “cum permixtione”. § Liber introductorius Albumasar astrologi qui incipit secundo folio “que efficiuntur” et 3° folio “nova coniunctione”.¹⁹

The library room was equipped with seven double benches (*banchi, scampni*, each having two sides or *partes*), to which the books were chained. It could be consulted at all times, probably by the clergy only. The use of *dictiones probatoriae*, originating like the chained library itself in university environment and often seen in princely inventories, is also a frequent means of identifying volumes in fifteenth-century church libraries (in this case normally the opening words of the second folio and of the last but one folio are given).

Libri catenati, a must in church libraries, will not have been a common feature in monasteries. Therefore the case of the immense Cistercian libraries of Ten Duinen and Ter Doest is the more remarkable.²⁰ At the end of the Middle Ages all volumes in these collections were chained and placed on desks, their front covers downward according to the practice in Flanders and France (the contrary practice, the books lying on their rear cover, was typical of Brabant, Holland and other principalities belonging to the Holy Roman Empire).²¹ The title labels on the bindings, an intrinsic element in the late medieval *libraria*, were consequently fixed on their rear covers. In the case of the two West Flemish Cistercian abbeys, this practice goes back to a time much older than the chaining, and how instructive such title labels (normally framed in a *fenestra*) could be is shown by the following example from Ter Doest, where the reader could see at a glance which texts occurred in the single volumes without opening the books:

Ysidorus super penthateuchon
Iosue Iudicum Regum et Esdre.
Et Beda super Thobiam et Regum. Solutiones eiusdem de verbis apostoli.
Item recapitulatio desolationis Iherosolime secundum Egesyppum.²²

¹⁸ Van der Vlist & Bouwman 2008, 122; Tervoort 2004. I thank Ed van der Vlist for bibliographical information about this will.

¹⁹ CCB I, nr 27.

²⁰ Derolez 2004.

²¹ Derolez 1985.

²² Bruges, City Library, MS 22. Reproduced in Derolez 2004, 239, fig. 5.

A third element that is generally seen in late medieval libraries is the pressmark (desk-mark would be better terms). They were of course essential in ensuring that all books remain in their right place in an unchained library; but they were especially useful for the rapid retrieval of volumes in any library room. For that purpose, they had to be placed on the cover of the book facing upward, either on the title label itself or on a separate label. On the bindings of some volumes from Ten Duinen they were written in the shape of large majuscules as early as the thirteenth century. This case is exceptional; most known examples are much younger and go back only to the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries. For small collections, such as the libraries for lay brothers in the Windesheim convents, a mark consisting of a single letter (or a numeral) would be sufficient. This was e.g. the case in the *Taeffele* (catalogue, probably a mural catalogue) of the Dutch books in Rooklooster.²³ The normal shelfmarks for Latin libraries in the Low Countries at that time on the contrary were double and consisted of a letter pointing to the desk and a number indicating the order of the volume on that desk. As these pulpits generally had two sides, these could be distinguished by using black letters for one side, and red letters for the other side.

The 'bench catalogue' of the convent of Rooklooster, written before 1522, with 413 items, is titled *Summula omnium voluminum nostre librerie secundum ordinem locorum eorumdem*, and its author signs as *Arnoldus Kerstinen existens librarius Rubevallis*.²⁴ On the desk 'red O' no more than three volumes appear to have been placed, numbered O1, O2 and O3; their content is carefully detailed: [346-348] *O rubea. 1. Epistole Petri Blesensis. Albertus de officio misse cum diversis aliis. 2. Epistole Petri Blesensis. Item sermo quod religio spiritualiter dicitur sepulcrum. 3. Epistole Pii pape secundi et Platina in vitas summorum pontificum*. It is clear that this and similar catalogues do not in fact provide easy access to miscellaneous manuscripts, but one may suppose that often an alphabetical index to the catalogue was available (even if such indexes have rarely survived) or there was a mural catalogue of the kind as discussed below.

The same arrangement was in use in the large library of the Windesheim convent of Zevenborren, closely related to Rooklooster (and Groenendaal, the third Windesheim convent situated south of Brussels), of which almost all manuscripts have perished but which can be partly reconstructed thanks to the recently edited inventory of refectory readings of the first quarter of the 16th century. This inventory offers ample readings for every day of the ecclesiastical year and for special occasions, and for each text gives the pressmark of the volume in which it occurs and even the folio number of the page where it could be read. Together the pressmarks refer to some 280 books (the total number of books in the library at that time may be calculated at some 1000). Here is a fragment, about suggested reading for the blood-letting days, at which 'lighter reading' was provided:

[...] In diebus minutionum materia lectioni mense aptata. [1279] Hystoria ecclesiastica S rubeo 5. [1280] Hystoria tripartita ibidem 7. [1281] Historia Troyana S rubeo 3. [...] [1296] De vitis illustrium philosophorum compendium Iohannis Galensis E nigro 14.²⁵

²³ CCB IV, 178-179.

²⁴ CCB IV, nr 86.

²⁵ CCB VI, 103-104 (the inventory is edited by Wouter Bracke with the collaboration of Jan Willem Klein).

In the Benedictine abbey of Saint Bavo in Ghent the colours of the shelfmarks apparently had another meaning.²⁶ The strange situation reflected by the catalogue currently dated about 1450 (615 items) is as follows: the first and largest section comprises 'the books of prior Oliver de Langhe' (Oliverus Longus, d. c. 1461), a collection of more than 300 manuscripts; the four subdivisions of this section are marked by golden, red, blue or black pressmarks respectively, whilst for what we may consider the main library (described under the title *Alia tabula*) no colours are given for the pressmarks. Apart from the overall significance of this catalogue, it should also be investigated why the numerical parts of the pressmarks are in disorder and why there are so many gaps in their series. Let us for example consider the 'black E' section of the de Langhe collection and the 'V' section of the main library:

[1-322] Tabula librorum bibliothecae monasterii sancti Bavonis, et primo librorum magistri Oliveri de Langhe, prioris sancti Bavonis. [...] E nigra. [304] Expositio grisismi [i.e. graecismi] bona, 2. [305] Textus phisicorum, 15. [306] Propositiones de Nova Domo [i.e. Iohannis de Nova Domo] super phisicorum, 6. [...] [323-566] Alia tabula diversorum librorum et primo de littera [...] V. [534] Lucanus, 4. [535] Iuvenalis, 5. [536] Vita Oracii sive Oratius, 8. [537] Iuvenalis, 10. [538] Virgilius, 13. [539] Enseridium [i.e. Enchiridion] de vitis patrum, 2. [540] Sermones et omelie beati Maximi, 7. [541] Pentateucus, Iosue, etc., 4. [542] Poetria Oracii et liber epistolarum eius, 6.

The late medieval mural catalogues, to which Pieter Obbema has devoted some enlightening studies, are of exceptional interest for the problem of the functioning of texts in libraries, as their aim is to direct the reader to the text he is seeking. It is unfortunate that so few of these documents survive, and generally only as fragments.

In the mural catalogue of Leiden, Hiëronymusdal (Lopsen, Regular Canons of St. Augustine) of circa 1495, including 204 items, it is exceptional that the class marks do not refer to desks or pulpits or other furniture where the books could be found, but to authors or subjects, e.g.: [98-102] *LIBRI YSODORI HISPALENSIS EPISCOPI. I. Ethimologiarum libri viginti. II. De summo bono libri tres. III. Super Vetus Testamentum. Interpretationes. IIII. Super Cantica Canticorum. V. Ad Florentinam sororem suam libri duo. VI. VII. VIII.*²⁷ The actual arrangement of this library is not easy to understand, as certain sections comprised only a few volumes, others, like the one devoted to the works of Saint Augustine, 23! And what is the meaning of the class marks not accompanied by a title, such as Isidore VI, VII and VIII?

The arrangement reflected by the well-known mural catalogue of the library of the Brethren of Common Life in the Heer-Florenshuis at Deventer, c. 1490-1500, is certainly more normal: the pressmarks consist of a letter and a number, so they appear to refer to desks, and the catalogue (classified partly according to authors and partly according to subjects) directs the reader to the place in the catalogue and in the library where each text of a miscellaneous volume could be found, using for this the word *require*.²⁸ So e.g. [9-11] *DIONYSII CARTHUSIENSIS. Super Apocalypsim, require in expositione super cantica de beata Virgine, D 41. Quatuor novissima, L 7. De arta via salutis, dilectione Dei et proximi, et vita sacerdotum, L 8.* So the treatise on Revelation by Dionysius de Rijckel

²⁶ CCB III, nr 11 and 48-51.

²⁷ Obbema 1996.

²⁸ Obbema 1973.

(or de Leeuwis) is not recorded in the section devoted to his works, which are placed on the desk marked *L*, but has to be sought in a volume containing a commentary on the Song of Songs, which is no. 41 on desk *D*.

Using Medieval Libraries

A good understanding of medieval booklists and thorough knowledge of the arrangement of actual medieval libraries are essential for whoever wants to study the functioning of texts in medieval collections. As essential is of course the study of the surviving books (manuscripts and incunables – excluding the latter when studying a late medieval library would be unjustified), and the problems involved by such a study are no less thorny. First it is essential to be aware of the enormous losses that have taken place during the centuries separating us from the original collections. Almost no manuscripts or early printed books have survived from the numerous chapter and church libraries that were created during the late Middle Ages. Of the 312 items recorded in the list of manuscripts belonging to Michael van der Stoc, monk of Saint Bavo in Ghent, about 1395–1400, no more than one is known to exist today.²⁹ Contrary to the common opinion Michael's is not the only case in which a member of the regular clergy was allowed to possess a private library; other monks had the same privilege, and abbots like Philip I Conrault and Raphael de Mercatellis in Ghent and Jan Crabbe in Ten Duinen in the fifteenth century had their own private collections, separate from the conventual library and generally characterised by the presence of manuscripts of exquisite execution or sophisticated content.³⁰ Pieter Obbema and Peter Gumbert both have made important observations about the survival of the holdings of medieval libraries in our countries.³¹ As a rule books from abbeys and monasteries had the greatest chance to survive (except those of the Dominicans and Franciscans: the libraries of these bitterest opponents of the Reformation have in the Low Countries suffered extreme losses at the time of the Protestant upheaval). Those of collegiate and other churches have disappeared in immense numbers, probably mostly due to neglect in the postmedieval period. Princely collections were generally in a much better position, given the value at all times attached to richly illuminated manuscripts.

As is well-known, it is often difficult or impossible to establish the early provenance of medieval books, i.e. the name of the institution(s) or person(s) owning these books during the Middle Ages. In the most favourable case medieval ownership inscriptions are available; other evidence, such as bindings and their fittings can also be conclusive, but this always depends on systematic investigation. The question which occupies us here is what books were actually used among all those that are recorded or that have survived. There is little doubt that the texts recorded in catalogues for public use (in contrast with inventories that had an administrative purpose) were at least *meant* to be

²⁹ CCB III, nr 10; see the excellent study by Gabriël 2009.

³⁰ There is no special study about the Library of Philip Conrault; for Mercatel, see Derolez 1979c; for Crabbe, see Geirnaert 1981.

³¹ Obbema 1996b; Gumbert 1988, vol. 2, 44–48.

used. Probably most books in private hands will have been used by their proprietors too, at least when they had been purchased or commissioned by them.

We have definite certainty about the actual use of books when books were borrowed by individuals. There are quite a number of testimonies about the borrowing of books in medieval libraries. An early example is Walter of Saint-Amand, a canon of the chapter of Saint Germain in Mons, who in 1308 during his stay at the university of Paris borrowed eleven books, mostly of Aristotelian philosophy, from the chapter library of Our Lady in Tournai.³² Well-known are the five documents about the borrowing of manuscripts by outsiders in the archives of the Charterhouse Genadedal near Bruges, from the last quarter of the fourteenth century, because one of them provided the title for Jos Biemans's great book on the tradition of the *Spiegel Historiae*.³³ Around the same time and in the same neighbourhood John Campion, canon of the chapter of Saint Donatian in Bruges, orator and poet, returned fifteen books he had borrowed from the chapter library, among them Boethius, Quintus Curtius, Jordanes, Orosius, Terence, Martial. The same day, 26 April 1372, one of these books, Gregory the Great's homilies on Ezekiel, was already given on loan to another canon.³⁴ In the same way master John du Mont on 30 January 1453 returned to the chapter library of Saint Lambert in Liège three books he had borrowed.³⁵ Furthermore, about 1486, six members of the chapter of Our Lady in Namur borrowed books from the *libraria* and afterwards returned them.³⁶ In 1453 and in 1478, master William of Caldenberch, canon of the chapter of Our Lady in Tongeren, received a long-term loan of law books from the chapter library in order to pursue his studies.³⁷

The list of books sold by the chapter of Saint Donatian in Bruges, in the years 1446-1447, is another document of great significance for our subject, as it not only mentions the price for all books, but also the names of the canons who purchased them: mainly glossed biblical books and books of canon law, but also philosophy, medicine, etc.³⁸ Some auctions of books from private estates also mention the names of the buyers, e.g. regarding the books of Lambert of Tienen, a chaplain in the collegiate church of Saint Rumoldus (Sint-Rombouts) in Mechelen, in 1498.³⁹

When dealing with books that still survive, it is of course essential to know at what time they were acquired or at least at what time they were available in a medieval collection. If no colophon or note in a manuscript gives information on this point and if the book cannot be linked with certainty to an entry in a dated booklist, we need to be able to date with sufficient precision ownership inscriptions, pressmarks and other relevant annotations, a task requiring more than common palaeographical skills.

This is even more true when we intend to study the annotations to the texts found in manuscripts the provenance of which has been established. This kind of research is

32 CCB IV, nr 123.

33 CCB I, nr 7; Biemans 1997.

34 CCB I, nr 98.

35 CCB II, nr 44.

36 CCB II, nr 84.

37 CCB III, nrs 115-116.

38 CCB I, nr 99.

39 CCB III, nr 90.

fundamental for the study we have in mind, because it can show whether, how, and by whom surviving books of a given collection were used. Among the still rare students engaged in this research is Robert Babcock, of the University of North-Carolina, recognized specialist of the history of schools and libraries in the Liège area in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. His present project consists in the study of the annotations in the forty-odd manuscripts of that period that have belonged to the abbey of Gembloux, to distinguish the hands that made them and to interpret their meaning for the cultural life in the abbey and the teaching of its school.⁴⁰ A meticulous examination of the hands appearing in the margins of these manuscripts will no doubt lead to the identification of readers and teachers (even if it will mostly be impossible to give them names) and to confront these findings with the literary and scholarly works produced in Gembloux and in the institutions with which it maintained relations.

The study of Thomas Falmagne on the *Flores paradisi* and the making of this florilegium in the Cistercian abbey of Villers in the first half of the thirteenth century is an example of what a well-conducted close examination of all the surviving manuscripts, booklists and other documents may reveal in relationship with the intellectual climate in a medieval institution and especially with a great compilation that has been generated in that scholarly environment.⁴¹

When Peter Dronke claims that Hildegard of Bingen had access to such rare authors and texts as Asclepius, Filastrius, the *Liber Nemroth* and perhaps even Avencebrol, he is without doubt right.⁴² But the library historian would be happy if he or she could imagine where and how the Sibyl of the Rhine got acquainted with these books. In rare cases, we have the chance to see a medieval author at work in a library. When the chronicler John van Thielrode, monk of the abbey of Saint Bavo in Ghent, in the second half of the thirteenth century writes that he got some of the information for his work *ex libro nostro Florido*, it is absolutely sure that he has used the autograph manuscript of the twelfth-century encyclopedic compilation called *Liber Floridus*, by Lambert of Saint-Omer, which at that time was part of the abbey library.⁴³ Such conclusions become even more certain when we find marks of such use of books in a library: in several manuscripts belonging to the small chapter library of Our Lady at Saint-Omer in the beginning of the twelfth century, we find marginal annotations in the hand of Lambert himself marking passages to be copied or summarized in the work he was compiling.⁴⁴

By way of conclusion: for scholars wanting to study the functioning of texts in medieval libraries an immense field of investigation lies open. Many publications have been devoted to medieval libraries, but they have not always led to satisfactory results. Ample materials have been edited or are waiting in our libraries and archives, waiting for students who are willing to invest time and labour in their research. Liefstinck's

⁴⁰ See for the cultural life in the Liège schools his studies Babcock 1984; Babcock 1986; Babcock 2009; and his forthcoming book *The Schools of Liège in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries. The Evidence of the Brussels Psychomachia* (Bibl. Roy. 10066-77).

⁴¹ Falmagne 2001.

⁴² Derolez & Dronke 1996, xxxiv.

⁴³ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, XXV, 561.

⁴⁴ Derolez 1998, 191-194, plates 38-41.

epoch-making study of the libraries of the abbeys of Ten Duinen and Ter Doest and their relations with the scriptorium of the collegiate church of Saint Donatian in Bruges has been criticized and its principal conclusion has met with little approval, no doubt rightly.⁴⁵ But in the six decades elapsed since its publication nobody has undertaken a new investigation of the surviving manuscripts from both Cistercian libraries, although they are easily accessible in two Bruges libraries, almost all of them still in their medieval bindings. The job is not an easy one, but it is beyond doubt that the findings of this and similar investigations would be important and even revolutionary.

Samenvatting

Nu de bronnen voor onze kennis van de middeleeuwse bibliotheken in de Nederlanden in wetenschappelijke edities toegankelijk worden en ons inzicht in de typologie van de middeleeuwse bibliotheekcatalogi sterk is verbeterd, kunnen wij nagaan (1) hoe de lezers destijds op grond van de boekenlijsten de weg konden vinden naar de teksten die zij zochten, en (2) hoe de boeken 'opgesteld' waren en in welke omstandigheden zij konden geconsulteerd worden, en vooral: of de aan een bepaalde bibliotheek toebehorende boeken, of sommige ervan, werkelijk geconsulteerd werden.

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⁴⁵ Liefstinck 1953.

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